

Island of Lost Forever

Book One of the *Mystical Island Trilogy*

by:
Megan Cutler
James Abendroth

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to real people or events is entirely coincidental.

ISLAND OF LOST FOREVERS

Copyright © 2014 by Megan Cutler and James Abendroth.

All rights reserved.

Cover art by Beth Alvarez

This book is protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without the express written permission of the author.

First Edition: May 2014

Chapter One

While the sea churned beneath the small boat, Captain Jones scrambled to reach the engine controls. Moments before the ocean had been placid; the perfect day for fishing. With the sun shining out of a cloudless blue sky, he'd spent the morning sprawled across the deck bench, waiting for a tug on the line.

The ocean announced its fury with a massive thunderclap. Water poured across the deck before the captain realized what was happening, sweeping his fishing rod and bait box overboard. He might have followed if he hadn't been sitting next to the lifeline. He hooked it to his belt with record speed and clawed his way toward the cabin.

The small craft pitched dangerously to one side as he turned the engine key, ocean slick hands scrabbling for purchase on the console. He brushed dripping grey hair from his face, squinting salt-stung eyes to read the GPS and weather data.

The depth meter read shallows where they shouldn't be. The satellite didn't indicate an unexpected storm. The ocean rumbled as waves slapped against the bow. The engine whined as it struggled to hold the ship against the current.

"Come on," he muttered between clenched teeth, repeating the mantra over and over. "You ken do it..."

When his sturdy little fishing vessel bobbed on a calming ocean, Captain Jones breathed a sigh of relief and lifted his gaze. It was then he saw the mountain, looming high in the distance, casting a shadow across what should be open water.

What the-

Screams drew his attention. His fishing spot wasn't crowded, but it wasn't secluded either. The clear, calm waters were a favorite vacation getaway. Not every boat weathered the crisis as well as his. Without hesitation he ran for the life rings, tossing them in the proper direction before steering close enough the swimmers could climb aboard.

He pulled a family of five from the water, two of them young children; they and their mother the source of the screams. All five thanked him profusely as he turned his craft toward shore.

The engine purred now the tide returned to normal. What havoc would those rogue waves wreak on the beach? Thankfully none had been large enough to qualify as a tsunami. They'd wash away plenty of umbrellas, beach towels and plastic toys. There'd be many a ruined day but, hopefully, no lives would be lost.

Course set, he came out of the cabin to peer at the mountain receding in the distance.

"It came out of nowhere," murmured the woman huddled in a damp blanket between two of her children, her voice pitched high toward hysteria. "It just sat on the ocean like it belonged there."

"The mountain?" Captain Jones demanded, breathless.

"Not just a mountain." The father shook his head. "An entire island."

As they bobbed on the crest of the next wave, he caught a glimpse of it, green and glittering in the sun.

"Yes," Captain Jones murmured, recalling the violent rocking of an otherwise smooth sea, "that would do it."

* * * * *

The headline: *Scientists Baffled by Appearance of Mysterious Island* conjured the image of people in white lab coats running in frantic circles flailing their arms. The amusing, if inaccurate, thought brought a smile to Catilen's lips as she scanned the article.

"All right, Damian, I admit it; I'd love to know how they're going to explain this. Conspiracy theory, maybe?" She glanced up at the professor who delivered the article. He leaned against her desk, arms crossed over his chest, a smug smile splitting his lips.

"This is a prestigious paper, not a tabloid. Besides, there were witnesses. I'll tell you what they won't do, Cat, they won't admit the flaws in their investigative methods." Catilen detected a hint of triumph in his voice. Damian wasn't fond of scientists or their methods. *They disregard too many possibilities he deems viable.* Not that she didn't agree modern scientists had some bad habits; she didn't share her colleague's desire to fill the gaps. *If San Francisco State University had a parapsychology department, he'd beat down doors to head it.*

"They're still going to have a hard time convincing everyone this is legit, even with the freak mini-tsunami. Islands don't just appear out of thin air."

"So conventional science tells us." Damian held up one finger to forestall any further arguments. "They'll have to worry about explaining it sooner or later. But look at this." He jabbed his finger at the article's final paragraph. "That's the most interesting part."

Catilen read the two lines partly obscured by his fingertip. "Just off the coast of... That's not far from here!"

"When do we leave?" Damian grinned, green eyes glittering with mischief.

Peering at him out of the corners of her eyes, Catilen fought the urge to grin. "Cheeky. It's not like I don't have a stack of papers to assault with a red pen. And it's the equinox this weekend."

"You know, I was wondering if that didn't have something to do with it." He sat down across from her. Leaning across her desk, he spoke his theories in low tones. It made sense he'd bring this discussion to her. She didn't dismiss Professor Damian Cooke's ideas the way everyone else did. "A lot of power pools at the turning of seasons. There are some interesting planetary junctions too." She noted the excitement in his eyes and the joy suffusing his face as he gestured wildly to emphasize each point.

"This could be big, Catilen," he finished with a sincere, pleading look. "People like us wait whole lifetimes for things like this."

With a start, she realized his question had been serious. Gazing at the blurry photograph, taken by a confused fisherman, included with the article, she considered his offer. She couldn't argue with his sentiment. What they could find on such an island! Lost history, artifacts, extinct animals. Her heart raced. *People.*

What kind of stories could a person living on that island tell? But such a trip wasn't without risk. An island that appeared out of thin air could disappear as quickly.

"Assuming we could get past the government barricades-" she started.

"Leave that to me," Damien interrupted, flashing her a confident grin.

"Assuming we could get past the government barricades," she repeated with a stern scowl, "this isn't something we can leap into. We're not going to find a Holiday Inn on an uncharted island. We're going to need camping equipment. A first aid kit. A few days worth of supplies." She ticked off each item on the list, lifting a finger to indicate how they stacked up. "Not to mention some other precautions I know you'd want to prepare."

Damian nodded to each item, waving a hand to indicate his impatience. "I thought early

Saturday morning.” He tilted his head forward and lifted both eyebrows, imploring her.

Catilen pursed her lips. Damian’s enthusiasm was contagious. The adventurous thrill in the pit of her stomach was hard to ignore.

“All right.” She noted the restraint her coworker applied to keep from pumping his fists with triumph. “Let’s meet for dinner tonight to discuss it.”

“Dinner,” Damian agreed as he swept to his feet. Catilen half-expected him to dance to his next class. “Seven o’clock. I’ll pick you up.”

“Seven,” she agreed. “See you then.”

* * * * *

Catilen chose an oriental style dress from her closet and donned it with care. The fabric was deep blue, the edges embroidered with delicate red flowers. It was of a more conservative cut than some of her outfits, with long, flowing sleeves and a knee-length skirt. She didn’t worry about Damian’s intentions, but she wanted to communicate hers.

Every time they’d done dinner, it had been as friends. To discuss Damian’s theories and ideas. To see where their opinions overlapped. They’d even started a proposal to open a new department at the University, but ultimately had to abandon the idea. Catilen couldn’t afford to lose her job no matter how much potential she saw in Damian’s research.

The trouble was, Damian wanted more than friendship. She wasn’t opposed to the idea; he was a nice guy, intelligent, thoughtful and passionate about his interests. *I could do much worse than Professor Cooke*. But she wasn’t sure she *wanted* more than friendship with anyone. She had other considerations when it came to relationships.

Satisfied by her quick scrutiny of the dress in the mirror, Catilen flitted down the hall to the bathroom. She gathered her dark brown hair in a bun high on her head, spearing it with an Asian-style hairpin that matched the dress’s embroidery. She donned a pair of silver earrings with dangling stars and applied a light coat of makeup.

As she slid her lipstick back into its tube, the doorbell rang. She hurried to answer the door, smiling at Damian in greeting.

“Wow.” He grinned. “You look gorgeous.”

Damian wore dark slacks and a navy button-down shirt. He also wore a tie, suggesting they were headed someplace fancy. He’d carefully combed his short crop of blond hair to one side, but a single strand stubbornly refused to submit. No matter how many times he brushed it aside, it strayed across his forehead.

Catilen smiled. “You clean up pretty nice yourself, Professor.”

He offered her his arm, playing the gentleman.

Snatching her purse from the table by the door, Catilen shook it to make certain she had her keys. She locked the door, pulled it closed behind her and accepted his offer, threading her arm through his. The gentleman act continued as Damian opened the car door for her before moving to the driver’s side. Raking the obstinate strand of hair out of his face, he settled into the driver’s seat.

“I brought you some reading material,” he announced, reaching across her to open the glove compartment. A thick sheaf of paper nearly lodged itself in the small opening as it tumbled into her lap.

Catilen hurried to contain the papers before they scattered all over the floor. “What’s this?” She thought they might be student papers he wanted help evaluating, but there weren’t any paperclips or staples in the stack.

“It’s everything relevant I could find about the island.” Damian turned the key in the ignition and put the car into gear. “Most of it’s from the Internet.”

Catilen’s eyebrows shot upward. The pages weren’t double sided, but it was still a large pile. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think someone didn’t have any afternoon classes to teach.”

Damian flashed her a grin as he pulled out of the driveway. “Independent studies. Projects are due at the end of the month. I figured most of my students needed the extra period to work on them.”

She was too preoccupied with the stack of printouts to comment on her colleague’s afternoon schedule. While she doubted the original agenda included project work, she understood the allure of the phenomena for someone with Damian’s interests. Her afternoon had been something of a blur, every spare moment spent rearranging her schedule to accommodate their trip and wondering what they would find.

If we make it as far as the island. The article warned of military patrols in the area, probably to fend off would-be adventurers like themselves. If they did cross the blockade, they were just as likely to be intercepted on the way home. And that didn’t account for the dangers they might encounter on the island; wild animals, poisonous plants, hidden cliff edges...

She scanned the text as she leafed through the papers. This was no hasty gathering of random data. Damian put work into this research, highlighting passages and jotting notes in the margins.

“Some of those highlighted sections correspond with discussions in one of my reference books,” Damian said as she flipped deeper into the stack. Catilen frowned, hoping he wasn’t neglecting work for this. “The island appears to be located in the center of a power nexus.”

Skipping several pages that lacked highlights, Catilen discovered a pixelated map. A large black blob rested in the center of a web of thin black lines. She didn’t need to read the legend to understand it.

“You mean a connection of ley lines?”

Damian nodded. “There’s evidence the lines have been shifting. The process has occurred slowly over the last several decades. I’ve been tracking it. Most people think it’s a natural process that occurs on its own. Like rivers changing course. But I found research recently that suggests the shift happens in cycles. The current flow of power along Earth’s ley lines matches one which existed thousands of years ago. That could account for the sudden appearance of an island out of nowhere.”

Most people would have laughed at the idea of mystical power lines causing landmasses to appear and disappear. Scientist regarded ley lines as supernatural nonsense, but Catilen thought the river metaphor apt.

A car horn blared, snapping her attention to the road. Their car swerved back into its lane and the sound of the horn whipped past. Damian cast her a sheepish look, followed by an apologetic one.

Catilen gripped the dash with one hand while she willed her thudding heart to calm. She was used to dangerous driving in the city, but she wasn’t used to being in the dangerous car. She swallowed several deep breaths before she spoke again.

“If you want to visit this island, you realize we need to survive until the weekend. Right?”

“Sorry about that.” Damian kept his eyes on the road this time. “Anyway, like I was saying; it’s possible this island only exists in our world when the ley lines take this precise alignment.”

It took a moment for Catilen to refocus on the printouts and the accompanying conversation. She kept peeking at passing cars, worried excitement would get the better of her companion

again. As the city lights streaked past and no other high-pitched horns split the night, her concentration returned.

“I wonder where it goes when it leaves. Do you think it travels across the lines to some other place?”

“I don’t know,” Damian admitted. “I suppose it could. Maybe we’ll find out.”

Catilen wasn’t keen on following the island to its new destination. She took a moment to contemplate the implication; for a long time, parallel dimensions had been consigned to the realm of science fiction. Only with the advent of string theory had mainstream scientists accepted the idea of parallel planes of existence. *I wonder if it’s possible for those dimensions to overlap sometimes.* If there was another Earth, with another Catilen living a similar life, could cosmic lines of power on each plane intersect each other, occasionally connecting them?

Damian pulled into a downtown parking lot. The small bump at the entrance jerked her attention back to the present. After parking, Damian hurried around the car to open her door and offer his arm again. Catilen’s high-heels clicked against the pavement as they made the short journey to the restaurant.

His choice surprised her. Boulevard boasted one of the city’s highest ratings for romantic getaways. The building bore an old-style façade, perhaps nineteenth century. Brown pillars stood between large, gold-trimmed windows. Intricate white engravings adorned the doorway. Matching molding lined the building’s first story. Catilen thought it looked French.

The hostess greeted them just inside the door. Damian gave his name and reservation time. The cheerful young woman led them deeper into the building, across a mosaic covered floor, past a polished mahogany bar to a secluded table near one of the windows they’d passed outside. She left them with menus and Catilen took a few minutes to browse hers. She’d never been to this place before.

It was fancier than she’d anticipated; another indication Damian wished for more than friendship.

Their waiter arrived quickly to introduce himself. He rattled off the daily specials the way only someone with long familiarity can, his smile never faltering. Damian ordered a bottle of wine and the waiter promised to return in a few minutes to take their orders.

“You’ve been quiet,” Damian noted, his tone cautious. “You aren’t having second thoughts are you?”

She smiled to reassure him. “Not at all. You’ve obviously put a great deal of thought into this. I’m just worried we’re rushing. We’ve spoken about your theories but you haven’t said anything about the supplies we need or-”

“Don’t worry about that.” Damian reached across the table, resting his hand on hers. “Let me take care of it. I have most of the camping supplies already. I just need to pick up a few extra things.”

“You make it sound as if you’re ready to drop everything and go on adventures at a moment’s notice.”

“I camp a lot.” He shrugged. “My research is best done in the wild. How do you think I spend my summer vacations?”

Catilen chuckled, not surprised. If Damian tried half his experiments in his back yard, his neighbors would think him mad. “All right, Tarzan. I guess I’ll trust you know what you’re doing.”

“I wish we could get away sooner. The government’s trying to keep all this quiet. There’re already rumors the newspaper article is a hoax. I think there’s something on that island they want

to hide.”

Catilen frowned. She worried most about getting past the navy patrols. Neither she, nor Damian, were chosen research representatives. The military wouldn't take kindly to their intrusion. They didn't care what kind of opportunity that island represented. They had the money and guns to fulfill whatever mandate the government handed them.

“You mentioned that before. How do you plan on getting past them? It's not like we're the only people who'll embrace this kind of foolhardy trip.”

Damian leaned close before he answered, glancing in every direction to make sure no one overheard. She recognized the conspiratorial look on his face; it meant most people would label him crazy for what he was about to say. She leaned forward to catch his words.

“Well, Cat, they don't believe in the sort of things we can do, so it doesn't occur to them to protect against them. A simple obfuscation spell ought to do it. Especially if we pair it with distraction charms. After that, as long as we keep quiet, we should be fine.”

Magic. At this point, most people would abandon Damian to his own devices. Lucky for him, Catilen wasn't most people. She fingered the silver pendant on the chain around her neck; a pentagram surrounded by the phases of the moon. Her magic differed from Damian's, but that didn't prevent her from understanding his abilities, or accepting them as legitimate.

“We should probably sync our wards,” she replied. “Mine are due for renewal anyway.”

Damian's eyes widened with surprise. “Are you sure? Your shields will be sensitive to me for an entire month.”

And yours to me. She wouldn't have offered if she wasn't comfortable with the commitment. Damian's gentle kindness had never been an act, unlike the good-guy routines she'd witnessed from many other men. It was a major factor in her willingness to run away to a mysterious island with him.

“I think it's better that way. If we do run into trouble, it'll be easier for us to keep track of each other. And it might give us an edge in an emergency. Besides, I have to renew them before we leave anyway.”

“We should do it Friday,” Damian mused after a moment to consider. “It'll be a full moon, won't it?”

Catilen grinned, her eyes gleaming. *Oh yes, Damian Cooke knows what he's doing.* “Indeed. Convenient, isn't it? We should use my backyard. It's surrounded by a high fence.” One of the reasons she'd chosen that residence. Some of her practices required privacy as well.

Damian nodded, pleased by the arrangement. “I don't think we'll be on the island long. I'll bet we can solve the mystery over the weekend. I guess you'll still miss your equinox festival though.”

She doubted they could unravel the cosmic mysteries of a ley line travelling island in two days. But they'd have to be satisfied after a single weekend if they wanted to keep their jobs. “There's always next year.” But where would she be in a year? The question sobered her.

“Damian,” she said softly, her smile gone, her tone solemn, “have you considered the possibility we might not make it back?”

“Yeah,” he admitted, his expression grim. “But I decided not to let it stop me from trying. I wouldn't be losing much, honestly.”

She wondered if he'd considered all the possibilities. If whatever brought the island here, ley lines or otherwise, shifted while they were on it, they could be trapped there. Who knew if its next destination would be hospitable? And that was only if they made it to the island. The military could arrest them, or worse, sink them. The island offered exciting prospects, but she

couldn't forget the risks were real.

"I just want to make sure you're not leaping into this without due consideration," she said slowly, worried he'd dismiss her words as nagging. "I can tell how excited you are..."

Damian brushed her hand with his, the gesture accompanied by a reassuring smile. "I'd be lying if I said it didn't frighten me at all. It's not too late to back out, you know. I wouldn't fault you."

"No." She caught his hand before he had a chance to remove it. "I'm frightened too, but not enough to give up this opportunity."

"Good." Damian squeezed her hand, a relieved smile on his face. "I can't think of anyone I'd rather travel with."

Her cheeks burned. Before she could respond, their waiter returned. He poured the wine for Damian and let him sample it before pouring glasses for each of them. Damian ordered himself a steak, while she chose a seafood dish.

The dinner conversation turned to other things. She enjoyed these friendly outings, even if she didn't want them to be dates. She was as eccentric as Damian, if in different ways. She was beginning to think those eccentricities complemented each other nicely.

Chapter Two

The rest of the week passed in a haze. Catilen stayed up late marking papers and projects. *Just in case.* She owed her students that much.

Preoccupation with the upcoming journey kept her awake, speculating on what they might find. She knew Damian hoped to find magic. Anything to lend credence to his theories and garner acceptance of his research. But he couldn't hope to overturn centuries of intellectual discourse in a single weekend. He'd need strong evidence to impress the scientific community. Results needed to be replicated before anyone took them seriously and a large portion of Damian's proof might soon disappear.

On Friday afternoon, as she rolled piles of clothing for ease of packing, Catilen realized she still didn't know what she expected to find. If the island disappeared while they were on it, she might be stranded for the rest of her life with only Damian Cooke to keep her company. She didn't share his conviction about leaving nothing behind. She had her mother to consider.

Three years ago, Delana's deteriorating health forced Catilen to put her in a home. It hurt, but her mother's condition required constant care, something she couldn't provide and work at the same time. She'd be well cared for, even if something happened to her daughter, but Catilen still felt she was abandoning her.

You know if she were here, she'd tell you to go. Catilen smothered as much air as possible out of her clothing and forced the suitcase zipper shut. She'd planned for warm and cool weather, plus extras in case she got wet or dirty. She stuck to essentials, doubting they'd encounter modern plumbing while they were gone.

Aren't you over-thinking all this anyway? They might arrive to find the island just like all the others located off the California coast. They'd probably return from an extended camping trip, bemoaning their waste of time.

She retrieved a dusty sleeping bag from the closet, gave it a quick vacuum, and rolled a pillow into it.

Damian might consider his job at the university an interim position while he searched for a foothold in a less common field, but she poured everything into her work. She mentored students over summer break and reviewed manuscripts in her spare time.

Then again, one literature professor was much like another. Those rising stars could find other mentors. With the year winding to a close, and the bulk of her grades prepared after her recent work binge, she wouldn't be missed. She loved her job, but it didn't mean the world to her. Her life lacked something. Like Damian, she couldn't find it here.

Catilen put her suitcase and sleeping bag by the door, next to the emergency first aid kit.

Her packing tended, she prepared for the night's ritual. A quick check of her supplies confirmed she had everything they needed. She spent an hour clearing the yard of stray leaves and stones, so neither of them would stumble in the dark.

Despite her doubts, she resolved to see the venture through. She'd spend her whole life regretting if she threw away this chance.

With plenty of time left before moonrise, Catilen prepared dinner. It was a humble affair; she didn't like to eat much before traveling. The butterflies dancing in her knotted stomach banished her appetite anyway.

Damian arrived just as the sun dipped below the horizon, igniting the sky with brilliant crimson and burnished gold. He brought a small overnight bag inside with him, leaving the rest

of his gear in the car. They'd agreed to leave from Catilen's house, since her backyard was perfect for the renewal ritual. He set the bag in the foyer and wriggled his feet free of his shoes.

Catilen waved him inside and offered him a drink. In stark contrast to their last get-together, she wore jeans and a baggy t-shirt, having changed when she got home from work. Damian wore similar attire, the hems of his jeans ragged from use, the decal on his t-shirt faded and cracked.

Retrieving a pair of frosted glasses from the freezer, Catilen filled them with lemonade and joined Damian in the living room. He accepted his glass graciously. She set hers on an end table without drinking.

"I picked this up for you today." She lifted a small case from the table and passed it to Damian. "It should help us link our wards."

Inside the case, a silver bracelet rested on a bed of velvet. A simple pentagram charm adorned the small, sturdy chain links. It would be a tight fit, but could easily be hidden beneath a watch or sleeve. Damian traced the shape with his fingers before lifting the bracelet from the case.

"Thank you," he said, touched by the gesture. "I'll keep it on all the time."

Relieved, Catilen crossed the room to help him secure the clasp. Most men didn't like jewelry, but she felt safer knowing he'd have a pentagram with him.

"Is everything ready to go?" she asked as she returned to the couch. She sipped from her lemonade and Damian did the same.

"Double and triple checked. We just need to wake up at the right time."

"Alarms are set. Mine even has a battery in case the power goes out."

Damian listed his preparations. They were extensive, assuaging her fears he'd leapt into this without consideration. By the time he finished, stars dotted the sky and their lemonade glasses were empty.

"I'm ready whenever you are," he said with a nervous smile.

Catilen stood, retrieved Damian's glass and set both in the sink. "Just head out the glass doors to the backyard. I'll meet you in a minute."

Damian departed without retrieving his shoes. She, too, padded through the door in bare feet after retrieving her basket of ritual objects. The grass felt cool and springy against the soles of her feet and between her toes as she bounded across the stone-free lawn.

A tall, wooden fence surrounded the yard. The east and west sides held garden boxes; vegetables grew in the east while herbs grew in the west. In the north corner rested a small stone altar, where Catilen set the objects from her basket; a dagger, a gold candle, a silver candle, a polished stone carved in the shape of a pentagram and a twisted driftwood stick.

She didn't know how many objects her companion recognized. Damian wasn't interested in the religion. He practiced a magic older than hers, ancient, lost. And while many of the tenets were similar, their applications differed. Catilen put positive energy into the world believing it would bring good things back to her. Damian made things happen.

"Where should I stand?" he asked. He stood several feet away, keeping a respectful distance. He rubbed the top of one foot against the opposite calf while he waited. She couldn't help but smile.

After lighting the candles, she took two steps back, motioning for him to join her. "Over here with me. I want to raise a circle of protection. Have you ever been inside one before?"

"Once," he sounded uncertain. "But I recall the preparations being far more elaborate than this."

Catilen knew Damian well enough to catch his skepticism. "You may feel disoriented for the

first few seconds. Just note the edges of the circle. If you pass through it before the end of the ritual, the protection will be broken and we'll be vulnerable."

Damian nodded.

Lifting the small dagger from the altar, Catilen drew the blade from its sheath. Most people got nervous about the idea of someone swinging a knife around, but Damian didn't flinch. He probably knew the knife wasn't used for cutting, at least not anything physical. It was a spiritual tool used for spiritual tasks, such as directing her energy when she drew up the circle.

She walked the intended perimeter of the barrier three times, using the blade to mark it. For the first circuit, she pointed the blade at the ground, imagining a golden light rising from the earth along the line she drew. The second time she pointed the blade straight out from her body, visualizing the golden light rising ever higher. Finally she lifted the blade above her head and imagined the edges of the light shield coming together to complete a half-bubble surrounding herself, Damian, and the stone altar. She returned the knife to its previous place and turned back to her companion.

Damian shivered. "Artfully done."

Catilen's ears burned. "Thank you," she murmured, though she hadn't done anything special. She knew many who practiced the same way.

"What now?" he asked, planting his feet further apart on the cool grass.

"Now we draw down the moon's power to renew our wards. Do you know how to do it?"

Again, he nodded. "Though I don't know if my method matches yours."

"It doesn't need to. So long as the source matches, the wards should meld. It's best if we each weave the energy the way it suits us best."

Damian's shoulders sagged with relief. "I agree. Let me know when you're ready."

Catilen nodded and closed her eyes. She performed this private ritual every month. It was comfortable and familiar. She drew in a deep breath and released it slowly, letting the tension leak out of her muscles. She repeated the process a few times until she relaxed. She shook her arms out, then lifted them over her head, palms turned upward. Her hands and wrists tingled, a sensation unrelated to her relaxation exercises. It was the moonlight, symbol of the power of her goddess, caressing her skin.

Leaving Damian to his own devices, she imagined herself sliding up the path made by her arms. She left her body and drifted up the moonbeams to the distant place where the bright, silver orb hung. There she felt a swirl of power, like a fountain of clear, clean water flowing from a deep mountain spring. She dipped her fingers in the edges of the pool, careful to avoid the fountain, knowing that kind of power could easily singe her. Then she drew back along the path of the moonbeams, following them into her skin, back down her arms and into her body.

Breathing deeply, she allowed the moonlight and the power to fill her. She liked to imagine she glowed with the moon's silver light, though she knew no such thing happened. Lowering her arms, she ran her fingers over the pentacle pendant at her neck. She imagined the newly gained energy flowing from the tips of her fingers to the small spheres that represented the moon phases around the pendant. After suffusing each with the moon's glow, she wove the wards she used for protection, using the pentacle to center and bind them. Once, in her youth, she'd neglected the ritual and spent the entire month in misery.

Satisfied with her work, Catilen reached for Damian with her mind instead of her hands. With her defenses lowered, she could feel him as a powerful presence beside her, relaxed and focused. She could tell he'd finished renewing his wards; his mind crackled with power at her tentative touch.

She'd never done this before, not with Damian. She didn't know if he used the same kind of wards she did. Likely not, since he had different needs. She worried his defenses might retaliate, but Damian answered her mental probe with reassurance, opening his mind, inviting her in.

The mind-link resonated a strange harmony. She *felt* Damian's kindness, affection and deep-running respect for her. Warmed, she allowed him a glimpse of similar feelings, though her affection still tended toward friendship.

Beneath his surface emotions, Catilen sensed Damian's hold over the magic he wielded. He drew deeper from the pool than she dared. Knowing the danger of tinkering with forces she didn't understand, Catilen turned control of the joining over to Damian. He wove the outer layers of the magic together until the two wards overlapped. Her trust had been well placed; neither of them would have trouble maintaining privacy for the month, but could easily perceive danger facing the other.

When he finished, Damian broke the mental contact. In the wake of it, Catilen mentally reached for the ground, allowing the excess energy to bleed into the earth. She blinked and opened her eyes. The night, lit by candles, street lamps, and the moon above, seemed suddenly bright. Damian squinted a moment and smiled at her, obviously feeling the same.

She moved to take down the circle, but hesitated, her fingers hovered over the dagger hilt. "Did you work your obfuscation yet?" She didn't know how that kind of magic worked.

"No. I wanted it to be fresh. Now seems as good a time as any. Do you mind coming here a moment?"

Catilen crossed the short distance between them and took his outstretched hand, squeezing it gently.

He never closed his eyes, but they grew distant. Catilen stood as still as she could, holding her breath, trying not to disturb his concentration. The distant look didn't last long. After a moment, Damian released her hand and smiled again.

"That should do it. Be careful, Cat. For the next few days, people won't notice you unless you go out of your way to draw their attention. It would be a bad time to walk in the middle of a road during rush hour."

Catilen chuckled, though she took the warning seriously. "I'll keep that in mind. Just give me a moment to dismiss the circle..."

She closed the ritual in much the same way she started it, reversing the order of her movements with the dagger until she visualized the gold light retreating back into the earth. She snuffed the candles and returned her objects to the basket, scooping it up as they made their way inside.

She locked the door and glanced at the clock. It wasn't late, but they planned to leave before sunrise. They should go to bed; they needed their wits in case they had to combat military patrols in the morning. But she couldn't sleep now, too energized from the ritual to settle.

"I can show you the guest room if you like," she offered, uncertain if Damian wanted to sleep.

He hesitated. Perhaps he caught something in her tone. With their defenses overlapping, it was easier to sense him than usual. He noticed and erected an extra shield to compensate. Not wanting to pry, she did the same, though she already caught his shared desire for further activity.

"Is there something you need to do?" he asked. "Perhaps I can help."

"Nothing I *need* to do. Since I feel so energized, I thought I'd read my cards."

"Read your cards?" He repeated the words slowly, eyes narrowed with confusion. "Is that your way of telling me I missed your birthday?"

Catilen laughed. “No, silly. My tarot cards. Haven’t you ever read tarot?”

“Ah.” His eyes brightened with understanding. “Not really.”

“Come join me then.” Catilen motioned toward the dining room table. She held up a finger, excusing herself a moment. Hurrying down the hall to her bedroom, she took a small wooden box from the bottom drawer of her nightstand. When she returned, she sat across from Damian, pulling the cards from the box.

She enjoyed the familiar feeling of the worn cards against her hands as she cut the deck and shuffled. She set the pile on a square of blue velvet in front of Damian.

“We can use the cards to gain insight for our journey. It’s traditional for the recipient of the reading to cut the cards. Any way you like.”

Damian glanced at the stack, skeptical. “This isn’t one of those things where you flip a few cards and it turns out I’m pregnant, is it?”

Catilen muffled her laughter with the back of her hand. “If you mean those old commercials for the gypsy lady who read tarot over the phone, that was total B-S. Tarot doesn’t work that way. It can’t tell us the future for certain, though it may provide helpful hints.”

“Why do it if it’s uncertain? Isn’t it a waste of time?”

“It’s like any form of divination.” Catilen shrugged. “It has its benefits and its drawbacks. If you keep the island in mind while you cut the cards, they may tell you what you can expect to find there. If you concentrate on our journey, you’ll probably learn something different. The answer depends on the focus. Just as the answer’s accuracy depends on how closely you maintain your current course of action. If you decided not to go to the island in the morning, everything the cards told you about it would cease to be relevant.”

“So it’s like a magic eight-ball?”

“Maybe. If so, would it hurt to try?”

“Fair enough,” Damian relented, reaching for the cards. He cut them into three different sized piles then shuffled them back into one. When he finished, he pushed the cards in her direction and tapped the top of the deck. “Done.”

Gathering the pile in one hand, Catilen flipped several cards, laying them in formation across the blue velvet. She used a variation of the Celtic Cross that included two extra cards for the outcome. The first six cards formed a cross shape, with a column of four cards beside it, the two additional cards forming a T.

She set the extras aside and contemplated the face-up cards. “Interesting,” she murmured.

“What is?” Damian squinted as he leaned over the cards from the other side.

“A couple of things.” Catilen considered the cards before offering an explanation, taking time to organize her thoughts.

“These cards represent us.” She pointed to a pair of cards in the center of the cross, one laid across the other. The bottom card read *IV Emperor*. The top read *III Empress*. “Aside from the obvious, these are powerful cards. To me, that indicates this journey will have a profound effect on our lives.”

“I thought that was the point.” Damian sounded disappointed.

“It suggests we’ll find more than a glorified camping trip. Look here.” She laid her finger on the edge of a card which read *Seven of Swords*. “This card is in the opposing forces position. It generally represents spying, stealing and lying.”

Damian arched an eyebrow. “I don’t expect anything like that to happen between us.”

“Of course not. But I hate to get my hopes up about meeting people. I still think the chances are slim. The meaning could be obscured by our lack of information. Maybe it’ll make sense

after we arrive.”

“It could have something to do with the government. We know they don’t want anyone investigating this mystery.”

“I considered that, though I’d rather not get involved with them. In any case, the most interesting thing is the outcome.”

She indicated the three cards at the top of the T. *XV The Devil*, *X The Wheel of Fortune*, and *VI The Lovers*. “All three major arcana again, which makes all three powerful cards. The Wheel of Fortune especially. It represents a shift of luck or a change of fate. That it falls between the Devil and the Lovers is what draws my interest. One obviously represents love and happiness. The other represents suffering, often the result of being trapped in a bad situation.

“Perhaps our fate has not yet been written. But it seems the wheel will turn to one or the other, and that outcome will determine our fate.”

“Could it mean we have to pass through one to get to the other?” Damian indicated the position of the cards. “Doesn’t the appearance of all three indicate we’ll experience each in turn?”

“Not necessarily. The extra two cards are meant to modify the meaning of the first one.” She tapped the devil card. “But your interpretation is as likely as mine. That’s the trouble with divination. The way we interpret the meanings is what influences our future.” She gathered the cards and put them away.

“I don’t plan to let it deter me. I feel great about this trip.”

“That’s the best attitude.” Catilen folded the cards into the blue velvet and tucked them back into their box. “Reading the cards always makes me feel better. They warn of danger, but we anticipated that already. I didn’t see anything unexpected and that reassures me we’re properly prepared.”

“Another good attitude.”

Damian covered his mouth with a hand, but it was too late. Catilen caught his yawn as if it were contagious. *Now it is getting late, and only a few hours before we have to get up.*

“Here,” she slid to her feet, “let me show you to the guest room.”

Damian retrieved his bag while Catilen put her cards and the basket of ritual supplies back where they belonged. Then she led him to the far end of the hallway. The guest bed was small, but the mattress was comfortable and the sheets were clean.

“All you have to do is hit the button on top the clock to turn it off,” she said. “The bathroom is one door up the hall on the same side. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen if you need something in the middle of the night.”

“Thanks, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Well then, good night.”

“See you in a few hours.”

Before she made her way back up the hall, Catilen stood on her tip-toes and laid a quick kiss on Damian’s cheek. She noted his look of surprise as she darted across the hall, disappearing behind her bedroom door.

Chapter Three

Damian lay on his back, staring at the plaster ceiling. The bold green numbers on the alarm clock indicated the passage of several hours. He felt as though he'd slept ten minutes. The strange surroundings didn't bother him. Since joining his wards with Catilen's, he felt warm, content and safe. Besides, he was used to sleeping in stranger places.

Excitement pried his eyes open long before the alarm was set to ring, his head filled with thoughts of the island and what it might hold. He didn't know why Catilen agreed to accompany him. *Probably just to humor me.* Catilen Taylor was the only professor at the University of San Francisco who hadn't laughed in his face the first time he mentioned energy constructs and sorcery. If he could find a hint of solid evidence to bring home with him, he might escape the label of *Catilen's hooky friend.*

It wasn't hard to find open-minded people in San Francisco. Not crazy people who believed any old conspiracy theory; people who believed in humans' abilities to manipulate energy fields and auras. No one treated it as much like a science as he did, but he wasn't without company or interesting conversations. When he met Catilen, he thought she'd be one of that crowd. She turned out to be so much more.

It had something to do with her religion. He hadn't paid much attention to it at first. Wicca, as people called it these days, had been all the rage among teenagers when they were young. Plenty of black-bedecked goth girls called themselves witches and talked about secret rituals they held in forests and abandoned warehouses. Most of them had no idea what they were talking about.

Catilen wasn't one of them either. She'd obviously studied the history of her beliefs. She knew *why* she did the things she did; she'd explained a number of rituals to him over the years when he expressed curiosity. He spent a lot of time contemplating the similarities between her practices and his own. Her knowledge impressed him and her rituals were practical, tailored to her needs. Catilen took care to distinguish between *needs* and *desires*. She never wasted energy.

Damian hadn't realized her practices were anything more than spiritual until last night. *Based on the way she talked about spiritual energy and its use in magick* – with a k, he reminded himself, distinct and different from the kind of magic he performed – *I suspected our techniques were similar. I never expected she could make things happen.* He marveled at her skill in drawing a shield out of the ground, a glimmering, translucent gold bubble to his second-sight.

He shouldn't be surprised. He knew Catilen used protective shields similar to his own. He'd tested them before, unable to resist the temptation when she proved so knowledgeable on the subject. Whatever she did, it rebuffed an earnest probe. Now he knew why. Her practices may be different, but their results were the same.

Damian had met precious few people capable of sorcery. They became his teachers, though each plea for apprenticeship met with resistance. Proving himself grew more difficult with each new level he strove to achieve. But the time and effort were worthwhile; he understood things most people dismissed. He *could* make significant progress in several scientific fields, if he could get people to take him seriously.

Lying in Catilen's guest bed, watching the glowing clock numbers climb toward the appointed hour, Damian wondered if other modern witches were as capable as Catilen. Could all the non-pretenders make things happen? Or was Catilen special? Did her teachers practice the same ancient arts he did? Had they disguised their knowledge as witchcraft? Perhaps a sorcerer

founded the religion for that purpose.

Does it matter? The revelation of Catilen's magical prowess made her the perfect companion. Last night's kiss was her first indication of interest. *Or was it?* Catilen had clearly defined their relationship as friends. He didn't want to risk losing that by misinterpreting a kind gesture. *A kiss isn't an invitation.*

Damian sighed. Despite its requirement in his arcane studies, he struggled with patience.

Shaking off the last of his weariness, Damian fumbled to disable the alarm before it chirruped its morning greeting. By the time he dressed and re-packed his bag, the agreed upon time had passed. Catilen should at least be awake. Even so, he lingered in the guest room, contemplating the paintings hung on the wall.

Catilen's house matched her personality. The walls bore earthen tones, wood carvings and faerie paintings. The atmosphere was open, airy and inviting. He wondered how often she entertained guests; she had the perfect space for it.

Damian inched the door open and peered through the crack before he ventured into the hallway. He didn't want to wander the house; it felt like intruding.

Catilen stood outside the door, her back to him. As he watched, she dropped something into a thick manila envelope and sealed it.

Guilt washed over him; he'd eavesdropped on something private. As if it caught her attention, Catilen turned. Heart in his throat, Damian opened the door and forced himself to smile.

"Good morning." Catilen greeted him with a genuine smile. "Did you sleep well?"

"Not really," he admitted, his tone sheepish. "Too excited. Kept dreaming of the mystical isle. Yourself?"

"About the same." Catilen tucked the envelope into the top drawer of an old wooden dresser that occupied one side of the hallway. "Let's eat a quick breakfast and be off, shall we?"

Damian nodded and followed her to the kitchen, wondering all the while what she put in the envelope.

Catilen offered him eggs and toast if he wanted, but Damian chose a lighter breakfast when he saw his colleague pulling fruit and yogurt from the fridge. Though his stomach rumbled, he knew heavy meals didn't mix well with long journeys.

When they finished breakfast, Catilen poured coffee into two thermoses and handed one to him. He took a moment to savor the first sip before he fetched his bag from the guest room. He helped Catilen tuck her suitcase into the back of his car, cramming the camping equipment deeper into the trunk to make space.

His hands shook when he got behind the wheel, nerves prickling with adrenaline. It was all he could do to keep the car parked while Catilen buckled her seatbelt.

The speedometer warned him he spent most of the drive over the speed limit. It was early enough the roads were still empty, or his driving might have crossed the line from reckless to dangerous. His companion pointed out every stop sign he missed, her lips pale and pressed in a thin line.

He lightened his touch on the gas pedal every time Catilen made one of her clenched-teeth comments, but the reform never lasted long. He wanted to be in their hired boat. He wanted to be across the ocean. He wanted the answer to this spell-binding mystery.

Catilen looked haggard when she exited the car. While he unpacked the trunk, she took a moment to re-bind her hair.

The tents and camping supplies fit into two large backpacks, though their bulk made them

unwieldy. Luckily, their personal packs were small and light. He didn't anticipate trouble finding a decent campground.

When Catilen's knees stopped shaking, she shouldered her half of the gear. Damian led the way to the dock.

The battered boat he'd hired to take them to the island brought a dubious look to his colleague's face. The craft looked as though it had seen better days, but it belonged to the only captain willing to brave the military patrols blocking their path. For the right price, he'd even pledged to bring them home.

"Our options were limited." He offered Catilen an apologetic look. "But Captain Jones has been to the island before. He was one of the original witnesses."

Catilen eyed the boat nervously for several seconds before she nodded. "I remember. He was the only one to let them use his name in the paper."

Aboard the shady vessel, the captain straightened ropes and adjusted instruments to make ready for the journey. Every time he almost turned to look at them, something else caught his attention. He waved a bird away. He remembered something he set aside. He checked his maps, untied a knot and stowed his toolbox.

Damian smiled and winked at Catilen when she arched an eyebrow in his direction. He'd warned her about this the night before. The man would fuss over preparations all morning if they let him.

"Excuse me," Damian called, "Captain Jones?"

Startled, the captain turned to face them. "'Bout time! C'mon aboard. We gotta get goin'." He pointed to a board propped between the boat and the dock.

Catilen eyed the ramp with as much unease as the boat. Before her resolve could waver, Damian offered to take her pack. When she reached the boat, he handed all four packs across, followed by the coffee thermoses. Then he joined her in the shaky craft.

With the captain's help, they stowed their gear. The grey-haired seafarer settled behind the controls and brought the boat's engine to life. It sputtered and rattled, as though it might give out at any moment. Captain Jones motioned for Damian to toss the dock ties aside. With the craft unfettered, the captain turned the wheel and put them out to sea.

The boat bobbed on the tide as it cut across the waves. Cool morning wind ruffled Damian's hair. He sighed, content to be underway. He sat on a bench near the side-rail, smiling as he turned his eyes skyward.

The breeze brought storm clouds with it. Heavy grey bands hovered on the horizon as the first light of day stained the sky. As the boat bucked and dropped beneath him, the first stray burst of rain moistened his arms.

Damian didn't intend to let the weather dampen his enthusiasm, but it only took a few minutes to discover he was prone to seasickness.

* * * * *

Damian spent the two hours of transit bent over the side of the boat. Breakfast, he decided, tasted better the first time.

Storm winds kicked up increasingly energetic waves. Though they kept his stomach churning, they didn't seem to bother Catilen. She stayed by his side, rubbing his back and holding his hand, offering what comfort she could. Only his overwhelming desire to visit the mysterious island allowed him to endure the endless tossing.

He knew they were getting close when the boat slowed. He thought the decrease in

momentum would diminish his nausea, but lifting his head summoned another round of sickness. *It's a good thing Cat came on this excursion as a friend. This is hardly first date material.* But either his stomach was empty, or the decrease in speed helped, because Damian's equilibrium returned.

Just in time for the captain to hiss a curse as he poked his head out of the driver's compartment. "Patrol ship," he warned, pointing to a growing steel-grey bulk on the horizon. It loomed out of the ocean like a whale. *I wonder if this is how krill feel when they're about to be devoured. Except krill probably don't feel much and blue whales have neither machine guns nor teeth.*

"How do you feel?" Catilen asked, leaning close to keep her voice low.

"I'll be fine," Damian murmured, mustering a weary smile. *At least our boat ride is almost over.*

"Good." Catilen grinned, blue eyes sparkling like polished sapphires. "You can help keep watch."

He didn't know what she expected him to find; the captain already spotted the danger. But he nodded and scanned the sea for other signs of movement. At least the rain had stopped. The sun peeked through breaks in thinning clouds. Morning light glittered off the storm tossed waves. The resulting dazzle made it difficult to distinguish anything. Squinting and blinking against the sun's glare didn't help. He dismissed every motion as a trick of the light to sore eyes.

"Is there anything we can do?" Catilen asked anxiously.

The grey-haired sea captain tugged on his scraggly beard, then shook his head. He'd already cut the engine. "No place to hide on open seas, Miss."

"Hey, have a little faith," Damian exclaimed, extending a hand to his traveling companion. "Remember what happened this morning?" She laid her hand in his and he squeezed it gently.

If they stayed quiet, if they drew no attention to themselves, the patrol ship would pass them by. Belief gave magic power; those who wove sorcery without conviction condemned themselves to failure. Positive affirmation from the caster sufficed but, since he'd included Catilen's energy in the spell, her attitude could bolster the magic. She still looked worried, but he hoped his words planted the seed of confidence.

Despite faith in his abilities, Damian held his breath as the patrol ship neared. It towered above them like a New York City skyscraper. It looked deceptively close, as if he could lay hands on the smooth steel surface.

Minutes slowed to small eternities. He'd read that time seemed to slow in moments of dire need so the mind had a better chance to react. Not that he had options. They were too far from shore to swim, there might be dangers lurking in the water, and the soldiers would find them anyway.

Catilen's hand tightened around his. He took a deep breath and tried to project a sense of calm. If they were arrested, a clear, rational head would serve them best. *We could claim we didn't know this area was off limits. Captain Jones might be enough of an old coot to convince them.*

"This is the acid test," he whispered, barely daring to breathe the words, though they couldn't compete with the military carrier's engines.

The patrol vessel pulled alongside theirs. Damian's heart lodged in his throat. Then the ship drifted past. Another silent eternity and it turned in the distance to continue its search elsewhere. Their boat rocked on the disturbance cut by the larger craft's wake.

The rugged sea captain's eyes followed the patrol ship until it disappeared in the distance,

tugging his beard all the while.

Catilen's lips fell open, accompanied by a joyful squeal. *It worked* she mouthed, sharing with him a conspiratorial grin. "We must be getting close if we're running into patrols!"

"Hell, at this point, I'd swim the rest of the way," Damian declared.

Captain Jones crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Now we just need ta find a good harbor that ain't crawlin' with gubment."

Damian muttered a curse. *I didn't think of that.* They couldn't pull up to any old rock and hop onto shore. They needed a shallow cove or a sandy beach. *We can't spend a lot of time looking either. If we're still here when that patrol ship returns, our luck is unlikely to hold.*

Catilen's fingers closed tighter around his hand. It gave him an idea. "Cat," he whispered, "mind lending me some of your strength?" He knew he didn't need to explain.

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you sure? You shouldn't work energy if you're sick."

"I feel better," he insisted, though the steady bob of their boat reminded him of his stomach's precarious position. *What choice do we have? Catilen might be able to manipulate energy, but she can't do what I do.* It would be a shame to come this far and fail, especially after avoiding arrest.

Catilen hesitated, her gaze searching. Finally, she nodded. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. Damian felt her half of the thin barrier between them slip away, a tentative tendril of power snaking in his direction. He lowered his half of the shield and grasped the seeking energy. Their connection snapped into place as if they'd been working together for years.

Damian kept his eyes open when he worked. One of his teachers warned him about lowering his physical defenses and trusting his secondary senses to keep him out of danger. This way, if Catilen signaled trouble, he could react quickly and without disorientation. Seconds were precious in emergencies. He learned long ago how to tune out the physical world, letting it fade into the background while he reached for his arcane abilities.

He needed power. He could draw directly from himself, but he preferred not to. It exhausted him. The ocean made things doubly difficult; the energy he worked came from the earth, and the ground was far below them here. Water diluted his secondary senses and the ever-shifting waves threatened his concentration. They were close enough to the island, he could use its energy without much extra effort. The energy Catilen funneled to him provided the boost he needed.

Having never encountered another world, Damian couldn't define the island's energy as other-worldly. It had a foreign aura, different from any energy he'd ever worked before. It responded instantly to his touch, yet proved difficult to siphon.

It took several minutes to wrangle the wayward energy into submission. When he did, a wind kicked up in the east, shifting their tiny boat off course.

Captain Jones reached for the rudder, but Damian lifted a hand to stop him. It took a moment to settle back into the working after dividing his attention. The wind returned, pushing them further west.

"Let's follow the wind," he suggested, choosing his words carefully. Sailors were a superstitious bunch and this old man seemed particularly prone to supernatural beliefs. The grey-beard eyed him for a moment before returning to the driver's compartment.

While Captain Jones got the boat moving again, Damian dropped his hold over the foreign energy. He reconstructed his half of the barrier and felt Catilen raise hers as well. He pretended not to notice she hadn't reclaimed her hand.

"Well I'll be damned!" Captain Jones's exclamation startled him.

Momentarily blinded by sunlight reflecting off the waves, Damian couldn't tell what excited

him. Then the dazzle cleared from his gaze and he caught his first glimpse of their mystery island.

A small band of yellow sand hugged the ocean. It gave way after several feet to a thick jungle, crowded with undergrowth reaching for sunlight.

Looks tropical. Can it shift to other positions on Earth? Does it carry its weather with it? He scanned the shore, drinking in the details. When he spotted the sheltered cove that excited their captain, butterflies took flight in his stomach.

The perfect landing place! They never would have found it if the wind hadn't blown them off course. *Another successful working.*

The captain steered toward the cove's shallow water. "C'mon lovebirds," he called. "I gotta get outta here 'afore that patrol comes back."

Catilen flushed. Grinning, Damian released her hand and bent to retrieve their gear.

* * * * *

When Captain Jones disappeared with his small boat around the curvature of the island, it was easy to believe they were the last two people on Earth. Damian shouldered his packs and flashed Catilen a grin. "Well Eve," he teased, "shall we discover what this Eden has in store for us?"

Chuckling, Catilen shifted the weight of her pack. When none of the gear dug into her back, she followed.

The island certainly *looked* untouched. Tall trees swayed in a light breeze, the last remnant of the morning's storm. Thick vegetation slowed their progress since neither wanted to hack a path through the underbrush. Gnarled tree roots protruded from the ground at irregular intervals, threatening to trip the travelers if they lacked vigilance. Most of the plant life looked familiar, but some plants concealed unfamiliar thorns and brambles.

It took awhile to reacclimate to solid ground after a few hours swaying on ocean tides. The ground bucked beneath her feet, making the trek more difficult. Catilen braced herself against nearby tree trunks to keep her balance and slid her feet through tall grass to check for roots, stumps and other hidden obstacles.

Though shadows ruled beneath the canopy, the forest awakened around them as they traveled deeper. Birdcalls sounded over the incessant buzz of various insects. Dragonflies glided by at eye level. Crickets chirruped aimlessly. They did their best not to disturb the local creatures with the flashlights they needed to find their path. The smell of moss and damp earth filled their nostrils.

There was nothing alien about the landscape but it was still breathtaking. *Like something straight out of National Geographic.* Catilen craned her neck to trace the origin of the vines hanging over her head. They disappeared into the thick twining of tree branches far above.

They searched for fresh water first, needing a place to refill their canteens when they ran dry. They drank liberally, unused to the heavy humidity that accompanied the heat. Sweat matted Catilen's hair to her head by the time they stumbled on a stream weaving through the vegetation. They stopped to rest a few minutes and Damian gathered plant samples. When she had her breath back, Catilen assisted him. She cut leaves or petals from unfamiliar specimens, tucking them gently in plastic bags for later examination. They were careful not to kill any of the plants they wanted to study. *If any of them are alien or extinct, Damian's going to make some botanist very happy when we get home.*

They followed the river's shore, looking for a suitable campsite. A break in the canopy

above the river allowed them to track the sun's progress across the sky. They called a halt at noon, relieving themselves of the weight of their packs. Catilen took out a pair of Tupperware containers filled with fruit and vegetables she packed for lunch, holding one out for Damian to take.

He accepted the container and perched on a large rock to eat. "I spotted a sandy cove a little ways from here. If the river's shallow there, it might be the perfect place to set up camp."

"Then we can begin in earnest." Catilen bit into an apple slice, savoring the tangy juice. They needed a safe place if they wanted to explore the island's mystical forces.

"I'm fairly sure there's no one on the island," her companion mused as he munched on a celery stick. "I think we'd have seen signs of people by now."

Catilen swiped an arm across her forehead to keep sweat from dripping in her eyes. "Maybe it's better that way." She had hoped to find people here. Her mind conjured fantastic alien civilizations with a plethora of history and literature to peruse. She was as excited to discover a lost culture as Damian was to discover new forms of magic. But now she saw the pristine jungle, she didn't want civilization spoiling it. "Imagine what people would do to this place."

"I know what you mean. I'll admit, I've had a strange sense of foreboding ever since we stepped off the boat. Almost as if it's wrong for us to be here."

"I assure you," a deep, silky voice drifted across the river, "nothing could be further from the truth."

Chapter Four

Wrestling a tendril of the island's power free for his use, Damian jumped to his feet, ready to throw himself between Catilen and danger. The words passed through his ears without registering. His mind leapt to the patrol ship. They may have encountered Captain Jones after his departure. Damian hadn't dismissed the magic which obscured their presence, but the energy might have been consumed by deflecting the patrol. Too late, he realized he left the rickety boat no protection for the return journey.

A tall man stepped from the shadows thrown by the canopy. His appearance banished Damian's concerns. He wore ornate, red-silk robes, embroidered with an intricate pattern reminiscent of ancient Chinese finery. His frame was lean, but he had an air of authority. His face bore east Asian features and a well-maintained goatee. Ebony hair, bound in a braid, cascaded down his back. Despite the length of both his hair and robes, neither caught on the underbrush as he approached the riverbank.

"All are welcome on my island," the stranger announced with a sweeping gesture. "Especially two such unique individuals as yourselves."

"Forgive our intrusion," Catlien said, recovering her wits before Damian could get his thoughts in order. Her voice shook at first, but grew stronger as she went on, "We're explorers. We come seeking knowledge. You said this is *your* island? You live here?"

"Indeed. I am Lord Sentomoru, master of all you survey."

Damian's heart soared. *So the island is home to someone!* Had Sentomoru's ancestors been born on Earth? Had the island once inhabited the waters of ancient China? *We'll learn twice as much from him in half the time.*

"No forgiveness is required," Lord Sentomoru continued, heedless of Damian's excitement. "You haven't trespassed. I have come to welcome you as my guests. Please, accompany me back to my home. I think you will find it comfortable."

Catilen glanced at Damian, seeking his opinion. He wondered if his eyes reflected her uncertainty. He didn't trust easily. But it would be insulting to turn the man down and they didn't know if there were guards lurking in the trees.

He forced his lips to smile, hoping to reassure his companion. "Beats sleeping on the ground." He shrugged. "Why not?"

A hesitant smile crept across Catilen's lips, some of her tension easing as she regarded the stranger. "Thank you for your hospitality."

The two of them shouldered their packs and picked their way across the river bank. "Your island is lovely," Catilen said when they reached the other side.

"Thank you." Lord Sentomoru smiled as he led them beneath the shadowed canopy. "I'm quite proud of it."

They encountered none of the brambles or roots that obstructed their path earlier. Damian might have imagined it, but he thought the undergrowth shifted as they moved, opening a path for them to follow. He blinked and shook his head. The early morning, motion sickness and jungle trek must have taken more out of him than he realized. Plants couldn't pick up their roots and move whenever they wanted.

It could be sorcery. A quick glimpse at their host with his second-sight revealed a strange aura, tinged with power. But the energy required to shift such dense plant life would be astronomical, without accounting for the trees. *It's just a well-worn path. That must be why he*

intercepted us here.

When the trail opened up to a cobblestone road, Damian glanced left and right with chagrin. *A few minutes' walk in another direction and we'd have encountered this road hours ago.* It must be old and well-maintained if the jungle showed no signs of it. It might well pre-date the surrounding growth.

An ornate carriage waited in the center of the road, drawn by two black horses and two white horses. They must be dyed; how else could a man come by two pairs of identical horses?

A liveryman jumped down from the driver's seat, opened the door and motioned for them to enter. Damian stood back, allowing Catilen to board first. She shrugged the pack from her shoulders and stuffed it as far under the seat as it would go. Damian passed his pack to her before entering. Together, they crammed it underneath the same bench. They held the smaller bags in their laps, leaving the other bench for their host.

When they settled, Lord Sentomoru perched himself in the center of the opposite bench. The liveryman bowed, closed the door, and scrambled back into his seat. A moment later, they heard the crack of the reins and the horses lurched into motion.

Silence reigned while the travelers appraised their host and he examined each of them in return. Damian bit the inside of his lip, agitated by the way the other man's eyes lingered on Catilen. He shouldn't read too much into that first glance; Catilen was an impressive woman.

"We have many questions," Damian broke the silence, if only to give Sentomoru something other than his traveling companion to contemplate.

"I'd be happy to answer them all," their host replied. "Though I do request you answer one for me first."

Damian swallowed hard, worms wriggling in his stomach. *No doubt he wants to know why we snuck onto his island rather than presenting ourselves properly.*

"What are your names?" the lord of the island said instead.

Catilen flushed. Damian's ears burned. In all the excitement of meeting someone who *lived* on the island, they'd forgotten their half of the introductions.

"I'm Catilen." His traveling companion laid a hand on her chest, quicker to recover her senses again.

"And I'm Da-" He hesitated. The carriage rocked as it bounced over the uneven cobblestones. He hoped the jolt covered his hiccup. "David," he lied. True names had power. Catilen might have no reason to fear, but he followed old laws. If their host was a sorcerer, Damian didn't want him taking advantage of that power. He swallowed a lump of guilt. *If he is a sorcerer, he'll understand the precaution.*

"It's a pleasure to meet you Catilen and... David." Lord Sentomoru nodded to each traveler in turn. The look that accompanied Damian's false name suggested his host had caught him in the lie. Yet he said nothing, perhaps too polite to confront him. "What would you like to know?"

Damian had so many questions, he didn't know where to start. He wanted to ask about the web of ley lines on which the island rested, eager to know if they attributed to the power transfer that brought the island to their world and subsequently transported it elsewhere. But such a question would mark him as a sorcerer. He didn't want their host aware of his abilities yet. An ever-present sense of caution nagged at the back of his mind; *it's unwise to reveal yourself until you assess Sentomoru's intentions.*

As always, Catilen spoke without hesitation, thirsty for information. "How long have you been on this island?"

"My entire life," Lord Sentomoru answered with a cryptic smile.

Damian caught their host leveling another appreciative look in his companion's direction. He clenched his teeth. "How long has that been?" he pressed, hoping the question seemed innocent. It earned him a sharp look from Catilen.

Lord Sentomoru chuckled, his eyes dancing with mirth. "I am older than I appear, David, if that satisfies your curiosity. You've a sharp eye."

Again, Damian's ears burned. He hadn't spotted anything. He wanted their host to reveal something unflattering, such as advanced age. *Who looks the fool now?*

"And have you been to Earth before?" Catilen reclaimed the conversation, excitement thrumming in her voice. "I mean this Earth? Our Earth? Here?"

Sentomoru tilted his head, regarding her with a tolerant, smile. Based on his expression, Damian guessed he had this conversation often.

"What makes you think I've ever been elsewhere, my dear?" He leaned forward, interested in her answer.

Catilen's cheeks burned. It was a point artfully made, however loathe Damian was to admit it. *All our questions are based on wild assumptions.*

"We've never seen your island before," Catilen clarified. "It appeared out of nowhere a few days ago. From the disruption it caused to the ocean, I'm guessing it wasn't here before. We hoped you could tell us how you got here."

"And where you go when you leave," Damian added, yearning for the answer.

"Perhaps it is you that disappears," Sentomoru suggested, mischief glittering in his brown eyes. He chuckled and shook his head, long braid shifting from shoulder to shoulder. "I jest. I have been to Earth, and specifically your Earth, many times. In the past, my island has been popular among your people. I usually receive many guests, many more than have turned up this time. I shall have to work doubly hard on this visit. I don't wish my good reputation to flounder."

"Why do you have so many guests?" Damian asked, wondering why the man was so concerned with his reputation if he didn't intend to stay.

"Because I offer only the highest quality services." When Lord Sentomoru noted their blank expressions, his face fell. "You don't know?"

Damian exchanged a glance with his companion. From the look on her face, she had no more insight than he did.

"We're sorry," she said. "We don't know what you're talking about. We had no idea this island existed until a couple days ago."

Frowning, Sentomoru stroked his goatee. His eyes grew distant, as though he'd forgotten his company. "Could they have forgotten?" he muttered to himself, sounding unconvinced.

Damian shared another glance with his companion, but it yielded no more revelations than the last.

"Forgotten what?" Catilen pressed, startling the man out of his reverie.

"My bathhouse, of course."

"Bathhouse?" Catilen asked at the same time Damian muttered the word. Though many cultures once included public baths, the tradition had long since fallen to taboo. He thought he recalled an article about popular tourist destinations mentioning Japanese bathhouses built around hot springs and wondered if their host referred to something similar.

"Indeed," Sentomoru replied. Damian got the impression their star-struck looks pleased him. "People come from all lands to visit my bathhouse. We have the greatest variety of fragrant herbal water mixtures, the best maintained hot springs and the most relaxing massages, as well as countless wraps and treatments. It was once renowned on your world. I'm surprised it's been

forgotten, though I suppose that explains the lack of new arrivals.”

“You have guests from other places you’ve traveled?” Catilen demanded. “Here? Now?”

“Of course,” Lord Sentomoru chuckled. “Many find my lands too lovely to leave. They are welcome to stay as long as they like. As are you, my dear Catilen.”

When Catilen’s cheeks flamed red, Damian stiffened, trying not to gnash his teeth into powder. She never blushed when he complimented her. *Because you’re her friend. Sentomoru’s mysterious.* Not that she was dumb enough to fall for the charming stranger routine.

The military hasn’t given you trouble?” he asked, impatient to change the subject.

Sentomoru blinked, startled. His hand went back to his goatee, an unconscious sign of puzzlement. “None at all. They’ve been perfect guests. I think many of them will stay.”

Catilen rocked backward, startled by the statement rather than the bumpy ride. Damian’s stomach dropped; that didn’t sound right to him either.

“Odd...” she murmured while Damian bit his tongue against a less diplomatic response. “Their orders should prevent them from making use of your services.”

“Discipline is usually very strict,” Damian agreed. “I can’t imagine their commanders approving shore leave on a place like this.”

Sentomoru made a soft sound while he considered their words. His eyes grew distant, as though he tried to recall something from long ago. “Well they were quite obstinate. But their commanding officer relented after I spoke with him. As far as I know, he’s having a marvelous time.”

Catilen looked anxious, unsettled by the revelation. He tried to project an air of reassurance, but his heart wasn’t in it. He knew enlisted men. It didn’t matter the branch, there was no nonsense in the military. They didn’t slouch. They didn’t abandon their duty posts. And they didn’t go on vacation when they were supposed to maintain a barricade. *Do their commanders back home know they’re shirking their duties?*

The carriage turned a corner and left the jungle behind. Sentomoru held up a hand to forestall any further conversation, directing their attention out the window.

“Now you can see for yourselves the amenities I offer.”

Damian leaned forward to see around Catilen’s shoulder as they both pressed their faces to the window.

Sentomoru’s home was situated in a valley, nestled against the side of a mountain. Thick mist obscured the white-capped peak. The bathhouse jutted from the mountainside, sloping roof gables sweeping out from the rock face. It may have been carved from the stone, with half the structure still inside the mountain. The architecture was Chinese in style — or perhaps it was Japanese, Damian wasn’t sure. *He mentioned hot springs. Am I looking at an active volcano?*

The jungle had been breathtaking; the valley was awe-inspiring. The bathhouse looked even more impressive when the carriage rolled to a halt and they stepped into the open. A waterfall plunged over a sheer cliff several feet above the building. Tiny rainbows danced in the thin mist rising from the pool at the base of it. The waterfall pool took up one side of a large courtyard. The cobblestone path cut through the center, terminating at the main entrance.

While the two of them stood staring like slack-jawed idiots, servants rushed to collect their bags from the carriage. More appeared to tend the horses. Sentomoru stood with his hands tucked into his sleeves, pleased by their reactions to his domicile.

Damian grew self-conscious, keenly aware he’d just spent hours hiking through the wilderness. And a few hours before that with his head bent over the side of a boat. Now he stood outside the entrance to a place that would demolish the reputation of every five-star resort he’d

ever heard of, covered in sweat and grime.

From the look on Catilen's face, she felt the same way. She tugged on her t-shirt as if it chafed. "Perhaps we should get cleaned up..."

Sentomoru grinned as if he'd been waiting for one of them to say that. "You're in luck. There's no better place to refresh yourself than a bathhouse." He clapped his hands. A trio of uniformed staff surrounded each of the guests, guiding them out of the courtyard in different directions.

Chapter Five

The steaming water smelled of rose and lavender. With a smile, Catilen closed her eyes and sank deeper into the bath, until only her face remained above the surface.

Every guest room in the bathhouse came equipped with a curious hollow tap. The staff showed her how to insert herbal packets in the nozzle. When activated, the herbs infused the water on the way to her tub. So long as the tap remained on, the water would cycle, keeping the bathwater clear and the herbal scent strong. Before their departure, the staff warned her to replace the packet every forty minutes. She didn't plan to linger that long.

A jar of sweet smelling sand sat beside the tub. Catilen took a tentative handful, testing it against one arm. It was soft, like soap shavings, but mildly abrasive. Pressing hard, she scrubbed till her skin turned pink, feeling clean only after scouring the sweat and grime from her skin.

Refreshed, Catilen reclined while the water soothed the aches from her muscles. Gone were the morning's troubles, choppy seas and fear of discovery, washed away with the dirt. Who'd have thought their mystery island included a five star resort and spa? She made a mental note to ask Lord Sentomoru how much they owed for his services. She doubted their credit cards would be valid here, which might make payment difficult.

It wasn't a big enough problem to keep her awake; she caught herself dozing off. Only after shaking off a week's worth of worries did she realize how they affected her. She hadn't slept much.

Well there were things to do. Even last night, she laid atop the covers staring at the ceiling. After an hour of watching the clock numbers change, she got up to tend her last loose ends.

Her body yearned for a nap. Twenty minutes would recharge her, but she couldn't sleep. Not when there was so much to do, so much to learn. She had to be back at work on Monday morning. Her minutes were too precious to spend napping. She forced herself to abandon the steaming bath, wrapping a blanket-sized towel around her shoulders.

She deactivated the tap and threw out the spent herbal bundle. A basket of fresh packs, in a variety of scents, waited on the counter for her next bath. She spent a few minutes drying her hair, trying to keep it from frizzing in the humidity. As she worked, her fatigue fell away.

Can this really be the same day? And only half over. It's amazing what a couple of hours can change.

Kneeling next to her suitcase, Catilen searched for something to wear. She'd packed for camping. Despite her overwhelming desire to meet alien people and learn about their worlds, she'd never expected to meet anyone here.

She settled on a swimsuit and donned a light beach sweater over top. It seemed appropriate for this kind of resort. *I'm in better shape than the soldiers. They'd only have their uniforms to wear.* She ran a brush through her shoulder-length hair and pulled it into a bun atop her head.

Still strangely self-conscious, Catilen peeked through her door before venturing into the empty hallway. Uncertain where to find Damian, her host, or any of the bathhouse's amenities, she chose a direction at random.

Most of the building was constructed of white marble, with a spattering of sandstone. The doors and accents were constructed from a dark, polished wood. The architecture fell somewhere between Chinese and Japanese styles, decorative but subtle. The roofs were high, the corridors airy. The colors were mellow, with plants decorating the halls as often as tapestries and paintings. She stopped occasionally to marvel at the artwork, wondering where it came from. She

was keen to find other people, hoping the guests would speak of their homelands, histories and traditions.

As she turned a corner and passed another hallway junction, Lord Sentomoru materialized out of the shadows cast by a large, leafy plant. Catilen nearly leapt out of her skin. She laid a hand against her chest while she caught her breath.

“Forgive me.” The lord of the island inclined his head politely. “I did not mean to startle you.”

“It’s my fault,” Catilen insisted. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

Lord Sentomoru smiled, as if to dismiss her worries. “Are you feeling better?”

“Much,” she confirmed without hesitation.

Her answer seemed to please him. “Are you lost?”

“You’d have to have a destination to be lost.” Catilen shrugged. “I thought I should go find Da-” She stopped short, almost forgetting her traveling companion’s assumed name. She wasn’t sure why he chose to lie, though she had an inkling it had something to do with his craft. She needed to be careful. One slip of the tongue would reveal his deception. Even a generous man, like their host, might take exception to dishonesty, no matter how insignificant the lie seemed. She repeated the false name in her head several times to get used to it.

“David,” she corrected in a rush, hoping her smile would cover the stumble.

Sentomoru’s expression suggested he caught the stutter, but chose to ignore it. “As far as I know, no one has seen him. He might still be soaking.”

Or he could have decided to take a nap. He probably hadn’t slept any better than she had. Plus, he’d spent half the morning heaving over the edge of a boat. *I shouldn’t disturb him if he’s sleeping.*

“Then I remain destination-less. I’m certain you’re busy, so I’ll jus-”

“Not at all.” Lord Sentomoru shook his head, bouncing his braid from shoulder to shoulder again. “I’d be honored to give you a tour of my abode. I can introduce you to the available services. I wouldn’t want you getting bored.”

“The honor is mine,” Catilen replied, touched by the offer. Considering the size of the bathhouse, and the number of people they glimpsed in the courtyard, the man couldn’t possibly offer such kindness to all his guests.

Lord Sentomoru bowed and offered his arm. After a moment of hesitation, Catilen laid her hand on his elbow. He straightened at her touch and led her down the hall, keeping a respectful distance, despite their contact.

Her guide navigated the hallways with ease, leading her past several closed doorways to a tower that housed a spiral staircase. Leaning over the rail to glance up and down, Catilen got her first impression of how many floors the bathhouse hosted. It was larger than she imagined. The lowest floors must extend below ground.

Windows lined the walls on the far side of the tower, separated only by thin wooden frames, allowing guests to trace the mountainside to which each level corresponded. A web of hiking trails wound through gardens and past high ledges. Sentomoru took her up a flight of stairs, around one of the stair rails and through a glass door. The path led to a wide stone balcony, which overlooked the courtyard below. He positioned her closest to the railing and slowed his pace so she could watch the scenery unfold beneath them.

At the base of the bathhouse, the waterfall emptied into the valley. From this height, the people in the courtyard looked like ants, darting from paths to pools to doorways. The cobblestone road that brought them to the bathhouse disappeared into the jungle beyond the

valley. Following the opposite fork, she caught sight of a clearing, dotted with brightly colored buildings. The village was accompanied by acres of cultivated farmland.

Catilen marveled at the magnificence of it; civilization huddled at the edge of the wilderness. Humans and nature forming a symbiotic relationship. People living off the land without plundering its natural resources or beauty. *If only there were more places like this. A true paradise.*

“Your island is beautiful,” Catilen murmured, her voice tinged with awe. “Maybe the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.”

“Thank you, Sentomoru replied, bowing his head with humility. “I have worked for centuries to make it so. I’m glad you find it appealing.”

“Centuries?” Only her host’s unbroken stride kept Catilen moving.

The lord of the isle chuckled at her consternation, amused rather than mocking. “Perhaps I understated the difference between my age and my appearance. But I feel age doesn’t matter where being a friend, or a good host, is concerned.”

Catilen’s cheeks burned. Why did he make her feel like an over-excited university freshman?

“Forgive me, your age is none of my business. It’s just that, no one on Earth — at least our Earth — lives that long.

“I am aware.” The island lord’s voice grew somber. She thought she detected a hint of pity. “That is why I’m happy to have your people visit my island. If a person’s life is brief, they deserve to enjoy that time, do they not?”

Catilen tried not to frown while she contemplated his words. His generosity was admirable, but his pity was misplaced. Humans had plenty of time for fulfilling lives, though she could see why someone as long-lived as her host might disagree.

“It’s kind of you to share your home with us.” This didn’t seem the time for a deep, philosophical discussion. “David and I live in a city, the opposite of your island in every way.”

“Man has a natural desire to use things.” Sentomoru’s smile grew cold, his tone cynical. “How unfortunate, they also forget those resources are finite. I have the advantage of control. This is my island; I manage it as I please. I limit the number of guests, control the placement of construction projects and reject anything that encroaches its natural beauty.”

“You do a good job of it.”

Sentomoru led her back inside. They descended a spiral staircase, carved from the mountain. So many feet had trod the stone over the years, the middle of each step bore a depression. The stairwell had no windows but, based on the number of landings they passed, Catilen guessed they hadn’t gone far before her guide indicated a branching hallway.

They entered a large, circular room with a slightly sloped floor. Three of the walls were set with large, open windows, looking out over the valley below. She couldn’t see any of the bathhouse from here, but caught sight of the waterfall tumbling over a nearby ledge. The rush and tumble filled the dome, barely muted by the glass. A mosaic covered the final wall. It spilled onto the floor, broken only by the circular pools that dotted the room, each wreathed by thin wisps of steam. The scent of herbs failed to mask the sulfur smell. Since none of the pools had taps, Catilen guessed they were fed by natural hot springs.

Before she had a chance to ask, a crowd of patrons burst through the wide double doors on the other side of the room. They laughed as they walked, though Catilen couldn’t discern individual conversations through the buzz of chatter. Several men broke away, racing between the pools before leaping into one near the center of the room. Giggling girls in bikinis hurried to

join them.

The glint of silver in the light drew her eyes to the raucous group. A closer look revealed familiar buzz cuts and dog tags. These must be the soldiers Sentomoru mentioned. A pair of them splashed water in each other's direction, part of some mock battle. It struck her as odder than anything else about this trip. Soldiers didn't behave that way when they were supposed to be on duty. *Somehow I don't think learning about the local population is supposed to include frolicking in hot springs.*

She didn't *sense* anything strange. There was nothing sinister about contentment and joy. She'd have been suspicious if anyone managed to be gloomy in a place like this.

There was a distinct void where her host stood, impossible to penetrate with her secondary senses. But even that wasn't unusual. Some people had a natural stubbornness that allowed them to shield without thought. Others learned without being aware of it. Privacy was a state of mind, and private people buried their emotions deep.

In a way, it was refreshing. Sensing the emotions of others made her an outsider, a freak. In her youth, she hadn't understood the way other children reacted to her. *Catilen knows things. Catilen is different.* And anything different was frightening.

If not for her mother, she'd have gone mad. Delana Taylor was an expert on her daughter's affliction, having suffered it all her life. She insisted Empathy was a gift. *It only seems like a curse until you learn to control it, to help other people.*

But using her 'gift' to help others meant taking risks, gambling the revelation wouldn't mark her for later shame. She achieved control only after hard lessons, bitterly learned, none of which made her inclined to share her mother's perspective.

Then again, Delana never cared if people called her eccentric. The idea of being *normal* appealed to Catilen. Not that she lived her entire life in isolation. In recent years, there'd been Damian. She could sense him. She suspected he let her, though he didn't know about her abilities. He'd never expressed discomfort with her eccentricities; then again, he had his own.

No, her inability to sense Sentomoru wasn't a mystery. But what report did those soldiers intend to deliver at the end of their vacation?

"Pardon me." She slid her hand from her host's elbow. "I think I recognize a few of the soldiers and I'd like to talk with them, if you don't mind."

"Of course." Lord Sentomoru bowed his head. "I shall wait for you here."

"Thank you." Catilen picked her way across the floor, careful not to slip where the tile was damp from splashes.

"Excuse me," she called when she reached the side of the pool, announcing her presence before she got too close. She didn't want one of them knocking her off balance when she interrupted their game.

Two soldiers ceased their splashing and turned expectant gazes in her direction. Both heads bore a thin layer of brown fuzz.

"Sorry to interrupt." She smiled as she knelt next to them. "I wanted to ask you about the island."

"Sure," said the first, mirroring her smile. A jagged scar on the back of his right shoulder suggested this wasn't his first tour of duty.

"Ask away," the other agreed with a wave of his hand.

"I've only just arrived, and you seem to be enjoying yourselves. I wondered if you might give me some advice."

"You're in for a treat." The first soldier grinned.

“Yeah, this place is great!” his companion agreed, green eyes gleaming. “You should hit the beach. This place gets serious waves.”

“I’m rather fond of the hiking, myself. I went all the way to the peak my first day. Still can’t get over the view.”

“My name’s Catilen, by the way.” She laid a hand on her chest.

“Tony.” The green-eyed soldier jabbed a thumb at his chest.

“And I’m Paul.” The scarred man offered his hand for her to shake. “Nice to meet you.”

Catilen accepted, her grip firm. The moment her skin came into contact with Paul’s, her entire arm froze. A numbing tingle prickled her flesh, a thousand tiny pins and needles relentlessly jabbing her arm.

She wanted to jerk her hand away, but couldn’t move, stunned by the force of the reaction. The sensation spread.

The floor fell away, opening a yawning black pit. The darkness became a tangible thing, alive and breathing. The formless force shifted until it resembled a creature, the gaping void its jaw. It snarled, threatening to lunge upward, snap its teeth closed and consume her.

Chapter Six

Her vision cleared, revealing cerulean sky broken only by the occasional wooden window frame. Tufts of steam danced in slanted shafts of sunlight. The falling sensation hadn't been an illusion. She lay on the hard tile floor, trying to regain control of her wits.

Paul shook her shoulders. His lips moved, unaccompanied by sound. His hands spread the freezing sensation down her other arm and up her neck. The dark creature loomed over his shoulder, the shadow of a wolf baring its teeth. She shuddered.

It isn't real. She tried to speak, but her voice stuck in her throat. Her tongue felt thick, too large for her mouth. It had been a long time since she experienced such a compelling manifestation. Icy tendrils gripped her limbs, beckoning her toward that endless abyss.

She closed her eyes. Focusing her strength, she jerked out of the soldier's grip and rolled on her side. She retreated inward, concentrating on the sound of her breath, banishing all other thoughts. In and out. Slow and steady.

Warmth returned. Her sense of impending doom receded. She blinked, testing her vision. Her eyes focused on Lord Sentomoru. He hovered at her elbow, Tony and Paul peering over each of his shoulders. Beyond them a dozen pairs of eyes stared at her.

"What happened?" Tony asked, casting a dark look at his friend.

"I don't know!" Paul insisted. "I swear I didn't do anything!"

"I...I'm all right," Catilen stammered, pushing herself upright with shaking arms.

Sentomoru pressed fingers to her elbow. When she didn't brush them away, he helped her stand.

"I'm sorry," she repeated as her voice returned. "It wasn't your fault, Paul. I'm not feeling well." She mustered a wan smile for him.

Both soldiers offered smiles in return.

"Feel better," Paul said.

"We'll talk later," Tony added as he turned, motioning for the crowd to disperse.

"Would you like to return to your room and rest?" the lord of the island asked as he led her toward the wide double doors, his voice thick with concern.

"That seems best," Catilen agreed, leaning against her host, unsteady on her own. "And David. I need to talk to David."

"Of course. I'll send for him."

Catilen gripped Sentomoru's arm for balance as he led her up a small set of four stairs and down another hallway. Her heart raced at the memory of the beast, made of midnight, hissing horror, rows of razor teeth but no eyes. *It was only a projection. The manifestation of some dark emotion. Hatred maybe, or fear.* A soldier could carry that kind of darkness with him. Some traumatic experience, latent, buried, or repressed.

Only extreme negative emotions conjured visions. This one caught her off guard, even with her shields at full strength. She didn't want to imagine an incident capable of generating that lingering shadow. *Paul may be enjoying his impromptu vacation, but it hasn't banished his bleak history.*

Her guide halted. Glancing up, she realized they had reached her room, though she couldn't remember the journey. Guilt joined the churning emotions in her stomach, enhancing the throb behind her temples. *He's going to think I've lost my mind.*

"Sorry," she mumbled, fumbling with the key as she unlocked the door. "I'm not sure what

came over me...”

“Nonsense. There’s nothing to forgive.” Sentomoru dismissed her apology with a wave. “Rest. I will summon your friend and ask one of my physicians to look in on you. Let no worries trouble you on my island, sweet Catilen. I am here to look after everything.” He left her in the doorway, gliding down the hall and around a corner.

Using the sturdy wooden frame for support, Catilen retreated into her room and closed the door. She left it unlocked for Damian’s arrival. How strange to stay in a resort with old-style locks. Everything was electronic now. In a hotel, she’d have to prop the door open if she didn’t want to answer it. She preferred it this way; no one could tell the door was unlocked from the outside. Her throbbing temples preferred it too.

She picked her way gingerly across the room, settled on the soft mattress and sunk her head into a pillow. Trying to keep her head still, she peeled off the damp beach cover and tossed it aside. When she was comfortable, she plucked an extra pillow from the pile and laid it across her eyes.

Still and silent in the darkness, Catilen tried to relax. She drew in a deep breath and held it, willing the pain behind her eyes to ease. She exhaled slowly, counting the seconds. She went on like that for some time. Breath. Pause. Silent plea. Exhale. After several repetitions, the pounding began to fade.

By the time she heard a knock, her headache had subsided enough to ignore. She lifted the pillow from her face and set it aside before calling for her visitor to enter. She assumed it was Damian come to check on her.

It wasn’t.

A wizened old man shuffled across her room, dragging a large leather bag. He might have been centuries old. A pair of tiny spectacles perched on his nose. Wrinkles almost obscured his eyes. He hunched forward when he walked, using the bag like a walker. His blotchy lips formed a warm smile as he knelt next to her bed, opened his bag and rummaged through it. She scrambled to sit up.

“Greetings young ma’am. Lord Sentomoru said you weren’t feeling well and asked old Doctor Quamoto to come check on you.”

She vaguely recalled Sentomoru’s offer to send a physician. She should have refused. The incident had nothing to do with her physical health, but she didn’t want to admit the truth.

“That’s very kind.” She plastered a fake smile on her face. “But it was just a dizzy spell. Nothing to wor-”

“Now, now, my dear,” the doctor interrupted, giving her hand a patronizing pat, “let me be the judge of that.”

Quamoto produced a strange device from the depths of his leather bag. It looked like a divining rod, though the idea was ludicrous. He dangled the twisted metal contraption over her head, a look of intense concentration on his face.

Catilen feared a magic probe, worrying her shields might buckle in the wake of the incident. The intense manifestation left her secondary senses sore. But she relaxed when no energy flowed from the doctor or his instrument.

With a grunt, the old man returned the gadget to his bag. A moment later, he lifted a stethoscope. Or at least, Catilen thought it was a stethoscope, until he pressed it to her neck. She bit the inside of her lip, wondering if this was a joke.

“As I suspected,” the doctor announced as he returned the not-stethoscope to his bag. “A simple case of the vapors. A common occurrence amongst women, due to their delicate, fragile

natures.” Again he patted her hand.

Before she had a chance to admonish the old doctor, the door jerked open. Damian rushed through, concern etched into his features. “Cat, are you all right?” he demanded between heavy breaths.

“I’m fine.” Her false smile grew genuine. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

Doctor Quamoto harrumphed, narrowing his eyes at Damian. “If people will allow her to rest,” he huffed, as if Catilen hadn’t spoken, “she’ll be fine in a few hours.” He turned his attention back to his patient. “You just need some fortifying tea. That should stave off any further episodes.” He retrieved a kettle from the room’s small table, filled it, and set it atop a burning brazier meant to heat the room. While he waited for it to boil, he explored his bag for the proper herbs.

Catilen puffed out her cheeks like a chipmunk, glaring daggers at the back of the doctor’s head. A lecture on proper bedside manner died on her tongue when Damian sat on the edge of the bed and reached for her hand.

“You sure you’re all right?” He brushed the fingers of one hand across her forehead. “Sentomoru said you collapsed.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted in a tone that suggested she didn’t want to be asked again.

Damian pressed his lips into a thin line. She couldn’t tell if he was displeased or duly chastised, but he nodded.

Catilen cleared her throat. Adopting a sickly-sweet tone, she batted her eyes at the old man. “Doctor Quamoto, thank you so much for your assistance. You must have many duties to attend and I don’t wish to keep you. David can help me with the tea. I’ll drink every drop, don’t you worry.”

The doctor frowned over his shoulder. For a moment, she feared he’d see through the act. Then he smiled, retrieved his leather bag and waved as he crossed the room.

“Just you take care of yourself, young ma’am. Come see old Quamoto if you feel weak again.”

When his footsteps receded down the hall, Catilen snatched a pillow from the bed and launched it at the door. It bounced harmlessly to the floor, but she felt better.

Meanwhile, Damian located a mug and poured her a cup of tea. “Are you sure you want to drink this?” His upper lip curled with disgust. “It smells awful.”

Catilen regarded the steaming brew. The sieve must have failed; herb flecks floated in the ugly brown liquid. She inhaled deeply, satisfied she could identify most of the herbs. *Echinacea*, *rose hip*, *chamomile*, *nettle* and a *hint of peppermint*. She set the mug aside to cool.

“It can’t hurt.”

“Cat... What happened?”

Catilen shifted, propping herself against a pair of pillows. To discourage the dull ache roused by the commotion, she massaged her temples.

“I approached a few of the soldiers Sentomoru mentioned. Their names were Tony and Paul. They looked like they were having a merry old time. I can’t imagine their commanders intended them to horse around in the hot springs, which is where I found them.”

She hesitated. She could pass the incident off as sickness, but she didn’t want to lie to Damian. She’d decided last night, beneath the full moon, to tell him the truth. That didn’t make it easy. No matter how understanding he seemed, she feared rejection. Her honesty ended more relationships than she cared to recount.

But Damian *had* to be different. He had abilities of his own. Considering all his strange

theories and bizarre methods, he *must* accept her explanation.

“What did they say?” Damian prompted when she didn’t resume her tale.

She drew a deep breath and let the words tumble free. “I *felt* something when I shook Paul’s hand. My whole arm went numb. I got dizzy. The floor opened up beneath me and I saw this... creature. It was terrifying, Damian, made of darkness, full of all the scary things people worry lurk in the black of night.”

Her companion arched an eyebrow, but said nothing, waiting for her to finish. She shuddered and he laid a reassuring hand on her arm.

“I can... sense the emotions of others. If the people around me are happy, so am I. And not in the sense that laughter is contagious. I mean, it alters my mood. Their joy becomes mine. If people are upset, or scared, or angry, I feel that too. And sometimes, when there’s something traumatic in a person’s past, something like this will happen. A manifestation. A vision.” She paused, searching his face for an unfavorable reaction. “Do you understand?”

He smiled. The rush of relief left her lightheaded.

“Of course I do.” He took her hand and squeezed it. The acceptance in his voice thawed her fear and warmed her heart. “I’ve heard of Empaths before, but I never met one. Or knew I met one, anyway. Were you born with the ability?”

“I was,” Catilen admitted, breathless with elation. “These manifestations are just something I’ve learned to live with. I block most of them without thinking about it anymore. But this one was strong. It must have been recent. Or else, the cause changed his entire life.”

“You don’t think...” Damian hesitated. “Could it have been a premonition?”

She shook her head. “My abilities don’t work like that. I sense what someone feels, or lingering emotions they might not acknowledge. But if it isn’t active, I can’t detect it. The cause of a manifestation might be buried in the subconscious, but it still exerts influence on the mind.”

“So it doesn’t indicate a forming action.”

“Most people aren’t aware they carry these things with them. Those that are, usually have some way of dealing with it. Paul didn’t seem unhappy. So, it’s probably something he experienced during in his military service.”

“I’m sorry you encountered that. I’ll understand if you don’t want to stay.”

“No,” she insisted without hesitation. How to express her happiness, her relief, at his acceptance? She realized she didn’t need words. Peeling back the outer layer of her shields, she allowed him to *feel* her joy.

After a moment, his side of the barrier dissolved. On the other side lay Damian’s elation at earning her trust. Further reassurance he understood her struggle. A silent promise he’d never use this knowledge against her.

The moment his exhilaration echoed hers, something snapped into place; a connection she never wanted to sever. If they learned nothing of this island, if they returned home tired, frustrated and empty-handed, this single moment made it all worthwhile. For the first time, she wanted a relationship beyond friendship.

He must have sensed her desire for contact. He lifted his hand at the same time she lifted hers. Their fingers entwined and she laid her head on Damian’s shoulder.

“We should enjoy our time here,” she murmured, “We’ll never get another chance like this.”

“I’d like to explore some more. This place is like a maze. As soon as I left my room, I got turned around. The corridors twist and branch and double back. If Sentomoru hadn’t fetched me, I probably never would have found you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t come looking for you. When Sentomoru said no one had seen you, I

thought you might be asleep. I didn't want to disturb you.

Her guilt must have translated across their link. Damian answered it with a surge of reassurance.

"Perhaps I can persuade our host to include me in his next tour. Aside from learning my way around, it might help me pick up some clues. So much knowledge has been lost. If I can bring home a small fraction of the island's potential, it will be a lot. Especially if we determine how it travels between dimensions."

"Careful," Catilen cautioned. "We may need to be *on* the island to learn how it shifts." It was safe to assume the island hadn't visited their Earth in a long time, since their history made no mention of it. If it traveled in a set rotation, or followed a configuration of ley lines, they may not have a route home. Catilen wasn't invested enough in the mystery to take that risk.

Picking up her hesitation, Damian projected comfort. "I know. I'm glad for any chance to study here, however brief." He grinned, leaning closer. "You know what else I'm glad about?"

As long as their connection remained unshielded, their emotions flowed unfiltered between each other. Before he could speak, his sentiments washed over her like waves caressing the beach. A bright spark. A warm embrace. A feather-light touch. Her heart pounded at the thrill. No one had ever looked at her that way, not after discovering she was *strange*.

"Sharing all this with you," Damian answered his own question, his hot breath caressing her cheek.

Catilen didn't bother with words. Inadequate things. Pale shadows of reality. Why quantify her feelings when she could simply share them? Damian's jubilation only compounded hers.

Always before, she'd resisted this, careful to keep her distance. She'd been good company, and a sympathetic ear, but never more than a friend. Now she sensed his hesitation, offering her one last chance to escape.

Catilen never wavered. She could search a thousand years and never find someone more willing to love her for who she was.

She crossed the last inch between them, heart thudding with anticipation, breath catching in her throat as the heat from Damian's mouth melded with hers.

The moment their lips touched, there came a knock at the door.

Chapter Seven

Startled, Catilen pulled away before their kiss had a chance to blossom. She wanted to throw another pillow at the door, but refrained. That would be the old doctor come to check on her again, to make sure she kept her promise.

Her frustration echoed back to her as she smothered the impulse, her connection with Damian so natural she kept forgetting about it. Before the bouncing annoyance built into rage, Catilen reconstructed her half of the barrier.

Her fingers trailed down Damian's arm as she drew away, trying to soothe his bruised ego. Surprise darted across the connection before he, too, renewed his shield.

Retrieving the lukewarm tea, Catilen tiptoed to the bathroom. She upended the mug close to the drain, to avoid leaving evidence, though she left a few drops at the bottom as proof the tea had been sipped. Then she plucked the pillow off the floor and tossed it toward the bed. Damian caught it and set it in the proper place while she answered the door. She was about to present her mug, along with high praise for the doctor's remedy, but the wizened old physician wasn't her visitor.

"Lord Sentomoru," she stammered, seeking a place to set the empty mug. She settled on a small table just inside the door. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all." A charismatic smile split the lord of the island's lips. They must ache by the end of the day. "I apologize if I startled you. Doctor Quamoto said he left you with one of his remedies. He suggested your condition was improving and I thought I should check in."

"Ah, yes. His restorative brews work wonders." She didn't want her host probing deeper into the day's incident. Best if he thought her weak or ditzzy. "Will you thank him for me?"

"I shall. Since you're feeling better, I wonder if you'd like to continue our tour?"

"You aren't busy?" He must have managers to tend day-to-day business. He couldn't give all his guests this level of attention.

"There's nothing which cannot wait. Please allow me to redeem my establishment's reputation. I would hate for the day to end on a negative note."

Part of her wanted to beg off, linger in her room and discover where Damian's kiss had been headed. But that wasn't why they'd come. *There'll be plenty of time when we get home.*

She opened the door wider as she turned, allowing the two men to see each other. "Still interested in that tour?"

Damian's eyes narrowed as he swept to his feet, but the expression disappeared quickly. It wasn't as if Sentomoru rushed over to interrupt; her companion had to realize that.

"I was just saying, I'd hate to go home with nothing to talk about but corridors."

As Catilen glanced over her shoulder, Sentomoru's lips formed a thin line. Like Damian's displeasure, it lasted only a moment. Did he think Damian was serious?

"Yes, we must fix that." Sentomoru gestured toward the hall. "Please, follow me."

"Just a moment." Darting to her suitcase, Catilen grabbed another light sweater to wear over her bathing suit. She slipped it over her shoulders, took Damian's hand and tugged him toward the door. "Let's go."

Sentomoru glanced at their twined hands for a moment before he led them down the corridor. Perhaps he meant to offer his arm, but thought better of it when he saw she had an escort.

As he guided them through the twisting hallways, their host suggested helpful references for

future navigation. Their first stop was the public bathing area, the most famed section of the bathhouse. They crossed a wooden walkway, suspended high above the steamy pools. Decorative screens divided the large chamber into sections, providing backdrops for each area. The delicate silk, stretched between polished wood frames, depicted stylistic cherry blossoms, humming birds, spiders, and bamboo shoots.

Different herbal and floral scents wafted on the rising steam. The best mixtures and soaps were only available in the main chamber, Sentomoru explained. Piping the infused water to every room required too complex a system, and the best mixtures needed time to set. The herbal packets provided privacy and convenience, but paled in comparison to the hand-mixed water maintained by the staff. Some pools could be reserved for private use, though most were left open to the public due to limited space.

Peering over the railing, Catilen caught her first glimpse of visitors from other realms. Some guests wore bathing suits while they soaked. Others brazenly bathed in the nude. Most were humanoid, with characteristics that marked them as alien. Several species bore scales of various hues. A pair of bead and shell adorned antelope horns rose from a woman's head. Feathers extended from the back of a couple's neck, but she couldn't tell if they were part of some elaborate costume or grew that way.

Bathroom staff moved among the guests, distributing brightly colored towels, drinks, snacks, fragrant soaps and oils. They wore red and black kimono to identify themselves. Most of them looked human. She supposed it made sense; how many grew up in the village?

Seeing so many alien species lounging in the baths, laughing and chatting, awakened her excitement. Breathless, she asked Sentomoru to identify several of the species, committing the names to memory. The antelope woman was a Lisitu, from a place called Nuniek that Catilen couldn't wait to ask about. The bird couple were Tyrrkarr and they called their home Yetakkorr. Sentomoru pronounced each of the r sounds with a rolling trill. The scaled species would be harder to keep track of, since it seemed they came from different places, identifiable by the patterns of their scales rather than their coloration.

"Is there a way down there from up here?" she asked, eager to speak to them all.

"It's a long walk," Sentomoru cautioned. "And there are many things I'd like to show you. If you're interested in conversation, it may be best to wait for dinner. Most guests attend, many as eager for conversation as you."

Blushing, Catilen motioned for Sentomoru to continue. Interrupting vacations to satisfy her curiosity would be rude. And she did want to see the rest of the bathhouse. Still, she scanned the scene for details until they passed out of the chamber.

How long did guests stay? Did the island visit some worlds with predictable regularity? Did the bathhouse serve as some exotic Caribbean cruise of the universe? Why hadn't Earth been included for so long?

Getting ahead of yourself again, she chided as they reached their next destination.

The bathhouse contained four large swimming pools of various depths. Diving boards and water slides lined the edges. The swimming area was rowdy, the ambient buzz louder than the tranquil bath chamber. Some guests swam laps. Young men splashed young women. Others lounged on chairs or towels, enjoying drinks distributed by the staff.

Another chamber hosted traditional hot tubs, heated via electricity. When they cycled back to the hot springs, Sentomoru confirmed they were natural, the dome carved from the side of the mountain. Catilen wondered if the bathhouse sat atop a dormant volcano, or if some arcane force kept the hot springs flowing. Hollywood taught her never to trust the idea of an extinct volcano.

The tour eventually took them outside. In the main courtyard, guests swam in the pool at the base of the waterfall. Others lounged nearby, soaking in the cool spray. Tiny rainbows danced in the mist. The lake was clear, obscured only by the froth churned up by the waterfall's descent. Sand lined the lake basin and decorative stones were set around the edge. The river seemed to flow into a cave behind the waterfall where it must continue its journey around the mountain.

Already the sun retreated in the west. Kimono-clad staff flitted through the courtyard, lighting traditional Chinese lanterns. Despite the late hour, the courtyard remained busy. People crowded around game tables, some playing, others observing. Chess seemed popular. Other games involved arcane arts similar to Damian's. He eyed the participants with interest.

Sentomoru identified nature trails and running tracks leading from the main building. As he spoke, several carriages pulled through the main gate, stopping to discharge their passengers. When their guide caught them eyeing the crowd, he discussed the tours available on a daily basis, though no more carriages would depart until morning.

Catilen had a difficult time choosing which attractions to make time for. A soak in the waterfall pool, perhaps. Every moment devoted to amenities might rob her of a chance to learn the island's secrets. A tour might be worth the time. Every second spent in private deprived her of stories a guest might relate.

They reentered the bathhouse through one of the side entrances. Sentomoru wound down his tour with the quieter activities. They passed a lounge and a library. Catilen intended to speak with the librarian the next morning; where better to find information and history than a library?

Their final stop was a small, non-descript room with red carpet and a mahogany desk near the entrance. Damian leaned forward, trying to glimpse what lay beyond the desk, but the room was only a couple feet square. A young woman, skin bronzed from the sun, stood behind the desk. She smiled when she caught sight of Damian and waved.

"What's this?" he asked, jerking his head in the woman's direction."

"I saved the best, aside from the baths, for last," Sentomoru declared. "My experts offer a wide range of full body massages. For those who feel a fragrant bath isn't enough to soothe their weariness or aches. Considering the day's events, I thought the two of you might be interested."

Damian looked doubtful but Catilen grinned. It had been a long day. *And tomorrow will be another long day if we're going to solve our mysteries and get home in time for work.*

"That's a marvelous idea. How much does it cost?"

"Cost?" Sentomoru asked, puzzled.

"Is it extra, I mean? Where we come from, hotels usually charge extra for this sort of thing. It isn't included in the stay. Do we pay for everything when we leave?"

Part of her explanation triggered understanding, Sentomoru's confusion giving way to shock. His eyes widened and he shook his head. "Not to worry. All the amenities of my bathhouse are open to all my guests, free of charge. Please, indulge. I will meet you when you're finished to help you locate your rooms."

Damian hesitated, staring after their host as he disappeared around a corner. Catilen gave him a gentle nudge toward the woman at the desk. She greeted him and explained the services available. He stammered through the conversation, choosing a simple back massage. The woman handed him a towel and escorted him down a hallway behind the desk.

When she returned, the attendant addressed Catilen. With more confidence, she chose the full body massage with scented oils. She received her towel and an escort down the hallway past several closed doors. When they reached her assigned place, the attendant showed her the oils available, describing the benefits of each. She asked Catilen to choose two and complimented her

choices.

“Undress and lay on the table.” Her guide indicated a pair of shoji screens in the corner. “Use the towel to cover anything you want to keep private.” With a smile, she excused herself and closed the door.

Catilen glanced around the room. The décor was simple, the walls unadorned. Aside from the rack of oils and other massage tools, it contained only the shoji screens and the padded table. She liked that. Opulence might increase the sense of luxury, but when it came to a professional plying their trade, skill spoke best for itself. The masseuses who made use of these rooms didn’t need fancy trappings to assure their customers received a pleasant experience.

It took a few moments to wriggle out of her swimsuit. She always seemed to grow between putting it on and taking it off. She wrapped the towel so it could be undone from the back and sprawled across the massage table. Her cheeks and forehead rested in the padded hole near the top, allowing her to breathe without twisting her neck. There was a small ledge underneath, for a book or magazine, so the client could read if they wanted.

The soft click of the door startled her awake; she must have dozed off again.

Her masseuse introduced himself as Kaoin and confirmed her desires before he began. The citrus scent of her chosen oils filled the air as he poured them. They felt warm on her back even before Kaoin’s hands began kneading them into her muscles. With a soft, contented sigh, she closed her eyes and relaxed.

Catilen paid for full body massages on occasion. She used them to realign her energies. It strengthened her shields, especially when recent events chipped away at them.

She needed this.

Inhaling the sweet-scented oils, Catilen turned her mind inward. She imagined her personal energy reserves as a river. Rocks and silt blocked its natural flow, leaving murky pools where negativity gathered. As her muscles relaxed, the stones fell away, the brambles crumbled, and the river flowed unhindered. The stagnant energy dissipated along with her tension.

When Kaoin finished, she felt more than relaxed. She felt recharged. He bid her farewell and she hurried behind the screens to don her clothing and vacate the room for Kaoin’s next lucky client.

Damian and Sentomoru stood side by side when she reached the hallway, waiting for her. Damian looked sheepish, a hint of red in his cheeks. Resisting the urge to tease, she slid her hand into his.

Sentomoru led them back up the hallway. “I assume you’d both like to prepare for dinner?”

“Not yet.” Catilen didn’t think it would take long to prepare; she didn’t have anything else to wear. “If it’s not too much trouble, I’d like to watch the sun set. Is there a place I can get a good view?”

Damian squeezed her hand to express his approval.

“I know just the place,” Sentomoru replied, smiling over his shoulder. “Follow me.”

They turned a sharp corner and ascended a flight of steep stairs. The corridor was narrow and Catilen had to release Damian’s hand so they could walk single-file. Halfway up the stairs, Sentomoru drew a tapestry away from the wall, revealing a cramped stone passageway.

Startled, Catilen wondered how many other hidden passages lay behind the bathhouse’s art fixtures. It wasn’t uncommon for old structures to include them, but why would the bathhouse need any? Had the island been part of a larger kingdom at some point in its history? Were the passages meant for emergencies? Perhaps they were service corridors? Or were there areas that had simply fallen out of use?

After picking their way through the tunnel, they emerged on a wide stone balcony. A low wooden guard rail marked the drop over the edge. The ground fell away beneath them, the cliff side covered with moss and vines. This was the highest up the mountain Catilen had ventured. It was a secluded spot, only accessible through the hidden passage.

The balcony faced west, offering an unhindered view of the sun as it kissed the far horizon. Brilliant crimson stained the sky, twining with hues of gold to form new shades. The unbroken canopy of the jungle spread out below, leafy fingers reaching for one last touch of the sun before it faded for the night. Again Catilen recalled photos from *National Geographic*. The magnificent view stole her breath.

Inspired by the green of the island, the gold of the sun and the invigorating adventure that lay ahead, Catilen threw caution to the wind. Lowering her shields, she reached for the solar energy, catching the last rays before they disappeared beneath the horizon. She worked better with lunar energy, which was usually associated with the feminine, while the sun was often associated with the masculine. Besides, the sun offered more power than she could use. But it didn't hurt to touch it every now and then, to let it fill her to brimming. It felt like a re-birth of sorts. Yesterday she was Catilen, literature professor. Today she was Catilen, transcendental explorer.

Before the energy of the joining could overwhelm her, Catilen reached for her center; the anchor point in the earth that allowed her to siphon away the excess energy before she gave herself another reaction headache. As her energy level stabilized, Catilen felt something *strange*. A *different* quality to the earth's energy flow.

Startled, she realized it had reacted to her touch. Had reached for her as though it were sentient. As though it wanted to join with her.

Then the sun sank below the horizon, her connection to it evaporated, and the strange tendrils of seeking energy disappeared.

Catilen blinked, shook her head, and dismissed the incident. It could have been her imagination. It must have been. She turned to find Damian and Sentomoru wearing identical grins, as dazzled by the spectacular sunset as she had been. She smiled back, found Damian's hand, and followed Sentomoru down the passageway to the bathhouse proper.

Chapter Eight

When Sentomoru informed them dinner was a formal affair, Catilen admitted she had nothing appropriate to wear. Damian echoed her confession. Luckily, several members of Sentomoru's staff matched their dimensions, all willing to share pieces of their wardrobe.

One of the towel attendants from the public bathing chamber helped Catilen don a green-silk kimono embroidered with gold and silver leaf patterns. She'd never worn a genuine kimono before, only cheap western rip-offs. It took some getting used to. The layers of fabric were heavy, the sash — her benefactor called it an *obi* — constricting. But the serving girl assured her she looked beautiful and offered to style her hair to match.

Self-conscious and unsteady in the unfamiliar dress, Catilen followed the attendant into the massive dining room. Bathhouse staff pulled out chairs, unfolded napkins and placed them in the laps of their charges. People clumped together between tables to chat, stubbornly refusing to take their seats. As she scanned the throng for Damian, she noted how the other guests were dressed. Attire ranged from formal gowns to flamboyant costumes adorned with feathers, beads, shells, gems and various other materials.

She recognized the Tyrrkarr man from earlier and realized the feathers grew from the nape of his neck. He wore a magnificent feathered cape and mask. She wondered if they were his own feathers, gathered after malting. He seemed proud of the costume, pausing often to bask in the praise of admirers.

In another corner, a tall woman wearing robes patterned like fire stood next to a tall man whose matching robes flowed like water. A Lisitu descended the stairs on heels higher than Catilen had ever seen, her dress sparkling with sequins. Bells strung in her antlers jingled with every step.

If she hadn't spotted a few plain evening gowns, Catilen would have felt under dressed. Finally, she spotted a familiar mop of dirty-blond hair. Damian brushed the rogue lock from his face, but it fell over his eyes a moment later. Catching her guide's attention, Catilen cut through the crowd in his direction.

Her attendant grabbed her arm. "No, miss, please follow me. You'll have an excellent place, I assure you."

"I'm sure I will. I've just spotted my friend. I'll want to sit with him, of course."

"Oh no, Lord Sentomoru doesn't allow guests travelling together to dine at the same table. Not for formal dinners." Face pale, eyes darting back and forth, the young woman tugged on her arm. "It's tradition, Miss. The lord of the isle feels it's easier for guests to form new friendships-

"If they're isolated from familiar associations," Catilen finished with a knowing smile. *Clever*. Considering how many of the bathhouse amenities required strangers of varying species to share close quarters, it made sense to foster camaraderie among the guests. Sentomoru did promise she'd meet people during dinner. But why did her guide look so worried? *You'd think she just delivered an eviction notice.*

A series of loud complaints issued from opposite ends of the room, curing her confusion. High-pitched voices tried to soothe frazzled egos.

"I just want to talk to my friend for a moment," she reassured her benefactor, laying a hand on her arm. "I don't mind if it loses me a choice seat," she added when the girl tried to protest.

Though her guide looked uncertain, Catilen pressed on, meeting Damian near the middle of

the room. His guide looked as though he stood on rusty nails, lips forming a grimace beneath wide eyes.

“Pushy about the seating arrangement, aren’t they?” Damian muttered, keeping his voice low. Someone had provided him with a navy button-down shirt, a black jacket and a matching pair of slacks. *I wonder if Sentomoru’s staff keep extra clothing on hand for people like us, who don’t know what they’re getting into.*

“At least we aren’t acting like that guy.” Catilen pointed to a grey-scaled man in a sea-foam tuxedo, clawing his way onto a table in the corner. Two staff members grabbed his shoulders, trying to extract him before he ruined the fancy place settings.

“I shan’t bear such insult!” he howled, flailing his arms as the staff dragged him away from the table. “Two nights of sub-par seating! What have I done to deserve such indignity?”

Damian laughed. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Besides, it’s the perfect learning opportunity.”

“I hope the people at my table like to answer questions.” Damian grinned. “Because I have a lot of them.”

“Me too.”

“Please, Miss,” Catilen’s benefactor prodded her arm. “We can’t delay any longer.”

Sensing the young woman’s misery, Catilen relented. “Enjoy,” she called as they followed their guides in opposite directions. Her attendant’s anxiety evaporated when Catilen settled without complaint into the chair pulled out for her.

She sat mid-way down a long table near the center of the room. Damian’s destination was a small, circular table near the outskirts of the room. There were fewer chairs, but the length of Catilen’s table limited the number of people she could associate with. After a quick glance around the room, she wondered what all the fuss was about. There didn’t seem to be any choice seats, aside from proximity to walls and windows. Everyone shared the same amount of company. Staff flitted between tables, serving everyone at once. *Try explaining that to the self-absorbed.*

As servers poured water and wine, Catilen got acquainted with her dinner companions. An audacious woman sat across the table, dressed in a fur coat twice her size. Her over-long lashes were obviously fake. A thick layer of purple eye shadow and a smattering of gemstones lined her upper eyelids. She introduced herself as Lingara, Duchess of Ilom and announced her intent to vacation for a ‘full cycle.’ Based on her description of family members’ vacations, the island seemed to visit certain places with predictable regularity. Catilen wondered how long a ‘full cycle’ lasted.

Duchess Lingara had no interest in the workings of the bathhouse or the exact length of her vacation, but she was perfectly willing to answer all Catilen’s questions about herself and her homeland. She seemed to like the sound of her own voice. Not that Catilen minded; the duchess’s stories quenched her thirst for knowledge, though most of them involved extravagant parties and imperious traditions.

To her left sat a handsome man with a flair for featuring himself in stories. His long, brown hair tumbled down his shoulders in a mass of unbound curls. He wore a gold-trimmed red coat that conjured the image of pirates. He called himself Yler. It took Catilen four tries to get close to the proper pronunciation. He referred to his occupation as ‘adventurer,’ which only enhanced Catilen’s image of a pirate. He spoke with a broguish accent, mischief glinting in his eyes and a roguish smile dancing across his lips while he recounted his exploits.

Between Yler and the duchess, Catilen had no want for pleasant conversation over the

course of the meal. But she was most interested in the quiet woman seated to her right. She looked human, save for her strange coloration. Shades of navy and teal graced the skin of her face and bare scalp. Her shoulders were burnished orange, the palms of her hands blood red. The hues of her skin melted into each other with such subtlety, it was impossible to tell where one ended and another began. Though Catilen tried not to stare, she swore the colors shifted, creating new shades as they blended and swirled. Because she wore a plain white dress, short of skirt and sleeve, Catilen believed the spectacular mix of skin tones were meant to be decorative.

Her name was Atil'awr. She served as curator in Sentomoru's library. When the others proved uninterested in her stories, she and Catilen spent the last half of the meal whispering about their love of literature. Books were sacred objects to Atil'awr's society, and libraries their holy houses. Most of her people served places like the bathhouse to gain access to isolated cultures. When she finished her term of service, Atil'awr would ply her trade in another alien place, but not before taking some new piece of history, literature or other knowledge back to the master library on her homeworld. She promised to help Catilen find the most interesting volumes in the library, if she'd visit the next day.

Catilen experienced a pang of disappointment when staff began carrying empty plates back to the kitchen, signaling the end of dinner. Guests carried refilled wine glasses as they drifted back to familiar groups and resumed abandoned conversations. She might have insinuated herself into one of those groups, but she was eager to swap stories with Damian. She settled into a seat at his table in the corner. They watched kimono-clad staff navigate the crowd bearing trays of sweets. Every time they presented one to her, Catilen felt obligated to taste one of the tidbits.

Damian identified his dinner companions among the congregation. He'd dined with the woman in fiery robes. She and her partner were artists, come to capture the essence of the island in as many forms as possible. Damian described her as prissy. He'd also shared his table with a former law-enforcer from a land called Gnax, on vacation after a nasty string of cases.

"Oh, and I heard rumors about the grey screamer. You remember, the one who made a fool of himself before dinner?" Damian flashed her a sardonic grin. "Two of the young ladies at my table were apparently professional gossips. Anyway, he's some kind of merchant. He acquires rare, expensive artifacts and sells them to people who appreciate their monetary value."

Catilen chuckled. "I wonder if he ever employs Yler for acquisitions."

"Yler?" Damian arched an eyebrow to indicate his interest.

She recounted the stories from her table, pointing to each narrator in turn. "I'm pretty sure Yler is a pirate, though it's rude of me to say."

Damian laughed. "Sounds accurate to me. Anyway, I guess the screaming merchant is here to hock his wares to our host. Sentomoru is a long standing client. That's why he feels entitled to special treatment."

"And I thought the Duchess of Ilom was self-absorbed." Catilen rolled her eyes.

Damian grunted, his eyes distant. Following his gaze, Catilen found only an unremarkable knot of guests chattering near the door. She suspected he didn't see them. His mind must be elsewhere. She waited several minutes in silence before she poked his elbow. Startled, he returned his focus to her.

"What?" she asked, glancing in the direction he'd been staring. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's *wrong* really. It's just..." He sighed and shook his head.

"What?" she insisted. "Disappointed we spent the afternoon touring the bathhouse instead of chatting with guests?" She could spend a lifetime recording the stories guests brought with them and consider it a life well spent.

"It's not that." Damian glanced over his shoulders, making certain they were alone. He leaned close and lowered his voice. "How much did your companions say about the island?"

Puzzled, Catilen pursed her lips. "Not much. But they mentioned lots of other things. Their homes, their professions, their travels." All of which Catilen found interesting.

"No one talks about this place," Damian growled, "aside from what they do while they're here. No one mentioned how it jumps around or why."

Catilen recalled Damian's confidence he could unravel the island's mystery over the weekend. He hadn't come for alien cultures. He wanted the how and why, the island's power, its purpose. That was his field of study.

"Maybe they don't know," she suggested. "Maybe they don't care. This is just a vacation for them. Besides, the esteemed Duchess of Ilom said something about being here a full cycle. Maybe the island moving from place to place is normal for most of the guests."

"Then why come to Earth, where no one knows about it? Why now? What's the benefit?"

"You're assuming Sentomoru has control over the island's movement." They had no evidence to support that hypothesis. "Maybe the island goes wherever the power takes it and he just uses that process to his benefit."

Damian's lips twisted in a thoughtful smile, conceding the likelihood of that scenario.

"I bet Sentomoru could answer your questions," Catilen continued. "He's lived here all his life. Or you could ask Atil'awr tomorrow at the library. There are bound to be books about the island's history."

"That's an excellent idea." Catilen was glad to see his consternation ease. "And I'm looking forward to meeting this Atil'awr. It sounds like she can teach us a lot."

"Made some new friends, have you?" Catilen jumped as Sentomoru's voice announced his arrival. She'd been so absorbed in the conversation, she lost track of their surroundings. "Ah, but why aren't you chatting with them?" Concern creased Sentomoru's face. "Why are you sitting all alone?"

He had a point; in a room full of alien species awaiting their discovery, they chose isolation.

"We're a little overwhelmed," Catilen admitted, realizing the truth as she spoke it. *It's been one hell of a day.* Did she really wake in her own bed that morning? Not only had they discovered they weren't alone in the universe, humans appeared to be a minority. The cosmos were vast, and Earth was insignificant in comparison.

With a knowing smile, Sentomoru patted her shoulder. "Allow yourselves to rest. There's plenty of time for everything else. You're free to stay as long as you like."

As he turned to leave, Catilen held up a hand to stop him.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, concerned.

"No," Catilen insisted, but her lower lip twitched with anxiety when she tried to smile. "I wanted to ask you something."

Sentomoru arched an eyebrow. She felt Damian's eyes on her. The two of them were so similar sometimes, it was hard not to tease.

"What's on your mind?" the lord of the island prompted.

How best to explain? She feared overstepping the boundaries of her host's grace. He let her stay free at a more than five star resort and she wanted something outside the itinerary. *It's too late to turn back now.*

"Tomorrow is the equinox," she blurted. "One of only two days on our planet where the length of day and night are equal."

"Ah yes!" Sentomoru exclaimed after a thoughtful silence. "I remember the cycle of seasons

in your land. It's a time of great celebration, is it not?"

"Not really," Catilen replied. "Not for most people. Not anymore. But it is for me. I practice old traditions."

Sentomoru smiled. "I have long been a student of the old ways, though they were not so old when I began practicing them."

The atmosphere in the room changed. She couldn't smell it, taste it or touch it, but the air grew thicker. A quick glance around the room showed no one else noticed. Or perhaps it was a local change, meant for her and Damian. Her skin tingled. When the hair on the back of her neck stood on end, she recognized the growing energy field. She had no second sight; she couldn't see the aura their host revealed. But she *felt* his joy, previously hidden from her secondary senses.

Her eyes widened. *He's a sorcerer, like Damian!* Her heart raced. This was the revelation he'd been waiting for. Damian shifted beside her, fingers pressed so hard against the table, the tips of them turned white.

"You're looking for somewhere to perform your rite?" Sentomoru asked as the energy dissipated.

She shook her head to clear it. "If it wouldn't be any trouble."

"Not at all. I know the perfect place. I can escort you there myself, if you like."

"That would be wonderful."

"Did you have a time in mind?"

"Early. I promised Atil'awr I'd visit her in the library in the afternoon."

"Then I will fetch you after breakfast. You'll be back in plenty of time to meet Atil'awr."

"Perfect," Catilen agreed. "See you tomorrow."

Lord Sentomoru bid them both good evening, bowed at the waist, and departed to converse with his other guests.

"Show off," Damian grumbled, the moment the man was out of earshot.

Catilen shot him a sharp look. "What was he supposed to do? Announce it to the whole room? Besides, why are you complaining? Now you *know* he can answer all your questions. Maybe even teach you some new magic."

"I suppose." Damian looked chastised but sounded skeptical. She waited for another expression of disappointment, but Damian seemed lost in thought.

"You coming?" She elbowed his side and slid to her feet.

"To bed?" A look of horror spread across his face, cheeks blazing red as he realized what he'd asked. "You to yours, I mean. And me to-"

Catilen laughed. "To the equinox ceremony, silly."

"I'd be honored." He fell into step beside her, reaching for her hand. "What do I have to do?"

"Show up." Catilen grinned. "I'll take care of the rest."

"I'll be there," Damian promised.

They reached the hall junction where their paths split. Damian's room was on the far side of the bathhouse, closest to the gardens. Catilen's room was in the front, near the waterfall. Hesitantly, Damian released her hand. She lifted herself onto her tiptoes and caught his shoulders. He needed no coaxing to lean into the kiss. She didn't linger long since they were in a public place. *And there'll be plenty of other nights.* She grinned like a schoolgirl as she hurried down the hall to her room.

Chapter Nine

Curiosity drove Catilen from bed before the sun rose. In the dim light of false dawn, aided by candles burning in the hallways, she navigated the bathhouse. She ascended the spiral staircase in the tower, choosing one of the mountain paths. Not wanting to stray too far, she paused on an east-facing balcony. Best not test the safety of the hiking trails in the dark.

She should have been exhausted. Yet something demanded her attention, refusing to relent until she rose, dressed and departed. Even now it nagged at the back of her mind. The overwhelming desire to do something foolish.

Not traipsing through the bathhouse in the wee hours of morning. Just because she hadn't seen others didn't mean they weren't about. What else were the candles for?

Not leaning over the balcony rail to peer at the gloom shrouded island below. The balustrade might collapse. She'd never see the end of the sheer drop. But that never stopped anyone from disobeying the leaning rule.

Not skirting the wilderness edge when there might be dangerous predators prowling the night. Sentomoru must take measures to protect the safety of his guests at all times.

No, foolish was dancing with forces she couldn't control.

This had to be her last day on the island. She had to find her answers today, or the mystery would haunt her forever. She had to know the source of that strange touch, the one that reached for her when she brushed the island.

She needed the sun's power to do it; lunar energy was too weak. The higher a celestial body rose through the sky, the more dominant its aspect, the greater its power. The full moon offered more power than a half moon. The sun was strongest at noon. Too strong; she couldn't handle that level of power on her own.

Her only options were sunrise and sunset. By the time the sun set, she'd best be on the mainland. Educational institutions despised unplanned sick days. That left her one, brief opportunity to knock on the door and see what answered.

To commune with an unknown, unidentified energy was insane.

Three times in high school, she snuck out of the house. Once to attend a concert. Once to help a friend in the midst of a family crisis, and once to meet a boy. Each time she felt lightheaded while her heart pounded and her hands shook, giddy from the rush of adrenaline and fear of discovery. And she had been caught; the third and final time. Drawn by an overwhelming sense of despair, Delana Taylor found her daughter sobbing in the bushes, too heartbroken to scale the drainpipe beneath her window. She suspected her mother also detected her second escape, but chose forgiveness under the circumstances.

She realized now she hadn't risked anything when she crept out her window. Today the peril was real. The unknown energy could overwhelm her, especially if it turned out to be intelligent. If she lost control, it could burn her mind away. She could end up an empty shell, or worse, a puppet. Not to mention the danger of losing her bond with Damian, the only non-family connection she ever considered worthwhile.

But she had to know the answer.

The first ray of sunlight flared over the horizon, searing the sky red, yellow and orange. Without hesitation, Catilen shored her shields and *reached*.

Like the fire that created it, the sun's energy was bright and hot to her secondary senses. She could only hold a small portion of what she took. Instantly she reached for the familiar anchor

point to siphon the excess before it could scorch her, body and soul.

The mystery entity waited, pouring across the link, bursting with joy. The force rocked Catilen's concentration. Faltering for a second might rob her of sanity, or worse, if the being on the other end of the connection proved malevolent. With effort, she maintained control. The entity didn't *feel* sinister, only pleased.

She held contact as long as she dared. The seeking energy spread across the surface of her shields, caressing but never coercing. Without lowering her defenses, Catilen couldn't sense more than contentment. The emotions seemed to emanate from the island itself. She couldn't tell what it wanted without letting it in; a gamble she wasn't willing to take.

Was that her answer then? *Does the island have a limited self-awareness? Or is it just an echo of its population's contentment, formed by the arcane forces that move and sustain it?*

It didn't *feel* like a remnant.

The moment passed. The sun continued its journey across the sky, forcing Catilen to relinquish her link or risk another reaction headache. But not before she sensed the island's last seeking tendril, tinged with the darkness of obsession.

* * * * *

When Catilen didn't respond to his second round of knocks, Damian pressed an eye to the keyhole. He couldn't have overslept. The day was fresh, the times on his cell phone and watch matched, and he'd hurried over the moment he woke. *She wouldn't extend an invitation, then leave without me.* But he couldn't shake his nagging sense of doubt. *If Sentomoru said 'now or never,' would she linger?*

His blood turned to ice. Sentomoru had seen more of Catilen since their arrival than he had. She spent the previous afternoon with him, thinking Damian slept. Then there'd been the massages and the dinner arrangements, not to mention rooms on opposite ends of the establishment. *If I didn't know any better, I'd think he was trying to keep us apart.*

It was ludicrous. He wasn't aware of their relationship when he assigned their rooms. *Not that we had one at the time.* Nor did they have reservations. The number of guests must limit the amount of available rooms.

The interrupted kiss had to be a coincidence. Even if Sentomoru's magic allowed him to peek behind closed doors, he couldn't spy on his guests. *That would be creepy.*

He's just trying to be a good host. But Damian noticed the way Sentomoru eyed them when they held hands. He tried not to let jealousy get the better of him, but it swarmed under his skin.

He abandoned the keyhole. He couldn't see anything through it. As he turned, Catilen bounded around a corner, room key in hand. His surge of relief turned to a stab of guilt.

"What happened? I thought I fouled up the time."

"Nothing. I got up early to watch the sunrise." She looked beautiful when she grinned, cheeks flushed from her run through the halls, eyes shining with glee. "I want to see and remember as much of this place as possible."

Catilen's smiles were always infectious. "Now I feel silly for sleeping through it."

She waved a hand in dismissal as she retrieved a basket from her suitcase. The same ritual basket she used the night they renewed their wards. He didn't have a chance to ask about it before someone else knocked at the door. Gritting his teeth, Damian suppressed his irrational annoyance.

The lord of the isle waited on the other side of the door, dressed in green-silk robes embroidered with a bamboo pattern, hair intricately styled. He looked immaculate, graceful,

perfect. Damian felt foolish and underdressed in his tattered jeans and t-shirt, though Catilen wore the same.

“Are you ready to go?” Sentomoru asked. Catilen nodded, brushing past their host into the hallway. “Very good.” His eyes fixed on Damian. “I expect you can find the way back to your room... David?” He spoke the false name in that manner which suggested his awareness of the lie.

Damian bristled, half-tempted to tell the man off. Of course he thought he could sneak away with Catilen, leaving him wandering the halls-

“He’s coming,” Catilen replied. “I guess I forgot to mention it last night.”

“So you did.” Sentomoru bowed his head, perhaps in apology. “Shall we go?”

Biting his tongue against a retort, Damian nodded. He joined them in the hallway and Catilen locked the door.

The same carriage that carried them to the bathhouse waited in the courtyard. They piled inside, the lord of the island tapped the roof and the driver urged the horses into motion.

They took the opposite fork in the road, cutting through the village and the adjoining farmland. Catilen leaned out the window as they passed. She blocked Damian’s view, but he didn’t mind. She was more interested in the village and its people than he was.

When the jungle surrounded them again, Catilen sat back in her seat, grinning. “What holidays do you celebrate here on the island, Lord Sentomoru?”

Their host pursed his lips while he considered the question. “Very few. My guests request the celebrations of their homelands and I sometimes accommodate them. The villagers celebrate the harvest each year and the bathhouse guests and staff participate.”

Catilen arched an eyebrow. “But not you?”

“I coordinate and participate in the festivities, of course.” Damian thought Sentomoru was careful to distance himself from the discussion, as he distanced himself from the revelry. *Can’t be caught mingling with the common folk?*

“You don’t believe in the principles behind the celebrations?” Catilen pressed, offering a more generous perspective.

“It’s not that, my dear.” Damian cringed when Sentomoru called her that, fighting to keep his expression neutral. “It’s just, when you live in paradise, every day is much like a festival day.”

Now there was a chilling thought. Damian loved the beauty of the bathhouse, its luxury, the allure of the knowledge it might hide. He hadn’t considered what it would be like to live there. He specifically avoided teaching summer classes so he could take extended vacations. He camped for weeks, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, away from the noise, pre-made meals and fast food restaurants. He preferred the quiet of the wild where he could forage, fish and sleep on the ground. He used that time for his personal research and he coveted it.

At the end of those months of personal reflection, he had to return to his job. Much as he loved that aspect of his life, he loathed the intrusion. Having to return to a routine, having to do what others expected of him rather than what he wanted, made him feel rebellious.

What would it be like to live without that feeling? Was Sentomoru bored?

From the look of consternation on Catilen’s face, she must have felt the same. “That doesn’t sound very rewarding.” Damian might have chosen a different word. “Paradise doesn’t mean anything if you don’t enjoy it.”

“You are very wise, Catilen.” Sentomoru leaned across the small cabin to pat her knee. Damian seethed at the patronizing gesture. “Thank you for thinking of me. What holidays do you

celebrate? Do they coincide with the changes of the seasons?"

Damian leaned closer, interested in her answer. He knew little of her religion. He'd asked about her rituals, but never their meanings.

"Some of them." She shifted, perhaps uncomfortable at the center of their attention, but she cleared her throat and continued.

"There are eight Sabbats. They follow the sun because it represents the male aspect of the deity. And there are thirteen Esbats which follow the moon, because it represents the female aspect... But that's not important. Sorry, I'm not explaining this very well."

"You're doing fine," Damian encouraged.

"Yes, please continue," Sentomoru added.

Swallowing hard, Catilen tried again. "I believe in a deity which touches all living things through a massive energy field. It has a male aspect and a female aspect. There's a cycle, you see, based on the seasons. The sun is reborn after the longest night of the year – that's Yule." She glanced at Damian. "It happens at the same time as Christmas.

"Throughout the year, the sun gains power as it gets hotter. The god's power peaks at Beltane, which is in May." Again she glanced at Damian, who understood the context.

"That's the fertility festival, isn't it?" he asked, pleased by the look of approval it earned him.

"Yes, it's the may-pole dance and all that. The God and Goddess are married and the Goddess conceives. At Samhain — that's Halloween or All Hallow's Eve—"

"Ah!" Sentomoru exclaimed, "That I recognize." His comment earned him one of Catilen's favorable looks.

"At Samhain the God's power wanes so much that he dies. But he's born again of the Goddess at Yule. So it's an eternal cycle, based on the position of the sun."

"So for a witch in the southern hemisphere, the dates are reversed?" Damian asked. "Since their summer solstice is in December."

"Right," Catilen confirmed. "The entire religion is based on nature."

"What about today's equinox?" Sentomoru asked. "May I ask the significance of the rite you wish to perform?"

"It has to do with the idea of rebirth," Catilen replied. "Spring is starting in our hemisphere. The sun is taking dominance over the world again. The Earth is waking up to new life all around us. The ice is melting. The flowers are blooming. The wildlife is breeding."

Despite the lack of snow in San Francisco, Damian liked Catilen's description of the holiday. Green grass and sunny afternoons would return to the parts of the world that endured dreary winter months. There was art in Catilen's beliefs, or at least in the way she spoke of them.

"Yours sounds like a noble way, Catilen," Sentomoru said. "I look forward to learning more."

"Me too," Damian agreed.

Catilen blushed, lifting her shoulders as though she wanted to disappear into her seat. The carriage drew to a halt, sparing her the burden of response. One of the footmen opened the door. Sentomoru motioned for Catilen to precede him and followed her outside. Damian followed, stretching legs gone stiff despite the short duration of the ride.

Sentomoru didn't wait for him. Offering his arm to Catilen, he led her down a short path through the jungle. Damian stumbled in their wake, impeded by vines and brambles. Sentomoru made traversing the jungle look effortless. The trail ended in a wide, circular clearing. An enchanted smile lit Catilen's face as she surveyed it. Damian brushed stray leaves from his hair

as he glanced around.

The trees formed a thick canopy overhead, blocking the sun save for one spot above the center of the clearing. Sunlight spilled through the opening, illuminating the ankle-deep grass. *Like a post-card picture.* He waded through the grass, feeling for obstacles, but found the clearing free of roots and rocks.

The trio stood in the center of the clearing. Damian glanced at his companions. Sentomoru stared into the distance looking pleased with himself. Catilen flashed him a grin.

“This place is perfect, Lord Sentomoru. Thank you for allowing us to use it.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Sentomoru bowed his head. “What do we do next?”

The tiny hairs on the back of Damian’s neck stood on edge. Tiny prickles traveled the length of his spine, settling in his stomach. He clamped his mouth closed to keep from snarling. *Why that arrogant...*

“I’m sorry.” A puzzled frown touched Catilen’s lips. “I didn’t realize you wished to participate. I feel terrible. I only brought enough for two people.” She shook her basket to emphasize how little it held.

A flash of irritation crossed Sentomoru’s face; the first flaw in his otherwise perfect poise. Damian seized the moment to justify his unflattering assumptions. *No wonder he made that comment about going back to my room. He thought he’d sneak out here with Catilen and...*

And what? Catilen isn’t that kind of girl, you nimrod. After the years it took her to open up, she wouldn’t abandon you in a day. If you want to have a relationship with this woman, you’d better get a leash on that jealousy.

But the personal reprimand didn’t ease his annoyance.

“Forgive me,” their host recovered quickly. “I have been presumptuous.”

Catilen flashed him a look that said *yes you have*, but a sweet smile replaced it. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t want to keep you; I’m sure we can find our own way back. The village isn’t far and I want to visit anyway. Maybe you could leave the carriage there to wait for us?”

Sentomoru inclined his head as he turned to depart. “Please, enjoy your celebration.”

Damian glared at the back of the man’s head until he disappeared into the foliage. Then he glared at the foliage for good measure.

“Can you believe the nerve of-”

“No,” Catilen interrupted, her tone sharp. She cast him a sidelong glance that transformed his anger to guilt. “He should have asked rather than assuming it was an open circle. But negativity isn’t welcome here either. If you can’t let it go, I suspect you can still catch the carriage.”

“You’re right, as always.” Damian squeezed her hand between his, seeking forgiveness. A rush of relief accompanied her answering squeeze.

“At the risk of sounding like an ass,” he said with a sheepish smile, “what *should* we do next?”

Chuckling, Catilen offered him the basket. “Go arrange a makeshift altar for us on the north side of the clearing. I’ll consecrate the ground so we can get started.”

“Your wish is my command,” Damian replied with a mock salute. He endured her counterfeit stern look before he tended to his task.

Chapter Ten

“That was amazing,” Damian murmured, breaking the post-ritual silence. Resting on the cool grass, side by side, the pair watched stray clouds drift past the small opening in the canopy above the clearing. Damian reclined on his back, crossed arms cradling his head. Catilen sat beside him, knees folded as she leaned back, hands extended behind her to support her weight.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” she replied, unaware Damian had been watching her instead of the clouds for the past several minutes. “It was nothing special.”

“But it was. I’m convinced you have a gift. No really,” he added when she cast him a skeptical sideways glance. “Your rituals are practical, yet deeply profound. No offense, but everyone else I’ve known who called themselves a witch tried to astound me with flashy contrivances. They always fell short.”

Catilen chuckled, a sound as beautiful as birdsong. “I know the type. The world is phenomenal on its own. It doesn’t need pomp or spectacle.”

“So you just take advantage of the wonder that is the universe,” he teased. She had the kind of quiet wisdom one expected to find in old men. Again, her pragmatic approach to mixing religious ritual with everyday life astounded him.

After drawing her protective circle and lighting her ritual candles, Catilen had traced a short labyrinth on the ground using birdseed. Each of them had donned a black scarf and made their way through the maze, visualizing the challenges they faced. When they reached the center, Catilen walked them through a symbolic rebirth. They shed their black scarves, left them in the center of the labyrinth, and visualized the answers to their conundrums as they retreated. After closing out the ritual, they spent a few minutes in meditation, leading to their current positions.

“That’s pretty weighty stuff for someone your age, Cat. How’d you come upon this enlightenment? Was your teacher a Buddhist monk?”

To Damian’s relief, Catilen smiled and ran reassuring fingers along his arm. “I learned it from my mother, actually. She taught me everything I know.”

“You mean she’s a witch?”

“Yes. But she’s also an Empath. I don’t think I could have figured out how to deal with this affliction without her. I’d have been lost.”

“Is that how you think of it?” Damian pushed himself into a sitting position. “As a disease? Cat, what you can do is amazing. It’s a gift!”

“You sound like my mother,” Catilen replied with a sardonic snort. “But I’ve always had a hard time thinking of it that way. Especially now. You know about my mom right? I think I remember telling you...”

“That she’s in a home up in Santa Rosa? You mentioned it a time or two, yeah. You said she needs constant care.”

“She does. I tell people she’s got Alzheimer’s because it keeps them from asking questions. But her problem is Empathy. She’s too old, Damian. She can’t maintain shields anymore. She’s under a constant onslaught of emotional turmoil. She had an incident a few years ago, and it nearly drove her mad.”

Damian’s eyes widened. He didn’t know much about empathy other than the basics. He’d never imagined it could be debilitating. “What happened?”

Catilen sighed, eyes focused on the grass as she let it slip through her fingers. “She lost control. Started raving. Needed to be sedated.”

“Sounds unsettling. You don’t think the same thing will happen to you someday... do you?”

“I don’t know. But I worry it will. It scares me.”

He laid a hand on one of her knees and she smiled at him, taking comfort from the gesture. “Round-the-clock care helps her, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Catilen swallowed hard, sucking deep breaths to maintain her composure. “It helps if she’s surrounded by happy people. Even if the people in her home aren’t healthy, they’re happy. They have activities to do. They go places. She has friends. Their collective joy uplifts her. And the nurses are there to help if she has a bad day. They think she’s got some kind of bipolar disorder or something. The antidepressants do seem to help her through the bad spells. But it’s only really bad if she’s close when someone dies.”

An unfortunate and inescapable reality in a retirement home. “It must have been a hard decision to place her there.”

“It was. I used my shields to protect her while she lived with me, but it was exhausting. I had to be near her. I couldn’t work. It was miserable. I got so tired, I started to forget things. Important things. Ultimately, it was her idea. Moving to a home, I mean. It took ages to find a good one. I wanted her closer, but the place in Santa Rosa is the best. Lord, was it ever a fight to get her in. Doctors can’t find anything wrong with her, of course. It took a police report from the incident to get the staff to consider her.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.” He couldn’t imagine dealing with other people’s problems all day, let alone trying to shield someone else from them. Part of him felt selfishly relieved he’d never had to deal with that kind of situation, which made him feel guilty in turn.

“My whole life has been a struggle to come to terms with my abilities, Damian.” Catilen lifted her eyes to meet his. Her sorrow pierced his heart like an arrow. He determined to ease that suffering, if it took the rest of his life.

“Even with your mother to help you?”

She nodded. “Though our location might have had something to do with it. I didn’t grow up in San Francisco, you know.”

“Neither did I.” Damian laughed. “Where’d you grow up?”

“A small town near New Orleans in Louisiana.”

Damian’s eyebrows shot upward. “That’s quite a move.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I lived it!”

“But why? Why not just move to New Orleans?”

“Too many bad memories, and New Orleans too close to it all.” Catilen shook her head. “Have you ever lived in the south, Damian? Being different there is the same as being wrong. And people never forget the strange things that go on in small towns. They’re probably still whispering about that weird girl who read people’s minds.”

His eyebrows inched closer to his hairline. “That’s what they said about you?”

“That was one of the nicer things, actually. Sometimes I was demon possessed or devil spawn.”

“Because you could tell what people felt without trying?”

Again she nodded. “I was well into high school by the time I learned to block properly. When I was a kid, I didn’t know what not to say. Kids have this compulsive honesty that makes them blurt out whatever’s happening at the time. It ate into my life, Damian. I’ve never quite gotten over that. I wanted a fresh start, someplace where people didn’t know my family. The further the better. The only real question was east coast or west? So I picked San Francisco and never looked back. When mom retired, she followed me.”

It was strange to hear the same woman who extolled the natural wonders of the world speak of her special ability as a curse. Not that he blamed her; she had every right to be jaded by her experience. That people would treat a child that way... He wished he could find them and set the record straight.

“And does your mom still consider her empathy a gift after all it’s put her through?”

“Yeah,” Catilen admitted with a bittersweet smile. “She’s a better person than I am. She spent her life as a councilor helping abused little kids. Her abilities actually helped her. She could tell when they needed to talk or when they needed a distraction. And she could tell when they’d worked through their problems or if they were lying.”

Damian couldn’t help but chuckle. “Like Deanna Troi on Star Trek?”

Catilen tilted her head and pursed her lips. After a moment, she laughed. “Sort of, I guess. I don’t know if my mom was ever into sci-fi. Maybe Councilor Troi was her inspiration. But I just can’t. Every time I use my abilities to help someone, it backfires. Somehow, knowing what people feel doesn’t keep me from trusting the wrong people.”

“You don’t read minds.” Damian laid an arm across her shoulder and drew her closer. “Assholes get genuinely upset too. And you’re a good person. I know you want to see the best in people, despite your bad experiences.”

“I can’t dispute any of that.” Catilen leaned into his embrace, resting her head on his shoulder. “What about you, mister ‘no one will notice if I disappear?’” She gave him a playful poke.

“Well they wouldn’t,” Damian snorted. When Catilen gave him a sharp look, he added, “I haven’t got any family.”

“None at all? Not even an aunt or a cousin or a grandparent?”

“None that I’m aware of.” Damian shrugged. “I never knew my mom. I was told she died in childbirth, but it’s possible she didn’t want me.”

“Damian! That’s a terrible thing to say about a mother!” Catilen gaped, eyes wide with horror.

“Not all mothers are as great as yours, Cat. I had a foster mother for a little while and boy was she a... Well let’s just say, I haven’t got any fond memories of her. Anyway, my dad died when I was still pretty young and I got shuffled from house to house for a while until I finally quit the system.”

“You ran away?” The way her eyes glittered with sympathy, Damian thought she’d reached back in time to share his pain.

“In the strictest terms, I guess I did. I think of it as giving up on a system that failed me. That’s how I discovered sorcery. The first person I really latched onto became my primary instructor. It took ages to prove I wasn’t a dumb street kid looking for a quick way to make money or something. Once he gave me a chance, I blossomed. His lessons sparked a desire for knowledge I’ve never been able to quench. I guess that’s the whole reason we’re here.”

“Speaking of here...” Catilen glanced through the hole in the canopy. “I think we’d better get going if we want to eat before we get to the library. Something tells me Atil’awr won’t be pleased if we try to eat over her books.”

Damian laughed. “No, I don’t imagine she would be. All right then, let’s get walking.” He groaned as he pushed himself to his feet. The laziness was all in jest. He didn’t think he could sit still much longer, too eager to reach the bathhouse and begin his research.

While Catilen gathered her things, Damian searched for the trail. He circled the clearing three times. There was only one path, but he swore it led in the wrong direction.

“Ready?” Catilen asked when she finished. She hooked her basket over one arm, letting it rest in the crook of her elbow.

“I think so.” Damian took her hand and they walked side-by-side down the trail. In less of a rush this time, Damian avoided most of the roots and brambles. Those, at least, were just as he recalled them.

He thought nothing of the path going on a little longer than it should have. Excitement could have distorted his memory. The longer they walked, the more the path twisted and the worse his stomach churned.

“Odd...” Catilen murmured just as he was about to call a halt.

“I know. The beginning of the path looked familiar, but I’m sure we should have reached the road by now. Maybe we should go back?”

Catilen pursed her lips. “Did you see another trail back in the clearing?”

“No. But this can’t be the right one.”

“Maybe we took a wrong turn somewhere?”

“I guess...” But he doubted it. Mentally, he retraced their route. He didn’t recall any branching pathways.

“Hold on a second.” Catilen fumbled with a blue-velvet bag nestled among the objects in her basket. When the task proved too difficult to manage one-handed, she knelt, laying the basket on the ground.

Damian used the opportunity to retrace their route, trying to locate where they went wrong. He was so focused on his search, he nearly tripped over a thick root in the center of the packed path. *I don’t remember any obstacles that large.*

“Got it!” Catilen called.

Damian stared at the root a moment before turning to face her. A wall of green blocked his view. He may have been distracted, but he couldn’t have gone that far up the trail. He burst through the low-hanging leaves to find a tree trunk where he’d left Catilen.

“Cat? Where did you go?”

“Nowhere,” her voice drifted through the undergrowth from a different direction. “I’m still right here.”

“Good, stay there. I’m coming.” He oriented on her voice, but a few minutes of walking only brought him to another tree.

Gritting his teeth in frustration, he called her name again. “I told you to stand still!”

“I haven’t moved!” Again he adjusted his direction and hurried forward, but to no avail.

He kept calling her name, trying to alter his course based on her answers. But no matter which direction he tried, her voice always sounded further away.

* * * * *

For ten minutes, Catilen stood tapping her foot, frustration mounting, while Damian fumbled through the forest trying to find his way back to the trail. *Why’d he leave in the first place? I told him to wait.* She gritted her teeth, trying to stay calm. *But I swear, if he accuses me one more time of-*

“Catilen, stop moving!”

Fists clenched at her sides, Catilen growled her irritation. It didn’t change the situation, but it made her feel better. She threw back her head and screamed as loud as she could, “*I’m not moving!*”

Only the rustle of the leaves answered.

If that didn't help him find me, he's hopeless.

She exhaled an explosive sigh, crossed her legs and settled on the springy grass, basket resting in her lap. Lifting her shoulders she inhaled a fresh, deep breath. *In for three, out for six, in for three...* She counted five breaths, then opened her eyes.

She couldn't hear Damian at all. He must have gone too far away. *How could he get lost in such a small area?*

It didn't matter. He was lost and, if she tried to find him, she'd get lost too. How could she lead him back to her? Yelling hadn't worked. The wind might have carried her voice in another direction, leading him in wider circles until he was too turned around to find his way back. Even as she crafted the explanation, she dismissed it. Whatever the case, sound wouldn't work.

I can't get him to see me. Even if she had the means to light a fire, she wouldn't dare. Not in the close-packed undergrowth. The entire jungle would go up. While it would be the fastest way to draw attention to herself, it put the island inhabitants at risk. *And I won't destroy a piece of paradise to correct my mistake.* Smoke signals would be ideal, but to make smoke she needed flames.

That eliminated the rest of the senses. At least, the physical senses.

Could I get him to sense me? She'd never used her abilities as a beacon before.

Peeling away the outer layers of her shields, Catilen opened herself to the link she shared with Damian. She sensed no danger, but a rising sense of panic reverberated across their connection. She wanted to quell it, before it made him irrational, but he didn't answer her probes. Given the situation, he might be unwilling to lower his shields. She couldn't blame him.

Damian didn't seem prone to foolish behavior in this sort of situation. He was an outdoorsman; his extensive camping gear was proof of that. He might be distracted. He could be working magic. Or he might have wandered beyond her range.

Something could be interfering with their connection. *That has to be impossible. How could anything insinuate itself into such an intimate ward without setting off our alarms?*

Her hand closed around the small object she'd pulled from her bag. The cool metal against her skin reassured her she wasn't helpless.

She considered her options.

She could wait for someone to find her. *Bad idea. No one, aside from Damian, knows I'm lost.* It'd be awhile before anyone thought to come looking for her. If she was off the trail, it'd be even longer before they stumbled on her location. Staying in one place meant counting on luck. She didn't like those odds.

She could look for Damian. Her fist tightened around the object she held. As it absorbed her body heat, the reassuring cool spot faded. *The chances of finding him are slim.* It was difficult to locate a moving object. Much easier to focus on a fixed location. Though she longed to go after him, traipsing through the jungle in Damian's wake wouldn't do either of them any good. She couldn't help him if she couldn't find him.

That left one logical choice. *Find my way to safety and send someone back for Damian.*

With his experience, he'd regain his composure in no time. He might find his way back before she did. *Then he can send someone for me.*

Satisfied, Catilen got to her feet. Balancing the basket on one arm, she let the metal object dangle from its chain. It was a pendulum, a tiny metallic arrow. This simple device helped her find things. Anything she wanted in whatever direction. Better than a compass; knowing which direction was north hadn't prevented her losing her way.

Safety. She held the concept, not the word, in her mind, focusing the idea until it was sharp

as a knife's edge. Then she pushed it down her arm, out the tips of her fingers, over the chain and into the pendulum.

The metallic charm jumped and danced with the shaking of her body, until her focus reached it. Then it swooped to the right, hovering in the air a moment before it fell slack on its chain. She concentrated again and the charm jumped in the same direction.

She felt her way through the underbrush to avoid thorns, roots and ensnaring vines, stopping every few feet to repeat the process with the pendulum. Slowly, steadily, it led her through the jungle overgrowth.

She relaxed when the pendulum hung in the air two full seconds, stuck like the needle of a compass. She had to be close, or the reaction wouldn't be that strong. Grinning, she surged forward, through the last of the jungle greenery, only to find herself back in the clearing where she started; the same clearing where she and Damian performed the equinox ritual.

Chapter Eleven

After the initial shock of circling back to the clearing, Catilen repeated her inquiry to the divining device. Twice it failed to yield results. Sitting beneath the gap in the canopy, she stared in dismay at the pendulum as it dangled from its chain.

Ending up here made some sense; she'd consecrated this ground. No negative energy could plague her here. But dark forces weren't her problem and she wasn't safe. She had no food and only half a bottle of water. Her skill *may* be strong enough to protect her from wild animals for a couple hours, if she was lucky. *Seriously damn lucky.*

She could wait. When Sentomoru realized they were missing, he'd check the clearing first. *But how long until he decides we're late? For all he knows, we stopped in the village on our way and got distracted. He might not think to look for us until we miss dinner.* With Damian lost in the jungle, she couldn't afford to delay. He might not have a safe place to stay. *He doesn't even have a water bottle with him.*

Why did the pendulum lead her back here? *User error.* This was a *safe* place, even if it wasn't the *safest* place.

She tried to hold that concept in her mind pushing it down her arm to the tips of her fingers. The pendulum spun on its chain with more enthusiasm, but failed to indicate a direction. Safest place *is either too abstract or too complex for a definitive result.* Simple always worked better. Concrete objectives were easier to visualize.

She could aim for the road. It was a simple image, but she didn't know it well enough to reflect the details. What if the island had more than one road? The village was closer, but she didn't know it any better. An uncertain image meant another malfunction.

It has to be the bathhouse. Her mind's eye saw it with crystal clarity. The white marble building melting from the stone of the mountain. The red-wood awnings jutting at consistent angles. The manicured courtyard. The waterfall tumbling from a high ledge, bathing grass and patrons with mist and rainbows. It was easy to hold the image while she got to her feet, took up her basket, and turned her focus to the silver arrow on its chain.

The pendulum jumped to the left. Holding tight to her memory of the bathhouse, she squinted at the metal charm. It jerked again in the same direction. She had to trust the instrument to lead her true.

Reminding herself it hadn't technically failed her the first time, Catilen steeled her resolve and strode from the protective circle she'd traced with herbs that morning. Parting the greenery with her free hand, she felt along the ground with her foot, weary of stray roots and thick shrubbery.

The rough terrain forced her to watch her feet more often than the pendulum, slowing her progress. The further she got from the clearing, the harder it was to see. Though it must be nearly noon, the jungle lived in eternal twilight. Leaves vied for sunlight, blocking all but tiny patches of illumination. Without a flashlight, it grew increasingly difficult to find her path among the shadows. More than once she stopped to extract herself from tangling vines. Her jeans caught on brambles. She left an easy to follow trail of torn fabric, snapped twigs and bent branches.

Undeterred by scrapes, scratches, and the tedium of finding her way, Catilen trudged forward, determined to get help for Damian. Concentrate, pendulum, part tree branches, test footing, ease forward, rinse, repeat. She tried to ignore the phantoms dancing on the edges of her vision. Wind in the trees, she insisted, rather than wild animals catching her scent. For a while,

she managed to believe it.

Until a patch of gloom followed her under the remains of a toppled tree and across the damp stones bridging a small stream. She tried to dismiss it as paranoia, but the figure wasn't a figment of her imagination. Stray sunlight reflected in the creature's eyes, confirming her worst fears.

She halted, blood turning to ice in her veins. Her heart hammered against her chest, trying to escape. Her frenzied imagination invented terrifying creatures that might inhabit the island. She recalled a fake documentary exploring dragon myths, which depicted the creatures as though they were real. The computer animated oriental variety sported stripped scales that offered camouflage as it slithered between jungle trees, stalking its deadly adversary; a tiger.

The documentary may have been fake, but the impression of stripes flitting through the jungle had been real. She recognized it now. Rather than a giant, extinct lizard, those vertical-slit pupils belonged to a familiar feline.

A shiver tore down her spine as she locked eyes with the hunter. Terror froze the scream in her throat. *What are you supposed to do when you come face to face with a tiger? Do you stand your ground or is it one of those play dead scenarios?* Surely if she ran, the tiger would give chase. It could be at her throat in a moment.

Without thinking, she backed away. Her feet slid on the water-slick rocks, failing to find purchase. Stumbling sideways, she grabbed a nearby branch, missed, entangled her foot in a thick root jutting from the streambed and tumbled to the ground.

Catilen lay stunned in the mud, the breath knocked from her chest. The click of claws on stone made her feel like a rat in a maze. Her heart raced. Black spots danced in front of her eyes.

Fighting panic, she lowered the outer layer of her shields. Her ability could work on animals. In her youth, she rode horses, though she never participated in competitions. Empathy gave her an unfair advantage at enticing horses to run, jump or perform.

It hardly compared to convincing a tiger she wasn't a threat. She doubted the creature cared. Yet she projected a false sense of camaraderie, hoping to turn it away. It must smell her fear. She was wounded now, easy prey.

The tiger stalked from the shadows, revealing its magnificent coloration. It moved with sure-footed grace. Powerful leg muscles coiled as it prepared to pounce.

It hesitated, slitted eyes focusing on some point over her shoulder. Even without her secondary senses, Catilen recognized a familiar tension in the hunter's form. *Fear*. She moaned softly, fighting the tears stinging her eyes. What kind of predator frightened a tiger?

Before she concocted a creature more terrifying than a dragon, the tiger fled into the jungle foliage. Gulping, Catilen pushed herself off the ground, surprised she didn't come face-to-face with yellow teeth or curved claws. Something stirred in the jungle, snapping a twig as it advanced. She yelped as the new predator stepped into the light, eyeing her with concern.

Lord Sentomoru looked immaculate despite his trek through the jungle. The sound of his approach must have frightened the tiger from its hunt.

Giddy with relief, Catilen exhaled. Her first breath in ages. She'd never be a thrill-seeker, couldn't imagine leaping from a plane or the side of a building, even with a safety mechanism to catch her. Tiger was as close to the face of death as she wished to look.

She hunched forward, laying her head in her hands while she caught her breath. When she glanced up, Sentomoru knelt beside her. "Are you all right, Catilen?" He extended a hand to help her up.

Half-afraid her rescuer was a hallucination, she accepted his hand. It proved solid. "I tripped."

With Sentomoru's help, she extracted her foot from the tree root. Pain lanced her leg the moment she put weight on it. She subsided, bracing against a gnarled log for support. With a quick glance, she noted mild swelling.

"I think I sprained my ankle. It's not bad, but it's going to be difficult to walk."

"You shouldn't put any pressure on it for the next few days." Without preamble or permission, Sentomoru lifted Catilen from the riverbank. "It seems Doctor Quamoto will have to pay you another visit."

The last thing she wanted was another visit from the wizened old doctor. The mention of his name almost quelled her anger at being manhandled. She needed help, whether she liked it or not, but that didn't excuse Sentomoru's lack of courtesy. If she wriggled out of his grip while he carried her, she might hurt herself again.

"That won't be necessary. I know how to treat a sprain. It's not my first." Before he had a chance to protest, she rushed to add, "Has anyone seen David? Did he make it back to the bathhouse?"

"I'm afraid not." Sentomoru picked his way through the jungle with ease, as if he knew the location of every thorny obstacle. It was no small miracle her face didn't end up in an overhanging branch. The lord of the island had no hands free and she wasn't paying attention.

"Then how'd you know to come looking for me?" The news disappointed but didn't surprise her. If Damian had made it back, he'd have accompanied Sentomoru.

"I asked the villagers to keep an eye out for you. When I realized you were going to be late for your meeting with Atil'awr, I sent out search parties. You don't seem like the sort to be late, Catilen."

"We lost the path somehow," she admitted, embarrassed. "I could swear there was only the one, but we ended up twisted around."

"And David left you behind while he went for help?" Sentomoru frowned.

"Of course not! We got separated. I stopped to get something out of my- My bag!" Catilen pressed against the arms carrying her. She needed to go back and retrieve the artifacts scattered on the ground by her fall.

Sentomoru's grip proved stronger than her struggles. "Calm down, Catilen." He had to speak the words a few times before they penetrated her panic. "I'll go back and get it for you. Please, let me take you to safety first."

Ashamed for worrying over objects when a person was lost in the jungle, Catilen calmed and allowed him to carry her back to the road. Those ritual objects were important and difficult to replace, but they *could* be replaced. *Damian can't*.

"I'm grateful for your help, Lord Sentomoru, but when we reach the road, I want to look for David. You know this island better than anyone. Surely you have the best chance of locating him?"

"I appreciate your confidence, but I'm afraid I can't allow you to accompany me. As you have already witnessed, dangerous creatures live on my island. Besides, you'll only aggravate your injury. Let me return you to the bathhouse, then I will continue the search."

As if his words were a summons, they broke through the last of the foliage. A carriage waited a few feet down the road. She offered to limp the short distance, but Sentomoru insisted on carrying her. He eased her onto one of the padded benches inside the door.

"I'll go retrieve your things." He hurried away before she could protest.

Guilt twisted her stomach in ever tighter knots while he was gone. She imagined Damian falling off a hidden cliff, swept away by a rapid river current, or hunted by the same tiger that

rejected her as prey. The moment Sentomoru reappeared, she grabbed one of his long, fancy sleeves, almost toppling her basket to the ground again.

“I’ll go back to the bathhouse if you insist, but promise me you’ll stay and keep looking for David. I trust your people to know what they’re doing, but I still think you’re his best chance. I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to him. He’s probably still looking for me.”

Sentomoru hesitated, prying his sleeve from her grip. “I will do my best, Catilen. Please try to get some rest. I don’t want more trouble plaguing your stay.”

“None of it has been your fault.” She was the one who sent him away. *If anything, this is my fault.*

She thought he looked relieved. “That’s kind of you. I hope to return, with your friend, in time for dinner.” Without waiting for a response, he shut the door.

Through the window, she saw him gesture to the driver. The carriage jerked into motion, almost knocking her from her perch. She caught herself, but bumped her ankle, sending another burst of pain through her foot.

Bracing her back against the carriage wall, Catilen propped her ankle on the bench in front of her. She watched the jungle pass outside, imagining Damian might slip through the trees at any moment and wave for them to stop. Perhaps he’d be waiting when she reached the bathhouse, soaking in the hot springs or cooling himself in the waterfall’s spray.

Knowing it was wishful thinking didn’t curtail her disappointment when the bathhouse staff informed her that no one had news of her companion. They did offer to carry her back to her room atop a gold-trimmed, silk-draped litter. Catilen wrinkled her nose with distain as she stepped down from the carriage. As if she would degrade the litter bearers like that. *Who do they think I am? The Duchess of Ilom?*

This must be common treatment for bathhouse guests. Certainly if a man would climb onto a table to announce his displeasure, he’d send staff scurrying the moment he received a splinter. *Disgusting.*

A young footman tugged her sleeve when she made no move toward the litter. “Please, my lady, let us take you back to your room. Lord Sentomoru insisted you receive the finest care we—”

“I can walk on my own, thanks.” Turning awkwardly on her good heel, Catilen limped across the courtyard. It wasn’t an impressive display and it left her leg aching, but she didn’t care. She refused to be babied, though four men lifted the litter to their shoulders and scrambled in her wake. Not that they needed to hurry; for every four of her steps, they took one.

The footman walked backwards in front of her, flailing his arms. “Since you’re injured, Miss, it’s best if you—”

“Don’t baby the sprain,” Catilen finished for him. Did they think she’d berate Sentomoru later for their ‘failure’ to tend her needs? She offered the footman one of the reassuring smiles she saved for students who approached her, full of nerves, to ask if she’d look over their thesis. The kind of smile that made her look approachable.

“You’ve all gone above and beyond for me, but I’m perfectly capable of managing on my own. My companion and I are having a lovely time and we don’t have any complaints. Why don’t you see if one of the other guests needs your assistance?”

The young man stammered a pair of butts as Catilen brushed past him. The staff gave up hauling the empty litter, though one woman trailed her all the way to her room. Catilen locked the door before her stalker could force her way inside.

She went straight to the bathroom, pausing to scan the basket of herb packets before she filled the tub. She couldn’t do anything about David from here and nagging the staff wouldn’t

help. *Sentomoru must have a way to send quick messages back here if they knew to be waiting with that dreadful litter. I'm sure he'll send one the moment they find Damian. By the time I've tended this ankle, I'm sure they'll be back.*

She clung to that hope. Hot tears stung her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. *Damian's an outdoorsman. He'll be fine.* But as she discarded her dirty clothing, terrible scenarios cavorted through the back of her mind, portraying all manner of ill fates Damian might encounter.

As she donned a new t-shirt and a fresh pair of jeans, there came a knock at the door. She hastened to finish dressing and limped across the room as fast as her bad ankle could carry her. Heart pounding, she hoped for news of her companion or, better yet, to find him on the other side of the door. She yanked it open without checking through the peephole.

Her hopes plummeted.

"You're becoming my most consistent patient," the too-familiar voice of Doctor Quamoto quipped as he pushed his way through the door. She didn't have a chance to protest. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I appreciate your concern, Doctor." She tried to be diplomatic, but she didn't know how he expected her to answer the door from across the room. She plastered a fake smile on her face and used the sickly-sweet tone that charmed him before. "I did have a moment of clumsiness in the jungle this morning, but it's nothing you need to worry about."

"Now, now, who's the doctor here?" He motioned toward the bed. When she resisted, he pressed against her shoulders until she gave way, pushing her inch by inch to the bed. She batted his hands away, but he never took the hint. Glaring at him through eyes narrowed to slits, Catilen sat on the edge of the bed. Quamoto smiled as though he didn't notice.

Humoring him seemed to be the fastest way to get rid of him.

The old doctor bent and reached for her ankle, his perch so precarious she could easily have kicked him over. He pressed his fingers to her swollen flesh until she flinched and grabbed her foot away.

"Ah, yes. A sprain." Muttering to himself, he crossed the room and retrieved his leather bag. "This is why ladies shouldn't go gallivanting through the woods." One arm disappeared into his bag, searching for tools Catilen assumed served no purpose.

This time he removed a mortar and pestle. He sprinkled various amounts of herbs from different jars into the mortar and used the pestle to grind them to powder. He paused once to spit into the mixture.

Catilen stared with open-mouthed horror. *Apparently I've made trouble by refusing to let the staff coddle me. I can't see any other reason they'd send this doctor to harass me.* Not that he was a real doctor. Whatever form of medicine he practiced, it was beyond archaic if it involved his *saliva*.

When Quamoto finished mixing the concoction, he slathered it on her clean ankle while Catilen clenched her teeth and counted to a number much higher than ten. He topped the thick, gooey layer of salve with a bandage. "Let that dry before getting it wet again," he told her sternly. "And stay off of that leg for the next few days so it will heal. It would be a shame to have to visit you again, young lady, you're supposed to be on vacation."

Satisfied, Doctor Quamoto packed his leather bag and departed. The moment he closed the door, Catilen snorted and tore the bandage from her ankle. She put a fresh herbal packet in the nozzle without checking the contents and refilled the tub. She scrubbed her skin red before she was satisfied she'd rid herself of the old man's spit. He might mean well, but the wizened old doctor infuriated her.

She could tend the sprain herself. Her mother taught her some basic healing techniques. They didn't work on serious injuries, such as cuts, burns and breaks, but they could easily mend a sprain. She may as well do it now, while she waited for news of Damian.

She emptied the tub and refilled it halfway, submerging her ankle in the steaming herbal water. Sitting on the edge of the tub, she leaned forward until her chest rested on her knees. She placed one hand at the back of her injured ankle. The fingers of her other hand cut through the water in a gentle swirling motion. She poured all her concentration into that motion.

Using her visualization technique, she summoned a brilliant white light, placing it at the tip of her finger. She wove it into the water as she twirled her fingers in inconsistent circles, imagining the light grew brighter until it suffused the tub with its glow.

Shifting her fingers, she swirled her hand around her leg in a three-quarter circle, picturing the summoned light wrapping around her injured ankle. She channeled it through her other hand the same way she'd pushed her image of the bathhouse into the pendulum.

The entire process took twenty minutes. She kept going until she felt the pressure beneath her fingers ease. When she lifted her ankle, the swelling had diminished. A gentle prod produced less pain. She'd have to repeat the treatment a few times, and she'd have to be careful how she walked, but she thought she could manage without limping. *Hopefully that'll keep the staff from fussing.* No doubt they'd attribute her recovery to their doctor. *Maybe it'll make them feel better.*

She emptied the tub, dried her leg and wrapped it in an ace bandage from her first aid kit. When she finished, she stared at the door as if that would summon a knock. Had they located Damian? Had the staff neglected to inform her of his return? Did that sorry excuse for a doctor tell them to stay away?

Catilen nibbled her bottom lip while she contemplated the silent door. Sentomoru would send a message as soon as someone located Damian. He was that kind of host. It didn't calm her worries, but it quieted them for a moment.

Glancing out the window, she realized with dismay half the afternoon had passed. In a few hours, the sun would disappear. If a tiger stalked her by day, what dangers awaited her companion at night?

Unable to keep her worries tame, Catilen opened the door and peered into the hallway. A staff member, easily identified by her flower-patterned kimono, appeared so quickly Catilen suspected she'd been lurking around the corner.

"Can I help you, my lady?" The young woman had a nervous, but eager expression on her face.

"Excuse me," Catilen replied, in case she'd interrupted something. "Is there any news of my friend David yet?"

"I'm afraid not. Lord Sentomoru and his search parties haven't returned. Did you want something from the kitchens, my lady?"

"No, thank you. But I'd appreciate it if someone let me know when Lord Sentomoru and David return."

"Of course," the young woman promised, wringing her hands together. "Are you sure I can't get you something?"

"No, thank you." She couldn't stay idle any longer. She abandoned her room, locking the door behind her.

As she turned to leave, the kimono-clad woman grabbed her arm. Catilen looked at her hand and she seemed to realize what she'd done. Jumping backward, she stammered, "F...forgive me, my lady! The doctor said you needed to res-"

“My ankle is fine,” Catilen interrupted. She took three careful steps down the hallway without limping. When she glanced over her shoulder, the young woman gaped at her. “Your doctor’s remedies work wonders. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some things to attend to.”

The attendant seemed displeased that Catilen didn’t ask for anything, but she bowed from the waist and flitted back down the hallway.

Catilen made her way to the library to speak with Atil’awr. She found the multi-hued librarian behind the front desk, the complex colors of her skin shifting to form brilliant new configurations. Catilen begged her pardon, but she didn’t seem bothered by their failure to keep their appointment.

“Vacations are supposed to be spontaneous,” she announced, her voice quiet but expressive. “Would you like to try again tomorrow?”

“That’s a marvelous idea!” Catilen agreed, but she scampered away before the librarian could ask too many questions.

The conversation called attention to another crisis. It was Sunday afternoon. She had an eight-AM lecture to give the next morning. She didn’t know how Damian intended to get home, but she refused to leave without him. In any case, it was safe to assume he had similar obligations.

In a flurry of panic, Catilen spent the rest of the afternoon pacing up and down the beach, cell phone pointed toward the sky. Various staff members trailed in her wake, trying to get her to settle, but she ignored them.

By the time she solved the scheduling issue, she was ready to march down the cobblestone road to find the search parties. She arrived in the courtyard as a trio of carriages pulled to a halt inside the main gate.

Heart fluttering, stomach twisting, Catilen hurried as fast as she dared to the lead cart. Her stomach fell when Sentomoru exited alone, a grim look on his face. He met her gaze and shook his head.

“I will send night searchers, of course,” the lord of the isle reassured her, laying a hand on her shoulder. “But I, and these others, need rest before we resume our efforts.”

“I understand,” Catilen choked against the lump of emotion rising in her throat. What had she done? Lost the only man she ever cared for in the jungle of a disappearing island. If she didn’t find him soon, how would she ever?

She pushed it all to the back of her mind, dumped it in a chest and locked it with a key. Clearing her mind gave her an idea. A wild, crazy, desperate idea. *Better than gambling on chance.*

“I think I know how to find David,” she said, hoping against hope the lord of the island wouldn’t think her a fool. “But I need your help.”

Chapter Twelve

Twilight wrapped shadowy fingers around the courtyard, increasing Catilen's sense of urgency. Her host arched one perfect eyebrow, regarding her with a quizzical expression.

"What do you suggest?" He frowned, but at least he didn't sound skeptical.

"I wondered just now..." She shifted her weight from foot to foot, worried her question might be rude. "How did you find us when we first came to your island?"

Understanding dawned in Sentomoru's eyes. He offered her a thin smile and a patronizing pat on the shoulder. "I think I see where this is going, Catilen. I'm afraid it won't help with this situation, you see."

"No! I'm sorry, Lord Sentomoru, I didn't mean to suggest you could find Damian that way. I'm sure if you could, you'd have done so already." She forced her lips into a reassuring smile. "I just want to make sure my suggestion isn't based on wild assumptions. I'd like to know how you found us, if you don't mind sharing."

The lord of the isle regarded her in silence a moment, intrigued. "It isn't a secret. I devote a small portion of my abilities to sensing new arrivals. It's a simple spell. My island visits several realms where the local population aren't aware of my establishment prior to their arrival, as was the case with you and David. I'm afraid it only offers a rough idea of a person's location. I usually reach the people in question before they wander too far, but your companion is moving steadily. My sense of his position keeps shifting, and it's throwing off our searches. There's a lot of ground to cover, even with an idea where to look."

Catilen nodded. She understood the logistics of covering rough terrain. Sentomoru's description of his magic made her heart flutter with distant hope. *It's close enough, it should work.* Even so, she hesitated when it came time to explain. He shared his home, his services, his food and staff, all free of charge. He'd spent most of his day trying to correct her stupid mistake, but Sentomoru was still a stranger. She'd known Damian for years and revealing her secret had still been difficult.

The truth left her vulnerable. A man with Sentomoru's abilities could oh-so-easily take advantage of her empathy. But the alternative risked stranding Damian in the jungle all night. Would there be anything left to find by morning? Even if she hadn't cared for him, she wasn't selfish enough to abandon a man in danger.

"I'm an Empath." She kept her voice low, barely breathing the word. She didn't want anyone overhearing the admission. "I sense what other people feel. When I collapsed yesterday, that's what really happened. I met that soldier... What was his name again? Paul? I had a strong reaction to some repressed emotion of his. I lied because I don't like people knowing. Where I come from, people don't like what I can do."

Sentomoru made a soft sound of disbelief, eyes wide in the dim light. "People ridicule you for such a gift, Catilen? Has Earth changed so much since my last visit?"

"I guess so." What was it like, the Earth that he knew? Now wasn't the time to ask. "My ability is rare, and people fear anything that's different."

"I'm troubled." Sentomoru shook his head, his expression bleak. "Gifts like yours should be treasured, nurtured, and respected. To think you'd fear to tell me such a thing... I'm sorry, dear Catilen. Please rest assured; your secret is safe with me and your abilities are welcome here. I have met few Empaths, but all were wise; healers, and shamans, and guardians."

"Thank you." Catilen's voice cracked. *A lifetime treated like a freak and suddenly everyone*

understands. “I appreciate that.”

“I will admit confusion; if you can locate your companion with your empathy, why have you delayed?”

“That’s the problem; I can’t. I already tried and it didn’t work. That’s why I need your help.”

“I see.” A spark of admiration shone in Sentomoru’s eyes. “You believe by combining our abilities we can succeed where we have each failed.”

“Exactly. The island is small enough, I can probably sense David wherever he’s gone.” She bent the truth with this explanation. If not for the blending of their wards, Damian would be well out of her reach. But it wasn’t her place to speak his secrets. “I can’t determine his location, though, just his emotional state. If I paired my senses with your spell...”

“David will light up like a beacon,” Sentomoru finished.

Catilen sighed with relief, not realizing until that moment she’d been holding her breath. “So I interpreted your abilities properly?”

“Indeed. I see no reason your plan won’t work.”

“Then you’ll help me?” The fear constricting her chest eased.

“Of course. But first I require sustenance, and I suspect you do as well. My servants inform me you have refused refreshment and relaxation since your return.”

Anger lit her cheeks on fire. “I couldn’t *relax* while David is lost in a dangerous jungle with tigers hunting him!”

Sentomoru laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I understand. But such a massive undertaking requires strength. Come to my office, we will eat to regain ours.”

Catilen wanted to protest, but he was right. The task would so drain her, they wouldn’t get a second attempt. Loathe as she was to delay, it might be best to wait for moonrise. Though the moon was only ever full for a brief moment one night of the month, it maintained that appearance for three days. The full moon’s power was equally strong all three nights. She could still use it to boost her abilities.

She followed Sentomoru past the dining room, where attendants herded noisy guests to their seats. The succulent smells drifting from the kitchen elicited a rumble from her stomach. Sentomoru guided her to a small door on the far side of the hall. Beyond it lay a plush office furnished with several overstuffed chairs, bookshelves and a polished oak desk.

Catilen fidgeted as she lowered herself into a chair, restless even after the staff set a plate of roasted meat, sweet potatoes and fresh steamed vegetables in front of her. She bolted the meal down, not realizing her hunger until she took the first bite. With her stomach performing anxious back-flips, she had reason to regret her haste. The food turned to fire in her gut.

Ignoring her discomfort, Catilen watched out the window for the moon. As soon as the silver orb cleared the horizon, she shot to her feet. “We should do this outside. I can use the moon to boost my strength.” She gave her host a significant look.

Sentomoru wiped his hands on a white napkin and slid to his feet.

By the time they reached the courtyard, the night searchers had already departed. One group lingered, hitching fresh horses to a carriage, awaiting their lord’s order.

Catilen stood in a patch of moonlight and turned to face Sentomoru. He held out his arms. She placed her hands atop his and his cool fingers curled around hers. She reached for the moon first, lest she drain the sorcerer’s power when they joined.

When she returned from the brief sojourn with the necessary power, she nodded. Sentomoru inclined his head and she felt the first tentative touch of his power. His magical presence was

different from Damian's; cooler, darker and stronger. Lowering the outer layer of her shields, Catilen completed the magical handshake.

He wove his energy around hers with expert ease, the sensation so familiar it left her with a dazzling sense of déjà vu. It also made her shudder. Sentomoru commanded a frightening amount of power. He could crush her with a thought, but she didn't have time to contemplate that.

Closing her eyes to block out the physical world, Catilen focused on her secondary senses. Usually she spread her awareness outward until she located her target. This time she turned her concentration inward, to the place where Damian's wards overlapped hers, the source of her constant anxiety; her only reassurance Damian was still out there somewhere, holding on.

Again she didn't seem able to reach Damian across their personal bridge. His presence remained masked. With her senses turned inward, it was difficult to determine what interfered with her empathy. A dark web of power shrouded the island like a veil. *Does this same force prevent Sentomoru from pinpointing a person's exact location? Who, or what, could generate an energy field that powerful? Did it occur naturally? Was it part of the mechanism that allowed the island to travel between worlds?*

She didn't have time to seek answers. Besides, that was Damian's territory. She had to break through.

Steeling her resolve, Catilen poured all her power into a mental thrust. Positive emotion could bolster strength, just as the moon did, and Catilen channeled her budding love for Damian to strengthen her assault.

The concealing wall crumbled against her onslaught. She caught a spark in the darkness and latched onto it, following her connection to its source, the brightly burning fire that represented Damian.

"I found him!" she cried aloud, though Sentomoru would have sensed her triumph through their connection.

Damian latched on to her with desperate force. Terror pulsed on his side of the link, acrid and dark. She poured reassurance across the distance, a wordless promise his ordeal would soon end.

"We have to hurry. He must be in danger."

"I sense it too," Sentomoru agreed as he took charge of their magical link. As he tried to match a physical location to Damian's terror, Catilen's stomach churned with nausea, as though she hung from a rope spinning above the jungle canopy.

Finally, something slid into place, like a plug sliding snugly into an outlet. The whirling sensation halted as suddenly as it started.

"I have his location," Sentomoru announced, squeezing her hands. "I will fetch him myself."
"

"Thank you," she breathed, sinking to her knees as he released her hands. Tears stung her eyes, but she hadn't the energy to devote to them. She clung to her connection with Damian, refusing to sever it until she knew he was safe. "I'll keep him focused until you reach him."

If Sentomoru responded, she wasn't aware of it. Only the clatter of hooves on stone marked his departure.

* * * * *

Like a drowning man clinging to a flotation device, Damian latched onto Catilen's presence, a ray of light piercing the darkness. She might be miles away, but her mental touch brought him

profound relief. Not because it promised rescue, because it would ease his passing. He knew, though she had no way of speaking to him, she was safe. His greatest fear had been abandoning her to die.

He'd been over those last few moments on the trail a thousand times. He hadn't moved more than a dozen steps from Catilen. The path hadn't curved. He hadn't sidestepped any trees.

In the beginning, he'd been convinced she moved. She must have. But he recalled the frustration in her voice every time he made the accusation. He'd made all his biggest mistakes those first few minutes. He hadn't feared getting lost, only losing her. He should have told her to go back to the clearing and tried to meet her there. He should have looked for her trail, or even his own tracks. But panic guided him elsewhere.

His stomach rumbled, a sharp reminder he shouldn't have skimmed on breakfast. He found several berry bushes while he wandered, but he hadn't dared taste any. He knew the wilds of his home country. He'd visited every mountain range from the Appalachians to the Rockies and the plains in between. But he didn't know if the island's fauna was native to Earth, or what alien seeds took root on its travels. Even familiar looking plants might prove poisonous.

His attempts to use magic failed. The island's energy slid through his fingers. He couldn't even sense Catilen across their link. He had no more success locating the bathhouse, the village or the road. Just before noon, he stumbled on a river. He followed its bank for hours. It allowed him to quench his thirst, and he knew the road was a short walk from one of the island's streams. But he hadn't dared let the river out of his sight. If the island could hide Catilen, it could hide the river too.

It sounded deranged. Catilen would think him mad if he lived long enough to talk about his experience. But he knew, in the same way he knew his own name, that the island had hidden Catilen from him. Then it drove him deeper into the jungle, playing games with him, tripping him up, leading him astray.

He wasn't crazy. When he guided their boat to the cove yesterday, the island's energy was sluggish to respond. Now he felt certain some other sorcerer commanded that power. *Unless the island is somehow self-aware.* It might consider outsiders a threat. *But what about the bathhouse guests? Does Sentomoru use his power to protect them?* The island entity might be angry he used some of its power without permission. Catilen drew the energy she worked from other sources. The island might not perceive her as a threat.

Still, it made more sense if a sorcerer controlled that force. Any person powerful enough to prevent him working magic could easily rearrange the island fauna, even the trees.

He might have been okay if he'd stayed by the river. But with night approaching, he needed to find shelter. He started checking patches of sparse green, hoping to find a well-worn path. Until one of his prospects gave way beneath him, dropping him down a steep incline.

He landed in an unceremonious heap of rocks and dead tree branches. The ledge was too steep to climb. If he hadn't fallen against the slope, he'd probably have broken bones. The plummet left him cut and bleeding. Agony exploded through his left leg when he tried to stand. *Forget about trying to climb.*

The ravine might even out somewhere, but he couldn't find his way in the dark and his leg protested every step. He dragged himself to cover, collapsed in a pile of gravel, and propped his back against the rock wall of his prison.

He gazed up at a sky devoid of stars, too dim to get their light through the tiny gaps in the canopy. The howling wind chilled him, but it wasn't cold enough to die of hypothermia. He'd have to wait on starvation, unless one of the island predators found him first.

He didn't want to die but, as darkness claimed the jungle, he accepted the outcome as inevitable. Night predators clawed and hissed as they sought food. Injured and cornered, he was easy prey.

Though it didn't change his outlook on survival, he drew warmth from Catilen's mental touch. He banished his half of the barrier between them, allowing Catilen to feel his relief that she was safe, his joy at having traveled with her, and the depth of his affection for her. If he was going to die, he refused waste this opportunity to express his true feelings.

Something scraped the rock above his head, dislodging several small stones. They trickled down the wall and bounced off his shoulders. Anticipating danger, he strained his neck to find the source of the disturbance.

A shadow leaned over the edge of the ravine. His heart skipped a beat. But the figure stood upright.

"David?"

He gasped. Was this another of the island's cruel tricks?

"Sentomoru?"

Light cut through the darkness, dancing and flickering beside Sentomoru's head, illuminating his tightly braided hair and emerald-colored robes. Damian thought the lord of the island summoned the light via magecraft, until a second man leaned over the ledge, extending the torch to illuminate Damian's face. He squinted against the bright light.

"Please be patient," Sentomoru called. "It will take some time to pull you from this hole." He turned to exchange words with a group of men gathered near the lip of the ravine.

Damian couldn't hear the conversation. Nor could he count the number in attendance. Powerless, he waited. Death fled before the torchlight. Warmth, safety and Catilen seemed once again within reach.

Two lengths of rope tumbled down the rock face. In a detached haze, he watched two men in climbing gear rappel down the incline. At the bottom, they rigged a seat to haul him up.

At the top of the ravine, others situated themselves beneath his arms, supporting him as they led him from the jungle. His leg burned fresh with each step, warning he may have a fracture.

A carriage waited on the cobblestone road. His helpers hauled him up the step and settled him on the padded bench. Sitting across from him, Sentomoru offered a basket of bread and a bottle of cool water. Damian accepted both as the carriage jerked into motion. He muttered a quick thank-you before he downed half the water bottle in a series of frenzied gulps. The cold water numbed his parched throat.

He nibbled the bread, resisting the urge to gobble it down. Glancing across the small space, he hated how perfect the lord of the island looked, not a hair out of place or a pulled thread in his fine robes.

Sentomoru took Damian's look as an invitation to converse. "You gave Catilen quite a scare. She's neglected herself out of concern since her return to the bathhouse."

"I gave myself quite a scare," he replied without a hint of humor. "How is she?"

"Well, I believe. From what I understand, her injuries were minor. I found her around midday, not long after I started looking. She was close to the clearing where I left the two of you. You covered an impressive amount of ground, David. If you'd been going in the right direction, you'd have reached the bathhouse by now."

Damian gritted his teeth, trying to take that as a compliment. "I followed the river once I found it. I knew it was close to the road at some point."

"A wise decision. I'm surprised you didn't find it, if that was your strategy."

His paranoia kept him from discovering the road. But he wasn't willing to discuss his theory of the island's malevolence with Sentomoru, still uncertain if the two were connected. "I'm just glad Catilen's all right. Losing her was the worst part of the ordeal."

"Don't worry, I don't believe Catilen blames you for wandering off."

Damian bit his tongue against a nasty response. He stuffed his mouth full of bread and Sentomoru happily filled the silence.

"She's quite resourceful, you know. We never would have found you if it wasn't for her."

"Cat?" He should have connected her touch across their private link with Sentomoru's arrival. At the time, rescue seemed impossible.

"Yes, she used her abilities to lead me to you. She wields them with fantastic skill, David. You must be certain to thank her." The affection in Sentomoru's tone made Damian's blood boil.

"Of course," he grumbled, annoyed that Catilen had been forced to share her secret. *Just another item on the long list of things I've ruined this weekend.*

Sentomoru filled the journey with useless chatter, but Damian didn't pay attention. Eventually, they both sat in awkward silence, watching dark trees pass until the bathhouse lanterns brightened the night.

Catilen waited in the courtyard. Damian managed two labored steps away from the carriage before she threw her arms around his neck, nearly knocking him flat on his back. He sank to his knees, drawing her with him. Pressing his face to her shoulder, he inhaled her herbal scent. Holding her accentuated how close he'd come to losing her.

"I was so worried," she murmured in his ear. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." He reinforced his answer with a wave of relief across their link. "A few cuts and scrapes, and a banged up leg. Nothing serious. You? Sentomoru said you were injured?"

"Just a sprain. I took care of it. It's fine." Drawing back, she got to her feet and offered a hand to help him stand. He accepted, careful not to pull her off balance.

Despite Catilen's help, he stumbled when he put weight on his left leg. It wasn't going to carry him all the way back to his room. He might be able to mend the fracture, if he could wrest enough energy away from the island for a simple working. Before he had a chance to try, two members of bathhouse staff converged on his location and tucked themselves under his arms. Each bore a portion of his weight while he limped inside.

He watched Catilen out of the corners of his eyes. When Lord Sentomoru climbed from the carriage, she threw her arms around him with the same enthusiasm she'd greeted Damian. The lord of the island blinked for a moment before he wrapped his arms around her in return.

Damian slammed his shields into place before his jealousy leaked through. He sensed only gratitude from Catilen and didn't begrudge the expression. Yet he loathed the sight of her in that man's arms. Sentomoru inflamed his ire, though defining why defied logic.

The bathhouse staff didn't just take him to his door, they helped him into bed. His room filled with people the moment they reached it. Serving girls brought hot food from the kitchen. Doctor Quamoto set his leather bag on a chair. Catilen and Sentomoru stood in a corner, watching the others perform their duties.

The wizened old doctor cleaned his wounds with a burning solution, splinted his leg and offered a scathing lecture about carelessness. "If you can't take proper care of a lady in the wilds," he ranted, "you shouldn't take them with you. Gods know, you can't expect them to take care of themselves!"

Damian ground his teeth while he endured the lecture. Before he could tell the man off, Catilen shooed everyone from the room, insisting he needed quiet to rest. When she returned

from locking the door, she helped him reach his dinner tray.

“Don’t mind old Quamoto. None of this was your fault.” She settled into a chair beside the bed while he spooned hot broth into his mouth. “I was the one who asked Sentomoru to leave.”

“It wasn’t your fault either.” In his haste, he’d already burnt his tongue. Sipping from his water glass, he dipped his tongue between the ice cubes. “I’m just glad you’re all right. If something had happened to you, I’d never have forgiven myself.”

“I feel the same way about you.” Catilen mustered a weary smile. “I think we should stick to the bathhouse for the rest of our stay.”

“Good idea.” He hesitated to mention his theory about the jungle’s consciousness. *Sleep on it. If you can’t find a more logical explanation when you’re rested, talk to her. You’ve had crazier discussions.*

“I rescheduled our library session with Atil’awr for tomorrow afternoon. And I’m pretty sure I got a pair of texts through to the university.”

Damian’s eyebrows shot upward. “How’d you manage that?”

“It involved a lot of shuffling up and down the beach, leaning over the docks and frantically pounding the tiny keyboard on my phone.” Catilen laughed. “I managed to find about two bars on the far side of the beach and I didn’t get any failure notifications. Anyway, I sent a hasty pair of messages informing our department heads that my mother had an ‘incident’ and you drove me to Santa Rosa to tend to the emergency. They know about her ‘condition,’ so it won’t seem out of place.”

“It buys us an extra day or so,” Damian agreed, pleased with her clever solution to the loss of their day. “So I guess everything works out in the end. We’ll study as much as we can tomorrow, then head back in time for our Tuesday classes. I don’t have any until the afternoon.”

“Same here. For now though, you should rest.” She retrieved his empty dinner tray and set it aside. “Healing your leg might be too much for me, but I’ll give it a shot. If nothing else, it’ll speed up the process.”

Damian sank into his pile of pillows, trusting Catilen to do her work. A warm sensation engulfed his injured leg just before sleep carried him away.

Chapter Thirteen

She drifted through a gray world. Down concrete sidewalks, beside asphalt roads, past faded brick storefronts. Thin shadows walked beside her, wisps of smoke with no faces, so fragile a touch might disperse them. Yet they crowded her, pushing past as they hurried in the opposite direction.

She walked this way every day. Beneath the same battered awnings, past the same dull streetlights, beside the same phantom people. She'd find more life in a desert than in this manmade wasteland.

A wasteland where she wasn't welcome.

Pausing amid the ghostly crowd, she glanced over her shoulder. A distant spark of light glowed on the horizon, the promise of color, joy and life.

"You again?" An angry hiss drew her gaze and the light vanished. Her eyes darted back to the horizon, and its promised light, but it had gone.

"Why are you still here?"

"Can't your mother take a hint?"

Smoky bodies sprouted corporeal hands. Accusing fingers accompanied the angry voices.

"We don't want your kind here!"

"I'm not interested in your dark magic!"

"Devil spawn!"

Glowing red slits appeared on every featureless face. The glaring crowd pressed close, driving her to her knees. Closing her eyes, she shoved her fingers in her ears, but it didn't muffle the mocking voices.

"Catilen cast a spell on me!"

"Catilen read my mind!"

She heard laughter. It started as a single voice but, as the sound spread, each throat contributed until it grew into a wall, a tunnel, a swirling vortex of mockery.

They didn't understand. They didn't want to understand.

Though the laughter started as a round, the chorus cut off as one. Hoping to find herself alone, she removed her fingers from her ears.

"Catilen is different." The words were a whisper and, like the laughter, they spread until they buzzed like bees in her ears.

Catilen is different.

"Of course you're different, darling," her mother's voice cooed, drowning out the others. She didn't say different like a dirty word. Instead she said, "You're special."

She fled that proclamation too. She didn't want to be special. She wanted to be normal, like everyone else. Then the voices would stop.

Her foot caught in something. She tripped and fell for a long time into darkness.

"Sorry..." her mother's voice sounded thick with emotion. "Catilen, I'm so sorry."

She opened her eyes to see her mother's face bathed in tears. The image was fuzzy, like an old photograph or a TV show watched through static.

"It happened so fast. He didn't feel a thing."

Turning her head, she saw the car. Only it wasn't a car anymore; it was a heap of metal so twisted as to be unrecognizable. Broken glass from the shattered windows lay scattered across the ground.

No...

"He didn't mean to..."

He couldn't be inside there.

A smattering of blood across the twisted steel.

...went away and left us all alone...

She screamed.

"Catilen."

In a blinding flash of golden light, color exploded as an artist's painting replaced the grey world. Sunlight warmed her face. That warmth enveloped her body. A light breeze kissed her cheek and stirred her hair. Springy green grass tickled her toes. Finally, the phantoms faded, replaced by life; swaying trees, fragrant flowers, singing birds...

A man's face. A stranger, yet somehow familiar. Crimson robes fluttered in the breeze accompanied by long ebony hair. Pale lips curled into a smile.

"Stay with me," he pleaded.

"Stay with me Catilen..."

* * * * *

Sleep refused to release her. With effort akin to dragging her body through thick mud, Catilen forced her eyes open. The last remnants of the dream clung to the backs of her eyelids as she rubbed the sleep gunk from the corners of her eyes.

She hadn't dreamed of her father's death since she left Louisiana. The twisted hunk of metal wasn't a nighttime creation of her mind. It's what the car had looked like to a seven-year-old when she peeked at the pictures the insurance company provided her mother after the accident.

Most of what she remembered about her father came from the stories her mother told while she flipped through old photo albums. He'd been a businessman and he'd left behind a considerable sum to ensure his family's care. Deciding to dedicate that money to her daughter's education, Delana never stopped working. After receiving her masters, Catilen set aside what remained for her mother. Now it paid for the home in Santa Rosa, though Catilen siphoned some of her income into the account as well.

Aside from his tragic death, she recalled only impressions of her father. Kind smiles, bedtime stories and treats he brought back from his business trips. She regretted never having a chance to know him. In the years before she learned to block, Catilen caught echoes of her mother's love for him. Delana Taylor loved her late husband so much, she'd never considered remarrying. Anyone who earned that level of trust from an Empath was worth knowing.

She still wondered how things would have turned out if he'd lived. If her mother hadn't had to squirrel so much away for her education, they might have had the money to relocate. Delana might not have ended up in a home either. She knew enough about her parents' relationship to know her father had grounded her mother. He could have kept her from losing control. *At least she'd have someone she loved taking care of her around the clock.*

With a sigh, Catilen pushed aside her silken covers and padded across the floor to her suitcase. Unless this island could move through time as well as space, there was no point dwelling on what-ifs.

A quick peek out the window revealed morning well underway. She slept right through sunrise, and her last opportunity to discover the source of the strange energy permeating the island. *Maybe it's for the best.* If it had anything to do with the dark web that nearly prevented her from finding Damian, she didn't want to risk tangling with it. *We've both taken enough risks*

for one weekend. Learn what you can from the library and take something home from this trip other than bad memories.

Was Damian still asleep? Considering the state he returned in, she wouldn't be surprised if he slept until lunch. She didn't want to risk waking him.

She may as well seize this opportunity to swim in the waterfall lake. The cold water would dispel the last vestiges of sleep, leaving her sharp and focused for her afternoon studies.

Catilen grabbed a few things from her bathroom and wrapped them in a blanket-sized towel. She left through one of the side exits to avoid the crowds, but the courtyard was surprisingly empty. Activities started late here, perhaps because so many guests stayed up until the wee hours of morning. Now she thought about it, the courtyard had been crowded when Damian returned the night before. *I assumed people wanted to witness the spectacle.*

In the polished rock wall beside the waterfall, she found a nook to stash her towel and shoes where they'd be safe from the soaking mist. Then she hurried to the edge of the lake, eager to take advantage of the solitude.

As she dipped her foot into the cold mountain water, something moved along the edge of her vision. A body bobbed in the small waves kicked up by the water striking the pool. Catilen frowned when the man didn't fight the current. She hurried up the bank to get a closer look. With each step, a chill cut deeper into her body. Her teeth chattered as the cold seeped into her bones. It didn't come from the spray; sheltered by jutting rocks from this angle, she was still dry.

This was no refreshing splash from a mountain spring. It was sheer terror. The swimmer didn't need her help. It was too late for that, though his lips were parted to call her. Sightless eyes stared from beneath the ripples. Familiar eyes. The eyes of the soldier who offered her his hand not two days before. The hand that summoned the creature which threatened to devour her.

She screamed. It echoed through the cave behind the waterfall, sounding strange when it struck her ears.

Her lungs ran out of air. Her knees buckled and thudded against the pavement. Silence descended over the courtyard, broken by the sound of water dripping against stone.

Gasping for breath, Catilen exhaled before her lungs had a chance to make use of the air. She became aware of a figure hovering close, ebony hair draped over one shoulder. Long fingers grasped her shoulder as his lips moved. His grasp tightened.

"Catilen?" Her name broke through the haze. "Are you all right?"

She nodded because she couldn't find her voice. She shuddered, contradicting herself. When she didn't respond to his quiet urging, the lord of the isle reached down and hauled her to her feet. He propelled her down the walkway, away from the rocky alcove. Slowly the sun cut through the lingering malaise to warm her skin.

"He was dead when I got here," she croaked.

"I'm sorry," Sentomoru cooed, stroking her back as a mother might reassure a child. "Such a shame. I give people paradise and still they aren't satisfied."

An attendant hurried by, draping a thick towel across Catilen's shaking shoulders. She pulled it close, trying to regain her composure. She glanced back toward the waterfall where she saw three men fishing the body from the lake. Shuddering, she averted her eyes.

"It's all right." Sentomoru guided her through the main door, down a hallway that led to her room. "There's nothing for you to worry about."

"I knew him." Emotion clogged her throat. Tears burned her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "The soldier... Paul. I met him our first day... I shook his hand and I... I..." She choked on the words.

Pausing, Sentomoru lifted a hand to stroke his goatee. “You mentioned it last night. That you collapsed because you sensed something when you shook his hand.”

“Yes.” Catilen forced herself to take slow, measured breaths. A sinking sensation took root in the pit of her stomach, but at least she managed to stop shaking. “I have to know what happened here.”

“Now Catilen,” Sentomoru held up a hand to stop her, “you shouldn’t feel responsible—”

“I need to figure that out.” Determination gave her strength. “That death was fresh or I wouldn’t have felt the void when I got close. I might be able to catch the empathic echoes of what happened...” She swallowed hard. She’d never tried anything like this. It would require pushing her abilities beyond her tested limits. It wasn’t dangerous, but it might be stupid. “I just need my scrying mirror. I’m pretty sure I brought it with me.”

“Catilen,” Sentomoru sounded stern, “you are under no obligation to consider this unfortunate incident further.”

“I can’t just forget!” She instantly regretted the sharp retort. “I’m sorry, but I have to do this. I have to know if I could have prevented this somehow.”

“You couldn’t have.” Sentomoru crossed his arms over his chest, tucking his hands into the ends of his long sleeves. “But if you insist on this undertaking, I will not hinder you. I, too, would like to know what happened. I’ll wait for you here.”

She nodded and hurried down the hall. To discover anything useful, she had to be swift. Inactive emotions were hard enough to detect without allowing the impressions time to fade.

She’d packed the black-glass mirror near the bottom of her suitcase, padded by a pair of old pajamas. She didn’t use it often; divination wasn’t her primary area of study. She knew the techniques, but she wasn’t very good at any of them. Tarot had its uses, but she never took it too seriously. She brought the mirror to help Damian study the ley lines he believed powered the island’s travel. Scrying worked best for abstract things.

The polished black surface reflected her wild hair and bloodshot eyes. A shocking sight. She leaned her forehead against the edge of the bed and closed her eyes, taking a moment to rest.

What made her think she could decipher faded, abstract emotional impressions? How had she come to this moment? Every attempt to enjoy the island met with disaster. Had Damian interpreted her cards correctly? Did they have to pass through misfortune in order to find happiness?

Bad things happen, even in paradise. She wanted to believe the trip had been a long string of coincidental bad luck, but she looked for purpose in every event, no matter how incidental.

She wanted to leave, but she couldn’t. She needed something of consequence to take with her. Something to make this suffering worthwhile.

Before the chance slipped through her fingers, Catilen shot to her feet and rushed from the room. The brief respite allowed her to recover her composure. When she reached Sentomoru, she presented the black-glass mirror and launched into an awkward explanation of its function.

“I’m aware of the technique,” the lord of the island interrupted, leading her back toward the waterfall. “Though I can’t claim to be an expert. I’ve never studied divination.”

The lake was clear again, the corpse nowhere in sight. Though they hadn’t cordoned off the area, the staff herded patrons elsewhere. The less people present to muddy the emotional waters, the more likely her success.

“I can’t claim to be well-versed either. But I’m glad I know enough to give it a shot.” She settled on a stone beside the pool, the rushing water at her back. “Quiet now. I need absolute concentration.”

Sentomoru shuffled backward and folded his arms into his sleeves.

She shifted the black-glass pane until her reflection disappeared. Her thoughts drifted, making it difficult to clear her mind. Precious minutes passed, further diminishing her odds of success. She persisted until she found that familiar state of focus. Something of heavy emotional impact *must* have happened here if a man ended up dead.

As she spread her awareness outward, she caught inklings of fear and anxiety emanating from the nearby staff. Sentomoru's concern remained conspicuously absent, locked behind his personal shields. She constructed an external shield to block the noise, isolating her secondary senses inside the affected radius.

She was about to give up when she detected a stab of jealousy, followed by a white-hot surge of anger. Fear tumbled in its wake, followed by desperation and, finally, a wash of overwhelming despair. The strength of the emotions, even diluted, left her panting. They stained the path, inhabiting the rocks and stones of the pool.

Working quickly, Catilen seized those impressions, directing them onto the surface of the black mirror. She cycled through the emotions two times, three, willing them to take physical shape.

Finally, Paul's face appeared, eyes narrowed, lips curled in a snarl of rage.

The image shifted. She saw a young man, no more than eighteen, fear etched into his features. He clutched a sharp gardening implement in both hands. As he lifted it, the vision wavered.

Gasping, Catilen lowered the mirror. She sunk onto the paved path, curling on her side for a moment. She sucked deep breaths, exhaling slowly, grounding herself in the present.

Sentomoru appeared in her field of vision. He knelt, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she breathed, sitting up. The lord of the island extended a hand and helped her to her feet. He escorted her back to the bathhouse, silent until they stepped through the main doors.

"Did you see something?"

Catilen nodded as she paced the length of the bathhouse lobby, trying to make sense of her vision. She expected the fear and desperation to belong to the dead soldier. But her mirror identified Paul as the aggressor, rather than the victim.

Sentomoru waited, tracing her movements with his eyes until she stopped to catch her breath. "What did you see?" he asked.

"I saw Paul. He was angry, jealous about something, though I can't say what. I also saw a young man. He must have been gardening; he had something sharp in his hands. I think Paul confronted him. From what I saw in the mirror, and sensed around the lake, I think the soldier attacked. The gardener defended himself. In his desperation, he landed a lucky strike. I can't imagine he intended to kill his attacker. He probably fled when he realized what he'd done."

Sentomoru narrowed his eyes. "You're certain these are the events which transpired?"

"No. I didn't see much and I could be assigning the emotions to the wrong subjects." She sighed. "But I know what I felt when I shook that soldier's hand. Jealousy is a powerful impulse. The desire for a confrontation, physical or otherwise, *could* cause that kind of manifestation."

"You think it was a premonition?" Sentomoru arched one midnight eyebrow.

Catilen buried her face in both hands, almost dropping her mirror in the process. "Not at the time!" The statement ended with a high-pitched wail, muffled by her hands. "It could have been hiding behind his smile and I never guessed!"

Whispering a gentle shushing sound, Sentomoru snaked an arm around her shoulders. "I

assert again; none of this was your fault, Catilen. You could no more prevent that soldier from attacking someone than you could keep the sun from rising. He chose his course, and he is responsible for the outcome. You played no role.”

He had a point. She could bemoan her inaction all she wanted, confronting Paul might not have made a difference. What would she have said that he couldn't allay with a dazzling smile?

When she said nothing, Sentomoru drew back. He held her at arm's length, one hand on each of her shoulders.

“Forget that you were unable to prevent this tragedy. What's important, dear Catilen, is that you may prevent another. The boy you saw in your mirror must be frightened. I'd like to find him and reassure him he's not in trouble. Will you help me?”

A hand flew to her mouth as she recalled the terror on the face in her mirror. *What kind of justice system does the island have?* What punishment awaited the killer of a guest in a tourism-centered society?

“Poor thing! Of course I will. But I don't think I can describe him well. I only saw him for a moment.”

“That's all right. I can take the image from your mind, if you're open to a minor intrusion.”

“Tell me what I need to do,” Catilen agreed without hesitation.

“Come with me.” Sentomoru offered his arm. She didn't need it to steady her, but she didn't want to be rude. He led her to his office and motioned for her to sit. This time, he settled into a chair beside hers. Leaning close, he placed his hands on either side of her head.

“I'll need you to lower the outer-most layer of your personal shields. I have no desire to steal your secrets. If you hold the image of the gardener in your foremost thoughts, I will be able to 'catch' it.”

Catilen nodded. “I have a good idea what you want me to do. I'm ready when you are.”

He nodded. Closing her eyes, Catilen did as he asked. She used the same process to project focused emotions. Familiarity with the technique allowed her to keep the image sharp without dwelling on thoughts she'd rather conceal. Such as her growing desire to speak with Damian.

Sentomoru's mental touch was feather light. Mere seconds passed before he removed his hands and settled back in his chair. “Thank you, Catilen for your co-”

The door slid open, banging against its tracks. As one, they turned to discover the source of the interruption. Who would burst into the island lord's office without knocking?

“Cat, I've been looking for you everywhere!” Damian gasped. “Are you all right?” He launched himself through the doorway and nearly ended up nose down on the floor.

Chapter Fourteen

Catilen shot to her feet, but couldn't reach Damian fast enough. He grabbed one side of the doorway, twisted midair, and landed on his rump instead of his face. She knelt beside him, regarding him with a mixture of concern and reprimand.

"Are you trying to break your leg?"

"I was worried about you." He reached for her hand. She hauled him to his feet, propping him against the wall so he wouldn't take another tumble.

"I felt y-" He stopped, casting a nervous glance in Sentomoru's direction. Leaning closer, he lowered his voice. "What happened this morning, Cat? It scared the hell out of me. Please tell me you're all right."

"I'm fine." By the way he quirked his eyebrows and twisted his lips, she could tell he didn't believe her. She glanced over her shoulder, hesitant to speak further in Sentomoru's presence.

"I have what I need," Sentomoru answered her unspoken question. "The young man's name is Tenolin. He's an apprentice to my master gardener. He lives in the village, which is likely where he fled. I will tend this matter, Catilen. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Please," Catilen blurted, holding up a hand. "If you're going to talk to him, I'd like to come."

Sentomoru arched one midnight eyebrow. "If you wish. But I intend to leave presently. The sooner this situation is sorted, the better."

"I'll come too." Damian's offer earned him a pair of confused looks. "What?" he demanded. Narrowing his eyes, he puffed out his cheeks like a child denied a toy. "I want to know what's going on. Who's this Tenolin guy?"

"You can barely walk," Catilen huffed. He'd probably undone all her efforts to heal his fracture.

"I got here just fine, didn't I?" Damian challenged.

The word *debatable* was on her lips, but the lord of the isle cleared his throat before she could speak.

"If the two of you wish to discuss the morning's incident, you can use my office as long as you need. I must prepare for my departure. Meet me in the courtyard if you wish to accompany me, but I will not delay my departure."

"Of course. I'll be right there." Catilen bowed her head, uncertain if her ears burned out of shame or anger. Assisting Tenolin was more important than a petty squabble with Damian.

Sentomoru closed the door when he left. Catilen took Damian's arm and helped him to one of the vacant chairs. She offered him an apologetic look as she settled into the chair across from his. She kept hold of his hand and he glanced at it as though he were too angry to talk.

After a moment, he relented. "Please tell me what's going on, Cat. I've been sick with worry all morning."

"I'm sorry. It's been such a hectic morning... I forgot you'd feel the backlash across our link."

"It's okay. Just tell me what happened. Did someone, or something, attack you?"

"No, nothing like that!" She sighed and he squeezed her hand. Bracing herself, she started at the beginning. She tried not to recall the horrible details. Yet the story conjured the memory of clouded eyes staring at her as the body bobbed on the current, lips parted in a soundless scream. She shuddered.

“And I felt the shock when you discovered the body.” Damian cringed.

“The death was fresh. An Empath can sense a soul’s parting turmoil for a brief window after their passing. It’s terrible. Cold and dark, like the world ending all around you. I call it the death void.”

Damian shuddered. “I don’t think you need to describe it. You’ve felt that before?”

“Once, when my father died. I was seven. I didn’t really understand what I experienced. My mom got an emergency call. She didn’t know what was going on and she had me with her. So she bundled me up, threw me in the car and out we went. It was terrible. Some drunk idiot barreled into my dad’s car at highway speeds and flung him into the back of a semi. Cars don’t exactly pancake, but it looked like the first stage of junkyard compression.”

“Jesus,” Damian squeezed her hand again. “I can’t imagine dealing with all that.”

“I still have nightmares about it,” Catilen admitted, picking at a stray thread on the arm of her chair. The morning’s nightmare felt strangely prophetic.

“So this Tenolin is the killer?” Damian returned to the original topic.

“It seems that way. But from what we can tell, it wasn’t his fault. The dead man I discovered was the soldier I spoke to the day we arrived. The one I told you about.

“The one that caused the manifestation?” Damian’s brow crinkled with confusion. “I thought you said it wasn’t a premonition?”

“I didn’t think it was. I’ve never had one before.”

The light of understanding dawned in Damian’s eyes. His lips formed a grim smile. “I get it. You blame yourself because you didn’t interpret the manifestation as a premonition. But why would you, Cat, if you’ve never had one before?”

“You sound like Sentomoru,” Catilen grumbled.

Damian’s lips formed a frown of displeasure. “I suppose you want to reassure yourself this isn’t your fault?”

Catilen narrowed her eyes. She found Damian’s aversion to their host misplaced and childish. He’d better not be stalling. She’d be livid if she missed Sentomoru’s departure. “You disapprove?” she demanded, her tone sharper than she intended.

“Of the suggestion you bear any responsibility for this? Yes.”

“I don’t have time for this.” Catilen jerked her hand free of Damian’s grip as she stood.

“Wait!” When Damian grasped her arm, she hesitated. She didn’t want him to end up sprawled on the floor. “I’m sorry, Cat. It’s just... Sentomoru has seen more of you since our arrival than I have. If someone’s going to help you through this, I want it to be me, not some guy you just met.”

Catilen gritted her teeth, bristling like a cat encountering its reflection in a mirror. “I want it to be you too, Damian, but you act as though Sentomoru orchestrated a murder to keep us apart!”

“Of course he didn’t! I’m sorry.” Damian squeezed her arm. “That came out all wrong. This isn’t about him or me. It’s about you. I care about you, Cat. Please let me be there for you.”

He looked up at her, green eyes wide as saucers, lower lip forming the first hint of a pout. It melted her heart. “You don’t need my permission. But you do need to be more careful. I’m not powerful enough to heal your fracture. I want you with me, but I don’t want you breaking that leg.”

“We’ll ride to the village and back.” Damian slid to his feet. She offered her arm to steady him. “I’ll rest when we get back. I promise. Scout’s honor.”

Catilen gave him an appraising look, as though her eyes could compel him to behave. “Well if it’s a *scout’s honor*...” She lifted Damian’s arm across her shoulder, supporting him while he

limped down the hall to the main entrance.

She resisted the urge to rush, her stomach doing little flip-flops as they navigated the bathhouse halls. They'd lingered too long. She understood Sentomoru's impetus; she didn't expect him to dally on her behalf. Nor did she want to risk Damian's health to satisfy selfish desires. But she desperately wanted to participate in the coming meeting. Only by scouring a small piece of gold from the morning's dirt and disaster could she put all this behind her.

She glanced up when they reached the door. Across the courtyard, Sentomoru climbed into the horse-drawn carriage. His eyes locked with hers and he jerked his head to indicate she should come. Relieved, she helped Damian down the stairs. They cut across the springy grass and Sentomoru offered Damian an arm to climb into the compartment. Catilen clambered in his wake, settling on the bench as the carriage jerked into motion. She wrung her hands together as she looked out the window, unable to keep still.

"Do you think we'll get there before he does anything rash?" She asked when the silence grew unbearable.

Sentomoru smiled. "I believe so. Mine are a simple people, Catilen, content with simple lives and simple joys. In times of trouble they look for simple answers. Tenolin probably believes no one will connect him with the incident if he conceals himself for awhile."

With no witnesses, Tenolin might never become a suspect unless guilt drove him to confess. Either way, that remorse would gnaw at him the rest of his days. *How wretched.* "Do you think you'll have trouble finding him?"

"Not at all."

The carriage ride was blessedly short. They halted outside a small cottage with a thatched roof. The thin wood walls were pink, their once brilliant red stain bleached by the sun's unforgiving gaze.

When they passed through the village yesterday, no one paid the carriage notice. The villagers must be used to guests passing back and forth through town. But when Sentomoru stepped from the interior, everyone took notice. His silver-trimmed navy robes trailed behind him as he made his way to the door. Everyone who saw him dropped to one knee and bowed their head. Noting the display, others hurried to pay homage to their lord.

Uncomfortable with the fanfare, Catilen shuffled in Sentomoru's wake. He didn't seem to notice the display, but he must be used to this treatment. He marched straight to the door and knocked. The only answer was a scrabbling sound, like rats darting inside walls.

"It's all right, Tenolin," Sentomoru called. "We only need to speak with you."

Silence. Catilen imagined the cottage's sole occupant holding his breath, hoping they'd give up and leave. *He must be weighing the words of his lord, trying to determine if they're truth or a sweet lie to trick him into showing himself.* Catilen sent a light wave of reassurance in the young man's direction.

The scrabbling sound returned. The door flew open, revealing the young man from her vision. Tall and thin, he bore a short crop of ruddy brown hair and matching eyes. He threw himself on his knees, pressing his forehead to Sentomoru's feet where they peeked out the bottom of his ornate robes. *How can he stand to be treated like an idol?*

"Please, Lord Sentomoru," the youth spoke around little sobs. "Please believe me! I didn't mean to--"

"It's all right, Tenolin," Sentomoru repeated. "I know the soldier attacked you."

For a brief moment, Tenolin lifted his head, regarding his lord with shock. His eyes widened when he realized on whom he gazed and he returned his forehead to Sentomoru's foot. "You

do?"

"Indeed." Catilen appreciated that Sentomoru offered no explanation as to how he arrived at that conclusion. "What I do not know is why. Shall we discuss the matter in the street?"

Tenolin sprung to his feet and jumped aside, motioning for the group to enter. He bowed from the waste as Sentomoru passed. "Please, forgive me, my lord. My home is yours, though it's hardly adequate for your comfort."

"It is sufficient," Sentomoru replied. A worn couch took up one wall of the cottage's main room. The lord of the isle perched in the center of it.

Slipping past the prostrating youth, Catilen sank into a threadbare armchair crammed in the far corner. Damian stood beside it, apparently uncomfortable with the idea of sitting.

Tenolin closed the door and slunk to the center of the room, kneeling before the lord of the isle.

Sentomoru folded his hands on his lap. "Now, tell me what happened this morning."

"I suppose it's my fault, Lord Sentomoru." Tenolin hung his head. "I've been courting Melana for several months now. She was assigned as the soldier's attendant at the bathhouse. She told me more than once the new patron she tended seemed to expect more than the usual services, if... if you understand what I mean."

Sentomoru's upper lip curled with disgust. "My servants are not prostitutes," he proclaimed, addressing his guests. "No matter how I stress this fact, there are 'misunderstandings.'" Catilen let her pallor answer for her. Shaking his head, the island lord turned back to Tenolin. "Please, continue."

"I visited her one night at the bathhouse. I know I shouldn't have, my lord. I should have waited for her to get home. But it's such a long walk and sometimes I can't stand the thought of her coming back after dark, so I went up to see her instead. He saw us together. The soldier, I mean. He got angry. Melana wasn't even on duty at the time, but he didn't care. We fled before he could do anything to her, but I was terrified."

"She should have reported the incident to me," Sentomoru said when Tenolin took a moment to catch his breath. "She well knows how I handle such incidents."

"The soldiers seem important," Tenolin protested. "She thought if she pretended to like him, he'd be happy and wouldn't make any trouble for you in this strange place. But I guess he wasn't happy. He came to find me while I was working on the waterfall garden this morning. When he lunged at me, I didn't know what to do. I've never fought anyone before."

With a strangled sob, the young man lowered his head into his hands. A dark splash of blood stained his tunic sleeve despite obvious attempts to wash it away.

Sentomoru made the same soft shushing sound he used to soothe Catilen out of her shock when he found her beside the waterfall. He kept it up until the young man ceased his rocking and raised his head.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Sentomoru soothed. "There's no shame in defending yourself. I know you would never willingly take a life."

"It was an accident," Tenolin sobbed. "I swear!"

"I know." Sentomoru flashed the youth a reassuring smile. "That's why I want you to take Melana's hand in marriage. Make her a fat, happy farm wife."

"You... you mean it?" Tenolin stammered, stunned. His transformation from despair to elation reminded Catilen of street lights coming to life at twilight.

She blinked, almost as startled by Sentomoru's suggestion as Tenolin. "Wait a minute." She held up one hand.

Tenolin turned a worried frown in her direction. Sentomoru arched one of his perfect eyebrows.

“You object?” She couldn’t decide if Sentomoru sounded surprised or amused.

“I don’t object to two people who care about each other getting married. But I do think you’re getting ahead of yourself. Shouldn’t one of you ask Melana what she wants?”

Sentomoru squinted, puzzled by her statement. “If she has allowed Tenolin to court her, I would assume she wishes to be with him.”

“That still doesn’t give you the right to make a decision that affects her future without asking her,” Catilen insisted.

“Aren’t you the one who teaches tolerance of other cultures?” Damian teased, prodding her shoulder. His devilish grin disappeared when she turned an acid glare in his direction.

“I teach my students to judge traditions in the context of the culture that wrote the literature. That doesn’t mean I encourage, or condone, out-of-date practices.”

Damian’s expression turned apologetic, though Sentomoru still looked confused.

“I see no amount of reassurance about how well I know my subjects will placate the fair Catilen. I mean Melana no disrespect. Tenolin,” the lord of the island regarded the bewildered youth, “why don’t you accompany us back to the bathhouse? You can offer Melana your marriage proposal in person.”

“There now,” Catilen grinned. “That sounds much better. I’m sure she’ll be delighted.” She stood and helped Damian back to the carriage, leaving Sentomoru alone with the young gardener. Tenolin wouldn’t go to pieces over an incident he hadn’t caused. Her heart felt lighter.

When they were alone in the carriage compartment, Damian laid an arm across her shoulders. “Are you finally satisfied you had no part in what happened?”

She rested her head on Damian’s shoulder. “I suppose. I still wish I could have done more.”

“You helped Sentomoru find this kid and set things right. That’s no small thing, Cat. Forgive yourself for being human.”

“I just don’t understand people sometimes, Damian.” She sighed. “How could anyone force themselves between two people who obviously care for each other?”

“Jealousy is an ugly thing. Some people only care about themselves. As long as they’re happy, they don’t care who they step on to get there.”

It was the darker side of humanity. “You might be able to force someone to stay with you, but they’d never be happy. Who could be content with a miserable partner?”

Before he could respond, Sentomoru’s voice sounded outside the door. A moment later it opened and the lord of the island settled himself on the opposite bench. Tenolin stumbled in his wake, cramming himself into the far corner to allow his sovereign more space.

Catilen sat up. She’d never been fond of public displays of affection. It would be rude to cuddle all the way back to the bathhouse. She spent the trip conversing with Tenolin, half-expecting butterflies to spring from his mouth every time he opened it. He seemed flighty and nervous. *He is on his way to propose.*

The group parted ways in the courtyard. Before he bowed and bid her farewell, Sentomoru flashed her a conspiratorial grin and murmured, “This is the part of my job I like best.”

Catilen smiled all the way back to the bathhouse, a spring her step. Some good would come of this tragedy after all. She imagined the young couple slipping away with each other after the proposal. That was how it happened in romance novels.

“Let’s get you back to your room,” she told Damian. “I’ll give your leg another round of healing before our appointment in the library this afternoon.”

Damian didn't protest, perhaps recalling his promise.

When they got back to his room, Catilen hurried to the bathroom to fill the tub. She tried to choose a spicy scent, doubting Damian wanted to smell like flowers all day. Inhaling the fragrant steam reminded her she hadn't yet bathed for the day, a strange irony in a bathhouse.

Damian limped into the bathroom. He'd stripped down to swim shorts, but she'd seen that much of him before. Gingerly, he lowered himself into the hot water.

"You know..." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm half-tempted to join you in there. I could use a relaxing bath after my morning."

"Oh?" Damian arched an eyebrow as he reclined against the tub's edge. A teasing grin split his lips. "I didn't realize we were 'there yet.'"

"Maybe we are." She wasn't joking.

Damian's smile disappeared. He sat up and blinked at her. "You don't feel we're moving too fast?"

Catilen settled on the edge of the tub, letting her feet dangle in the hot water. The heat relaxed the stiffness in her ankle. All her running had inflamed the injury. One more healing session ought to see it mended.

"I came so close to losing you yesterday, Damian. It terrified me. If nothing else, it made me realize how much I want you in my life. I've already told you the difficult things. For me, it doesn't get any more serious than this."

Damian pushed off the side of the tub and crossed the space between them, pressing his chest against her bare legs as he reached for her hands. He caught one and lifted it to his lips. "I love you too, Cat." He grinned. "I think I have for awhile, but I didn't know if you felt the same way."

Forgetting her clothing, Catilen slid from the edge of the tub into Damian's waiting embrace. She threw her arms around his neck and pressed herself against his damp, muscular chest, fingers pressed into his shoulders, forehead resting against his cheek. Her sudden entrance to the water kicked up tiny waves that lapped against her saturated clothing.

"I've been scared, Damian. So scared to let anyone into my life. I didn't want to get hurt or..."

"Lose someone like your mom lost your dad?" Damian suggested, drawing her closer.

"Exactly," she whispered. She kept people at arm's length. She couldn't handle it if someone she cared about laughed in her face. She didn't want the difficulty of special needs driving people out of her life. It was easier to be alone.

But Damian wasn't like that. He understood her abilities, her limitations and strange practices. He'd proven it when he put the pieces together on his own. He accepted every part of her, just the way she was. She felt safer with him than she'd felt since that day, at age seven, when her whole life changed.

"I feel the same," Damian murmured, wrapping his arms around her waist, squeezing her gently. "But life is short, Cat, and we can't let our fears run it. I want to share all the time I have left with you. So long as I'm breathing, I'll never hurt you."

He didn't promise nothing bad would ever happen. Somehow, that comforted her more than his promise. One thing she'd learned long ago; life was an uncertain thing. You could lose everything in the span of a day, discover one morning your beliefs were misguided, or wake up in the gutter and fall asleep in a five-star hotel. Life was crazy like that, the original rollercoaster ride.

Damian was right; she'd let fear dictate the course of her life for too long. She was sick of

running and tired of hiding. With Damian by her side, she could face anything.

She'd never find the words to answer. It occurred to her she didn't have to. Instead, she lowered her shields. Not just the outer layer, which kept her thoughts private, but the inner layers which isolated her from the emotions of those in close proximity, followed by the layers which protected innocent bystanders from her projections. She peeled them away one by one, the way she might peel an onion, to keep her feelings from overwhelming him. With her mind exposed, her true feelings washed over him like the tiny waves lapping at her shoulders.

She'd never cared for anyone like this. After her high school crush tore her heart to shreds, she fostered a belief that men were cruel. But not Damian. He was kind, caring, intelligent and brave. He pursued his desires without caring how people judged him. He wasn't forceful or demanding. He let others walk their own paths at their own paces. He'd waited for her to open up at a time of her choosing and she let him sense her gratitude. She also included her desire to share with him, not just her life, but these precious moments.

He made a soft sound of surprise when the first wave hit. His hands moved up and down her back, though whether to reassure her or to ground himself, she couldn't say. At least not until he stripped away his own protections, granting her a similar glimpse of his feelings.

He thought she was courageous too, and strong, thoughtful, wise and beautiful. He had wanted to be part of her life longer than she'd realized. He felt honored to be welcomed in, pleased by the prospect of a permanent relationship.

More than anything he wanted to demonstrate the depths of his emotions.

Almost as one, they turned their faces toward each other. Damian leaned down and Catilen met his lips with hers. She'd wanted to share this kiss with him yesterday, full of fiery passion, expressing her love in a way words could never. They parted for a moment, each marveling at the strength of the other's affection and each feeling the other's wonder. Then they kissed again, with hunger born of passion.

Damian's hands slid under her soaked shirt, peeling it away from her body. She pressed her bare chest to his, her flesh drinking in his touch. She wanted to melt into him until they became one being. He shared her desire to merge, but kept his passion restrained, moving slowly, stroking the fire that burned inside her until its glow matched his.

Their minds mingled as their hands roamed, shared sensations pouring through them, weaving them closer together as their excitement mounted. Catilen almost got her wish; Damian filled every part of her being, his love for her as bright as the noon-day sun.

Finally, they joined their bodies as they had joined their minds and discovered a place beyond words.

Chapter Fifteen

As the sun joined hands with the distant horizon, setting the sky ablaze with gold and crimson light, Catilen strolled the walkways of the bathhouse garden. After dinner, when only lanterns held back the darkness, the paths would be teeming with guests. At the moment, they were empty. While other guests sculpted their extravagant hair-dos and donned their expensive eveningwear, Catilen meandered between blooms and bushes, lost in thought.

The afternoon had been as relaxing as the previous day had been hectic. In comparison, the past few hours felt magical.

The bathhouse library was three times the size it appeared. Atil'awr and her associates kept the most popular books out front, so guests could easily access them. Most were novels from the different worlds the island visited, though a few were collections of old legends. For those unsatisfied with the offerings, the library staff retrieved archived items on request. When they arrived for their afternoon appointment, Atil'awr led them through a hidden break between bookshelves, down a set of stone stairs, into the storeroom and allowed them to prance among the stacks as long as they pleased.

Catilen never dreamed she'd find such a storehouse of knowledge. The bathhouse archives included the histories of a hundred different races. Most were incomplete but many were comprehensive. Sentomoru, and his ancestors, had collected literature from twice as many lands. Old volumes were preserved and stored as they fell out of popularity, in case they became desirable again. Catilen could spend a lifetime among the shelves and never touch half the information available. It was a literature academic's dream. *If Sentomoru possesses such treasures, what must the libraries of Atil'awar's homeworld be like?*

As she helped the multi-hued librarian return the books to their places, Catilen asked about her home. Atil'awar described vast libraries, with entire buildings devoted to a single subject. Her people endeavored to chronicle and preserve knowledge. That's why everyone brought some new piece of information home when they finished a term of work or study abroad. Sometimes they brought books, painstakingly hand-copied, to store in the capital's master library. When no such opportunity presented itself, they took notes on alien cultures, recorded first-hand accounts of travelers they encountered, or noted corrections for incorrect or incomplete histories.

The more Atil'awr recounted, the more Catilen wished to visit her homeland. Would they accept an alien apprentice? Her life would pass in the blink of an eye compared to how long Atil'awr claimed her people lived. But she could exchange her knowledge of Earth's history and literature for an opportunity to study at one of the sacred libraries.

If they wouldn't accept her, she could still spend a happy lifetime plumbing the depths of the bathhouse's archives. Sentomoru's library possessed precious little information about Earth, most of its history missing from the stores. Atil'awr might treat her as something of an apprentice if she offered to help expand them.

She was tempted to broach the subject with their host after dinner, except Damian hadn't enjoyed his time in the library. He'd leafed through plenty of books, but none held the information he sought. Despite the treasure-trove of information related to its myriad of visitors, the bathhouse records contained little of its own history.

Perhaps no one knew how the island worked. Sentomoru might have inherited the bathhouse from his parents. Whoever built it might have taken advantage of the island's natural shifts to build the ultimate vacation destination. Anyone who stayed long enough could map the regular

travel sequence. Or, if there was some deeper working, it might be a family secret.

Damian refused to be deterred. But after his certainty he could unravel the island's mystery in a single weekend, she could tell three days without a hint rankled. How long could they delay their return before the dean took notice of their absence? It would only take a call to Santa Rosa to determine they weren't there, and that her mother was fine.

At the beginning of their journey, Damian would gladly have given up his job at the university for a chance to remain where his talents would be taken seriously. If the island had been uninhabited, he would have traveled with it until he discovered its deepest secrets. Or found a place more interesting. Now it seemed kinder to take him home before he tore himself to pieces over an unsolvable mystery.

There was a time she would have given up everything for an opportunity like this; now she couldn't imagine living in a place that made Damian unhappy.

Sentomoru seemed his last hope. But for all he refused to give up, he wouldn't speak to their host either. With Sentomoru's advanced age, he must be Damian's superior in the magical arts. While she became Atil'awr's pupil, Damian could become Sentomoru's. The prospect pleased her, but how would Damian react to the suggestion? Was he embarrassed to ask for instruction?

While she gnawed her bottom lip, contemplating the conundrum, she turned a corner and nearly stumbled into Lord Sentomoru. He was bent over a bush of fire colored chrysanthemums, but he lifted his head at the sound of her shoes scraping the path.

"How do you like my gardens?" He made a sweeping gesture as he straightened.

"They're lovely. Though there are many flowers I don't recognize."

As always, Sentomoru seemed pleased with her praise. She didn't wonder why he took pride in the gardens; each was a carefully cultivated tapestry of colorful blossoms. She'd have to look at them from the bathhouse balconies sometime. She bet they looked like pictures from above.

"I've always been proud of my comprehensive collection," Sentomoru mused as he fell into step beside her. "Though now I see such a beautiful flower strolling the paths, I realize my garden is incomplete."

Her face burned as though she'd spent too long in the sun. She hardly deserved a compliment, dressed as she was in faded jeans and an over-large t-shirt, her hair thrown in a lopsided bun to alleviate the heat on her neck. For the first time, she couldn't dismiss the comment as the friendly remark of a good host. That made her wonder about all the others.

"You flatter me. But considering the trouble stalking my footsteps, I'm more accurately classified as a weed."

The lord of the island chuckled. "The only difference between a flower and a weed is its value to a person."

"I'm not sure what value I could have to someone I just met." She chose her words carefully. She might be assuming interest in a mere expression of gratitude. In a round-about way, she had helped this man solve a murder mystery. "David's the only person who's ever really respected my quirks."

Sentomoru's smile faded. Pressing his lips in a thin line, he concentrated with determination on some point in the distance. Catilen tried to trace his gaze, but saw nothing of interest.

"It's funny you should mention David."

"Is it? We're good friends. We have been a long time. That's why we came to the island together."

"Is that so?" Sentomoru's skepticism soured her smile. She tried not to frown, but the muscles of her face won in the end. She wanted to point out the arrogance of questioning

something he didn't understand, but he continued before she had a chance.

"You know, Catilen, my servants tell me a great deal, even under normal circumstances. But this incident with Tenolin and the soldier has loosened many tongues. I've heard a great many secrets today."

"Have you?" She didn't see how it was her business. *Unless...* Her heart pounded in her chest. Had someone overheard the two of them speaking when they thought they were alone? Did he know Damian lied about his name to hide his abilities?

Sentomoru nodded as though he'd just revealed the key to enlightenment. "The most disturbing stories came from Lilliana." He said the name as though she should recognize it.

Her brows furrowed as she raced to match the name to a face, but she came up blank. "Who's that?"

"David's attendant," Sentomoru replied, and Catilen finally traced the connection between the two topics. "She described several attempts by David to coax her to his bed. As I mentioned earlier, such services aren't provided by my establishment."

Catilen's jaw fell open. "Lord Sentomoru, I hope you're not implying--"

"While David does seem the sort of charming young man to which women usually flock," Sentomoru barreled on, heedless of her interruption, "Lilliana has expressed clear disinterest. It seems your friend isn't used to being turned down. Lilliana fears what might happen if she's ever alone with him. I offered her reassignment, but she fears it will cause another incident."

While Damian could be stubborn and persistent, he wouldn't force himself on a woman. He'd expressed a desire to date her on and off for months, but always backed off when she made it clear she wanted to remain friends. Sentomoru's accusation might have planted a seed of doubt on any other day, but she'd experienced Damian's full essence today. No one could stand so exposed and hide such a terrible secret from an Empath.

"Are you certain you don't have my friend confused with some other David? One of the soldiers, perhaps?" Sentomoru couldn't have memorized the names of all his guests, let alone their staff assignments.

The island lord's brow crinkled with consternation. "I'm aware of only one David currently visiting the bathhouse. We have so few of you Earthians, it isn't hard to keep track."

"Humans," Catilen corrected. "Anyway, there must be some misunderstanding." Perhaps Damian's attendant didn't understand his particular brand of humor, though interpreting his actions as pursuit seemed a leap. "David's one of the kindest, gentlest men I've ever met. He wouldn't force himself on a woman if you held a gun to his head."

Sentomoru heaved a sigh that bounced his shoulders. "I wish I shared your optimism, Catilen. The amount of predators I've encountered on my fair island demands vigilance. Men like that are willing to do, or say, anything to get what they want. I hate to deliver such painful news, but I don't wish to see you hurt."

Anger boiled in her stomach, threatening to consume her. She pasted a fake smile on her face and bit her tongue against a scathing retort. She hated to think ill of people, but it sounded as though this Lilliana desired attention in the wake of Melana's incident. People who thrived on dramatics disgusted her.

She didn't believe Damian had done anything untoward, but she couldn't accuse someone she didn't know of attention seeking. Sentomoru obviously cared for his subjects. He knew Lilliana and trusted her. She'd have to talk to Damian. He could set things straight with Lilliana, or he could request a new attendant.

Best not discuss staying on the island until we straighten this out. If Sentomoru thought

Damian a scoundrel, he wouldn't take him as a student. She wasn't willing to stay where Damian wasn't welcome.

"Thanks for your concern, Lord Sentomoru, but I'm certain there's a reasonable explanation for all this. David isn't that kind of man. I wouldn't associate with him otherwise." She wouldn't hear further slander of her traveling companion. She hoped her tone made that clear.

Sentomoru forced himself to smile, a twitch at the edge of his lips betraying the deception. "I've noticed the days are growing longer on your planet. The sun seems to set a little later every evening."

As he spoke, she noted the twilight shadows shrouding the gardens. Bathhouse staff flitted across the paths, lighting candles and lanterns. The tiny flickering lights in the glowing gloom resembled trapped fireflies. If she'd been in a more whimsical mood, they might have reminded her of faeries.

"It's because of the way Earth tilts on its axis," she explained, demonstrating with her arm. "Our hemisphere is pointed toward the sun right now. The days will grow longer until the summer solstice. Then they'll get shorter again as winter approaches."

"We rarely experience winter here. I haven't seen snow since I was a child. I admit, I miss it. It was a great fun, as I recall."

Catilen chuckled. "I haven't seen much snow in my life either. I've always lived in warm places."

"And do you often watch the sun set?" Sentomoru asked, noting the direction of her gaze.

Though the mountain obscured their view from the bathhouse garden, brilliant colors danced across the sky while the last rays of sunlight clung to the Earth.

As she opened her mouth to answer, something prodded her shields, an errant tendril of energy. At first she thought it was Damian seeking her whereabouts through their link, but the source lay outside her protections.

She shuddered, realizing the probe originated from the strange entity that inhabited the island. She'd almost forgotten the tinge of obsession in the last moments of their previous contact. She had no desire to meddle with that kind of power.

The sensation lasted only a moment, vanishing when she didn't respond.

"Catilen?" Sentomoru's hand on her shoulder jolted her back to the moment.

"Sorry." She shook her head to clear it. "I got caught up in the moment, I guess."

"Many of my guests say the same." Sentomoru waved a hand in dismissal. "It's my fervent desire to see all my guests happy, though I'm fonder of some than of others."

Catilen pursed her lips, uncertain if this was a wayward advance or a backhanded jab at her traveling companion.

"I'm happy. I like the sunsets here. They're never this spectacular back home. The city interferes with the view." She turned toward the bathhouse. "I'd best return to my room if I don't want to be late for dinner."

Sentomoru followed, perhaps intending to escort her. "I never paid much attention to sunsets until recently. I find I rediscover the beauty of my island through the eyes of my guests. There's a familiarity about being in one place a long time. New perspectives help me see common things in a different light."

"Don't you ever leave the island?" she asked as they passed through one of the small side entrances to the bathhouse. When the narrow passage opened to a wider hallway, Sentomoru sped up to walk beside her again.

"Why would I leave paradise?" He sounded perplexed.

“I didn’t mean forever. Don’t you visit other places? See the homes of your guests? Arrange to trade with other races?”

“There’s no need. My guests bring stories of their homes with them. All I need do is listen while they weave the tapestry of their lives with words. My subjects often visit other places and bring exotic goods back with them. And many of my guests arrive with the promise of trade. But I see no need to depart, however briefly. Everything I need is here.”

“I used to think that too, until a strange island appeared on my doorstep.”

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you like, Catilen. Even after my island departs.”

It was like a golden invitation to mention her plans. Perhaps if she revealed Damian’s talents, she could convince Sentomoru of his sincerity. Once they knew each other better, Sentomoru would see the error of his accusations and accept Damian as a pupil. But it was a risk. With the lord of the island suspicious of Damian’s motives, unveiling his lie might only exacerbate the situation.

The timing of these two conversations struck an eerie chord. Had Sentomoru spent the afternoon stalking her? It seemed as if he knew her thoughts.

A scream split the air, shattering the chilling notion. Walls muffled the sound, but they couldn’t be more than a hallway from the source. She altered her course to intercept. Sentomoru kept pace with her as they pelted around a corner.

A door burst open and a young woman staggered through, terror twisting her face. Her lips peeled back to scream again, but the sound got stuck in her throat. She wore a torn kimono. Her hair fell about her shoulders in a wild disarray. She raised her hands to ward something off as she stumbled further from the doorway.

“Nooo…” she moaned, colliding with Catilen in her desperation to flee.

Catilen made a soft, soothing sound as she put an arm around the woman’s shoulders, not wanting to frighten her further. The stranger jumped, but relaxed when she saw the lord of the island standing beside her.

“I told him no,” she cried. Pale and shaking, she clung to Catilen’s arm for support. “But he wouldn’t stop.”

“Shh,” Catilen soothed, projecting a sense of calm reassurance, though it required her to lower the outer layer of her shields. “It’s all right now. We’re here to help.”

Sentomoru narrowed his eyes, pressed his lips into a thin line and curled his hands into fists at his side. Setting his jaw with determination, he strode toward the open door to confront the woman’s attacker, his shoulders tight with tension.

He took two steps before the accused appeared in the doorway, still clutching the missing piece of kimono silk in his hand.

Catilen’s acid glare melted. Her knees turned to jelly, her stomach to lead. The color drained from her face as the blood rushed from her head, leaving her mind reeling. *Have I misjudged?* Sick with dread, she clutched the terrified young woman as much to keep herself upright as to steady the victim.

You want to see the best in people.

Assholes get genuinely upset too.

She tried to summon words, but her voice failed. She could only stare in disbelief.

Damian stood in the doorway.

Chapter Sixteen

A heavy breath would have swept the tattered silk from its precarious perch on Damian's palm. He stared at it the way a child stared at snowflakes plastered to the window during their first snow. How had he come into possession of it? Why did the owner flee when he tried to return it?

Several seconds passed before he became aware of his audience. Dazed, he watched a familiar figure in crimson robes jab a finger in his direction, eyes flashing with anger. The accusatory look on Sentomoru's face, galled Damian's lips to motion.

"You!" he hissed before Sentomoru could speak, stabbing a finger of his own in his host's direction. Sentomoru was responsible for this bizarre incident, though he'd yet to work out how.

"Yes, me," Sentomoru snarled. "Your host. The man who invited you into his home, offered to share paradise, and asked nothing in return. This is how you repay me? By assaulting my staff?"

"Assaul-" Dumbfounded, Damian couldn't repeat the accusation. "Have you gone mad?"

Every muscle in Sentomoru's body seemed taught, like a rope ready to snap. "What's in your hand?" he demanded, aiming his index finger at Damian's fist.

Damian unfolded his hand, revealing the crumpled silk. He'd forgotten it. It took effort to penetrate the veil of his anger, to see the situation from the observers' perspective. With sudden, sickening clarity, he understood his predicament. Horror kicked the breath from his lungs. He cringed, snatching his hand out from underneath the fabric. It fluttered to the floor like an abandoned feather.

He stumbled back to the doorway, fleeing the sick look on Catilen's face. It was one thing for a stranger to assume the worst of him, but her? Didn't she know he'd never do something so vile? He shuddered, projecting a wave of nausea across their private link.

"Damian," Catieln's voice quavered. In her distress, she forgot his false name. "What's going on here?"

"That's what the hell I'd like to know!" He didn't bother masking his hurt or desperation. How could he reach her? After all the months he spent on the sidelines, waiting for her to get comfortable with the idea of a relationship, how could she believe he'd throw it away after less than a day?

Her half of their link remained blocked, devoid of emotion like salt rubbed savagely in his wounds.

Lord Sentomoru vibrated with rage. "How dare you?" he demanded as he advanced. "You *scum-*"

The sobbing woman in the torn kimono squealed, perhaps anticipating a brawl. Damian clenched his fists at his sides, yearning to drive one into Sentomoru's immaculate face.

"Stop it!" Catilen commanded, a sharp edge in her voice. "Both of you." She turned her acid glare in Sentomoru's direction. "There's a distraught woman here and neither of you are helping. Shouldn't we ask her what happened instead of throwing baseless accusations back and forth?"

Ashamed, Damian hung his head. An lance of guilt evaporated his anger. He stood at the center of some scheme, likely Sentomoru's, meant to demonize him in the eyes of his companion. But no manner of frustration excused his actions. Either the kimono-clad young woman was a superb actress, or she had experienced something terrifying.

The lord of the island must have felt similarly chastised. He leashed his anger, replacing it

with a mask of cool confidence.

“Lilliana,” he addressed the sobbing woman clinging to Catilen’s shoulder. “Please tell us why you fled David’s company. Does it have something to do with the matters we discussed earlier?”

Damian arched an eyebrow. *What matters might those be?* He bit his tongue, knowing the lord of the island would twist anything he said to make him look guilty.

With effort, Lilliana took a step away from Catilen. She sniffled several times, dabbing her eyes with her kimono sleeves before stuttering, “Y...yes, m’lord. I came to lead Master David to dinner. He asked me to sit down. I thought it might be all right when he left the room. But then he said I was pretty and he wanted to take me away with him.”

Damian’s jaw fell open before he registered his shock. *Did they plan this? Did he tell her what to say? Or is she making it up as she goes?* Unable to keep silent, he uttered a soft sound of protest. “I didn’t-”

Lilliana’s shoulders sagged and she dissolved into inarticulate sobs. Catilen put an arm around her shoulders and murmured soothing sounds. Sentomoru shot him a glare that might have felled a rabbit.

“Please continue,” the lord of the island prompted through clenched teeth, sounding more angry than encouraging.

The distraught woman hiccupped as she tried to quell her sobs. “I told him how happy I am here, m’lord. I don’t ever want to leave! But he said he’d take me some place better if I did something for him. Then he reached for me but I ran.” Lilliana sunk to her knees, burying her head in her hands. Catilen knelt beside her, stroking her back, still cooing softly in the woman’s ear.

“This is ridiculous!” Damian blurted, unable to restrain a fresh surge of anger. “I never touched her!”

“I hardly think I need to reply to that.” Sentomoru smirked as he plucked the silk from the floor and dangled it in Damian’s face as though it were a prize.

“That’s not what I...” Damian started, but what could he say? Even he would have believed Lilliana if he’d been on the other side of the situation.

“How did her kimono get torn then?” Catilen prompted. She narrowed her eyes in Sentomoru’s direction. The lord of the island folded his arms across his chest, tucking the stray silk into one elbow. Pursing his lips, he gave Damian an expectant look.

“I’m not sure,” Damian admitted. “I’m as confused about all this as you are. Lilliana did come to show me to dinner, but I wasn’t ready. I was trying to get my hair to cooperate.” As if to demonstrate, he brushed the errant lock of blond hair out of his face. It fell back over his forehead the moment he pulled his hand away.

“I didn’t say anything after that. I was in the bathroom and she was sitting in the main room. Suddenly, she screamed like the hounds of hell appeared and I ran out to see what was the matter. When I tried to comfort her, she screeched and ran away. I tried to stop her because I worried she’d hurt herself, not to force myself on her! I must have torn her kimono then. I don’t know what she thinks I wanted, but she was already screaming when I walked into the room.

“Please, Cat,” he pleaded, ignoring their host for the moment. “You have to believe me. I couldn’t ever force myself on a woman. You have to know that.”

Before Catilen could answer, Sentomoru snorted. “We’d have to be fools to believe a story like that. What reason does Lilliana have to lie?”

“I don’t know,” Damian growled between clenched teeth. Sentomoru lived in great luxury

for someone who didn't charge his guests. That profit had to come from somewhere. He might demand reparations for this 'grievous act against one of his subjects.' Would the girl get a piece of it? "Does it have something to do with what you discussed earlier?"

"That's enough," Catilen snapped. She turned back to Lilliana, smoothing the woman's hair out of her face while she whispered words of encouragement. Damian expected another admonishment but, when she raised her head again, Catilen narrowed her eyes at their host.

"I can't believe this is how you usually handle these situations, Lord Sentomoru. Forcing Lilliana to endure further trauma in the middle of a public place is both inappropriate and inexcusable. Can't you see how distraught she is? Yet you discuss her as if she isn't even here!"

By now a crowd of bathhouse staff clogged the hallway, drawn by the commotion. Guests peeked around corners and through nearby doors open the barest cracks. Repressing a groan, Damian slunk back to his room. The bathhouse clientele had already witnessed enough to invent spectacular rumors. He didn't want to offer further fuel for the flames.

Meanwhile, Sentomoru bowed his head and motioned to a nearby knot of kimono-clad women. They rushed forward while Catilen helped the sobbing Lilliana to her feet. They fell over themselves to offer assistance, scurrying to take Catilen's place while they cooed reassurances.

"We will take excellent care of her, Lord Sentomoru," one of the women pledged, bowing low before she helped whisk the distraught woman away.

With a flick of his wrist, Damian invited Sentomoru and Catilen to join him in his quarters. The lord of the island entered first, hovering awkwardly on the near side of the doorway until Catilen joined them, closing the door in her wake. Sighing, she crossed her arms in front of her chest, hands gripping the opposite elbows as though trying to embrace herself. He longed to comfort her, but he doubted his touch would be welcome. Nor did he relish further mocking from their host. He tried to send a pulse of reassurance across their link but, if it reached its destination, it was laden with his anxiety.

Noticing Catilen's discomfort, Sentomoru took a step in her direction. She took several steps back and he seemed to take the hint.

"Something horrible happened to that woman." Catilen broke the silence. "An Empath could drown in her despair and terror. You can't manufacture those kinds of emotions."

Damian's stomach dropped and his heart fell with it. If it was his word against hers, Sentomoru wouldn't seek other evidence. He'd side with the victim. So would Catilen. *And rightfully so. Too many women get ignored or ridiculed when they claim something happened to them.* He hated himself for acting like those stereotypical jerks.

But I didn't do a damn thing to her. How can I prove that to Catilen? She must be able to sense my feelings are just as genuine.

Catilen was the center of all this, the only common factor. Every time something went wrong, it drove them further apart. First the jungle conspired to separate them, dumping him in a hole while spiriting Catilen back to safety. Then the murder threatened to consume their extra day on the island. Now this; it couldn't be a coincidence Lilliana broke down with Catilen passing close enough to take notice. Someone on this island, whoever wielded its significant power, wanted Catilen here. And wanted her independent of him.

He suspected Sentomoru. *But if I try to explain now, I'll sound like a raving lunatic. I waited too long. I should have mentioned my theory last night.*

"We already know what happened," Sentomoru scoffed, a look of bewildered disbelief on his face. "Lilliana wouldn't lie. I trust her implicitly."

The earth might as well open up and swallow him. Knowing Sentomoru, he'd demand Damian's life in exchange for his wrongdoing. *Anything to remove me from the picture.*

"And I trust David with my life."

Shocked, Damian stared at Catilen. One hand lay over her heart. Unshed tears filled her eyes. Her brows crinkled with determination, her lips parted as if to deliver an impassioned speech. A tsunami of love and relief swept through his body and across their link. He couldn't have blocked it if he tried.

He didn't have to prove himself. She believed him. More than that, she would fight for him. He could abide whatever happened, if he retained her confidence.

"Now, I don't know what happened to that woman," Catilen continued. "But we'd better figure it out before it affects someone else. Maybe, if I use my scrying mirror again, I can catch what triggered the incident, like I did this morning."

"No!" Damian and Sentomoru cried at the same time. They glared at each other across her shoulders.

Damian recovered first. "I don't want you to experience whatever she did. Even if it's just emotional impressions, that isn't your burden to bear."

"Of course he doesn't want you to do it," Sentomoru sneered. "Then you'd see the kind of man he is."

Damian wished his hate would turn to fire he could spew at the lord of the island.

"But you objected as well," Catilen pointed out before he could vent his spleen.

"For the same reason," Sentomoru admitted, steepling his fingers in front of his chest. "You've experienced more than enough trauma since coming to my island, Catilen. Especially with the murder this morning. Much like then, this is not your responsibility. I'm confident I can uncover the truth."

"Well I'm not." Catilen planted her hands on her hips, fingers digging into the sides of her legs until her knuckles turned white. She set her jaw and lifted her chin. "You've already proven your bias. Besides, you don't have the same tools I do. Empaths can detect lies more accurately than a polygraph – that's a tool we have on our world which reveals when a person is lying. Deceit has a distinctive signature. The mind can't tolerate dissonance, which is exactly what you create when you claim one thing and do another. When a person lies, their mind rejects it and an Empath senses that disturbance like a beacon."

"You're offering your services as an Empath to determine David's sincerity?" Sentomoru sounded skeptical.

"Do you have another Empath in your employ?" Catilen arched an eyebrow.

"I don't. Forgive me, my dear, but I must decline your offer. I don't like to discuss the private matters of my clients, which is why I have neglected to mention this, but David has the Gift. He could twist or divert your secondary senses as easily as he could have bewitched Lilliana's mind."

"I doubt it. My abilities aren't like yours. Empathy doesn't involve spells, it happens as naturally as hearing or seeing or smelling. But it isn't worth arguing over. Remember how we found David yesterday? I intend for you to link with me again, so you can verify my results."

Sentomoru regarded her through half-lidded eyes. Damian expected him to reject the offer because he wouldn't be able to dismiss evidence that contradicted Damian's guilt.

"Very well," the island lord relented. "But I insist we link first and remain in contact for the duration of the proceedings. I intend to shield you, Catilen. I will not allow David to use you to deceive me."

“I would never,” Damian growled, disgusted.

Catilen held up a hand to stave off further argument. “That was my intention anyway. David,” she turned her attention to him. “Try to focus on the questions we ask you. The clearer your mind, the more definitive the results.”

Damian nodded. Clearing his mind would be difficult while he struggled to make logical sense of this incident. But he understood the necessity of keeping a tight rein on his thoughts after he lowered his shields. Catilen only sensed emotions, but Sentomoru might be able to read his mind. Had this been a ploy to make him lower his defenses, leaving him open to Sentomoru’s manipulation? Trap or not, he didn’t have a choice. He raced to suppress his anxiety, lest Sentomoru interpret it as guilt.

Catilen turned to their host to continue her instructions. “Guard if you wish, but you can’t put a shield between me and David. It’ll prevent me from reading him. Speak your questions aloud. David, you speak your answers back. Got it?”

Both men nodded.

Damian tried to ignore Sentomoru. The man dominated his thoughts, making them hard to drive from his head. Despite her willingness to defend him, Damian worried Catilen was angry with him. He wanted to talk to her, but didn’t dare until Sentomoru left. He still yearned to punch the man in the face. *Have to banish that impulse quickly.* How infuriating to stoop to this, dragging Catilen into another crisis he couldn’t resolve on his own. *What good will it do anyway? Sentomoru’s just going to brush the results aside...*

Evidently, Catilen understood the magnitude of what she asked. One by one, he squelched his fears while she waited. He signaled his readiness with a nod and she answered in kind.

The lord of the island must have raised a shield while she initiated contact. Damian caught no hint of energy transfer between them. After a moment, he felt Catilen’s feather-light touch against his shields. Sucking a deep breath, Damian peeled away the layers of his protection until he stood naked in the center of their focus. Not since his first night on the streets had Damian felt so vulnerable. Catilen responded with a surge of reassurance and he tried to put faith in her abilities.

She signaled Sentomoru to begin.

The lord of the island narrowed his eyes when he addressed Damian. “Why did you try to rape Lilliana?”

Trust Sentomoru to dispense with delicacy. He didn’t try to suppress the anger and frustration boiling in the pit of his stomach. Surely both signaled his innocence.

“I didn’t,” he annunciated every syllable.

“Why, then, did she accuse you?” Sentomoru demanded.

“I don’t know!” Confusion tinged his frustration. *If I knew, I wouldn’t be in this mess.* He locked the theory about Lilliana benefiting from his suffering in the back of his mind, refusing to think of it. Catilen proved it false when she pronounced the woman’s terror genuine.

“So you didn’t force yourself on her?” Sentomoru persisted.

Before he could answer, Catilen snorted. “You already asked that and David didn’t lie. It’s a waste of time and energy to repeat questions.”

“I just want him to admit what really happened,” Sentomoru replied, his tone crisp.

“I already told you everything I know. She freaked out. I never touched her.”

“We’ve clearly established you did,” Sentomoru countered, jumping on the small inconsistency. “You held a piece of her torn kimono when we found you.”

“I meant before she started screaming, I never touched her.” He spoke through clenched

teeth, fighting to stay calm. “When she got up to run, I reached for her. I didn’t want her to hurt herself and I hoped I could help. I guess I caught her kimono, but she kept going and it ripped. I was dazed; it all happened so fast and it didn’t make any sense. The rest you know, and now here we are.”

“Here we are indeed,” Catilen said, “and every word of it completely true.”

Sentomoru broke contact first. His sudden absence became a void, as though someone abandoned the other end of a tug rope, letting it go slack. He shared his gratitude with Catilen as he rebuilt his protections, safe again from Sentomoru’s magical backlash.

“This matter obviously requires further investigation,” the lord of the island declared as he strode toward the door. “I accept that David is innocent of lust-driven misconduct, but I’m not entirely convinced he wasn’t involved in the incident. Until we have a better idea of what happened, David, I ask that you remain in your rooms. I will, of course, provide you with anything you require to keep your stay pleasant.”

“You’ll get no complaint from me,” Damian replied. “Anything to prove my innocence. All I need is breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

“Please,” Catilen pleaded, taking a half-step forward. “Let me help you discover what happened to Lilliana.”

Damian thought Sentomoru’s answering smile seemed patronizing. “I appreciate the offer but I must decline. This time, I insist. You’ve been subjected to enough unpleasantness. I won’t have anything else marring your visit.” He jerked the door open, silencing her protests with a wave of his hand. “Allow me to escort you to dinner.”

Damian bit the inside of his lip so hard it bled. *So that’s his game? Banish me to my room so he can spend unlimited time with her?* He dug his fingernails into his palms hoping the pain would keep his temper in check. He didn’t dare undo all Catilen’s hard work.

Catilen hesitated, then backed away from the door. “No, thank you.” She wrapped her arms around her chest in another self-embrace. “I think it’s best if I eat here tonight. There’ll be questions at dinner and I’m not comfortable facing them when I don’t have any answers.”

Sentomoru frowned. His arm hung in the air a moment, as if to suggest her words insulted him. Then he tucked his arms into his flowing sleeves and inclined his head as usual. “As you wish.” He spun on his heel and hurried out the door, slamming it in his wake.

Damian held his breath, waiting for Sentomoru’s footsteps to disappear before he spoke. Then he swept forward, wrapping his arms around Catilen’s shoulders. She returned his embrace without hesitation, banishing his fear of rejection.

“Thank you, Cat,” he murmured, his lips close to her ear. “I can’t tell you how much it means that you believe me.”

“Of course I believe you.” His shoulder muffled her words. She lifted her face to peer up at him. “I may have had a moment of doubt, I’ll admit. But I felt through to your core. You couldn’t have fabricated *that*. I don’t know what happened, but I believe you had nothing to do with it.”

Damian took a step back. With Sentomoru gone, the tension between them shattered. Fatigue rushed to fill its place. His leg ached, a painful reminder he shouldn’t have run. Deflated, he sank onto the edge of the bed, drawing Catilen down beside him.

Catilen laid her free hand on his injured leg. “You pushed yourself too hard.” She clicked her tongue. “I’ll do another healing session tonight, before you go to bed.”

“Thanks,” he murmured. “But it’s not that. Not entirely that.”

He had to tell her now. He’d never get a better chance. *And if we’ve got important decisions*

to make, they should be informed decisions. Her brows furrowed but she waited for him to continue.

“Cat, I have to tell you something crazy. I have to offer you the same trust you offered me.” He took a deep breath and plunged into the explanation before he could think better of it.

“I think there’s something on the island, a sorcerer, or else the island is alive somehow. Whatever it is, it’s powerful enough to keep me from working the island’s energy. I tried several times while I was lost in the jungle, but I couldn’t do anything. I’m convinced if you hadn’t found me, some creature would have gobbled me up in the night. What’s more, I think the island, or the person controlling it, wanted that to happen. I thought it was angry at us for sneaking here, or because I used the island’s power without permission. But the more I think about it, the more I’m sure it has something to do with you.”

He paused to catch his breath. Catilen squeezed his hand, silently encouraging him to go on.

“I don’t know what happened with Lilliana, but I’m worried it has something to do with you. I don’t think the island, or its driving force, wants us to be together. I know how paranoid that sounds, but think about it. Every time we spend time together, or show a bit of affection, something on the island goes topsy-turvy and you end up having to deal with it.” He left out the part about Sentomoru being responsible. He didn’t want to sound petty or jealous.

“I think it wants you to do something, though I don’t know what. Maybe it believes I’ll stop you. Whatever it is, it’s dangerous, Cat. I think it’s responsible for everything that’s happened since we arrived.”

“Even the dead soldier?” Catilen asked, shocked.

He hesitated. “That I’m not sure. But certainly getting lost in the jungle. Maybe it even sent Sentomoru to you when you found that body, to keep me away a little longer. And I think it pushed Lilliana into a tizzy because you were outside and you’d see and think that I…” He swallowed hard, not wanting to recount the experience.

“Please tell me you don’t think I’m crazy,” he pleaded, turning wide eyes in her direction.

His heart skipped a beat when Catilen didn’t answer right away. He watched her face. Her lips quirked and her eyes narrowed, indicating careful consideration.

Finally, she said, “I don’t think you’re crazy.”

Damian released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

She squeezed his hand again. “I’ve felt something too, from the first day. At sunset, actually. I reached for the sun in the same way we drew down the moon. When I grounded to siphon the excess energy, there was something there. I don’t know what. It felt like the island but, at the same time, it acts too much like a person to be an ambient nature spirit.”

“Yes!” If his leg hadn’t been busted, he’d have danced a jig of joy. “That’s exactly what I thought.” Until his concern evaporated, he didn’t realize how heavily it wore on him. He’d skirted paranoia the past few days. But he wasn’t crazy. Catilen came to her conclusion without his input.

“I think it blocked me when I tried to find you. But it couldn’t compete with our connection, not while the moon was still full. I think…” She hesitated. “I think it wants me to stay.”

“On the island?” That, too, matched Damian’s observations.

“Yeah. And, to be honest, I considered the possibility.”

“So did I. Before all the weird stuff happened.”

“I considered staying despite all that,” Catilen admitted, her tone sheepish. “I took a walk in the garden this evening and I thought about how wonderful it would be to study in the library, maybe even contribute to it. But I don’t want to stay without you and you don’t really have a

reason to stay anymore.”

Remorse lay in his heart like a heavy stone. *I'm the one who convinced her to come in the first place, now I'm rushing her home against her will.* What had he done to spoil their visit? Would things be different if he'd been more careful?

“We can stay if you want,” he insisted. “It’ll be difficult to convince Sentomoru to trust me, but we’ll manage it. I’ll stick to my room and try to do what this entity wants. Maybe it’ll forgive me, or at least see I’m no threat. Or we could get off at the island’s next stop, couldn’t we? Or wait for an interesting one?”

Catilen smiled and patted his leg. “I appreciate the sentiment, Damian, but no. If all this entity wants is for me to stay, it shouldn’t matter if you’re here too. It’s hard to ignore all these so-called coincidences now you mention them. It does seem like someone, or something, wants us apart. If this trip has taught me anything, it’s that I want you as part of my life. A big part. And I want you to be happy. We have a future waiting for us back home, even if it’s less exciting than what we’d get here.”

Touched, he laid a light kiss on her cheek. “Then I guess that decides us.”

“I guess it does,” she agreed, decisive if not pleased.

“I know it sounds terrible, in light of what just happened,” Damian chose his words carefully, “but I don’t think we should tell Sentomoru we intend to leave. I think he’s connected to this entity somehow. I don’t know which controls the other. But if they are connected, and Sentomoru discovers our plan, something might prevent us from leaving.” If he didn’t just deny them outright.

“How would we get off the island?”

“I have a radio in my bag. We never planned on finding people here, remember?” At least she didn’t seem horrified at the idea of sneaking off. “I’ll contact Captain Jones and he’ll meet us at the cove. He promised to lurk close to the island as long as he could avoid the patrols. Apparently, he’s got a fishing spot nearby. With luck, we’ll be home before anyone notices we’re gone.”

Catilen made a soft, mournful sound. “It does seem like the best idea. When should we leave? Tonight?”

He never thought it would end this way. Slinking home empty-handed, running from the locals and the military. *And no one will ever believe the story.* He shook his head. “It’s been a long day. We need to rest before we navigate the jungle and we don’t want to encounter any night predators. We’ll slip out before the bulk of the staff wake up tomorrow morning. That gives us a few hours before sunrise to cross the patrol lines.”

Catilen’s shoulders sagged, but she nodded. “Tomorrow, then. We’ll say goodbye to paradise.”

Chapter Seventeen

Sleep eluded Catilen, like an old friend with whom she had quarreled. She tossed atop the unfamiliar mattress until she tangled herself in the sheets. Despite long years of practice, she couldn't tame her fevered mind. She didn't want to focus on the lost knowledge and fantastic possibilities she had to leave behind. She wanted to banish it all and relax. But the moment she loosened her mental grip, her thoughts exploded like birds kept too long in a cage.

Finally, she reached an uneasy stalemate with her exhaustion, slipping into a half-doze that blurred the distinction between waking and dreaming. Wind howled. Branches scraped her window. Shadows danced like nightmare creatures through that strange state of non-awareness, never quite real, never entirely imagined.

A dark figure detached itself from the others, casting its shadow over her bed. Catilen dismissed it as a dream, even as it spoke.

"Catilen, wake up."

Her eyes slid from everything, unable to focus. It took several repetitions for the words to reach her ears.

"Please wake up, Catilen."

Dragging her limbs through invisible mud, Catilen latched onto the voice. Her eyelids fluttered, but refused to yield. Sleep, so hard won, wasn't easily abandoned. She threw her mind against the dream barrier, fighting the sleep paralysis to move or speak. "Is it time already?" she slurred.

"Indeed," the shadow's voice purred.

She struggled to wake. If Damian was here, she'd overslept. If they weren't on the ocean by sunrise, they'd risk being trapped on the island. Urgency added strength to her resolve. She blinked several times as she regained her senses.

The unfamiliar shadow did not belong to Damian. With a yelp, Catilen rolled away from the nightmare figure. She tumbled over the edge of the bed tangled in a knot of sheets.

The phantom stepped into the moonlight flooding through the window. The angular face belonged to Sentomoru. He made a soft, reassuring sound, holding up both hands to show he meant no harm.

Catilen sat on the floor, clutching the covers to her chest, panting as she peered over the bed. "What are you doing in my room?" she demanded when she could breathe again. He must have a master key that accessed every room in his establishment, but it was inappropriate to enter an occupied room without knocking.

"Forgive my intrusion," Sentomoru replied without a hint of remorse, "but it is urgent that we speak."

"What's going on?" Panic trampled her carefully collected calm and set her heart racing.

"Nothing yet. But I fear I may have come too late."

If anyone else crept into her room in the middle of the night, she'd deliver a stern lecture and dismiss them. But she knew Sentomoru's power. The memory made her shudder. If he sensed danger, she couldn't ignore it.

"What's wrong?"

Sentomoru advanced. His eyes seemed to glow in the moonlight. "You're in danger. I want to protect you."

What could threaten me here, with the might of Sentomoru's power in its path? Shivering,

she reached for the pentacle charm resting against her chest. Her wards were supposed to warn her of danger. Something throbbed beneath her hand. Did it originate from her protections, or her panic-stricken heart?

“What about David?”

“We can save him, if you come with me now.” He held out his hand.

As she lifted her arm, heat flared against her chest, just beneath the pentacle pendant. Trembling, her hand froze mid-air. Was that a warning? Or confirmation?

Despite the incident with Damian, Sentomoru had been kind to her. He showed nothing but consideration and concern for the wellbeing of his people. What reason did he have to lie? But she recalled Damian’s chilling warning about the energy entity. *If they are connected, and Sentomoru discovers our plan, something might prevent us from leaving.*

Sentomoru’s fingers twitched, a reminder of his urgency. She couldn’t delay if the danger was real. Icy hands gripped her heart. She couldn’t risk Damian’s life on speculation. Steeling her resolve, she completed the abandoned motion. As Sentomoru’s fingers closed around her hand, the warmth beneath her pentacle dissolved; a reassuring sign.

He helped her to her feet and released her hand. Then he rushed from the room, navigating the halls so quickly, she had difficulty keeping up.

The bathhouse looked different at night. The lantern wicks had been trimmed, dimming their glow. Each flickering lamp formed a small island of light in a sea of darkness. No moonlight penetrated here. Sentomoru disappeared into the shadows between each lantern, reappearing briefly as he passed the next. Each time she lost sight of him, Catilen feared she’d fall behind. If he failed to reappear, she’d be lost in the tomb-like silence.

Their path defied logic. In the darkness, she lost all sense of direction. Without the tapestries, sculptures and fine wall carvings that lined each hall, every part of the bathhouse looked the same. She thought they’d doubled back several times, walking in circles.

Where is he taking me? Do we have time for this? The danger couldn’t be inside; Sentomoru took obvious precautions to ensure the safety of his guests. Her room wasn’t far from the courtyard. Yet they moved ever upward.

A pair of ornate double doors materialized out of the gloom, ringed by a quartet of lanterns, bathed in its own pool of radiance. Golden bas-relief patterns of lines, angles and complex knots covered both heavy, wooden doors. Sentomoru pushed them open without regard for their size or weight, motioning for her to precede him.

An inviting antechamber waited beyond, filled with plush furniture and exquisite artwork. A fire crackled in a fireplace on the far side of the room, welcoming her to relax after her trying journey through the bathhouse labyrinth. She frowned as she stepped across the threshold, expecting to find someone pacing within. Seeing no sign of discord, she turned furrowed brows toward her host.

He shut the doors behind him. They slammed with a strange finality, locking her in the bastion of warmth and light.

“What the hell?” Anger overrode her fear. “Where’s this so-called emergency?”

Sentomoru’s lips formed a malevolent smile. “You have averted it, Catilen, by making the right choice.”

Icy claws penetrated her heart. “What are you talking about?” Her voice cracked.

Sentomoru closed the distance between them like a malignant viper. He loomed over her, his posture rigid, his eyes narrowed. “Your plan to sneak away like common thieves after taking advantage of my hospitality.”

Catilen gulped and took a half-step backward. "You don't understand," her voice cracked again. She cleared her throat and started over. "David and I talked after you left. When we looked back over our visit, we realized how much harm we caused. We decided we should leave before we caused more trouble and we didn't think you'd accept our reasons. Besides, if David was guilty, you'd exile him anyway, wouldn't you?"

Sentomoru arched one perfectly manicured eyebrow. "Is that an admission of guilt, Catilen?"

His tone set her on the defensive. She wouldn't be tricked into providing him ammunition. "An admission we wanted to leave? Yes." Indignation made her voice stronger. "Let's be honest, Sentomoru, no amount of proof is ever going to convince you of David's innocence. It's pointless to reason with someone who's abandoned logic. We have lives waiting for us back on the mainland. Should we ruin them over a misunderstanding? If we left, everything would go back to normal and you could tell Lilliana you dealt with the situation."

"Why should you suffer for his mistakes?" Sentomoru took a step closer and, again, she retreated backward. "Why are you protecting him?"

"David doesn't need my protection." If push came to shove, she didn't doubt he could get himself off the island. But she didn't want it to come to that. "I just want to go home. And I want to do it while I still have fond memories of this place."

"That wasn't how you felt yesterday. You wanted to stay, didn't you? When we were walking together in the garden, I know you were going to ask about it. But Damian... He stopped you, didn't he?"

Shock knocked the breath from her chest. Catilen shivered as though she'd been tossed in a freezing pond. *How does he know that? How does he know Damian's name?* Had she slipped? She skimmed her memory of the past few days, but couldn't remember revealing Damian's secret.

So there was real danger. But why did the warning fade when she followed Sentomoru? She'd trusted the wrong man. How much of what she saw in the lord of the island had been real? *How much was the good I wanted to see?*

"How do you know all this? Did David tell you?"

A smug smile split Sentomoru's lips. It made him look ugly. "This is my home; I have ears everywhere. But I knew from the start your companion was lying. He's an experienced enough sorcerer to know true names have power. Why do you think I introduce myself, even to my staff, by my family name? Admit it, Catilen, your traveling companion has been dishonest with me from the start."

"By your own admission it was safer for him to lie!"

"He could have announced his possession of the Gift without giving his name. Instead, he chose to lie."

"Lying by omission is still lying. If you knew about Damian, you could have addressed it the day we arrived."

"I have to consider the safety of my guests." Sentomoru laid the long fingers of one hand against his chest. "I cannot announce myself to a potential rival until I have assessed their level of threat."

"Damian never posed a threat to you. He came here looking for a teacher. And that's why I didn't ask if I could stay and work in your library! Because you said all those horrible things about him and I knew you'd never instruct him."

"Listen to yourself," Sentomoru hissed. "See how he's clouded your vision! I tried to protect

you from him. I tried to show you his true nature. Yet you reject what's right in front of you!"

"You don't know him." Catilen clenched her fists at her sides. She set her jaw with determination, refusing to be silenced by the lump of emotion clogging her throat. "You don't know how sweet and kind and caring he is. Or how hard he works. Where we come from, people you describe can't do the kind of work he does. Society finds out about them and ruins them."

"Some people are very good at hiding." Darting forward, Sentomoru grabbed her arm to keep her from escaping. She twisted in his grip. "Damian is one of those people, isn't he? He'd have to be to keep his abilities secret in a world like yours. I know that much from what your soldiers say about this place. What if he just hasn't been discovered yet? Every bad man seems good until he reveals himself a snake in the grass. Everyone's always surprised when that happens, aren't they?" He clicked his tongue like a disappointed parent.

"Catilen, how can you touch the sun as you do and not realize you were meant to be here?"

Catilen's heart skipped a beat. Her chest constricted, making it difficult to breathe. *Have I had a single moment of privacy since my arrival?*

"How the hell do you know I drew down the sun?" Her voice trembled with the effort to maintain her composure.

Sentomoru released her arm and took a step back. Instead of answering, he lowered his barriers. His magical aura flared to life, a halo of light and energy. She joined with this power to find Damian and share Tenolin's identity. But those had been small fractions of what she sensed now, pieces of a shattered mirror, not reflective of the whole. This aura was identical to the energy that brushed against her shields during sunrise and sunset, vast and powerful, clever and competent, alive, aware and active.

Bile rose in her throat. She'd joined with the earth back home many times. It had always been a healing experience. That kind of communion with a living being went beyond intimate, a joining of mind and soul deeper than the physical connection made by lovers. She shuddered violently, glad now she'd kept her shields in place, kept that obsessive entity from accessing all that she was, kept it out of her mind and away from her secrets. That her host would participate in such a personal connection without making her aware of it... *Disgusting! He's worse than a voyeur and he accuses Damian of taking advantage.*

"You controlled the entity I encountered," she choked, trying not to vomit.

"What you describe as an 'entity' is the island," Sentomoru replied. "And I *am* the island, Catilen. It's an extension of *me*."

Catilen was no stranger to anguish. As a teenager, struggling to master her abilities, she was exposed to hundreds of minds on a daily basis. The silent mockery added to the verbal ridicule made her days almost unbearable. When her crush broke her heart, she didn't think she'd survive the next day at school. Everyone knew. Judgment, contempt and scorn hounded her from all angles for months, a crushing burden.

But it couldn't compare to Sentomoru's revelation.

Damian can't hope to fight this. Sentomoru could crush him as easily as he could swat a fly. What could she do? She was tangled too deep in the spider's web to escape.

"And you would use this power," she gasped, laboring to speak each word, "to keep me here against my will?"

"No!" Sentomoru looked aghast as he let his aura fade. "I want to free you from the veil of lies Damian pulled over your eyes. Can't you feel how the island calls to you? You belong here."

She'd spent most of her life wanting to belong. Searching for a place she'd be considered normal instead of a freak. Somewhere she didn't have to hide or walk on eggshells. But she

didn't want fate. She didn't want some grand destiny. She didn't want to be special when her mother said it. She wanted it even less now.

"The island wants me to stay?" she spat. "Or is that just what *you* want?"

"I've waited centuries for someone who could complement me." The lord of the island spread his arms in entreaty. "The moment you set foot on my island, I sensed it. Something snapped into place. How can I make you understand?"

"How do you know you sensed *me*?" The stars hadn't sung when she stepped on that beach. "Damian arrived first. He led us here. Without his magic, we'd never have made it past the patrols. And he used the island's energy to do it. You could have felt *that*."

"Impossible. He's never tried to join with the island as you have. That's how I know you're the one, Catilen. You're meant to be the lady of this island. Why can't you see that?"

She bristled, sick at the implication. "Because you can't force people to see things your way! Because I care about someone else! Because not even your magic can change that!" She hadn't meant to say it, but the words tumbled free when she opened her mouth. She was too tired to be diplomatic. He could wave his arms and stomp his feet all he wanted; he couldn't make her love him.

Sentomoru regarded her in silence, his hands sinking back to his sides. He drew himself up, back and shoulders ramrod straight, tension tightening every muscle in his body. He sighed. "I see now the strength of his spell. I suspect only his death can break it."

Catilen's jaw hung slack. "You can't possibly believe that."

"It makes my heart heavy." Again he showed no sign of remorse. "But I will do what I must." He turned toward the door.

With a snarl, Catilen launched herself at the lord of the island, closing her fists around the silk of his robes. She clawed and tore, not caring if she damaged fancy fabric or flesh. "You aren't going to touch him, you sick, deranged bastard!" she shrieked.

Sentomoru grasped her wrists and pried himself free of her grip. She hadn't the strength to fight him, physical or magical, but that didn't stop her. When she couldn't reach him with her hands, she kicked his shins.

"I'll never stay if you hurt him! I'll swim back to the mainland if I have to!"

When brute force failed, Sentomoru made soft, soothing sounds. His expression transformed from anger to desperation.

As exhaustion overcame her, Catilen sank to her knees. Hot tears stung her eyes and stained her cheeks. Her skin felt burnt, her nerves raw. No matter how hard she flung her mind across their link, she couldn't reach Damian. Sentomoru's quarters must have been shielded; she couldn't get beyond them. Nor could she escape the man still holding her wrists. A man she now hated.

"What would you have me do?" the lord of the island demanded, fingers digging hard into the soft flesh of her wrists.

"Respect my decisions!" She flailed until he released her arms.

"I'm trying to prevent you from making a grievous mistake."

"*Liar!*" she screamed with all the rancor she could summon. "You'd kill a man on a whim just to get something you want. You're like a child with a toy who doesn't want to share. When you know full well Damian's not as powerful as you are. There's no spell he could cast you couldn't break. You think if you kill him I'll eventually gravitate to you, but instead I'll hate you. I'll hate you with every fiber of my being."

"Under normal circumstances, you may be right. But his magic is so deeply ingrained in

you, Catilen. I fear I'd cause you harm just trying to set you free."

She refused to answer aside from a sullen glare. He was grasping for straws that might redeem him in her eyes, but she wasn't that foolish.

Steeping his fingers in front of his chest, Sentomoru bowed his head. "There may be another way. As you've deduced, my island travels between realms. If you remained on the island while it shifted, and Damian remained behind, the resulting distance should sever any link he may have forged."

She regarded him through narrow eyes, weighing her options. She wanted to go home. She wanted to deliver a grand lecture on minding his own business. How dare he meddle in her affairs? How dare he dictate her decisions? But her words would fall on deaf ears. Sentomoru had abandoned reason. If she resisted, he might kill Damian out of spite and she'd be powerless to stop him.

She had to outwit him. She could humor him, give him a false sense of hope he might one day convince her of his truth. When she squashed it absolutely, beyond a shadow of anyone's doubt, she'd demand to come home. She'd tear the multiverse apart, if she had to, to find a way back to Damian.

Summoning her strength, she stood. She brushed the stray locks of hair from her face and tried to make herself look regal. Lifting her chin, she squared her shoulders and regarded her host through half-lidded eyes. "I will allow you one attempt to break this so-called 'spell,' if you agree not to harm Damian. I will only linger if you allow me to study under Atil'awr in your library. But when I deem a sufficient amount of time has passed, you will return me home."

Sentomoru locked gazes with her in a silent battle of wills, perhaps trying to measure her resolve.

"You would have to stay long enough to satisfy me the spell's effects expired. One year should--"

"A month," Catilen interrupted, galled that he'd try to manipulate her further. "This decision will be mine or no one's. Don't forget, I have a life and a family and it's my right to go back to them whenever I choose. Given my particular abilities, if there's a spell, I should notice the change right away. I'm doing you a favor, not the other way around. I'm perfectly happy leaving in the morning. Damian might be willing to stay, if you want to work out the Lilliana situation before his departure."

After another moment of consideration, Sentomoru inclined his head. "More than one month may pass before your return. I hope you understand; time may move faster wherever else we go. But I will do my best."

"Fine," Catilen agreed. She couldn't expect him to control the cosmos. "But when I'm ready to leave, you will not try to stop me."

"Very well. If Damian agrees to leave amicably, he will be escorted to the far shore in the morning. When we depart, you'll be free to live as you were meant to. I'm certain once the spell is broken, you'll make the right choice. And you will be happy, I'll ensure it."

She'd be happy when this fiasco ended. Too bad she couldn't take out a cosmic restraining order. She'd need to convey her plan to Damian in the morning. He'd have to make preparations in case Sentomoru tried to prevent her from coming home. Despite Sentomoru's convictions, their link might survive the transition. They could use it as a beacon, or to open a doorway between worlds.

No matter what happens I'll find my way home.

"I'm tired," she said, unwilling to continue the conversation. She brushed past him, moving

toward the door. "I'm going back to my room."

"Oh no," Sentomoru exclaimed, shaking his head. "You needn't return to those inadequate accommodations! Take one of the suites reserved for visiting dignitaries. You are, after all, my very special guest."

Following him through the darkened corridors was like descending into a dream. Sentomoru babbled about her future happiness, insisting she not worry about anything from that moment forward. Meanwhile, the darkness seemed to reach for her, threatening to suffocate her with its nightmare tendrils. Luckily, the walk was short.

Though the quarters to which Sentomoru led her were less luxuriant than his, they outclassed her old room. The bed was larger and sat higher off the ground. It bore a thick, padded mattress and crisp silk sheets that smelled of flowers. Large windows overlooked the valley below. Embroidered curtains blocked the moonlight.

Catilen banished the lord of the island the moment they reached the room. She needed to shut down her brain for awhile. Despite her resolve, when he closed the heavy doors behind him, they seemed like the gates of a prison slamming shut.

Chapter Eighteen

If he concentrated on a time he wished to wake, not just the numbers on the clock but the relative level of darkness, Damian could rouse himself without an alarm. He set the timer on his mobile phone as a backup, but turned it off before it rang. Their plan hinged on stealth; he didn't want the noise drawing attention.

Blinking sleep from his eyes, Damian tossed aside his blankets. He dressed in the clothing he'd laid out and shoved his pajamas into a zipper pouch on the front of his bag. To save time, he'd packed the night before, and checked his equipment. He planned an order in which to discard items, if they needed to travel lighter.

They'd agreed Catilen would meet him here. It would look less suspicious if someone stopped her in the hallways, since Damian wasn't supposed to leave his room. Together, they would slip into the courtyard before he recast his obfuscation charm. He didn't dare do it inside the bathhouse. They wouldn't get far if they set off an alarm, and Sentomoru was bound to have anti-magic or magic-detection charms spread throughout his domicile.

Cloaked in his magic, they'd use Catilen's pendulum to find their way back to the cove. There, they'd conceal themselves while he contacted Captain Jones on the radio. They were prepared to hide for some time. Damian didn't doubt Sentomoru could easily shatter his spell, but he'd have to notice it first. He estimated they had until mid-morning before anyone forced their way into his room and reported his absence. With luck, the spell might obscure them longer.

He glanced at his watch. Minutes remained before their designated rendezvous time. He fidgeted. He paced. He checked his watch again. The minutes crawled past. Despite the island's magic, mystique and beauty, Damian was eager to have it at his back. *Never thought I'd look forward to spending a few hours bent over the side of a boat.* He'd made such a mess of this trip; he owed it to Catilen to get her home.

The appointed meeting time passed. He watched the second hand make three rotations of his watch face, but heard no sound of approach. Did she oversleep? Did a 'helpful' member of staff stop her in the hall? *If we lose the cover of darkness, we'll never get out of here, even with the obfuscation charm.*

Hoping they'd cross paths in the halls, Damian gathered his belongings, settled his bags over his shoulders and pressed his ear to the door. He strained for several seconds, but heard nothing. Careful not to disturb the guests in the adjacent rooms, Damian eased the door open, wincing when the hinges creaked.

He poked his head outside and checked in both directions. The lantern wicks burned low. Darkness filled most of the corridor. Holding his breath, Damian padded down the hallway as quietly as he could manage with the bulky packs. He paused at each intersection, checking for signs of habitation, but the halls were deserted.

Everything looked the same in the dim light, leaving only the occasional plant or bust to mark his route. Though he'd memorized the shortest path between his room and Catilen's, he worried he'd lost his way. *Why'd they have to build this place like a maze?*

Finally, he located Catilen's door. He ran his fingers over the room number twice to make sure. He didn't waste time pressing his ear to the door, instead he turned the handle. The door opened. His heart skipped a beat; he'd missed her in the dark halls.

A cursory scan of the room revealed her bag, propped against the wall just inside the door.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Catilen? he hissed into the darkness. “You awake?” No answer. “I don’t think anyone saw me, but I think we should hurry...” No response. Not a murmur, not a whisper, not a breath.

He squinted, trying to penetrate the shadows shrouding the bed. He approached cautiously, not wanting to startle his companion awake. The covers lay twisted in tangles, heaped on the floor. There was no sign of Catilen, not even a hint of warmth on the mattress.

He saw no sign of struggle. But she’d left without her bag. There were things in there she wouldn’t leave behind.

Fear took root in his chest, turning his blood to ice. He tried to ignore it, refusing to allow panic to overwhelm him as it had in the jungle. He needed a clear head.

Catilen wouldn’t leave without him; he didn’t question that. *Someone asked something urgent of her. Otherwise she’d have taken her things.* Only one person would trouble her at such an early hour. Anger boiled in his gut.

Breathing deep to steady his nerves, Damian lowered his defenses. He couldn’t sense emotional echoes the way Catilen did, but he had other ways of tracking people. Everyone left a distinctive energy signature. With a bit of magical effort, he could distinguish between them the same way a bloodhound discerned specific scents. He’d have to use his personal reserves. He’d hesitated to exhaust himself while lost in the jungle, but he’d soon be in a position to recharge.

The magic jumped at his call, unlike when he used the island’s energy. Catilen’s presence filled the room at varying levels of decay. She’d spent a lot of time here over the past few days, but even her most recent signature was several hours old. The impression washed out, like clothes hung too long in the sun.

Sentomoru’s presence tainted the air like an oil spill. He recognized it because he’d peeked at their host’s energy signature. He’d never dared do so in the man’s presence, but he’d checked the office after Sentomoru’s departure.

They left together. Nothing would have changed her mind. Had he delayed her? Rage swelled in his chest, the formation of a tidal wave. *I will find her.*

Shrugging off his packs, he piled them next to Catilen’s suitcase. He doubted he’d have time to come back for them. He didn’t bother looking for servants, guards or guests as he followed Catilen’s energy signature back into the hallway. Her presence grew stronger with each step, as did his resolve.

Sentomoru had taken Catilen through a long corridor, up two flights of stairs, and down another hall in the opposite direction. The higher he traveled, the more the path twisted. Certainly their host knew a more direct route to his destination. He must have intended to confuse Catilen, to force her to rely on him.

On the sixth floor, her path ran into a wall. His mage sight revealed a faint line of energy passing through the obstacle. He knelt and traced the wall, searching for seams that would indicate a hidden passage. Neither his fingers, nor his magic, exposed a door.

The wall might be an illusion, but his secondary senses failed to detect the presence of magic, despite several probes. *Can Sentomoru change the layout of his home at will?* It would require an absurd amount of power. *The same amount of power it would take to rearrange trees.*

It didn’t matter; magic blocked his path and he didn’t have the energy to expend unraveling it. Not with the island hoarding its power. Since he couldn’t find a door, he’d just have to make one. With the arcane, elegance took a lot more effort than brute force.

Laying his palm against the smooth marble, Damian summoned his strength. Energy surged within him, flowing through the space beneath his flesh. He ignored the giddy rush that

accompanied it, focusing the power through his fingertips. A large portion of the wall cracked beneath the magic onslaught. It crumbled, revealing a wide hallway and a startled woman's bedroom. She hugged silken blankets to her chest and screamed. The high-pitched sound followed Damian down the corridor, setting his ears ringing.

Shouts echoed in his wake as the noise roused other guests. A soundless tingle replaced the ringing in his ears. He must have set off a magical alarm. *That'll get Sentomoru's attention. How long before he finds me? Minutes? Seconds? Better make the most of them.*

The corridor ended in a spiral staircase. Damian took the stairs three at a time.

Guards with heavy wooden staves waited for him at the top. They attacked when he didn't stop, apparently under orders to avoid lethal force. Damian had taken several years worth of martial arts classes, but couldn't compete with men trained for combat. He took several blows to the chest and shoulders before he resorted to magic, using a shockwave to knock them off their feet.

While the guards scrambled to recover, Damian turned his magic inward. His injured leg ached, threatening to fail if this physical activity continued. He found the tiny fissure in the bone and accelerated his body's natural healing processes. Catilen had done a magnificent job with her treatments. Unfortunately, he'd undone most of her work in the past hour.

As soon as the leg would carry him, he pelted around a corner, following Catilen's energy trail. The guards barreled after him, trying to trip him with their staves. He skidded around another bend, almost colliding with a group of staff bearing makeshift weapons. Even if they weren't well trained, they'd overwhelm him before he could reach Catilen. His magic couldn't tell him how close she was.

Turning on his heel, he directed an arcane blast at another wall. He hurried through the shattered support structure, hoping the debris would slow his pursuers.

Several slipped through the chaos, assaulting his heels with their makeshift weapons. Another mage blast knocked a pair of lanterns from their wall sconces. The staff abandoned him to deal with the resulting fire.

He darted up another flight of stairs, but it seemed several of the guards had anticipated his route. Anger shielded him from bumps and bruises as he waded through the assault. Blood, hot and sticky, dripped down his arm, though he never noticed the cut.

Guests screeched hysteria as they fled his mad rampage. He'd caused thousands of dollars worth of damage by now, and ruined several priceless pieces of artwork. He didn't care; sticks and stones wouldn't bring him to heel. He was taking Catilen home, one way or another.

Despite the overwhelming odds, he believed he'd find her. Until a mage blast slammed into the back of his head. If he'd sensed the attack, he might have been able to block or divert it. Either he'd been too occupied with the guards to notice Sentomoru's arrival, or the sorcerer really was that damn good.

Peering up from the floor, Damian thought he saw a smug smile split the island lord's lips. He heard the order to bind him, but lost the fight for consciousness before the guards could carry it out.

* * * * *

Heat and moisture made the air thick and heavy. Damian struggled to breathe with bruised ribs. Living in the age of air conditioning, he took the bathhouse's cool halls for granted. Sentomoru must have used magic to chill them and, of course, he wouldn't bother cooling the dungeon. He couldn't recall such oppressive heat in the jungle, but he'd been distracted at the

time. He'd always assumed caves were cool. Not this one. It must be deep beneath the bathhouse, close to the volcanic vents that fueled the hot springs.

The rough walls of his prison suggested a natural cavern. A heavy wooden door barred the exit. It bore a slit adorned with iron bars that allowed the jailor to keep tabs on his prisoner. *How many cells in Sentomoru's dungeon? And how many are occupied?*

Steel bit into his flesh every time he moved more than an inch. His wrists were shackled to the wall, just above his head, forcing him to kneel on the uneven stone floor. Unable to stretch, his muscles grew stiff. His clothing clung to his body, damp with sweat, aggravating his cuts and scratches.

He didn't sense any active magic reinforcing his physical bonds, but it must be present. Sentomoru was intelligent and powerful enough to lay that kind of trap, but he wasn't fool enough to fall for it.

Rather than sorrow or defeat, Damian trembled with rage. Their host had presented himself as the caretaker of paradise. Both he and Catilen had hoped for an instructor. But Sentomoru was a predator, buried in the ocean sands, waiting for his prey to venture near. All along, Damian believed Sentomoru crafted the strange events conspiring to keep Catilen away from him, yet he convinced himself it was only the voice of jealousy whispering in his ear.

Now the snake had done something to Catilen. Even stripped of his protections, Damian couldn't reach her. The connection that once saved his life, failed to yield results. Either Sentomoru severed it, or found some way to block it. Would his wards react if she found herself in danger?

Sentomoru's conflict is with me. He doesn't have any reason to hurt her. Thank whatever gods for that.

As if summoned by his thoughts, footsteps approached his cell door. Damian tensed. *Who else would venture down here to check on me?* The door creaked on rusted hinges as it opened, revealing Sentomoru in all his crimson-robed splendor. Lips twisted in a smug smile, the lord of the island pressed his long fingered hands together, forefingers tapping against each other as if to express impatience.

"Awake, I see. How are you feeling, David?" He spat the name as though it were an insult.

Damian glared at his host through eyes narrowed to slits. He contemplated spitting at the man's feet, but he had precious little saliva to spare.

"Let's stop pretending you don't know my real name."

Sentomoru's smile became a grin. "Very well Damian," he spoke the name with disdain. "I tried to tell Catilen you couldn't be reasoned with. She pleaded for your life, you know. She must have thought you'd respect her decision to stay, and leave without a fuss."

"Bullshit, her decision!" Damian snarled, pressing against his bonds. Pain shot through his knees and wrists, making him regret acting on impulse. "Forcing her to stay doesn't count as her decision."

"I haven't forced her to do anything. My intention is to set her free of your influence. Without you mucking up her life, she'll see where she belongs; here, in paradise, with me."

Damian bit the inside of his lip until he tasted blood. He wanted to release himself from his manacles and lunge at the island lord's throat. No doubt Sentomoru had some magical force protecting him.

"I've never interfered with Catilen's life. I let her make her own decisions and I respect them. If she wanted to stay without me, she'd have told me that last night. And I'd have crept out of your stinking bathhouse on my own without any help from her. What's the matter, high-and-

mighty lord of the isle? Can't imagine a woman that won't throw herself at your feet?"

Sentomoru's upper lip curled with disgust. "If not for you, she'd have asked to study in my library. She admitted as much to me. You've been nothing but a nuisance and an obstacle to her. I merely provided her an opportunity to fulfill her grand potential."

"And do you still intend to honor her plea for mercy, Lord Sentomoru?" he returned the favor of sneering the man's name.

Sentomoru snorted, pacing from one side of the small cell to the other. "I don't see why I should. Did your discussion with her include a threat to destroy my home if she refused to accompany you?"

Damian grit his teeth to keep from saying something he'd regret. "That's absurd. I, at least, understand the concept of honor."

"But not the concept of arrogance, I see." Sentomoru peered down the tip of his nose at Damian's prone position. "You couldn't have hoped to win this little challenge against me. My power far outclasses yours."

He couldn't argue with that; Sentomoru not only caught him off guard, he knocked Damian flat with as little effort as it took to breathe. That hadn't failed to make an impression on him. Even if he could break free of his chains, even if he could bend the considerable power of the island to his will, he couldn't defeat Sentomoru in a battle of brute force. Willpower simply wasn't enough.

But in a test of wits? *Now there's an area I might have the advantage. If I could clip his wings, limit the amount of power he could throw at me at any given time, I would at least have a chance.* Surrounded as he was by luxury and power, Sentomoru probably didn't have a concept of prudence. Damian, on the other hand, knew how make a small amount of power go a long way. *He flaunts what he has. And he's underestimated me.*

Thank-you-very-much, Lord Sentomoru, for the idea.

It took effort not to grin. "That wasn't a challenge, Sentomoru, but this is; I challenge you to prove your honor in the old ways."

The lord of the island stopped pacing and narrowed his eyes at his prisoner. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't pretend you don't know. You've been a student of the ancient arts far longer than I have. Surely your first master passed on the old laws just as mine did. I bet they were still in flowery language too. Let me translate: you can't deny a challenge set to you by another practitioner of the arts. You must honor the old traditions or you forfeit by default. And don't you remember the warning, Sentomoru? Anyone who denies or cheats the laws which bind our power loses their ability to wield it."

Sentomoru pursed his lips, regarding his captive in silence. His cool exterior didn't fool Damian; he could see the cracks. Lines of tension formed at the corners of Sentomoru's mouth and eyes. He squared his shoulders and straightened his back. *He didn't expect a challenge. He can't find a way to wriggle out of it.*

"If it were a genuine challenge, there might be a risk. The lord of the island crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Yet, there is evidence to suggest the loss of power is a false consequence manufactured by overzealous instructors."

Damian leaned as far forward as his bonds permitted. "Oh it's a genuine challenge, Sentomoru. Is loss of your considerable power something you're willing to risk?"

"Of course I have every intention of meeting your challenge, petty and effortless as I expect it to be," his captor sneered, bearing his teeth in reply. "Name your terms."

“When I win, you have to let me and Catilen leave your island unmolested. Then you have to take your godforsaken bathhouse off our world and never bring it back.”

The lord of the island smirked. “Very well. And when I win, Catilen will pledge herself to me while you-”

“Hold on,” Damian growled, digging his nails deep into his palms to keep his temper under control. “You can’t demand terms of Catilen. She’s neither here nor party to the challenge.”

“You did.” Sentomoru waved a hand in dismissal.

“No, I said you had to let her go. You’re the one who fulfills that term. What she does after that is her choice.” Not that he worried she’d consider staying.

“Very well.” Sentomoru sighed. “If you win, I will allow Catilen to choose whether or not she leaves the island with you. But if I win, you will forfeit your life.”

Of course. “And what will happen to Catilen after I’m dead? Will you keep her hostage on your island?”

“I don’t see the point in speculating. Once you’re dead, she’ll be free of your influence and she will certainly agree the island is where she’s meant to be.”

Unbelievable. “Fine. One last thing; you have to let me make use of the island’s energy for the duration of my stay or lose by default.”

Sentomoru’s lower lip twitched. *Perhaps he thought I’d forget to mention it.*

“I suppose you do require an energy source to fuel your puny powers,” he muttered. “Consider it done.”

“Then I agree to the terms.”

“By the law of the old powers, I accept your challenge and the contract binding it.” Turning, Sentomoru swept out of his cell. “I shall inform the lady Catilen of the morning’s events. In the mean time, I suggest you consider who we should invite to judge our little competition. Make your choices wisely.”

“Oh, I don’t even have to think about that.” Damian flashed his captor a wicked grin. “There’s only one person we’ll both agree to trust with that responsibility.”

Again Sentomoru’s jaw tightened with annoyance. “Indeed,” he replied as he slammed the cell door closed. “Then I shall inform Catilen of that as well. I will send my men to escort you back to the surface.” With that, Sentomoru marched away, his heavy footfalls echoing through the open caverns.

Damian struggled against his manacles, even testing them with his magic, but they remained firmly in place. No doubt his host ‘forgot’ to unlock them. Damian drew a deep breath, resisting the urge to waste it on useless curses. “Sentomoru!” he snapped, trusting acoustics to carry his cry to the man’s ears.

A moment later his bindings clicked open, finally freeing him from his uncomfortable captivity.

Chapter Nineteen

A distant rattle drove sleep away. Catilen woke to find the walls and floor shaking. Her first panic-stricken thought didn't concern the imminent collapse of the bathhouse, but rather her failed rendezvous with Damian. They'd hoped to be on the ocean by dawn. Her tardiness ruined everything.

But of course she'd overslept. She'd left her cell phone and its alarm in her room, along with all her other belongings, when Sentomoru lured her away. The conversation came back to her, a nightmare caught in the fringes of her memory like a fly trapped at the edge of a spider web. No matter how she flailed, she couldn't escape reality.

She'd meant to meet Damian anyway, though she expected Sentomoru to stalk her. She'd hoped to pass her companion a message, perhaps via her phone when she got it back. But in her haste to sleep, and distance herself from the night's events, she'd forgotten she needed an alarm.

Cursing, she stumbled from the unfamiliar bed and searched for her bag. She tore through every drawer and cabinet, thinking the 'helpful' bathhouse staff had unpacked for her. She found no sign of anything she owned. A red silk kimono, embroidered with shimmering gold thread, hung on the back of the bathroom door. *They let themselves in to deliver that but didn't bother retrieving my things?* Her blood boiled. She wasn't keen on traipsing through the bathhouse halls in her pajamas, but they'd have to do for now. *I am not Sentomoru's dress-up doll!*

The floor trembled beneath her feet like a tree branch swaying in the wind. She grabbed a nearby dresser, as if that would help. The shaking receded before she recalled proper earthquake procedure. In the ensuing calm, she rushed from her room without care for what she wore.

A frenzied attendant met her in the hallway. "You must stay in your room, my lady!" She flailed her arms so that her kimono sleeves fluttered around her head, advancing until Catilen retreated through her door.

"What's going on?" Catilen demanded. "The floor keeps shaking. Is it safe?"

"It's safe here, ma'am, but I'm afraid you have to stay in your room until the trouble is sorted. Please, I'm sure it won't be long."

Catilen subsided, waiting until the woman left to calm other guests. Then she tried again. Every time she opened the door, a passing member of staff appeared to shoo her back inside. They must be waiting in the hallways. But it was always someone different, and she never spied them through the peep hole.

Exasperated, Catilen gave up. She had nothing with which to pass the time; no books, no mystical tools, and television wasn't included among the bathhouse's amenities. She decided to bathe, though she had to return to the same clothes she slept in.

About an hour after the shaking ceased, a member of staff let himself in to her room. He wore a pair of light, flower-patterned robes and bore a tray of food.

Catilen confronted him, her arms crossed in front of her chest. "What are you doing?"

He hesitated, looking like a deer caught in headlights. "Lord Sentomoru thought you might like some breakfast, my lady."

"And you just waltzed in without even knocking?"

He stammered, unable to answer. Catilen made him go back into the hallway and knock. When she answered the door, she refused to let him in.

"I don't want breakfast, I want answers. What's going on?"

"I... I'm not sure, my lady. There was some trouble, but Lord Sentomoru handled it."

“Can you take me to him? I need to speak with him.”

“I’m certain he’s busy, my lady. If you’d just eat-”

“No thank you.” She shut the door in his face. Guilt engulfed her, but she could no more reason with the bathhouse staff than their obstinate lord.

With a sigh, she paced the length of her new room. *Damian’s noticed my absence by now.* It was too late to relay her plan and ask his cooperation, even if she had some means of communicating with him. *For all I know, he caused this morning’s trouble.* She shivered.

I have to find him, and I have to find Sentomoru, and fix this before it gets out of hand. Steeling her resolve, Catilen jerked her door open and stalked down the hallway. This time, she wouldn’t be stopped.

Halfway down the first staircase, she encountered Sentomoru on his way up. They paused and he offered her a smile, though it seemed forced.

“Is something wrong, my dear?” His voice sounded strained.

Catilen narrowed her eyes. “Quite a few things, actually. For one, I’m not your ‘dear.’ And where are my things? It seems I’m not allowed to go fetch them. I’m forced to traipse around in my sleeping clothes because I haven’t anything else to wear.”

Sentomoru’s smile flickered, but he managed to maintain it. “I had new clothing sent to your room. I’m certain I sent someone first thing this morning so tha-”

“I’m not wearing what *you* want me to wear,” Catilen snarled. Looking at Sentomoru’s robes, she could tell the dress left for her was its twin; they were embroidered in the same gold pattern.

“Of course,” Sentomoru stammered. “I meant no offence, my d- err... I took the liberty of ordering you an entirely new wardrobe, but it will take some time bef-”

“What makes you think I need a new wardrobe?” Catilen planted her hands on her hips, tapping one foot on the stair. Ridiculous flew out the window last night. This, she couldn’t even describe.

“A woman of your caliber deserves only the finest of everything,” Sentomoru protested, holding up his hands as if to placate her.

“A woman of any caliber deserves the right to dress herself as she pleases. And I’m quite pleased with my own clothing. Now where is it? Or did you already take the liberty of having my personal possessions burned?”

The lord of the island cleared his throat into one fist, then folded his arms into his sleeves. “I see your point, Catilen.” He seemed to choose his words with care. “I meant the gesture as a gift, to welcome you to your new home-”

“I never said I would stay forever.” Catilen narrowed her eyes further, wishing she could turn her words to acid so they’d penetrate her host’s thick skull.

“I...indeed.” Bowing his head, Sentomoru lowered his eyes to the floor. “I’ll have your things delivered immediately. Now would you like to continue yelling at me on the stairway, or shall we return to your room?”

She wanted to keep yelling at him. She wanted to tell him what she thought of him and his attempts to ‘help’ her. *What good will it do to vent your spleen? He only hears what he wants to.* Spinning on her heel, Catilen trudged back to her room, assuming Sentomoru would follow.

“Something happened this morning,” Catilen declared when the lord of the island shut her door behind him. Somehow she kept her voice from shaking. “I suspect it involved Damian, but no one will tell me what’s going on. Your staff let themselves into my room, without permission, whenever they please. I may have agreed to linger on your island, but that doesn’t make me one

of your subjects. I want to speak to Damian right now.”

“It may be too late for that.” Sentomoru held up a hand to forestall any response. “He made quite a fool of himself this morning, I’m afraid. You’re right about his involvement with the trouble. In fact, he was the source of it.”

Can’t say I’m surprised. Catilen swallowed against the fearful lump in her throat, refusing to fall to pieces. “I’m sure it confused him when he woke and found me missing.” She didn’t bother masking her bitterness.

“Or angry to discover you slipped from his grasp,” the lord of the island replied with a smug snort.

Catilen gritted her teeth to keep from growling. Talking to Sentomoru was like talking to a child. “What happened?”

“I understand you’re upset, Catilen,” Sentomoru spoke in his most patronizing tone, “but Damian attempted to destroy the bathhouse. He frightened and injured several of my people. He had to be restrained before he killed someone.”

She wished she could argue in Damian’s favor. While she knew he’d never take a life, vandalism sounded like his kind of irrational behavior. That’s why she’d meant to intercept him, before he had a chance to overreact. *He probably thought Sentomoru kidnapped me.*

I don’t feel much better off than a prisoner.

“Where is he now?” Squaring her shoulders, she lifted her chin with determination. “I demand to speak with him.”

“By now he’s back in his room. I’m afraid his brief stay in my dungeon did him no good. When I confronted him, he took his fate into his own hands. After his release, however, I instructed my people to take him breakfast. Does that give you piece of mind?”

The assurance of Damian’s wellbeing summoned an intense wave of relief. Catilen nearly fell off her feet. She flopped into an armchair, shaking her head to clear it.

“I don’t understand. How did he take fate into his own hands?”

“He challenged me to a duel governed by the laws of the ancient art we both practice. Are you familiar with such rites?”

“No,” Catilen admitted. She had a sinking suspicion she could guess what they entailed.

“When one sorcerer challenges another, they are honor-bound to accept the challenge no matter the discrepancy in skill between them. Damian knew this when he spoke, though I’m afraid it was short-sighted of him. The two of us will compete in three challenges, to be determined by ourselves and our chosen judge. Magical prowess need not be the focus, though it usually is. Whoever wins the majority of the challenges is declared the winner. Failure to comply with the old laws, supposedly, results in the loss of one’s ability to wield the power.”

“And what’s the reward for winning these challenges?” She understood the concept, though she wasn’t thrilled by the idea.

“The terms are chosen when the challenge is issued. If Damian should win, he has chosen to leave the island, and take you with him if you desire to leave.”

“Which I do,” Catilen asserted, hoping to irk her host.

Sentomoru hesitated, perhaps trying to brush the insult aside. “If I should win, which is more likely, Damian will, sadly, forfeit his life.”

“And me?” Catilen demanded. “What happens to me if you win?”

“That is not for me to determine,” Sentomoru replied with a thin smile. “But I’m certain once the meddler is removed from your life, you will make the right choice.”

Catilen didn’t want to contemplate the consequences of Sentomoru’s victory. She

considered protesting the terms were too extreme, but they were exactly what Sentomoru wanted. Exactly what she'd hoped to prevent by offering herself instead.

"How is this contest judged?" Anxiety fluttered in her stomach like butterflies. Damian couldn't hope to compete with Sentomoru's magical ability. Was he even aware of its full scope? He'd studied the arcane arts a fraction of the time Sentomoru had available to perfect it. Even without the power imbalance, his chances were slim.

Sentomoru's smile grew weary. Catilen noticed dark lines beneath his eyes, perhaps indicating lack of sleep. She found it difficult to summon sympathy for him after last night.

"Both Damian and I agree there is only one party we trust to serve as a judge for our duel. That person is you, Catilen."

So, losing the man she loved wouldn't be enough; she might have to send him to his death. Surely this mystical contract contained some clause which prevented cheating. *No doubt forcing the party I favor to forfeit.* Could this day get any crazier? *Damn it, Damian, what were you thinking?*

She couldn't refuse. No one else would give Damian a fair chance. The guests would treat the challenges as spectacle and Sentomoru's subjects would favor their lord by default.

"Very well." Catilen sighed, steeling herself for the task ahead. "But I still want to hear Damian's side of this before we begin."

"I have asked him to meet us in my office when he is ready so we may discuss the focus of the challenges."

"Then I'll join you when I'm ready." Sentomoru opened his mouth to protest, probably intending to offer her an escort. "I'm still waiting for my things," she added before he could speak.

It was as good as a dismissal. The lord of the island stared at her for a moment, as if he couldn't believe she'd turn him away. Then he bowed his head and backed toward the door. "I shall await your arrival."

Catilen closed the door after he left. She paced while she waited for her suitcase, replaying the last twenty-four hours in her mind. Everything she loved about the island concealed deceit. Now she could see through the veil. The bathhouse glimmered, an illusion of paradise. But it was a façade, a mirror to deflect the vision of its visitors from the island's true nature. How often did Sentomoru force someone in or out of his domain with irrational demands and false accusations? Had anyone else ever challenged him?

When the man bearing her suitcase entered without knocking, she made him go out and try again. She pulled the deadbolt across the door when he left. She'd have to keep it locked from now on. Not that locks had prevented the staff from delivering the red kimono. And, of course, Sentomoru had a master key. *I'll make his life miserable if he dares to use it.*

Despite the heat outside, the bathhouse maintained a comfortable temperature. Yet Catilen shivered, limbs trembling with anger, sorrow and frustration, all of it tinged with fear. Fighting numb fingers, she pulled a sweater over her t-shirt, hoping it would combat the unnatural chill. She didn't want to watch Damian fight Sentomoru, couldn't stand to see him defeated, couldn't bear the thought of judging him. What made him think this was a good idea?

She lingered outside Sentomoru's office when she arrived. She didn't want to go inside. She wanted a chance to talk to Damian in private. Neither asking nor demanding got her far with Sentomoru. It was easier to circumvent him. She wanted a chance to correct whatever twisted version of last night her host passed on. *Not that Damian would believe I abandoned him.*

She was about to give up, assuming Damian already waited inside, when she heard him call

her name. Taking her hand from the door, she turned. Damian rushed up the hallway from the dining room. Suffused with relief to see him in one piece, Catilen darted down the hall and threw her arms around his neck. He hugged her waist, drawing her close.

“For a minute there,” Damian murmured in her ear, “I feared I’d never see you again.”

She couldn’t deny sharing his dread. From the moment Sentomoru closed her in his quarters, her life seemed in danger of disintegrating. If she raced ahead of the collapse, she might be able to retrieve all the pieces and put them back together.

Taking a step back, she held Damian at arm’s length, looking him over. His face seemed drawn and worn, as though someone tried to pinch the flesh from his bones. His skin was pale, his bottom lip cut and swollen. Each of his arms bore several small scratches and bruises dotted his exposed skin. *How many more are hidden beneath his clothes?* Judging by the large purple bruise on his right cheek, he escaped a black eye by mere inches.

Each injury made her heart heavier. Even so, she lifted a hand and lightly smacked the back of his head. It wasn’t meant to hurt, but she hoped he took her meaning.

“Damn it, Damian, what have you gotten yourself into?”

“Ow! Hey!” Damian jerked his head away, rubbing the place her hand landed. “I was just trying to save you.”

“What makes you think I need saving?”

“Sentomoru took you away in the middle of the night to prevent you from leaving. What was I supposed to think?”

“That I wouldn’t let him lock me in a tower? I had a plan, you know. I was going to humor him long enough to prove his stupid delusions wrong, while you found a way to ensure I got home safely. It wouldn’t have involved duels to the death.”

“Listen, Cat, I’m not sure what he told you, but he probably wants you scared. This duel doesn’t mean we stand across from each other in some giant arena on tiny little rocks and beat each other with magic until one of us can’t stand up anymore. Our traditions aren’t that barbaric.”

Catilen swallowed hard. That was an accurate description of what she imagined. “Then what does it entail?”

“That’s what we have to decide.” He gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. “But trust me, the point isn’t sheer magical force. I couldn’t hope to beat Sentomoru that way. Don’t you see? That’s why I challenged him to the duel.”

Even without the full force of the island behind Sentomoru, Catilen couldn’t imagine how Damian intended to defeat him. She tried to have faith, but it felt shaky. “I hope you’re right,” she said softly.

Before Damian could answer, the door to Sentomoru’s office slid open, banging against its tracks. The lord of the island stood in the doorway and cleared his throat. “Shall we begin?”

Catilen exchanged a glance with Damian. Reluctant as she was to enter the office, she saw no point in stalling. Damian took her hand and they followed Sentomoru inside. The lord of the island sat behind his desk. He laid his hands in front of him, fingers folded into a pyramid. Damian took the chair closest to the desk. The two men scowled at each other.

The other chair was only two inches further from Sentomoru’s desk than Damian’s, but Catilen wanted those inches. Anywhere in the same room was too close after last night. She entwined her hands on her lap, tapping one foot while she waited for someone to speak.

Slow, silent minutes dragged by. Finally, she cleared her throat.

“What are these challenges going to be?” she asked, peering between the two men.

Damian sat up straighter and squared his shoulders. "First we need to decide what we want to test."

"Indeed." Sentomoru rapped his fingers against the oaken desk. "I believe the first trait we should test is intelligence."

"And I think we should test our perseverance," Damain said.

Sentomoru's eyes drifted in Catilen's direction. She tried not to cringe beneath his gaze. "I believe you should choose the final challenge," he said. "You may not be included in the terms, or bound by them, but you hold as much stake in the outcome as either of us."

"Me?" Catilen laid a hand on her chest. "I don't even understand the rules of the competition." Which would make it exceedingly difficult to judge.

"Just think of the most important characteristic for a mage to possess." Damian flashed her a reassuring smile. "What quality would best help us decide the outcome of our current predicament?"

Catilen bowed her head while she considered the question. She tried to block out the office, the two men and their expectant gazes. She tried not to dwell on their feud or her place in the middle of it. She tried not to imagine a life without Damian. *What would solve this problem?* The answer seemed simple.

"Compassion," she said as she raised her head again. "The final challenge should test your compassion."

"Agreed," Damian said at the same time Sentomoru murmured, "Indeed." They shot acid glares at each other across the desk.

The lord of the island cleared his throat. "I suggest a maze for the first challenge. That will test our reasoning capabilities."

Catilen bit her tongue against a sharp remark. *He can't hope to win that one, not after last night.* "I don't understand," she protested, "how will a maze test your arcane skills?"

"I told you," Damian replied patiently, "the challenges don't have to require wielding magic. A sorcerer must be clever. Whoever is more intelligent has more potential arcane ability, and therefore would be the superior mage."

"So you won't be able to use your magic to solve the maze?" Catilen asked, glancing from one man to the other, still confused. How did they test their magic without using any? *Is this why Damian issued the challenge?*

"That will be determined when the maze is constructed," Sentomoru replied. "And I believe you should be the one to do it, Catilen. If you wished to restrict our magic ability during the test, you would certainly find a means to do so."

"Me?" Catilen exclaimed again. "I'm not an architect. I wouldn't know how to design a maze, let alone build one!"

This time, Sentomoru smiled. "I believe you have a strong enough connection to the island to manipulate its power. You could stimulate plant growth, move the ground, even manipulate the weather if you chose. Those tools should allow you to build a maze worthy of the test."

Catilen shook her head. "In case you've forgotten, I don't use the same kind of magic you two do. I wouldn't know the first thing about manipulating the island's energy, let alone doing any of the things you mention."

"But you know how to interact with other energy sources," Sentomoru pointed out. "That should be enough. If you open yourself to the island, it will readily serve your will. I will absent myself from a small portion of the land so that you alone will have control. Once the island senses your desires, it will shape itself to that form."

Catilen didn't want to go near the island's energy, not now she knew it was all bound up with Sentomoru. She glanced in Damian's direction, hoping he'd protest, but he nodded agreement. *What choice do we have?* Building a maze by non-magical means would take ages. Neither Sentomoru nor Damian could do it, or there wouldn't be a challenge. *I'm tempted to tell them to make mazes for each other.* She could imagine the resulting disaster.

"I'll try," she promised, stressing the word. "But it will take a lot out of me. I suppose the only judgment to render is who finished first." That, at least, shouldn't be difficult. "Is the challenge to escape the maze, or find the center?"

"We should have to find our way out," Damian said. "Otherwise, you'd have to wait inside it."

"I'll have to wait either way," Catilen reminded him. "It doesn't matter to me if it's inside or out."

"I think you should wait at the center," Sentomoru replied with a smug grin. She was certain he said it to be contrary. "Our task should be finding our way to you."

After a moment to consider both options, she cast Damian an apologetic look. "I have to agree with Sentomoru." The words tasted rancid on her tongue. "Only because I think it will be easier to create the maze from inside."

"Fair enough." Damian offered her a reassuring smile.

"All right, when do the two of you want to start?" She half-hoped they'd want to wait a day. She'd only been awake a few hours and already she was exhausted.

"Today," Sentomoru said at the same time Damian declared, "Immediately." Again they paused to glare at each other across the desk.

With a sigh, Catilen slid to her feet. "Let's just get this over with."

"No!" Sentomoru shot to his feet, holding up a hand to stop her from leaving. "You haven't eaten yet, Catilen. If this task will consume much of your energy, your health must be tended first."

Damian shot her a reproachful look. "I'm forced to agree."

In all the morning's hoopla, she'd forgotten about breakfast. She wasn't hungry, but she couldn't drain herself on an empty stomach. She'd end up sick, or worse.

"Fine," she relented. "I'll go up to the café and order myself something. And perhaps fetch a book to read while I'm at it." She didn't want Sentomoru's company and she doubted he'd let Damian accompany her without surveillance. At least this way, she'd get some peace.

"As you wish." Sentomoru sank back into his chair, sounding disappointed. "We shall meet you in the courtyard when you're ready to depart."

Chapter Twenty

When Catilen arrived in the courtyard, she found Sentomoru and Damian standing with their backs to each other, feigning interest in uninteresting objects. Damian had a good view of the carriage horses' rear-ends. Sentomoru eyed what must have been a very familiar wrought iron fence.

Children, she thought as she descended the bathhouse stairs. *Acting like adults might have averted the whole situation.* Then again, Sentomoru seemed to have taken leave of his senses and Damian didn't deserve his ire.

The carriage horses pawed the ground, anxious to be on their way. Their handler stroked their flanks, trying to keep them calm. She smiled as she slid past, swinging herself into the carriage before the other men took notice. A discrete cough from the handler caught their attention. Both men scrambled to get through the door first.

Disgusted, Catilen sprawled across her bench, back to the carriage wall like the day she sprained her ankle. Wearing identical dejected looks, the two men resigned themselves to sitting together. Damian crammed himself into the far corner to avoid physical contact with their host. Sentomoru gathered the silk of his robes into his lap, as if he feared Damian's touch would soil them.

The carriage lurched into motion. Catilen concentrated on the jungle foliage as it whipped past the window, trying to ignore the dirty looks Sentomoru and Damian kept sneaking each other. Her patience ran thin. She needed to figure out how to build this maze. *If it's even possible for me to do such a thing.*

She'd seen what Damian could do. She recalled the way Captain Jones's eyes slid past them the day they departed for the island. If Damian hadn't caught his attention, they might have stood there all day without him noticing. She'd passed one of the holes Damian made in the bathhouse walls on her way to the courtyard. Impressive seemed an understatement.

Magick didn't work like that. She manipulated energy on a spiritual level. She believed her work affected the material world, but those effects were difficult to measure or quantify since she didn't create or destroy. That's why witches called their efforts 'magick', with a k; to distinguish it from modern illusions or, in this case, Damian and Sentomoru's sorcery.

For Sentomoru, who must have studied the mystical arts most of his life, wielding the island's magic might be as simple as a thought. Perhaps he'd forgotten the difficulty of weaving his first spells. *What if I can't master the power enough to raise a maze? Would they set a different challenge? Based on their behavior this morning, they'll just argue until they get hungry enough to forget about it.*

Even if it was as simple as showing the island what she wanted, Catilen dreaded the task. She'd been weary of the energy field since she caught its dark, obsessive tinge. Now she knew that energy belonged to a person. Not only did he share that obsession, he directed it at her. Even if he disconnected himself from a portion of the land, touching the island would be like touching him. She had no desire for such intimate contact. Especially since the task required the lowering of her defenses. She suppressed a shudder.

They took the fork which led away from the village, moving deeper into the jungle. The road narrowed until there were no gaps in the canopy overhead. Thick foliage reduced the light level to irregular blotches. If she hadn't known better, Catilen would have thought the day overcast; weather that better suited her mood.

The carriage drew to a halt beside an ordinary patch of jungle. For Catilen, the journey went on for ages, but ended too quickly. She wanted to finish this sorry exercise without having to participate in it.

They filed from the compartment. Sentomoru led them down a jungle path Catilen hadn't noticed. Damian trailed behind her, as if worried something would sneak up behind them and snatch her away. The walk was short, the path free of underbrush, roots and brambles. *Did Sentomoru use some trick to clear the path?* Her last trek through the jungle hadn't been so accommodating.

They fanned out when they reached the end of the path, Catilen surveying their surroundings with a critical eye. Trees formed a ragged half-ring perimeter with the rest of the clearing open to sky. A sheer cliff formed the meadow's final border, overlooking more trees and a river far below. Under different circumstances, she would have enjoyed the view; it was beautiful. Instead she concentrated on the logistics of her task. The width of the clearing would accommodate a large maze. The absence of the canopy would allow for high walls. The forest's proximity would provide natural obstacles. The cliff could even serve as a hazard, though she didn't want the maze to be deadly.

Of course, if the island was an extension of Sentomoru, he'd know the perfect location to conduct any activity.

Catilen took a pair of hesitant steps toward the center of the clearing. "Okay." She took a deep breath. "Explain again how I do this."

"Relax," the lord of the island instructed. "I will relinquish my connection to this part of the island. It wants to connect with you. If you open yourself to that seeking, it will latch on to your will. Then it's as simple as imagining what you want and it will happen."

Catilen was skeptical anything magical could be simple, but she nodded. If she failed, they'd just have to find another answer. "I'm ready."

Nodding, Sentomoru spread his arms, as though inviting her to embrace him. He must have entreated the unseen life-force of the island. Catilen felt foolish, unable to see or sense any arcane activity. Could Damian see the interaction between island and lord?

She waited in awkward silence until Sentomoru lowered his arms. "The island is ready," he declared. "All you need to is initiate the connection."

Banishing both men to the edge of the tree line, Catilen planted herself in the center of the clearing. She turned her back on her audience, drew a deep breath and steeled herself. She peeled back the outer layer of her shields, fearing the overzealous island energy would overwhelm her. When no assault came, she removed the next layer, slowly divesting herself of protection. She kept her core shield intact. This could be an elaborate ruse by Sentomoru to expose her to his influence. She wouldn't give the island a chance to seize control of her mind.

Still skeptical of her success, she reached out to brush the island.

A rush of power greeted her tentative touch. Panicked, Catilen slammed her shields back into place, locking it out. When the energy encountered resistance, it subsided.

Breathing hard, Catilen relaxed and dismissed her protections again. This time, she was prepared for the rush of eager energy. She drew it around her like a cloak, adjusting to its presence before trying to wield it. She sensed none of the dark obsession and took comfort from its absence.

She turned her focus on the meadow. *What to build?* She'd spent so much time agonizing over how she could build the maze, she hadn't considered what it should look like. She wasn't an architect. She didn't know how to make a maze challenging. How many years did designers

spend on hedge mazes? How many times did they draw it, test it, throw it out and start again? And this maze needed to test sorcerers. Twists and turns weren't enough; she needed pitfalls and illusions. *Can the island inhibit their arcane abilities while they're inside the maze?* How could she command it to do things she didn't understand?

The island energy tingled against her exposed skin, making the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Did Sentomoru have some way of speaking with it? Was it capable of communicating with words? It did radiate a quiet confidence. Could the island give form to a vague concept? There was only one way to find out.

She recalled a movie from her childhood which contained a labyrinth. Not just a maze, a labyrinth filled with obstacles, tricks and false paths. She couldn't recreate it; it had never been anything more than movie sets. But perhaps it would give the island an idea of her needs.

As Sentomoru predicted, she didn't need to give the island specific instructions. It didn't need a guide. She *felt* the objects in her imagination take form. The plants grew as though they were her hair, billowing in the wind. Her awareness spread further. Disoriented, her stomach dropped as she soared over the clearing and its cliff drop, but her feet remained on solid ground. Without opening her eyes, she watched a green dome form over her location, blocking Damian and Sentomoru's view of her work. Trees bent their branches through the dome, helping to form the maze's inner walls. Twists and turns took shape. Magic integrated itself into the obstacles, looking like heat lines over pavement to her mind's eye.

She never could have imagined building such a thing. Yet a flicker of desire was all the island required to give it form. When she observed the finished product, she gleaned the logic necessary to unravel the maze's secrets. It was subtle, but it would fulfill the challenge requirements. The island even integrated the cliff into the final design, though none of the labyrinth's dangers were fatal.

Her sense of self grew smaller as she returned to her body. The dizzying sensation of floating faded. Though she began her task in sunlight, she ended it in shade. Four green walls surrounded her, but she didn't feel trapped. She felt safe, content, satisfied.

She needed some way to indicate the challenge could begin. The island's energy, still clinging to her fatigued mind, happily obliged. Her task finished, she relinquished her hold over the island and reconstructed her shields. She didn't want that kind of power; a small taste of it left her drained.

Exhaustion washed over her like waves breaking on the beach. This was the expected price of success, but she had to stay awake to judge the competition. If she dozed off, she'd no doubt wake to find both men bickering over victory and her efforts would be wasted.

She backed toward the wall. She'd conserve energy if she got off her feet. Bumping into something at thigh height, she turned, surprised. It seemed the island had anticipated this need as well. With a smile, she sank onto the fern-formed bench. The cushioning leaves gave slightly beneath her weight. She resisted the temptation to lay down.

* * * * *

When the ground began to shake, Damian knew their plan had succeeded. Not that he ever doubted; he thought Catilen would make an excellent student of the ancient arts. The inky purple and black energy that detached from Sentomoru became green and gold as it enfolded her. As the quake grew more intense, Catilen glowed brighter, forcing Damian to turn away.

When the tremor subsided, Catilen stood in thigh-high grass. As he watched, the green stalks continued their climb. He blinked, certain he'd imagined it. But the grass continued its journey

skyward, entwining to form a wall. The plants grew with impossible speed, until the wall towered over his head. It curved, meeting the other walls of foliage to form a dome. As the final connection knit together, red and blue flowers bloomed along the exterior.

Venturing forward, Damian set his hand against the wall to assure himself it was solid. Though the springy surface gave way beneath his palm, it was too thick to force his hand through.

An impressive and worrisome structure; even his second sight couldn't penetrate the dome. *I hope Catilen's okay in there.* He wouldn't be able to cut through Sentomoru's magic if he abused this opportunity to influence her. The same entity that misled him in the jungle, now had access to her mind. Though the island's energy now answered his summons, Damian wielded it with trepidation.

He glanced at Sentomoru. The lord of the island stood with his hand pressed to the grassy wall. Their eyes locked and narrowed at the same moment. As one, they jerked their hands away from the dome and retreated to the tree line. Damian paced, trying to banish his fears.

Attempting to influence the duel's judge would disqualify the meddler, granting victory to the other by default. *But it won't matter if Sentomoru succeeds in brainwashing Catilen.* A duplicity he might be powerless to prevent. *And losing his magic might not shatter his final spell.*

I have to reach Catilen first. Nothing else mattered.

Time passed, measured only by the sun crossing the sky. Sounds echoed inside the dome. Occasionally the ground shuddered or nearby trees bent their branches to penetrate the hedge walls. As the hours wore on, he feared for Catilen's health. This was a heavy task for someone who'd never worked magic before, even with the island bearing the brunt of the work. She might not recognize the signs of burn out until it was too late.

He was about to suggest finishing tomorrow, when a seam appeared in the grassy wall. It formed the outline of two rectangles which slid aside like supermarket sliding doors, revealing the maze beyond. A pair of vines snaked their way across the entrance, wriggling until they formed the word *welcome*.

I suppose that settles that.

Drawn by the strange activity, Sentomoru glanced in his direction. For a moment, they stared at each other. Damian considered suggesting a countdown, but Sentomoru scrambled through the doorway without preamble. Damian followed, unwilling to fall behind.

The lord of the isle darted left at the first fork, but Damian paused. The splendor inside the dome took his breath away. The walls were double his height, springy enough to give way when he leaned against them, but smooth enough he couldn't find handholds to scale them. Tiny blossoms broke the monotony of the green walls like bright splashes of paint. In many ways, the maze reflected Catilen.

He didn't want to rush, not to take in the sights, because this maze was meant to test his ability to reason. He could employ the tried and true method of hugging the left wall. *That might account for Sentomoru's hasty choice.* It might be possible to solve every maze that way, but it wouldn't be the most efficient route. It was too obvious; Catilen would have accounted for it. By the same logic, he couldn't reverse the tactic. He needed to search for clues, find a pattern.

He took the right fork; an arbitrary decision. He may as well take a different path, since he'd already fallen behind. Traversing the maze would require a certain amount of trial and error, but eliminating illogical choices would allow him to solve the riddle faster. He considered his options at every fork. He tried to guess the length of each corridor, predict dead ends and identify back tracks. With each step he asked, *what would Catilen do?*

It was difficult. Despite being close friends, they approached problems differently. Damian preferred a scientific, logical method, while Catilen tended toward the whimsical. She also had a seemingly endless well of patience, while Damian frustrated easily. But the longer he wandered the maze, the easier the journey became.

He learned the most from his mistakes; fitting for a challenge created by a teacher. He stepped through two portals before he realized they returned him to previous portions of the maze. Not only did he have to regain his bearings with few visual references to assist, he had to identify the hidden doorways before he ran into them again.

The maze's composition changed the closer he got to the center, allowing him to track his progress. Flowers grew thicker, their colors changing from red to blue, then orange, and finally purple. More light seeped through the dome roof. He suspected the center of the maze would also be the brightest, if he reached it before sunset.

Some obstacles, such as the portals, required magic to solve. Others prevented him from using magic. Catilen's cleverest trick was never making it obvious which were which. He got stuck navigating a climb to a high platform, only to realize he required magic for the task. Whenever magic seemed the obvious answer, he found he couldn't summon it.

He progressed slowly. He refused to worry about Sentomoru's success; he needed every ounce of reason to advance.

Finally, he hit a roadblock even his *what would Catilen do* tactic couldn't counter. His observations indicated he was close to the maze's center, though he stood at the edge of the cliff. Wind howled from the depths of the chasm, disturbing his carefully tamed hair. The unruly lock danced across his forehead. Cowed by the vertigo churning his stomach, Damian retreated from the edge.

Why would Catilen include the cliff in her maze? Could it be a mistake? Even the hedge walls cut off at the edge. He tried magic, but couldn't reach it here. Not even when he backtracked to the nearest fork.

It wasn't like Catilen to put a life in jeopardy. Danger had been her primary objection to this duel. She wouldn't even lash out at the lord of the island for tricking her into staying longer. That just wasn't her.

The solution nearly knocked the air from his lungs. *How could I have been so stupid?* There was no danger. He couldn't trust his eyes, but he trusted Catilen's gentle soul.

Ignoring the whistle of the wind against the rocky crags below, Damian drew a deep breath and closed his eyes. Steeling his resolve, he stepped forward.

It was a leap of faith. If he hadn't seen to Catilen's core once before, he wasn't sure he could have taken the plunge.

The ground held his weight. The din faded. Sunlight assaulted his eyelids. Grinning, he opened his eyes, surveying the center of the maze. Flowers coated the walls, petals featuring every color of the rainbow. More blossoms trailed from vines, hanging from openings in the dome's roof. There was enough daylight left, the dome shadow cast no gloom on the chamber.

Lounging on a fern bench in the center of it all sat Catilen, grinning.

"There you are," he murmured.

"Here I am," she agreed. She sounded tired but didn't look sick. If she'd burnt herself out, she wouldn't be awake. "And you're the first," she added, pleased.

He hadn't let himself hope. He'd wasted a lot of time pondering options, doubling back, and falling prey to the maze's pitfalls. He'd feared he'd find Sentomoru waiting for him, instead of Catilen.

“And you’re okay?” Approaching the bench, Damian tested the ferns would hold his weight before he settled beside her, sliding an arm across her shoulders.

“I just need some rest.” She laid her head against his shoulder.

“I can see that.” He smiled, rubbing her back. “You should see this maze though, Catilen. It’s beautiful.”

“Is it?” she asked around a yawn.

“Indeed.” The lord of the island crossed his arms, narrowing cold eyes in Damian’s direction.

At least he can’t dispute my victory.

“Well, it looks as though I don’t have much to judge.” Catilen’s words echoed his thoughts. She slid to her feet, legs wobbling. Damian caught her arm to steady her. When he stood, she pressed against his side.

Damian basked in his victory. Though the day dawned grey and abysmal, life seemed brighter as the sun descended. He expected a scathing accusation he’d cheated. Instead, Sentomoru turned on his heel and drew up his shoulders, as if determined not to notice him.

“Catilen, would you lead us out?” He motioned toward the maze corridor.

“I suppose I could. But wouldn’t it be easier if I just took it down?”

“Oh no,” Sentomoru exclaimed. “This is a work of art, Catilen. I’d like to preserve it, if you’ll let me.”

“I think the island did more work than me,” Catilen protested.

“Nonsense.” Sentomoru waved a hand in dismissal. “Without your mind to draw the picture, the island couldn’t have done this.” He made a sweeping gesture.

Catilen shrugged. “If it means that much to you, I guess the effort shouldn’t go to waste.”

The lord of the island seemed pleased.

The maze corridors were too narrow to walk three wide. Sentomoru fell into step behind them. They spoke little on the way back. Catilen didn’t even flinch when she crossed the cliff illusion and Damian complimented her on that brilliant piece of magic.

When they reached the carriage, Damian helped Catilen mount the stairs set out by the footman. This time he sat beside her, motioning for her to use his lap as a pillow. She accepted, falling asleep before the driver whipped the horses into motion.

Damian ignored the dark looks Sentomoru cast him all the way back to the bathhouse. His triumph ensured the lord of the island would take him seriously for the rest of the competition. That was victory enough for him.

Chapter Twenty-One

Midmorning sun speared Catilen's eyes, banishing sweet oblivion. She drifted to the surface of consciousness, head heavy with the burdens of the waking world. She wanted to roll over, cocoon herself beneath the blankets and return to sleep, but she knew better. Delaying the next challenge would only amplify their problems.

Rolling away from the window, she tried to relax; a woefully difficult task.

Her thoughts drifted across the ocean. Had the dean gone looking for them yet? Had he called the home in Santa Rosa? When he did, the nurses would tell him no one came to visit Delana Taylor. Her 'episode' would be revealed as a lie and the texts would become evidence, possibly implicating Damian.

The university would contact the police. Questions would follow, search warrants and door breaking. Would they find the letter she left her mother? *I hope not. Not yet.* Not while the things she wrote were still lies. She wrote it so her mother wouldn't worry, not matter what happened. *Only, I hoped it'd be true by the end.* It was written in code. Most witches wrote their notes in one runic language or another. Only her mother's name had been written plainly. *Hopefully they'll give it to her before they try to crack it, or confiscate it for evidence. Hopefully she'll lie about what it says.*

Did her students wonder about her canceled classes? *They'll worry when the newspaper prints a story proclaiming two of their university professors missing.* Then journalists would hound them all for statements. *Poor young things.* She never meant to abandon them. *But you knew the risks. Besides, you're getting ahead of yourself.*

How long would the rest of the challenges take? How would they explain themselves when they got back? No one would believe they slipped past the military onto the island; not that they'd want to brag about illegal activities. *We'll probably have to elope.* It wouldn't save their jobs, might not spare their careers, but at least no one would end up in jail.

She'd rather wake to uncertainty in her old neighborhood, than face losing the man she loved.

Finally pushing back the covers, Catilen dragged herself out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom. She fetched a random herbal pack and sat in the tub as it filled. The fragrant water didn't ease her foul mood. Only one thought bolstered her; *if Damian wins today, we can go home.*

Now Damian had won the first challenge, Sentomoru would be careful instead of treating his opponent like a joke. That eliminated Damian's edge.

How will they test their perseverance? She imagined cross-country skiing and mountain climbing as she dressed and pulled her damp hair into a braid. *Knowing those two, they'll scale a sheer rock wall with only their magic to prevent them plunging to their deaths.* Her stomach dropped. She decided to skip breakfast.

Hoping to get things underway, Catilen hurried to Sentomoru's office. The door was closed. She hesitated to knock. Were the two men already discussing the day's challenge? If they'd made a decision after the maze, she'd slept through it. She didn't want to be involved in every aspect of the duel anyway; she only had to judge the competition.

As she turned to leave, the door slid open.

Sentomoru paused in the doorway, his hand on another man's shoulder. Catilen squinted, trying to place a name to the face. *Tony.* Paul's friend. The dead soldier's friend.

Tony's shirtless chest bore a bronze tint from long hours spent in the sun. A grin lit his face. Joy sparkled in his eyes. How could a man who'd just lost a friend exude such glee?

Sentomoru clasped Tony's hand for a moment. Then the soldier rushed down the hallway, perhaps eager to share news with his other companions. She watched him until Sentomoru's voice startled her from her reverie.

"I'm glad to see you feeling better."

"I just needed a good night's sleep. Who was that?" she asked, ignoring the inner voice that warned it was none of her business.

"One of the soldiers from your world." Sentomoru smiled. "I granted him permission to remain on the island when it leaves."

Alarm reverberated in the back of her mind like a warning klaxon. A soldier abandoning his country and his family, after the sacrifices he made to protect both? It struck her as stranger than soldiers neglecting their duties for a vacation.

"Have many asked to stay?"

"Most of them. It isn't unusual. Many guests request to stay, though it means becoming one of my servants. You must understand. You wished to stay before Damian misled you."

Catilen never got as far as the comment about Damain's deception. "Servants? You mean they work here?"

"Some of them work here. Some of them work in the village, or elsewhere. Whatever I require of them."

"And they get paid?"

"Isn't remaining on the island payment enough?" Sentomoru furrowed his brows, confused.

Catilen gaped. "And you free them after they pay back their debt?" Suddenly Sentomoru giving Melana to Tenolin took a whole new meaning.

"Catilen, what's wrong?" Sentomoru sounded concerned. "Why do you look disturbed? Surely people must work for what they want on your world?"

"Of course they have to work. But not as servants. Not like slaves. They put away money for things they want and they save up for retirement, a time when they get to stop working and enjoy the rest of their lives."

"Anyone's free to leave whenever they want," Sentomoru insisted, shaking his head. "And, of course, I reward faithful service with promotions."

All this time she'd thought Sentomoru a cunning businessman, making his small kingdom profitable. Now she understood he bore his title in the most literal sense; he owned everything on the island, including the people. Rage swelled beneath her breast. Different cultures and traditions be damned. *Nothing justifies slavery.*

The approach of a kimono-clad serving girl stayed her tongue. This was a conversation best held in private. But she couldn't let it go. How could a man who traded his freedoms to brave the battlefield, abandon his nation for a life spent in servitude to a stranger? Soldiers didn't turn in their uniforms for a small slice of paradise. The two decisions so countered each other, she couldn't fathom the mind resolving the dissonance. How could it?

Goaded to action, Catilen reached for the serving girl's mind. Never before had she intruded without permission, not even when someone inadvertently blasted their emotions in her face.

She met no resistance. Most people didn't know how to shield and weren't aware of the necessity. Most people on Earth didn't believe in Empathy.

The island, and its lord, filled the servant's mind. Nothing else. No desires. No aspirations. No fear, worry or longing, not even for a pleasant meal at the end of her shift. This wasn't a tired

contentment born from a long day's fulfilling work. It was a shockingly mindless joy.

With practiced care, Catilen delved deeper, sifting through every dark corner where secrets might dwell. Still, she found nothing. Obsession with the island utterly consumed this woman, turning her into a single-minded drone.

Bile rose in the back of Catilen's throat. Were they all like this? All the bright-eyed young women who led her to dinner and offered her a chance to try on their kimonos? All the athletic young men who tended the flowers and the horses? The masseuses? The cooks? What about Atil'awr in the library? Was she this far gone?

Outrage boiling in her stomach, Catilen did the unthinkable; she used her Empathy as a weapon. Penetrating the woman's mind, she tore through the paper-thin veil that remained of her personality, uncovering her link to the island. An oil-black taint that poisoned everything it touched. Like a lance, she struck the black fingers, shattering them one by one.

She found a faint sense of confusion and disorientation beneath. A vague desire for travel. A fading sense of loss. Whoever she'd been, only an echo of her remained.

The serving girl swooned and Sentomoru caught her, shooting Catilen a sharp look. "Are you trying to save her, Catilen?"

His dispassionate tone irked her. She grit her teeth, swallowing the fury rushing up her throat. She couldn't hope to penetrate his shields. He commanded the island's power. He was the source of those inky tendrils.

"There's nothing left to save. What did you do to her?"

"I?" Sentomoru's eyes widened. "I did nothing. She's much happier this way."

"Are they all like this?" Her stomach twisted. Blood rushed in her ears. Her heart pounded against her ribs, trying to escape. "Dependant on you?"

"Yes," Sentomoru's voice went flat. "If they stay long enough, they all give themselves to the island. Only the strong can fight the pull. They leave before the island consumes them."

"Is this what you want me to become?" She indicated the serving girl struggling to regain her senses. "A mindless drone that hangs on your every desire?"

"No! Don't you see, Catilen? You're different. You could stay forever and resist the island's power. That's what makes you special."

"I don't want anything to do with this place." She took a step back, ready to flee down the hallway. Ready to hurry out the door, run through the courtyard and swim across the ocean, if she had to. "I don't want anything to do with you!"

"You can't leave." Sentomoru's voice grew low and menacing. He narrowed his eyes to dangerous slits. "You promised to remain until the duel is done."

"The duel meant to test your integrity as a sorcerer? You should forfeit by default. You haven't got a shred of honor!"

Sentomoru loosed an inarticulate growl. The force of his rage shook the bathhouse walls. He tossed his servant aside as if she were a rag doll and stalked toward Catilen. Lifting one hand, he compressed his fingers toward each other, making a fist in slow motion.

Invisible fingers seized her limbs, paralyzing her. Her shriek of surprise turned to a scream of horror as the invisible arcane power closed around her like a vice. She threw herself against the ethereal force, but she couldn't move an inch. Unseen walls crushed her chest. The air rushed out of her lungs. Black spots danced in front of her eyes.

"Stop!" she gasped. "Please!"

"I have been patient with you out of kindness," Sentomoru growled. "But I will not allow you to throw your destiny away. I will break the curse that man laid over you. I will make you

see the light.”

He has some skewed idea of kindness. If she couldn't reason with Sentomoru while he was calm, she couldn't reach him now. Dissolving the outer layer of her shields, she poured desperation across her link to Damian. Never mind that it hadn't worked since Sentomoru lured her from her room in the middle of the night. Damian knew how to fight this kind of power; she couldn't.

Sentomoru laughed. The sound echoed in her ears like glass shattering. “That's the connection I intend to sever. He'll never reach you in time.”

The invisible hand squeezed harder. Gasping for breath, Catilen closed her eyes. Panic served no purpose here. Damian's power couldn't compare with Sentomoru's, even if he could reach her. *Sentomoru may have blocked your connection, but you are not helpless!*

She couldn't summon the magic her attacker wielded against her. But if she put enough force into a single empathic projection, it might penetrate his shields. It might buy her a moment, allow her to break free.

She couldn't just drop her shields. Leaving herself exposed wasn't enough. She'd have to break her wards. Burn herself out and burn like a star for the briefest moment. *Better than being at his mercy.*

Rapidly constructing new shields, Catilen piled layer upon layer of inferior defenses atop her regular protections. A bunker built of rice paper. Then she lowered her core shields, unleashing a flood of fear, panic and anger on the fledgling fortifications.

Drained from her exertions the day before, Catilen couldn't maintain those new protections long. It was like patching a cracked dam with chewing gum.

Daggers pierced the space behind her eyes. Black and white streaks danced in front of her vision. Sentomoru's lips, twisted with smug anger, receded into the distance. Pressure built behind her temples. Her skull was going to explode.

White-hot heat flared at her breast. Her wards crumbled, taking her mental barriers with them.

Sentomoru's anger raked her mind like flaming tongs. His servant's fear battered her exposed nerves like a whip on a horse's flank. Desperation and determination speared her temples. Her own spark of hope drew a whimper from her lips.

The pressure against her limbs eased. The floor rushed up to meet her. In the last moment before she passed out, she thought she saw Damian standing over her.

* * * * *

Dreading he came too late, Damian skidded around the last corner. Sentomoru grasped Catilen in tendrils of power, inky black and vivid purple to Damian's mage sight. People talked about seeing red, but white rimmed his vision instead, giving the scene a washed-out appearance.

If he hurts her...

Fists clenched so hard his knuckles turned white, nails biting the flesh of his palms, Damian quivered with rage. He siphoned more power from the island than he meant to. Ignoring the burning sensation in his fingers, he focused all his might into a single mage blast, hoping to shatter the island lord's hold on Catilen.

If he channeled every ounce of the island's power through his hands, he might hurt the opposing sorcerer. As it was, the blow only startled him, a pebble tossed at a giant's ankle. Damian didn't break the spell; Sentomoru dissolved it.

The lord of the island blinked as though awakening from a trance. His eyes looked bleary

and unfocused.

Catilen fell to the floor before either man could reach her. As one, they darted forward. Damian reached her first. *But what do I do?* He needed to keep Sentomoru as far away from her as possible, but couldn't compete with his power. He managed a paltry three feet.

"Stand aside," Sentomoru demanded.

"Like hell," Damian snarled. "Look what you've done!" He'd obliterated her defenses. Luckily, the violent release of her empathic projections caught his attention. He hadn't detected the energy fluctuations signifying Sentomoru's use of magic; the lord of the island really was that damned good.

Sentomoru glowered. "What I've done? I only intended to free her. You've muddled her mind. Confused her—"

"The only one confused here is you," Damian interrupted, not interested in another of Sentomoru's conspiracies. "You can't attack her every time she disagrees with you."

"Attack her? I would nev—" His statement ended in a cry of pain.

At the same moment, a white-hot lance threatened to split Damian's skull in two. Closing his eyes against black spots, Damian grasped his head and stumbled half a step backward before regaining his balance. Cautiously, he glanced in Sentomoru's direction. For once, he found no venom in the man's gaze.

Together, they regarded Catilen. He hadn't realized she was still conscious.

Kneeling, Damian eased Catilen onto her back, cradling her head in his arms. She looked pale and worn, her face pinched and wrinkled. He'd never seen her so fragile. "Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"No." The single word left her gasping for breath.

"What's wrong?" Sentomoru asked, taking one of her hands. Damian shot him an acid glare, resisting the temptation to bat his hand away.

"Quiet," Catilen wheezed. "I need... quiet."

Sentomoru stared at her a moment, bewildered. Slowly his eyes drifted in Damian's direction, seeking clarification.

Damian sighed. "She's an Empath, you idiot. You shattered her defenses."

Another electric jolt struck behind his eyes and Damian gritted his teeth. *I suppose I deserved that.* Clamping down on his frustration, Damian bolstered his shields. Any emotional response would make the situation worse.

"She means solitude," he explained. "Silence of the mind. If her shields are broken, she can feel everything we can. And who knows how wide her range is."

Understanding dawned in Sentomoru's eyes. His face became a mask of concentration. He must intend to shield Catilen, though Damian wasn't fond of the idea. Unfortunately, he wasn't sure how to do it himself.

"Fetch a stretcher." The lord of the island turned to a stunned woman pressed against a nearby wall. She stared at him, eyes wide and wild. "Now!" he barked.

Gathering her senses, the woman stumbled to her feet and hurried down the hallway.

"She can rest in her chambers," Sentomoru said when he turned back to Damian. "I take extra precautions for special dignitaries. It's shielded there. That should provide the ideal environment for rebuilding her defenses."

And of course those precautions include denying access to plebeians like me. He loathed the idea of Sentomoru locking Catilen away. *What will he do when he has her isolated?* He eradicated all trace of his emotions before they slipped through his defenses. Arguing now would

only increase her agony. She did need a safe haven in which to recover. *Away from both of us.*

It went against all his instincts, but he had to let it happen. “Just take care of her,” he spoke through clenched teeth. “And when she’s safely in bed, the two of us should discuss the state of our contract.” Like it or not, Sentomoru had to account for this incident. “We’d best make certain it hasn’t been breached.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

A train circled the interior of her skull, whistles blaring and wheels screeching. With a groan, Catilen cracked open her eyes. The thrashing of her temples paled in comparison to the agony that knocked her out, but that didn't make it pleasant. The raw emotions of half the bathhouse population raking her exposed nerves had been torment beyond measure. She'd take the headache over the alternative.

She surveyed the room as best she could through the tiny gap between her eyelids. Curtains drawn across the window blocked the sun. Just enough light filtered through the edges for her to identify her new room. She couldn't tell the time of day.

A shadow moved at the edge of her vision. Her heart skipped a beat. The pulse behind her eyes increased to cymbals crashing in her cranium. Her eyes fluttered open, but it took them several seconds to resolve the figure as more than an outline.

Recognizing the lord of the island didn't ease her fear. She was in no shape to deal with this man. She had no way to defend against his magic and no patience to converse with him. *He probably didn't mean to kill me.* But he could have caused her serious harm. She had underestimated the backlash of full empathic exposure. *What would he have done if Damian hadn't shown up? Why wasn't he here? Did Sentomoru clap him in irons for objecting to his behavior again?*

She shuddered, wishing Sentomoru would go away. It was too late to pretend she was still asleep.

The island lord tucked the blankets closer around her, perhaps thinking she'd taken a chill. She shrunk away from his hands, wishing the mattress would swallow her. She didn't want his attention, comfort or company.

She might have been projecting; his smile faltered. "Do you feel as though you can sit up, Catilen? Doctor Quamoto prepared a restorative for you. I've kept it warm."

Since the sheets shrouded the lower half of her face, Catilen stuck out her tongue at the mention of the fidgety old doctor. *Did he spit in this one?* Still, she slid her hands beneath her and pushed herself up. Sentomoru adjusted the pillows scattered at the head of the bed until they supported her. Then he handed her the mug.

The warm ceramic against her hands rejuvenated her. Lifting the steaming gold liquid to her nose, she inhaled deeply. *Echinacea. Chamomile. And a hint of Valerian.* She sipped the infusion tentatively. It tasted faintly of honey.

She watched Sentomoru out of the corners of her eyes. He shuffled his weight from foot to foot, uncomfortable. *Good. He has a lot to answer for.*

"That square case there..." She pointed to the first aid kit half-hidden by her suitcase. "The one with the cross on it. Yes, that one," she added when he knelt and laid his hand on it. "In the right corner pouch on the inside of the lid there's a small bottle. No below that. There, that one. Bring it here."

She held out her hand. Sentomoru gave her a strange look but handed her the bottle. Setting her mug aside, she wrestled the childproof top open and spilled two oblong brown pills into her hand. She used the tea to swallow them both, hoping they kicked in fast.

Sentomoru eyed the bottle as though suspicious of its contents. She gave him a sharp, expectant look and he slunk back a step. Swallowing hard, he cleared his throat. "I suppose you want to know what came over me."

That's one way to put it. She nodded.

“Please accept my most humble apology, Catilen. I hope you know I would never hurt you. In my desperation to reach you, I allowed my temper to get the better of me. I believed you’d be unwilling to hear my words until I broke your connection with Damian.”

“Those were my wards you broke.” Catilen’s raw throat made her voice sound strange and raspy when she wanted to sound stern. “My personal defenses.”

Sentomoru hung his head. “I mistook Damian’s amplification of your shields as the spell he used to influence you. Had you not acted so quickly, I may not have realized my mistake in time. I swear to you, Catilen, I would never have attacked you on purpose. I’m horrified by what I’ve done.”

On purpose? How do you attack someone accidentally?

“As you should be,” she declared, voice hard and cold. “You attacked me.” There was no distinction to be made between intentions. No argument made his actions acceptable; he needed to get that message.

“I’m so very sorry.” He peered at her through wide brown eyes, lower lip poised to tremble. It was the most pitiful look she’d ever seen him wear. “There are no words to express my regret.”

She wanted to dismiss him. But she couldn’t forget the empty-minded serving girl. While Catilen sat sipping her tea, the same force that transformed that woman assaulted the soldiers from Earth. *I can’t abandon them to that fate.*

“These words you so desperately wanted me to hear...” she started, before Sentomoru could moan about Damian hiding his ‘influential spell’ better than anticipated. *His apology didn’t include an admission he was mistaken about its existence.* “Does it have something to do with the soldiers asking to stay?”

The lord of the isle winced, once more shifting from foot to foot. “I don’t want the islanders to become drones, Catilen,” he blurted. “I’ve tried to stop it, but I can’t. I don’t know how. The island’s pull is too strong.”

So Sentomoru’s vast power did have limits. “But you said, you *are* the island.”

“I am. But sometimes I’m more like an appendage than its master. That’s why I want you to stay. When I discovered your abilities, I knew you could help me. You can find a way to give the people back to themselves. I know you can.”

He had more confidence in her abilities than she did. It was difficult to break that kind of dependence, like kicking an addiction. How many of the bathhouse servants had personalities left to restore? *The new arrivals might be all right.* But what about the people who lived most of their lives here? *Not a chance.* And if she could give the people back to themselves, what then? *How many still have lives to return to?*

“I’m not sure what you ask is within my ability.” The best she could hope to do was halt the insidious compulsion’s spread. She resisted the urge to shake her head. The Aspirin dulled the pounding in her temples, but she didn’t want to reawaken it. “Besides, won’t the island perceive me as a threat the same way it did with Damian? If the island controls some of your power, it may have forced you to attack me.”

“Never! That was my mistake. The island wants you to stay.”

“How do you know it’s the island that wants me to stay and not just you?”

“Does it matter?” Sentomoru furrowed his brows. “Is there any difference?”

How to explain the importance of the distinction? “Sentomoru, I-”

“Kenjiru,” he interrupted, speaking softly.

“What?” she blinked, wondering which language the word came from.

“My real name is Kenjiru.” His eyes remained locked on the floor. The way he shuffled his toe against the carpet made him look shy.

“Kenjiru...” she repeated, testing the name on her tongue. “Why tell me now?”

“I hid it for the same reason your companion did. True names have power, Catilen. But I want you to know mine. I want you to know me. I want to share my life with you.”

It was a touching speech, but not enough to bridge the abyss between them. He hadn’t approached her about his feelings, and disregarded hers whenever it proved convenient. He hadn’t asked her to stay; he’d bamboozled her. No one could build a relationship on such an unsteady foundation.

“That’s kind of you, Kenjiru, but trust takes time to build. I barely know anything about you. I don’t even know how old you are.”

“A little over a thousand years,” Sentomoru supplied, lifting his eyes to cast her a hopeful glance.

“That’s... um... You don’t look a day over thirty,” she stammered, not sure how to reply.

“It’s part of my connection with the island,” he explained. “It preserves me.”

Catilen puffed up her cheeks like a chipmunk. *This certainly qualifies as the most bizarre conversation I’ve ever had.* “Not to be rude, but won’t it be difficult to share your life with someone if the island makes you immortal?”

“That’s why I’ve spent so much time searching for a lady for my domain. But if you were to stay, I’ve no doubt the island would preserve you. It wishes a connection with you, Catilen, surely you can sense that.”

She hated the idea of immortality. She had a healthy fear of death, but she’d always considered growing old the reward for a long, productive life. *Isn’t each grey hair proof you tackled one of life’s challenges?*

Besides, she didn’t want a connection with the island. Again, she wished she could stress the difference between its desires and Sentomoru’s.

“I’m... flattered. I just don’t feel the same way.”

Awkward silence engulfed the room. Catilen sipped her tea, silently willing her guest to excuse himself. Her mental barriers remained thin and weak. One slip of Sentomoru’s active shields would shred the fledgling defenses.

Finally, her guest leaned forward. “What about you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Is Catilen your real name?”

“Oh. Yes. My magic is different from yours and Damian’s. We even spell it differently, with a ‘k,’ to signify the difference. Our work is spiritual, not physical. Names are special, but we don’t believe they give you power over a person, or their soul, or anything like that.”

“But you have a special name you use when you work this... magick?” he pressed.

Catilen pursed her lips. “Most of us choose a name to use when we perform our rituals. Some share it with their coven, but I’m a solitary practitioner. Only the Lady may know my mystical name.”

“You will never share it with anyone?” Sentomoru’s eyes widened. “Not even your lover?”

“If my lover wanted to call me something special, he should pick a name better suited to it. I consider myself a servant of my goddess. I wouldn’t be the servant of my lover. I would be his equal.”

“But true love means submitting to your lover,” Sentomoru insisted, shaking his head. “You must put their needs before your own in all things. In essence, don’t lovers become each other’s

servants?”

A twisted, but unsurprising philosophy. Most of the people he met became his servants. He was used to being elevated, used to getting his own way, used to people submitting to his will. Of course he believed love worked that way. *Is he even capable of putting the needs of others before his own?*

“You make love sound like a prison, Kenjiru. Lovers don’t serve each other, they cooperate with each other. It’s true, most couples put the needs of their partner before their own. But no one should be expected to give up their aspirations because they entered a relationship. If both parties don’t work together, the relationship won’t survive.”

“You speak as though you have great experience in this area,” Sentomoru sounded bitter.

“My parents were very much in love,” Catilen replied softly. It was difficult to think of her father and all the years of absent memories his death stole from her. “This is how my mother spoke of their marriage.”

“I see.” Sentomoru turned toward the door. “I hope that you have accepted my apology. I’ll leave you to rest. You’ll need a few days to regenerate your defenses. I’ll make sure you’re not disturbed.”

“Speaking of your apology,” there was no point in rejecting it, Sentomoru had already made up his mind. “Did Damian accept it?” *How raw did the two of them rub their throats screaming at each other after I passed out?*

Sentomoru paused in the doorway and cleared his throat. “I doubt that very much. But he agreed your recovery is our top priority. Since we can’t find a replacement judge, the competition must wait until you’ve recovered. But don’t burden yourself with us at the moment. We can get along, as it were, without you.”

They may, if they avoid each other until I’m well enough to mediate again. Strange that Damian was willing to continue the competition at all. Perhaps he wanted her well before challenging the contract. She didn’t know what it entailed.

Setting her mug aside, Catilen shifted lower on her pile of pillows. “Solitude is best for me now. Anyone who steps through that door will have to be heavily shielded or they’ll set back my recovery.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Sentomoru inclined his head politely before he excused himself.

Now the Aspirin had silenced the marching band inside her head, Catilen could rest. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths, welcoming the cool embrace of oblivion.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Not since her grade school days had Catilen been so sensitive to ambient emotion. She'd never had to rebuild her defenses from scratch. Once the foundations were established, expanding her protections became effortless. It would have been impossible to cement that critical infrastructure if Sentomoru hadn't shielded her room. Every stray rush of excitement, flash of fear, or tinge of anxiety shredded hours of work and she didn't have the full moon to assist her anymore.

Solitude may have been a salve, but the reconstruction quickly grew monotonous. She meditated often, focusing her mind inward, testing those crucial inner shields on which the rest of her network rested. If they buckled beneath the strain, her defenses would crumble, forcing her to start over.

She exercised her fledgling protections every day. Like muscles, they needed to be used, stretched and tested to increase their strength. The mind grew calluses. Luckily, she hadn't lost those; it eased the rebuilding process. Much like physical exercise, the effort produced aches. Her supply of Aspirin ran low.

She didn't devote every second to the task. She'd only exhaust herself if she tried. She couldn't venture into the bathhouse until she knew her defenses would hold, so she passed those empty hours in boredom.

Atil'awr sent books from the library and Sentomoru delivered them. He wouldn't allow anyone else to enter her room. In fact, he delivered all her meals and appeared at random intervals offering to run errands. He acted like a lost puppy desperate to gain affection from a stranger. How irksome that her only company was the source of all her woes.

When reading grew tiresome, she turned to her tarot cards, but she couldn't unravel their cryptic message. She thought often of her students. Had the university found a replacement for her yet? With each passing day, she imagined the situation back home grew more chaotic. With each new sunrise, their chances of regaining their former lives faded.

A week passed before she felt confident enough to venture into the bathhouse. She took short excursions to the library and the café, careful to avoid large crowds. She was anxious to see the mage duel completed, eager to put it behind her, desperate to get home before their lives fell to tatters. But she didn't dare exert her Empathy until her new defenses proved ready.

Her spirits plummeted the night Sentomoru appeared with a tray, insisting they share dinner.

"I don't know," she protested, resisting the urge to call him revolting.

"But I've noticed your progress," the lord of the island insisted. "Shouldn't we celebrate?"

Has he been stalking me from the shadows? "I'm not sure I feel much like celebrating."

"But surely you're feeling up to guests now, aren't you? Other than me, I mean."

Catilen's heart skipped a beat. *He wouldn't allow it, would he?* An electric tingle of anticipation spread through her limbs. *Anyone's better than Sentomoru.*

"Did you have someone in particular in mind?" She arched one dark eyebrow. There was only one person she wanted to see. After a week of separation, she longed to fill the aching void in her chest.

"Oh yes." Sentomoru grinned. "Someone I think you'll be very happy to see."

Every time she mentioned Damian, Sentomoru muttered something about undue stress and changed the topic. *He'd never let him visit if he could avoid it.* But she couldn't banish the faint hope he might be waiting just down the hall. She couldn't risk turning him away.

With a sigh, she relented, motioning Sentomoru through the doorway. "Let's share it on the balcony then."

"I'll go lay the table settings," the lord of the isle announced, pleased. Balancing the dinner tray on one hand, he slid open the balcony door. "Can you walk? Should I summon a servant to carry you?"

"I've been wandering the hallways on my own for days, Kenjiru," she chided, exasperated. "I'm not disabled and I'm not fragile."

"I didn't mean to insult you," he pouted. "I don't want you overtaxing yourself. It would be wretched to repeat this unpleasant experience."

You don't have to tell me. "I'm fine. In a few days, we can continue the competition." She brushed past him, settling at the small table in the center of her balcony. "Believe me; no one is as eager to see the end of all this as I am."

"Of course," Sentomoru agreed as he laid plates and covered dishes on the table. "I'll go fetch your guest," he announced when the tray was empty.

Catilen watched him go, heart pounding in her chest while she waited for Damian to appear in the doorway. How wonderful it would be to see him smile. How thrilling if he bounded across the balcony and swept her-

"I knew you'd be pleased to see him." Grinning, Sentomoru ushered her guest through the glass doors to the balcony.

Her heart dropped. This time, the wizened old doctor didn't carry his leather bag of implements. Quamoto grinned as he settled into the chair next to hers and waggled a wrinkled finger in her face. "Still striving to be my most regular patient, I see." He lifted the cover from one of the silver serving dishes and helped himself to a plate.

Unable to summon a fake smile, Catilen made a faint sound to acknowledge his words. She waited until the doctor heaped his plate full of food before serving herself. Sentomoru seemed pleased as a kitten with a bowl of milk as he watched the two of them. Ever the good host, he waited until they abandoned the serving spoons before helping himself.

"The good doctor was concerned when he learned of your condition," Sentomoru chattered as Catilen picked at her food. "I explained to him this illness isn't something he can treat, but he insisted he'd feel better if he got a chance to check in on you."

"I'm touched by your concern," she lied, tone flat, movements wooden. If there was anyone on the island she hated more than Sentomoru, it was Doctor Quamoto. Their ideas of medicine clashed.

"I admit, I've encountered accident prone guests." The leather-faced doctor seemed oblivious to her annoyance. "But none so susceptible as you. Fainting spells, sprained ankles, and I heard rumors you had a fit of vapors down at the waterfall one morning."

Gritting her teeth, Catilen silently counted to ten. "I've been unlucky of late, it seems."

"Hmm," the aging doctor said around a mouthful of food. "I'll have to prepare a charm for you. I can cure bad luck, you know."

"I'm sure you can." Catilen had hoped to eat a few bites, then claim fatigue to banish both her guests. Now she feared the doctor would use it as an opportunity to diagnose her.

"I have another theory," Quamoto barreled on, jabbing his fork in her direction. "You ladies are all the same, letting vanity get in the way of health. I'll bet you've been getting too much sun and not enough food. Look at you, all skin and bones."

Catilen slammed her hands against the table, abandoning her fork and napkin as she pushed her chair away. The legs scraped the balcony in protest. "Well doctor, your highness, this outing

has made me lose my appetite. It must be too much for poor, fragile little me to have all this company right now. Perhaps you can do me a favor and see yourselves out?"

Despite her earlier insistence and acid tone, Sentomoru took her words at face value. As she stomped back to her bedroom, she heard him mutter to Quamoto about granting her solitude until her 'condition' cleared up. The doctor proclaimed he had an herbal mixture that could cure it in a matter of hours and Sentomoru promised to deliver it in the morning.

Gnashing her teeth, Catilen kept a close rein on her anger. She didn't know how her new defenses would weather the snapping of her temper. Not to mention what might happen if Sentomoru lost control again. She didn't want their first test to be another explosion, but she couldn't take any more of this.

When the doctor had gone, Sentomoru carried the tray of abandoned dinner back to the door. Catilen stalked from her bedroom and planted her hands on her hips, narrowing her eyes in his direction.

"Don't bother bringing any of that so-called doctor's potions to me. I'll toss them over the balcony."

Sentomoru's hand stopped short of the door knob. Blinking with surprise, he turned to face her. "Doctor Quamoto is a very wise man--"

"Maybe he was a thousand years ago, but he isn't anymore. You're being terribly rude and I don't appreciate it."

"I don--"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. You're smothering me. You know I want to be left alone but you won't give me space. Maybe this is some misguided attempt to apologize, but it won't change my mind. You know there's only one person on this island I want to talk to. You won't let him up here and I can't venture into the more populated areas he's allowed to inhabit. You have less right to see me than he does; you're the reason I'm holed up with no company and no entertainment. If you're really sorry, perhaps you'll take the time to think about that."

Sentomoru's eyes darkened as he hung his head. "I am sorry," he insisted. "I told you, I--"

"Then do the right thing, Kenjiru. I know you have it in you." Before he could answer, she returned to her bedroom and slammed the door in her wake. A moment later she heard the dishes rattle as he shuffled out.

* * * * *

Sentomoru didn't come calling the next day. He sent one of his servants to deliver her meals. No one else knocked. Catilen spent one blissful day in solitude and pardoned the monotony.

The next morning, she walked to the library to stretch her legs. There was never a crowd there and it gave her a chance to thank Atil'awr for all the books she'd sent. They shared a small, private lunch in the library store room, away from the stacks. Catilen retreated to her room afterward with a fresh stack of books.

While she struggled to focus on her chosen reading material, a knock shattered her concentration. Her jaw dropped when she answered the door. Overjoyed, Catilen threw her arms around Damian's neck. With a light chuckle, he embraced her in return.

Worried someone might see them, fearing what would happen if word reached the lord of the island, Catilen drew Damian into her room and closed the door. "Goddess, Damian, I've missed you! If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were an illusion."

Damian laid a light kiss on her cheek. "I'm the real thing, promise."

“How’d you convince Sentomoru to let you up here?”

“I didn’t.” He shrugged. “I mean, every day I bother him about it and today he finally dropped the barrier and waved me past. It was strange. I kept expecting armed guards or poisoned arrows to be waiting around every corner.”

Catilen pursed her lips. She’d dismissed Sentomoru as arrogant and intractable. *Did my lecture actually get through to him? Is this an admission of guilt? An attempt to make amends?* Perhaps he wasn’t a lost cause. Perhaps he did want to save his people from the island.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter.” She took his hand and squeezed it.

“I won’t lie, I’ve been tempted to tear down a few more walls. But it didn’t end so well the last time.”

“I’m surprised you let him hide me up here in the first place. I have a hard time believing you’ve forgiven him.”

“He told you I forgave him?”

“Not as such. He said you both agreed to wait until I recovered before discussing your contract.”

Damian snorted. “After he attacked you, I told him he should concede, since he obviously doesn’t have any honor. He claims anything that happens outside the competition can’t be allowed to affect it. He’s desperate to keep you here, though I can’t imagine how he’ll prove himself now.

“The trouble is, if I break the contract, I risk losing my magic. I couldn’t take that risk, Cat. I can only imagine what he’d do if he had absolute power over the situation. I don’t want you getting hurt again. If I thought anyone else would judge me fairly-”

“I appreciate you being the bigger man,” Catilen interrupted, pressing him onto the comfortable couch in her sitting room.

“What about you?” Concern filled Damian’s voice. “What B.S. did he offer to keep you from demanding the first boat out of here?”

With a sigh, Catilen leaned her head against Damian’s shoulder. She didn’t want to answer that question. She’d been avoiding it for a week. There hadn’t been easy answers since they arrived on the island. She reminded herself Sentomoru was only human, immortal or not. She tried to be understanding, but her kindness had limits.

“Before he attacked me, I overheard one of our soldiers asking to stay on the island. I thought it bizarre he’d abandon the country he volunteered to serve to live in a luxury hotel.”

“It does sound strange. Stranger than their agreeing to come here in the first place.”

“That’s what I thought. When I asked about it, Sentomoru said all the people who stay become his servants. It seems the natives aren’t his subjects, but his slaves. And all this time I thought the bathhouse staff were paid.” She shook her head. “I got angry. He insisted everyone’s happy, but I couldn’t believe that.

“I don’t know what came over me. Maybe I’m as bad as he is. When one of his servants approached, I probed her mind. It was empty, Damian. There was nothing but love for this island and adoration for its lord. I’ve never encountered a mind like that. It’s horrifying! Sentomoru says it happens to everyone. Only the strong can resist the island’s pull. People like him and me and you.”

Damian narrowed his eyes. “He attacked you for discovering this?”

“No, he attacked me because I announced I was leaving. I told him I didn’t want anything more to do with him or his island. He claims he was trying to break your spell over me, and I still can’t get him to admit there isn’t one.

“Anyway, when I woke up, he said he doesn’t want the people of the island turning into mindless drones. He thinks I can save them.”

“Can you?”

With a groan, Catilen pressed her face into Damian’s chest. She might be fed up with the lord of the island, but what about the innocent people who were stuck here? What about the soldiers throwing their lives away to become puppets? What about the travelers who’d be tangled in the island’s web of influence? *Can I punish them for Sentomoru’s shortcomings?*

“I don’t know. It would take time. Once the island leaves Earth, won’t we be stuck here? Besides, Sentomoru wants you off his island either way and I don’t want to stay without you.”

“But you feel like you should?” Damian pressed, squeezing her hand.

“I don’t know! Should this even be my responsibility?”

“No,” Damian replied without hesitation. “Of course not. No one can demand any more of you than you’re willing to give.”

And just how much is that?

She squeezed his hand to express her gratitude. He always knew exactly what she needed to hear. “What have you been up to all week?”

“Not a whole hell of a lot,” Damian admitted with a shrug. “Sentomoru says I’m free to use the bathhouse so long as I ‘behave myself,’ but I’m not comfortable leaving my room. I don’t trust him and I don’t want to give him another opportunity to set me up. For the most part, I just eat, sleep, bathe and meditate. It’s lazy, I know. I try to exercise some. It’s not a big deal, though. I know you need this time to recover.”

That didn’t stop her from feeling guilty. “I’m sorry, Damian. I never wanted any of this to happen.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Damian brushed his thumb down the side of her cheek. “None of this is your fault. Don’t go assuming the blame. A little boredom won’t kill me. Besides, I imagine you’ve had the same problem. How have you been keeping busy, aside from the obvious?”

“Reading mostly.” Catilen hesitated a moment. “I’ve been consulting my cards again.”

“The tarot cards?”

“Yeah. I thought maybe another reading would help clarify the situation, tell me what to focus on or give me some hint what to do. But I got the strangest result I’ve ever seen.”

Damian arched an eyebrow, intrigued. “What makes you say that?”

“I drew the exact same cards I drew the night before we left.” She worried Damian wouldn’t believe her, but it was no more bizarre than some of the other things they’d encountered on the island.

“All of them?”

“Every single one. And in the exact same positions. That’s never happened to me before.”

Damian whistled. “I don’t imagine it’s likely. I mean technically, if the cards you flip are random they have the potential to be the same every time, but I’d imagine the odds of it are astronomical.”

Catilen made a soft sound in the back of her throat. “And what, do you imagine, are the odds of getting the same cards three times in a row?”

“You’re kidding!”

She shook her head. “I thought it was a fluke at first. So I shuffled them all up and did the reading again. Exact same cards, exact same spots. I splashed cold water on my face to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.”

“What do you think it means?” Damian sounded as mystified as she was.

“I have no idea. My best guess is that we’re locked into this cycle until it’s finished. That we’re so entangled in this path, there’s no way to get off it. Especially since I did a third reading.”

“Don’t tell me the same cards came up that many times?”

“No,” Catilen admitted sheepishly. “But only because I took those cards out of the deck. I half-expected them to get back in there somehow, and pop up anyway, but no. They stayed on the pile where I set them. Not that it made any difference. The cards sent the same message.”

“How so?” Damian leaned forward, interested.

“Some cards have overlapping meanings. Each card has its strongest meaning depending on its position and whether or not it’s inverted. But other cards can convey the same meaning, usually to a lesser extent.

“For example, instead of the Devil, I flipped the Eight of Swords. Both cards mean self-imposed bondage, getting stuck in a bad situation and refusing to walk away. I’d say that pretty accurately describes where we find ourselves right now.”

“It hits close to home,” Damian agreed.

“So did the rest of the cards. Instead of the Lovers, I drew the Four of Cups, which can mean marriage. In this case, I assume it points to our relationship. It can also mean community or going home, which is something we both want to do. And instead of the Wheel of Fortune, I drew the Five of Wands, which indicates a competition. If you put those cards in the same order as the ones to which they correspond, it indicates that the duel between you and Sentomoru will determine if we get a happy ending or a sad one. I even drew the Three of Swords, which indicates opposing forces of grief, heartbreak and separation, instead of the Seven of Swords, which warned of deceit and lies. Sound familiar?”

“Indeed. I have to admit, Cat, I’m impressed by this tool of yours. I’ve never put much stock in divination, but I dare say your cards have given us some pertinent information.”

“Oh?” Catilen arched an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

“That I’d better win this competition or we aren’t going to like the outcome.”

Catilen’s lips twitched, mirroring the grim look on Damian’s face. “I’ll rest one more day. Then we’ll see if we can escape this place. You only need to win one more challenge.”

Damian nodded, a humorless grin on his lips. “But no pressure, right?”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Heart heavy with trepidation, Catilen descended the stairs. One thought sustained her; *if Damian wins today, we can go home*. She didn't know what they'd return to, if they'd have jobs or homes or peace. Damian might be arrested for abducting her. *Anything is better than the island*. Police she could handle. She was sick of magic.

The smell of scrambled eggs, ham and toast greeted her when she opened the door to Sentomoru's office. Damian and Sentomoru sat across the desk from each other, their expectant gazes spoiling her appetite. Sucking deep breaths and squaring her shoulders, Catilen sat in the empty chair. She accepted her portion of breakfast and munched while she waited for the meeting to start. The constant scrutiny of her companions made it difficult to eat.

Finally, she pushed her plate aside. "How will we manage the next challenge?"

"We agreed to test our perseverance," Damian reminded them of the previous conversation.

"Indeed." Sentomoru folded his fingers into a triangle in front of him, elbows resting on his desk. "This can be no mere test of physical endurance. We must challenge our minds."

"I agree." Damian lifted his chin. "And I have a suggestion."

Sentomoru arched an eyebrow while Catilen nodded encouragement. Damian cleared his throat. "I think the essence of perseverance is suffering without struggling to escape. I think we should submit to the experience Catilen had forced on her when her wards broke. We should endure the raw emotional projections of the bathhouse without the benefits of our mental shielding. Whoever lasts longer wins."

"Interesting," Sentomoru murmured, sounding intrigued.

Catilen shook her head. *Is this supposed to be revenge for Sentomoru's attack?* "How would you manage that? Neither of you are empathic."

Living with empathy taught her to identify those with the gift. She'd always known her mother had it, not because Delana told her, because Catilen observed the way her mother interacted with others. The way she tensed for a moment, bracing herself, before she opened the door to a crowded room. How she could instantly locate the saddest person in that room and say exactly what would cheer them up. The moments she stole for meditation while no one was watching, reserving a small slice of her focus in case she needed to buffer her defenses. Habits Empaths developed to help them survive busy, modern society. If Damian had a hint of empathic talent, she'd have spotted it long ago.

"But that's an important part of the challenge," Damian insisted. "We won't know what to expect. We have to step outside our element to be properly tested."

Catilen laid one hand on the oak desk and leaned forward. "I understand. But you can't just sprout Empathic abilities."

Damian drew a deep breath that lifted his shoulders. Catilen's stomach dropped. She had a sinking suspicion she knew his answer.

"I thought you could share your empathy with us," he ventured, confirming her suspicions. "You said your abilities are both projective and receptive. That's how you shared your findings with Sentomoru during the truth reading."

It wasn't a question of ability, it was a question of consent. Did she want to undertake such intimate mental contact with her shields untested? Did she want to subject them to that kind of agony? She was angry with Sentomoru, but she wouldn't wish that misery on anyone. *It'd be easier if someone prodded them with hot fire irons.*

“I can do what you ask,” she chose her words carefully. “But I don’t think you realize what you’re getting into. It’d be safer to swim in a frozen pond until one of you can’t stand it.”

“It wouldn’t be enough.” Damian shook his head vigorously. “Physical pain is irrelevant. It has to be mental strife. Magic requires focus to overcome internal struggle. That’s what makes perseverance important.”

“I agree.” Sentomoru leaned back in his chair. “But I only wish to undertake the challenge if it won’t cause Catilen further harm.” He gave Damian a sharp look. “Her new defenses are untested.”

“Sharing my empathy won’t cause me strain. For me, Empathic projection occurs naturally. I’d have to maintain connections with the two of you to limit it, but the energy for that can come from your end. I’d only have to lower one of my shields. It isn’t me I’m worried about.”

“It isn’t supposed to be pleasant, Cat.” Damian laid his hand across hers, gently stroking her fingers. On the edge of her gaze, Catilen saw Sentomoru’s eyes narrow and his lips twitch. “It wouldn’t do any good to see how long we can endure fluffy kittens and cute puppies. That it’s unbearably daunting is what makes it the perfect challenge.”

“You aren’t listening to me.” Catilen snatched her away. She almost preferred the idea of the two men climbing the mountain with magic as their safety gear; it was less ludicrous. “It took me twenty years to master my abilities. I’ve had my whole life to learn what it means to be an Empath. You can’t, neither of you, expect to understand my experience in the course of a single afternoon. It’d be like withstanding a tornado without a tether. It’s dangerous and I’m not moving forward until you both understand that.”

Sentomoru laid his long fingers on the armrests of his chair. “If we cannot master our abilities in the face of danger, how can we prove ourselves worthy?”

Catilen gritted her teeth, exerting effort to keep from growling.

“We both saw what happened to you,” Damian said. “We understand what we’re asking. If you don’t want to do it, we’ll think of something else. But who knows how long that will take.”

He didn’t say *we could go home today*, but it echoed in the vaults of her mind. They could be on a boat before nightfall. She could sleep in her own bed, if the police didn’t keep her up all night. She shouldn’t let such thoughts tempt her; the potential benefits didn’t outweigh the risks. But if she delayed another week, and they couldn’t find a comparable test, what then? Her house called from across the sea and, try though she did, she couldn’t ignore it.

“Fine,” she relented. “But you have to understand; this won’t be raw empathy as I experienced it. I’ll act as a filter. That will make the emotions you sense more refined, and that might make the ordeal worse.”

“In what way?” Damian asked. Catilen didn’t like the look on his face, as if he were preparing notes for an experiment.

“I’m used to sensing people’s emotions all the time. It’s like white noise to me. There are things I do automatically when I’m in my right mind. Such as identifying the owner of each emotion and its relevance to my situation. It’s the difference between the buzz of ambient conversation and a group of people trying to talk to you all at once. When it’s unfiltered, it’s easier to ignore.”

“It seems to me that will only make our task more challenging,” Sentomoru said. “I see no harm in that.”

“We’ll need a crowded place,” Damian added, preventing any further argument.

“The dining hall should serve,” Sentomoru replied after a moment of consideration. “Though we should wait until lunch. Guests move in and out regularly while food is available.”

That should provide the ideal background.”

Both men looked at her, seeking confirmation. She sighed. She could caution them until her lips turned blue, it wouldn't make any difference. *On your heads rest the consequences.* “Very well. We'll meet in the dining room ten minutes before lunch service starts. That will give us enough time to position ourselves before guests start to arrive.”

Time to think didn't ease her misgivings. This challenge went against her better judgment. When she met both men in the dining room, she was tempted to refuse. They couldn't proceed without her. But Damian's unspoken words still reverberated within her skull. *You can go home today. You can leave this all behind.*

She chose a table on the outskirts of the room and motioned for both men to sit. “You'd better get comfortable. Once we begin, you might not be able to move.”

Damian slumped lower in his chair, letting his legs sprawl beneath the table. Sentomoru sat up straighter and leaned his elbows against the table, folding his hands in a triangle. Catilen waited until both men stopped fidgeting.

“Now lower your shields.”

Despite suggesting the enterprise, Damian looked distinctly displeased by the suggestion. The two men eyed each other with suspicion as they came to terms with fulfilling the challenge's requirements. Each man's face assumed a different mask of concentration. Sentomoru's eyes grew distant and his lips drew into a frown. Damian's brows furrowed and his eyes narrowed.

Lowering the outermost layer of her shields, Catilen monitored their progress. As they stripped their defenses, both men's emotions grew more distinct. Sentomoru felt confident and annoyed, while anxiety tinged Damian's determination.

Dread weighed her chest. She rubbed sweaty palms against her jeans. *This can't end well.* Neither man seemed aware he'd soon become the victim of the other's foul mood. She wanted to flee, but it seemed too late to back down.

“Are you ready?” she tried to keep her voice steady. “I'm going to begin. I'll stop the moment one of you raises your shields. That's how I'll determine the winner.”

Both men nodded. Catilen took a deep breath and reached for each exposed mind in turn, her touch feather light. Maintaining those invisible links would be part of their task. When she had both men within her mental influence, she lowered the shield which prevented her from projecting. It took a few tweaks to project information received from her surroundings, but she knew the moment they inherited her empathy. Sentomoru looked surprised. Damian looked alarmed.

She hoped the challenge would last mere seconds. That the experience would overwhelm one of the participants enough to instinctively snap their shields back in place. She'd underestimated them. *Or I underestimated their overwhelming desire to show each other up.* She'd have to wait for one of them to see reason.

She settled in a chair with her back to the wall, watching as guests poured into the dining hall. A large buffet took up the far side of the room. Staff instructed the guests to form lines and scooped food onto plates as the diners marched past. Delectable scents drifted across the room, turning Catilen's stomach.

Chaos swarmed the buffet table. High-born guests shouldered their way to the front of the line. Sentomoru's servants rushed to placate them, sometimes asking them to wait, sometimes asking others to accommodate their rude behavior. A few kimono-clad serving girls rushed plates heaped with food to nearby tables to calm the pushiest guests. Catilen recognized Lingara, the Duchess of Ilom, among them. She found the duchess interesting the night they shared dinner,

but her lunch behavior was revolting.

There was plenty of joy amid the madness. Many guests enjoyed the smell of food and the taste when they reached their tables. Yler, another of her dinner companions from the first night, passed with a lady on his arm. Catilen caught a flash of lust from the young woman, mingled with the charm exuded by the red-coated rogue.

Happiness and excitement danced in the air, occasionally interrupted by a flash of anger or a stab of jealousy, sometimes tinged with sadness or accented by anxiety. It all formed a silent symphony, with each guest contributing to the composition. Catilen's shields kept her safe, allowing her to identify each emotion without having to experience it. To an unprotected mind, even the harmless emotions could be terrifying, disorienting and painful. Joy could cut like a knife. Darker emotions became lances, punctuating the agony as they penetrated the skull. The memory made her shudder.

It didn't take long for both men to radiate frustration, which only compounded the issue, until raw anger and hatred flowed freely between them. Like wild dogs they clawed each other, gaping wounds oozing distaste.

Again she expected one or the other to slip, but neither did. Eventually Sentomoru squelched his emotions, finding a way to contain them as he fought to maintain his sanity among the flood.

With a moan, Damian slumped forward, his forehead resting on the table in front of him. He looked as though he were about to be sick, but he squeezed his eyes closed and maintained the contents of his stomach.

Sentomoru stared at some distant point on the far wall, his teeth clenched with determination, his brows furrowed with concentration.

Agonizing minutes dragged by.

Half an hour passed.

Neither man raised their shields.

* * * * *

Damian drowned in a choppy sea of emotion, tossed by turbulent winds of uncertainty. He didn't exist outside the storm. He lost himself in the middle of it.

That frightened him more than anything.

His fear grew fat, feeding on itself, until it threatened to devour the tumult surrounding him. He fought against looming insanity, clawing his way back into his own head, trying to regain his balance or some sense of perspective.

I am me. I am strong. I can overcome this. But every time he slipped, his terror grew that much stronger.

He raised his head, trying to identify his surroundings. For all he knew, he could be on a mountain top in a rain storm. Clutching his throat, he gasped for breath, silently repeating the mantra. *I am me. I am strong. I can breathe, damn it!*

How much of him would be left when this was over? He wasn't sure he could raise his shields if he tried.

He became aware of a weight on his shoulder. The weight came from a hand. The hand belonged to a woman. The woman wore a familiar face.

Catilen, some distant part of his mind supplied. Her face hovered close, concern etched into her features. Yet it was conspicuously absent from the storm in his head. If he couldn't sense her, she couldn't be real. She must be a hallucination. A trick to force him to give up.

Of course she's real, rationality echoed from the dark depths of his mind. *She's the reason*

you're doing all this.

When had he forgotten? It had been days since he'd seen her. *No, it couldn't have been that long.* Hours perhaps, since he'd noticed her.

She looked miserable. Unshed tears stained her eyes red. Her brows were creased and her lips were pinched. She kept opening and closing her mouth, her lips moving rapidly. It took him a moment to realize she spoke and longer to identify her words as his name.

Sound struck his ears like an eighteen-wheeler slamming into a brick wall at highway speeds. For a moment everything sounded like gibberish, wind rushing, cymbals crashing and an incessant crackling in the back of his ears. Then it faded to the familiar buzz of conversation and Catilen repeating his name as she shook his shoulder.

"Goddess Damian," she pleaded when his eyes focused on her. "Let me end this before you hurt yourself!"

"No," he gasped, his voice sounding strange to his own ears. "No," he tried again, but didn't sound any more like himself. He wanted to tell her this couldn't be for nothing. He hadn't endured these long hours of pain to fail. He only managed to gasp two words, "Can't stop."

"You have to!" Catilen choked on emotions he couldn't identify without sharing. "Look at yourself!" She brushed her fingers across his cheek and held them up for him to see. He stared at the moisture glistening on her hand, puzzled. Where had it come from?

He pressed numb fingers to one of his cheeks, awestruck to find the same moisture beneath them. He couldn't feel the tears spilling from his eyes like rain.

"Home," he gasped, insistent. Sentomoru must yield any moment now. If he held on a little longer, he could take Catilen home. He never should have brought her here. Why had he robbed her of the life she deserved? Why didn't things make sense before?

"It isn't worth this." Catilen waved her wet fingers in front of his eyes again. "Nothing's worth this."

Writhing tendrils of emotion tugged at his body like seaweed trying to drag him underwater. Turning his head, Damian glanced at Sentomoru, expecting to see a blubbering mess. He thought he might find the lord of the island curled in a ball, hair matted to his face by sweat and tears. A more shocking sight greeted his gaze; Sentomoru sat ramrod straight in his chair, eyes locked on the far wall, with nary a crack in his cool façade.

How could it be? Sentomoru might have taken a stroll through the mildly uncomfortable heat of the jungle from the look of him. Somehow he weathered the storm without displacing a hair. *He cheated. He must have. He raised a shield and hid it.* Rage welled in his gut, a tsunami threatening to wash away his last tenuous grip on sanity. It drove him so close to the brink, he clutched his throat again, panting for breath. Catilen was right; he couldn't keep this up.

"Do it," he choked.

The storm vanished. Silence rang in his mind like a high-pitched squeal in the ears after long exposure to loud music.

Damian became himself again, one mind in a too-small body. He felt the reassuring solidity of the floor beneath his feet and the table beneath his arms. The constant buzz of chatter distracted him as he struggled to raise the innermost layer of his shields. He forced himself to concentrate on long-familiar motions. The effort was paramount. It gave him new respect for Catilen's recent experience.

Sentomoru's eyes shifted, locking first on Damian then on Catilen. "Is it finished?" His voice sounded strained but he didn't struggle to speak.

Damian couldn't hide his bitterness. The island lord's victory stung like a son-of-a-bitch.

Bile rose in the back of his throat and he fought to swallow it.

Catilen nodded and Sentomoru pushed his chair back. He got to his feet, a wooden puppet on short strings. "Then I have other matters to attend to."

As he turned to leave, Catilen caught his arm. "K...Sentomoru," she hissed. Damian wondered what she'd been about to call him. He narrowed his eyes, watching the two of them with suspicion. "Are you certain you're all right? That was no small ordeal."

"The challenge is over," Sentomoru replied, each word a crisp staccato beat. "I won. There's nothing else to discuss."

It wasn't a yes, but Catilen released his arm and watched the man stalk away. Damian seethed. *How dare she show such concern to the man who attacked her? While I'm so battered I can't even stand.* He bit back a growl when she laid her hand on his shoulder.

What's wrong with me? She convinced me to give up because she cares about my wellbeing. Of course she's worried the challenge affected Sentomoru. How could it not? His ill will evaporated.

With surprising strength, Catilen hauled him to his feet. She wedged herself beneath his shoulder and nudged him toward the door. He had to walk under his own power; if he leaned too heavily on Catilen, he'd topple them both. Her support got him moving. His momentum carried him up the stairs, down the hallway and around the few corners that led to his room.

Without fanfare, Catilen dumped him in bed. She brought him a glass of cold water and he tried not to gulp it all down. He set the glass aside and made himself comfortable while Catilen fluffed his pillows.

It was much easier to speak now his mouth didn't feel like a desert. "Thank you," he murmured, tugging at a loose thread in the blanket she pulled across him.

"No, thank you for doing the right thing. I know it wasn't easy to give up, but I feared you'd lose your mind if it went on longer. I shouldn't have agreed to this. I let anticipation get the better of me."

"It's not your fault." Damian sank into the pile of pillows, grateful for the soft mattress beneath him. "I thought I knew what I was getting into."

Her lips twisted in a sarcastic grimace. "I certainly didn't need so much time to recover because I'm the fragile flower Doctor Quamoto keeps insisting all women are."

"I never thought you were weak, Cat," he protested, unable to meet her eyes. "I just thought I was strong. We could've--"

"No we couldn't. Even if we got back to the mainland, there are tons of things we have to figure out before we show our faces back in the city and you know it. You aren't thinking straight right now. You're confused."

He disagreed, not placated by her attempt to cheer him. But moaning wouldn't undo his defeat. He rolled into a more comfortable position, scowling when bright light assaulted his eyes.

"Why's the light so bright in here? I didn't think you turned it on."

"That's the sun." Catilen crossed the room and pulled the heavy curtains closed.

"The sun?" Damian blinked. "Shouldn't it be well past nightfall by now? Did the challenge reach a second day?"

Catilen crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "I told you; you're confused. The challenge only lasted forty-five minutes."

"Forty-" *Impossible!*

Catilen returned to the edge of his bed and patted his shoulder. "Minutes felt like hours, didn't they?"

“You knew this would happen,” he sulked, ashamed at the accusation in his voice. *She tried to warn you, numbskull.*

“Take these.” She curled his fingers around a pair of oblong pills. “Ibuprofen,” she said by way of explanation as she refilled his water glass, “from the first aid kit. They should calm the headache enough for you to sleep, which is what I recommend. Anything else hurt?”

“Just my pride,” he muttered as he tossed both pills into the back of his throat. Tilting his head, he swallowed them both with a few sips of water.

“It’ll recover,” Catilen reassured him, laying a kiss on his cheek. “There’s only one challenge left, Damian. One way or another, this’ll all be over soon.”

Easy for you to say. You aren’t going to die if you screw up again.

But he chose this path. He couldn’t blame anyone else for the outcome. He had to focus on the final challenge. For both their sakes, he had to find the clearest path to victory.

“I love you,” he whispered. As the pills eased the pounding pulse behind his temples, exhaustion gripped his mind. Darkness clouded the edges of his vision.

“I love you too,” she murmured, kissing his lips this time. “Now rest. You’ll be yourself in the morning, I promise.”

* * * * *

Different anxiety plagued Catilen as she ascended the stairs to her room. She paused often, senses straining for signs of movement. Twice, guests on their way to other activities made her jump.

She felt like a deer in headlights. She didn’t trust Sentomoru’s composed exterior when he departed the dining room. Fear he lurked in the shadows kept her heart pounding. He couldn’t have weathered his ordeal unaffected. Either he’d retreated so far into himself he wasn’t aware of anything, *dangerous and doubtful*, or he’d been as lost in the torrent as Damian and managed to hide it. *He didn’t even notice when I stopped projecting.*

But if the lord of the isle insisted he was unimpaired, she couldn’t help him. She wanted solitude. There was another challenge to consider. She needed time to clear her head. *Let the afternoon’s storm blow over without my interference.* Hopefully Sentomoru’s duties would keep him busy until exhaustion drove him to sleep.

She froze in the hall outside her room. The door hung open. Her heart crawled into her throat. Instinct told her to flee. It didn’t matter where she went, so long as other people were present. The dining hall would suffice, or the public bathing room or the gardens. *Anywhere but here.*

Yet, her legs wouldn’t work. Guilt hounded her. *Sentomoru’s mental state is my doing.* If she hadn’t given in to her overwhelming desire to get home, the island lord wouldn’t be so off balance. *If Damian can’t keep the time straight, what does Sentomoru think?*

Leaning forward, she strained her ears for several moments but heard nothing. He might have come looking for her, found her missing and moved on.

She inched through the door, reaching for the light switch. A tornado might have struck her quarters. Statues lay overturned. Shattered vases spilled their contents across the fine rug. Paintings hung askew. A chair lay on its side.

A shadow moved in her bedroom. Catilen backed up, bracing herself in the doorway. “Sentomoru?” she called. “Are you all right?”

She gasped when he stepped into the light. His eyes were wide and wild, set in sunken sockets, black rings staining his cheeks. His hair had come unbound, tumbling in tangles behind

him, a ragged mess. Catilen had never seen him so ungraceful and distraught, not even in the throes of his anger.

Her breath caught in her throat. “Kenjiro?” She tried his other name, hoping it might jolt him from his madness. “What happened here?”

“Do you think you can deny me to pleasure that peasant?” he demanded, ignoring her questions. “I am Kenjiro Sentomoru! Everything on this island belongs to me, including you!”

She stumbled into the hallway, mind racing, limbs numb. Why didn’t she run when she saw the state of her room? Saw the door open on its hinges? Felt that anxiety on the stairway?

If I bolt now, he’ll catch me before I reach the first junction. Catilen swallowed hard. “You don’t mean that. You’re confused. It’s a side effect of the empathy. In the jumble of emotions, it’s hard to tell which are yours.” Her voice shook, betraying her fear.

“Don’t presume to tell me how I feel,” he growled pouncing at her. She tried to dart out of the way but he caught her shoulder and forced her against the wall. She struggled in his grip. He pressed harder, mashing her body against the smooth marble.

“Please Kenjiro,” she pleaded, her voice rising several octaves in panic. “Listen to me.”

“I have forborne my desire for too long. I refuse to be further cuckolded in my own home!”

“Don’t do this-” she begged.

He ignored her. With another growl, he pressed his lips to hers. His tongue darted between his lips, forced its way passed hers and delved into her mouth.

Catilen thrashed against his hold. Dirty and violated, she choked on his tongue. In desperation, she kneed him in the stomach. He didn’t loosen his grip, but he did pull his mouth from hers to suck a breath.

Knowing she had mere moments to escape, Catilen lowered the outer layer of her shields, striking with the full force of her empathic projection. She couldn’t win a challenge of brute force. Sentomoru looked slim, but muscle hid beneath those robes. She had to get away before he summoned his magic. His shields had to be weak after the challenge. He wouldn’t have the sense to bolster them now. In the confusion, she could slip away.

True to her prediction, Sentomoru’s shields bent beneath the force of her assault. She didn’t expect them to shatter. She didn’t anticipate the flood of bitterness, anger and envy that spilled through his tattered defenses. Dark hands scratching at her mental barriers, threatening to overwhelm them. Worst, and most frightening, the underpinning swell of lust that tinged the rest, an almost primal desire.

Shuddering with revulsion, Catilen hurried to bolster her shields against the chaos spewing from Sentomoru’s mind. No amount of reason could reach him through *that*.

Fighting to keep her mind clear, she clawed her attacker’s face, desperate to free herself from his crushing grip. Howling in pain and anger, he stumbled a half-step backward. His grip loosened and she slid free.

He retaliated before she retreated two steps, backhanding her across the face so hard her vision swam. Tripping over her feet, she crashed to the floor, where she lay stunned, terrified and breathless.

Long fingers seized her shoulders and hauled her off the floor.

“Please, Kenjiro,” she screamed, using all the air left in her lungs. “Stop!”

“Your pleas mean nothing,” he sneered as he dragged her down the hallway toward his chambers.

Exhausted, knowing she hadn’t the strength left to escape, Catilen relaxed every muscle in her body. It was the sort of limp-limbed trick a preschooler used when they didn’t want to go to

sleep, forcing their parents to drag them to bed. She prayed if she made movement difficult enough for Sentomoru, he'd drop her and she could scamper away.

The island lord's quarters were in a familiar state of disarray, trashed pieces of priceless art littering the floor. Sharp edges of shattered vases scraped her skin as he dragged her through the desolation.

When he hauled her off the floor, she found the energy to fight. She clawed and scratched and bit and screamed for what felt like hours. The darkness of his mind surrounded her, pounding her shields, threatening to suffocate her. Her throat grew raw. She couldn't tell whose blood caked her fingernails.

Just when she felt certain she'd go mad, he drew back.

His rage and desire spent, Sentomoru staggered away from her, a look of abject horror on his face. With an inarticulate wail of despair, he turned and fled the room.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Images danced before her eyes, shadows and long-forgotten dreams. Voices whispered in her ears. Her mother's voice, and her father's, but she couldn't make out the words.

She couldn't say how long she lay there before awareness seeped back into her brain. Her chest heaved. Chill air bit her exposed skin. Moisture soaked her cheeks. How long had she been crying? *Is it possible for a person to cry all their tears? Do their eyes dry up after that? Do they go blind?*

She sat up. The motion felt strange. She glanced down. Her t-shirt was too tattered to salvage. Bits of fabric hung from her arms. Other discards lay scattered on the floor. Her jeans seemed caught on her ankles. She pulled them up awkwardly, the thick, unwieldy denim compressed by the clumsy attempts to remove them.

She snatched a sheet from the bed and wrapped it three times around her chest and shoulders. Despite the reassuring caress of fabric against her skin, she felt exposed.

What do I do now?

She picked her way across the debris strewn floor, bracing herself on the doorway. Returning to her room seemed a mammoth task, but the thought of lingering made her gag.

The wall kept her upright as she made the journey. Down the too-long hallway. Through the skewed door. Sidestepping shattered artwork. Into the bathroom. With numb fingers she turned the crank that activated the bath faucet. She didn't bother with an herbal packet, didn't think she could read the labels or find their resting slot. Still wrapped in the sheet, she crawled into the tub without bothering to remove the remains of her clothing. Resting her head in the crook of her elbow, she sobbed.

The steaming water wasn't hot enough to clean the filth clinging to her skin.

Sometime later a series of splashes caught her attention. Raising her head, she found a kimono-clad woman frantically turning the crank on the tub faucet.

"You must let the tub drain, my lady!" the servant exclaimed. She plunged her hand into the water.

Something wet slapped Catilen's arm. Dimly, she realized the sheet plugged the draining mechanism. Water sloshed over the sides of the tub, filled the drip guard, and puddled on the marble tile.

"You'll flood the whole bathhouse, my lady," the servant sounded exasperated.

Catilen blinked. She didn't care about the tub or the bathhouse. She narrowed her eyes and bore her teeth like a rabid dog. "How did you get in here?"

"Y..you left the door open, my lady," the servant stammered, scrambling backward when she saw the look on Catilen's face.

"Get out!" she snarled. "Go serve your disgusting, pretentious overlord. He's got plenty of issues that need tending."

The servant slipped on the slick tile and caught herself on the towel stand. "Please, my lady! Isn't there s..something I can do for you?"

Her words sparked a memory. The gears in Catilen's brain began to spin again.

"Go and wake Damian Cooke."

"But he isn't supp-"

"Go and wake him!" Catilen surged to her feet. "I don't care what your goddess forsaken lord has to say about it! Let him answer for his crimes to someone capable of holding him

accountable if he takes issue with my desires!”

By the time she finished her impassioned screeching, the servant had gone.

Stepping from the draining tub, Catilen peeled the saturated sheet from her skin. She discarded her soggy jeans and dilapidated t-shirt. She donned fresh jeans, two clean t-shirts and one of her long-sleeved beach wraps. After tying the wrap closed, she still felt exposed.

She abandoned the fancy apartment and its artistic ruins. Stumbling down the stairs, she tried to navigate the halls to Damian’s room. The last hour left her world upside down. Her mind turned to images she’d rather forget while her feet moved on autopilot, constantly carrying her down the wrong corridors.

Luck brought her to the proper hallway. She turned a corner and there he stood. Brushing past his guide, Damian rushed to her. She collapsed into his arms, a new wave of tears spilling down her cheeks. He sank to the floor with her, cradling her head, fingers stroking her damp hair.

What will he think of me now? It hadn’t occurred to her until she saw him. I’m spoiled. He’ll hate me.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, hands cupping her face, tilting it upward.

It was excruciating to look at him, knowing she’d never be good enough for him now. She winced, a wicked purple bruise forming beneath Damian’s fingers; the result of Sentomoru’s first strike.

“What happened?” Damian demanded, his tone frantic.

“What’s the commotion?” Sentomoru burst around the corner and froze the moment he saw her. His voice sent a violent shiver down her spine.

Narrowing her eyes, Catilen poured all her anger and hatred into the glare she leveled at him, wishing her gaze had the power to set the man on fire. Words could never answer Damian’s question. Instead she lowered her shields, letting her memory of the past few hours flow free.

This wasn’t the uncontrolled chaos from the dining hall. Her refined projection painted a vivid tapestry of her experience after leaving Damian’s room. It wove the story of Sentomoru’s assault and illustrated the oppressive cloud of emotions the island lord manifested throughout the ordeal, a symphony punctuated by her pain and terror. Sentomoru played the role of an insatiable wolf, while Catilen had been a caged canary, desperate to return to the sky.

She held nothing back, snapping her shields in place when she finished. Heaping thick layers of protection atop her defenses, she created a bunker. *Let nothing escape. Lock it away. Refuse to feel.*

From the numb nest she built, Catilen took pleasure in the horrified look on Sentomoru’s face. *How does it feel to experience your assault from the victim’s perspective? Let it haunt your dreams for all eternity.*

Damian surged to his feet. Eyes flashing, his lips twisted with rage. “I’ll kill you!” he snarled, fists curled so tightly his knuckles turned white.

Sentomoru stumbled backward, eyes wide with desperation, hair tumbling down his back as he shook his head. “I didn’t mean it! I lost control! I didn’t realize what I was doing!”

“Like hell you didn’t!” Damian surged forward.

Catilen shut her eyes. Even with her shields at full strength, she couldn’t bear another confrontation. Not now. Clamping her hands over her ears, she sucked a deep breath and screamed, “*Stop!*”

She waited for an impact, heavy breathing, or objects crashing as they fell from the walls.

Her pounding heart echoed in the silence.

She cracked one eye open. Her plea froze Damian in place, fist raised to the level of his eye, lips pressed in a grim line. Sentomoru stood with his back against the wall, hands raised as if in surrender.

“Stop,” she pleaded, lowering her hands. “Stop all this nonsense. Just stop.”

“After what he did?” Damian demanded, voice vibrating with anger. “The very thing he tried to accuse me of? What he claimed to be protecting you from?”

“I was weak from my trial,” Sentomoru gasped. “I can never atone for my actions, but I am sorry. I am so sorry Cati-”

“Just stop,” Catilen’s voice was barely more than a whisper as she fought to maintain her composure. She wanted to curl into a ball, wanted to fade away, wanted to hide where the world could never touch her. These two were like children. Why did she have to pick up the pieces of this tragedy and shove them back together? How could she when she was the broken one? *When does it end? How do I end it?*

“What are you doing, Damian?” she demanded. Sentomoru could rot for all she cared, but from Damian she expected better. “After all you’ve experienced today, the darkness that nearly drowned you, your response to violence is *more* violence? Haven’t you learned anything? Can’t you see that negativity feeds on itself? Breeds more heartbreak, more suffering, more pain...”

“Catilen he-”

“I *know* what he did, Damian. I was there. I have to live with it for the rest of my life.” Her voice shook. She choked on a lump of emotion lodged in her throat. Fresh tears spilled from her eyes. She hadn’t the energy to stop them. “I never should have shared my empathy. I knew you didn’t understand. All I did was throw fuel on the fire.”

Damian lowered his arm and rushed to her side. Kneeling, he laid his hands on her shoulders. “Listen to you! You can’t do this, Cat. You can’t blame yourself for what he did.” He jabbed an accusatory finger in Sentomoru’s direction. “He deserves to pay.”

“Oh he’ll pay,” Catilen’s voice grew cold. If she were stronger, or less moral, she might have cast a curse over him that moment. “Our actions come back to us in threes. But who says *you’re* supposed to hold him accountable? If you attack him, are you any better than he is? And you’d have to pay for the things you did, Damian. Are you prepared for that?”

For a moment, Damian stared past her head. His shoulders rose and fell with each heavy breath. She imagined smoke pouring from his ears. She understood his anger; hers threatened to consume her. She built a wall around it, and a wall around that, desperate to contain the rage before it destroyed her. But she couldn’t spend the night cleaning blood off the floor. If she lost Damian now, it would break her.

Damian must have come to the same conclusion. Caging his anger, he slid to his feet. “We’re leaving. Right now. Come on Cat.” He held out his hand.

“You entered a contract,” Sentomoru snarled, pushing away from the wall. “You can’t break it because it’s convenient.”

“To hell with the contract!” Damian clenched his fists at his sides. “Losing your temper isn’t a free pass to do whatever you want. It’s your responsibility to keep your strength in control. I’m not buying the accidental bullshit this time. You’re devoid of honor. You forfeit the competition.”

“What happens outside the duel can’t be allowed to affect the contract.” Sentomoru jabbed a finger at Damian’s chest, though he wisely kept his distance. “You don’t get to reinterpret ancient laws to suit your whimsy. Our agreement stands. And if you break the contract, you’ll forfeit your life.”

“Unbelievable! Catilen begs for your life and you threaten to kill me? You already admitted you lost control *because* of the challenge. If anything, that should void your victory. That means I’ve already fulfilled the terms of the contract and Catilen and I are free to go whenever we please.”

“*If* that were the case, the challenge would end in a draw,” Sentomoru argued. “A draw isn’t the same as a victory. But it doesn’t matter. We agreed whoever left their shields down longer would be the victor. At that point, the challenge ends.”

“The essence of this exercise is integrity,” Damian insisted. “Your actions prove you have none. That satisfies the conditions of the duel as far as I’m concerned. I’m not forcing Catilen to spend another night on this hunk of rock with you.”

“*You* do not get to dictate the conclusion of an ancient ritual. I have studied the art far longer than you. And as your senior, I believe my interpretation of the rules is more accurate.”

“Enough!” Catilen screeched.

Both men fell silent. Sentomoru’s finger drooped. Damian hung his head. They turned away from each other.

“I don’t care about your stupid contract! It’s dark.” She pointed to the nearest window and the star studded sky outside. “It isn’t safe to leave right now, even if Sentomoru gave us a boat big enough to get past the military patrols. We’d crash on some rocks and kill ourselves. Would that make you both happy?”

Neither man answered.

Bracing herself against the nearest wall, Catilen struggled to her feet. “I want to sleep. I don’t want to see your face ever again.” She jabbed a finger in Sentomoru’s direction. “I don’t care about your desire to show off.” She gave Damian a significant look. “I intend to leave this place in the morning. I don’t care what the two of you do after I’m gone.”

Both men stared at her. She wanted to storm away, but didn’t have the energy. She didn’t even know where she was, let alone where she intended to go. She wouldn’t go back to Sentomoru’s prison. She refused to sleep so close to the place he violated her. She’d gladly sleep on the ground just to get out of the bathhouse. But it would take too long to find a place and pitch a tent.

Shaking himself from his stupor, Damian offered his arm. She sagged against him, relieved when he pulled her close. “Just take me to your room,” she sobbed into his shoulder. The rest they could figure out in the morning.

* * * * *

After tucking Catilen into his bed, Damian sat near the door until she fell asleep. Then he paced, keeping to the far side of the room, bare feet padding across the polished wood. His quick pace matched the flurry of his thoughts.

I could end this right now. If he severed his contract with the lord of the isle, and his suspicions were correct, Sentomoru would be stripped of his abilities if he tried to resist. Without his magic, Damian could easily defeat him.

Only Catilen’s chilling warning held him back. *You’d have to pay for the things you did, Damian. Are you prepared for that?* Now that he’d been captive to a dark morass of impulses, he understood Catilen’s desire to break the cycle of violence. *She always wanted a peaceful resolution to this conflict.*

He understood how Sentomoru lost himself among the chaos. He’d skirted the edge of that abyss himself. *But I didn’t force myself on an innocent woman. Sentomoru was always rotten.*

The challenge just stripped him of his mask.

He resolved to get Catilen off the island in the morning, whatever it took. He'd summon Captain Jones with the radio. If he couldn't reach the captain, who may have abandoned them for lost by now, he'd demand a boat from the island lord. If the universal forces governing their ancient laws didn't strip Sentomoru of his powers, Damian would send Catilen home and remain to finish the competition.

As long as she's safe. It tore his heart to watch Catilen sob uncontrollably, to see the desolation in her bloodshot eyes. *Where's the confident woman I've always known? She might never recover.* He couldn't forgive Sentomoru for treating her as less than human. Bad enough she'd weathered his ceaseless accusations and dangerous temper. Recalling the dark emotions now trapped beneath Catilen's shields made him sick. He choked on bile in the back of his throat.

It's all my fault. He'd promised to protect her. Why hadn't he re-forged the broken wards? Why hadn't he summoned a protection charm? He'd known Sentomoru was dangerous, but he hadn't taken action. He'd been too concerned with his reputation after the incident with Lilliana. He didn't want to offer Sentomoru an excuse to disqualify him from the competition.

Will she ever be the charming, happy young woman I fell in love with?

That she'd never hold him accountable for his failures wounded him deepest of all.

Whatever happens to me, I'm getting her home.

Satisfied, Damian settled on the edge of the bed, in case Catilen needed him. Propping his back against the headboard, he fought to keep his eyes open. But his eyelids were heavy and sleep called his name.

Screams roused him. Sitting bolt upright, Damian rolled off the bed, eyes darting to every shadow, searching for the source of his companion's terror.

Struggling against the tangle of sheets, hair plastered to her sweaty face, Catilen fumbled for the lamp catch.

Damian blinked as light flooded the room, drawing several measured breaths. *There's no battle that needs fighting.* He glanced at his watch; they'd only slept a few hours. Returning to the edge of the bed, he reached for Catilen's shoulder.

"You okay? Did you have a nightmare?"

Cheeks cherry red, Catilen glanced away, refusing to meet his gaze. "Something wrapped around me in my sleep. I... I thought it was him coming back."

Damian winced, putting the pieces together. He'd dozed off. *And naturally gravitated toward the other warm body in the bed. Why'd I come here instead of the couch?* "That was me. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"No, I'm sorry," Catilen insisted, still unwilling to look at him. "It was just a moment of panic."

"Don't apologize." Gentle fingers stroked her arm. "You didn't do anything wrong." He wanted so badly to kiss her, but feared it would only upset her. *Will that fear ever go away? Will the time we spend together always remind her of her ordeal?* Deep in his stomach, fear and concern turned to rage. "I'll be more careful," he promised.

"Just for tonight."

"For as long as you need." He squeezed her shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere, Cat."

"You aren't?" she asked, her voice small. Her eyes finally met his, full of dread. She looked ready to flinch. "You aren't angry at me? You... you still want me like before?"

His heart constricted. If only he could unleash his anger against their so-called host, he'd

have launched the attack with glee. “Of course I still love you, Catilen. How could I be angry at you? Nothing that’s happened has been your fault. No more of those thoughts. You’re still as beautiful and wonderful as you ever were. More, in fact, because you faced your attacker and offered him kindness.”

“I didn’t,” she protested, peeling damp hair from the side of her face. “I’m just not ready to confront him.”

He couldn’t imagine the courage it had taken to face Sentomoru in the hallway, let alone call him to task for all he’d done. *And I didn’t exactly help.* Guilt twisted his insides at the memory of his childish behavior. “If I get my way, you’ll never have to. There’ll never be justice for the island’s lord so long as he rules. But I intend to take you home in the morning, come hell or high water.”

“Can you do that? What if he’s right about the contract? Would you sacrifice your magic just to get me home?”

“Yes,” Damian replied without hesitation. The idea stung. The arcane arts were the only constant in his life, the hard-won prize of his wayward childhood. He didn’t have a family. He had the memory of his mentors. He didn’t have many friends, but he had his studies. Losing his magic would be like severing one of his limbs.

He’d gladly give an arm or a leg to make Catilen whole. He should have severed the contract after the first attack.

“Oh, Damian...” Catilen’s voice went up an octave. Her eyes filled with tears. She swallowed hard. “I can’t let you do that.”

“It’s my decision. You’re more important than my magic. You’re more important than everything.”

“Thank you.” She brushed the moisture from her cheeks. “But that’s why I can’t let you do it. Your magic is part of you. You shouldn’t have to lose it when you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Then you go home tomorrow morning and I’ll stay behind. We’ll manage the last challenge without you, even if it means re-negotiating the terms.”

“No!” She grabbed his arm with both hands. “I won’t leave without you. I can’t!”

“How can you consider staying after all that man has done to you?”

“Oh, I intend to leave. I don’t care how much the people of the island need me. I want worlds between myself and the lord of the island. But I won’t leave you behind. Who knows what he’d do to you. I can’t go home and spend the rest of my life not knowing.”

“You aren’t making this easy.” Damian sighed. “You act as though you want to go through with the final challenge.”

“Do you... do we have any choice?”

“Yes. You, at least, can leave.”

“Not without you.”

“Do you really want to endure Sentomoru’s presence that long?” Catilen’s strength astounded him. That she could consider another’s needs after all she’d been through was the mark of a great person. *Remember this moment. You have to make sure you’re worthy of her love.*

“I guess I have to. Though it seems pointless. The final test is compassion. He’s already failed. I feel such a fool. His story about the island turning people into mindless automatons must have been feigned to keep me within his reach. I can’t believe I fell for it.”

“You think he does it on purpose? Brainwashes people? So he’ll have more admirers?”

Catilen considered the question for several minutes before she answered. “For such a powerful sorcerer, an awful lot escapes his control, don’t you think? It’s a convenient excuse. Whenever something makes him look bad, he washes his hands of responsibility. But if he’s really that unstable, if the island is such a wild force, how does he ever wield its mystical might? We both know how powerful he is. We’ve been on the receiving end of his skill.”

“But why make excuses? To distract us?”

“Maybe. Think about it, Damian. I first felt that obsessive impulse from the island when I inadvertently touched it. And I felt it again when he...” She glanced down a moment before meeting his eyes again. “When he confronted me about leaving, he claimed there was no difference between the island’s desires and his because the island was an extension of him. But after he attacked me, he said he felt like an appendage. Considering what we’ve seen, it makes more sense if his desires power the island. The answer’s been right in front of us all this time. We were too naive to see it.”

Narrowing his eyes, Damian tried to replicate her reasoning. “You’re talking about the dead soldier.”

She nodded. “Sentomoru said the strong resist the island’s pull. I notice many of his guests are still in control of their minds. He’d have to have guests to profit off this place, in rare goods and reputation if not in money. But he needs workers too, and I’ll bet the village is too small to produce the workforce he needs. And the soldiers represented a threat. I’ll bet poor Paul was strong enough to realize something was amiss. That kind of internal struggle could have manifested the projection I experienced when we shook hands.”

“But what about the gardener and the serving girl? Their stories don’t make sense if all he did was fight the island’s pull.”

Catilen pressed her lips into a thin line. The ashen color of her skin made her expression grave. “If Sentomoru can manipulate people’s minds, he might have induced the envy and jealousy to get Paul to attack Tenolin. Goddess, Damian, if he has that level of control over the islanders, imagine what he could do! He could have forced Tenolin to kill the soldier. We can’t trust our version of events. I’ve never tried to make sense of faded emotional impressions before. Sentomoru could have projected the images onto my scrying mirror, or made them appear out of order. He might even have fabricated the romance between Tenolin and Melana to cement the story.”

He shivered. *To have that much control over another person... Are we all just so many meat puppets to that man?* It would require an astronomical amount of power, but no more than the other lofty things Sentomoru seemed to do. Rearranging walls and trees, for example. It was consistent with his theories.

“It also explains Lilianna,” Damian added, though he loathed to think of it. “I always believed the point of that incident was to make you think ill of me. It was too convenient, how it played out like a scripted drama just while you were passing by.”

“But think of the incident from her perspective, Damian. To her, it really happened.”

His stomach dropped; that hadn’t occurred to him. Gears clicked together in the back of his mind. “If he can wield that kind of power, everything that went wrong during our visit might have been scripted; the dead soldier, getting lost in the jungle. It might have been designed to test your abilities.”

Catilen shuddered violently. He regretted bringing it up as he watched her tremble. Leaning down, he wrapped his arms around her, careful not to squeeze too tight. He drew back when she relaxed.

“We have to get out of here,” Catilen asserted. “It seems the best way, the only way, to beat Sentomoru is to play by his rules.”

“We have to out-negotiate the loopholes in his contract.”

She nodded.

“It’s not going to be easy,” Damian warned. “We can only hope unraveling his ruse will grant us an advantage.”

* * * * *

The next day was the hardest of Catilen’s life. Harder than enduring the years of silent ridicule in high school. Harder than watching her mother amble out of the hospital in a haze the day her father died. Harder than sorting through the keepsakes he left behind, realizing she’d never really known him.

All she wanted to do was bathe. An hour after her first bath, her skin crawled again. She scrubbed so hard her flesh turned raw and red. When she tried to draw her fourth bath, Damian chased her out of the bathroom.

His patience made her love him more. He stayed when she wanted company and left when she wanted solitude. He didn’t press when she couldn’t give him answers, but didn’t shy away from tough conversations.

His offer to demand safe passage from the island tempted her. Often she caught the suggestion forming on her lips, but she always choked it back. A few hours on the choppy sea and this nightmare could be a distant memory. But at what cost? How was severing Damian from his magic any different than what happened to her?

She wasn’t worth that heavy a sacrifice. Certainly not after last night. But she couldn’t curl into a fetal position and wait for things to pass. The fastest way off the island was to finish the competition. That required her to confront her attacker.

When she could think, Catilen mulled over the details of the mystic competition. She pumped Damian for information, gnawing her fingernails while she contemplated future negotiations. Puzzling through their predicament kept her grounded. Any action she took tread a dangerous line between justice and cheating. If Damian beat Sentomoru and lost his powers in the process, the lord of the isle would use it to justify his false accusations. They couldn’t hope to convince Sentomoru to concede.

By mid-afternoon the second day, Catilen knew she had to face the task. She paused outside Sentomoru’s office, swallowing fear, stifling anger, walling off hatred. She built herself a fortress to hide in, stacking the stone walls high. Only when the bright fire of doubt could no longer reach her through the barriers did she open the door.

She pulled her chair as far from Sentomoru’s desk as she dared. The lord of the island frowned while they rearranged his office, but she ignored him. Damian sat beside her and she gripped his hand tightly, using him as an anchor.

Sentomoru sat on the other side of his desk, back straight, shoulders stiff, jaw set. He folded his fingers in front of him while he scrutinized specks on the oak surface. “I don’t suppose you called this meeting because you changed your mind?”

“The way I feel hasn’t changed,” Catilen confirmed. “I would be well within my rights to demand immediate passage off your island. And while you may not lose your magic for denying me, it would prove you a heartless brute unworthy of competing in what you clearly consider a prestigious competition.” She paused to let her words sink in, watching closely for signs her words wounded him.

His head drooped. "Yet you have come to discuss the competition."

She took a deep breath, drew up her shoulders and steeled herself. *Don't feel anything. Safe within the walls of your fortress.* Despite the silent mantra she felt small, lowly and full of shame. "I've considered your argument with Damian. If it were up to me, I'd judge his claims accurate. Your failure to control your temper outside the challenges is proof you forfeit any right to continue the competition. How can you expect to prove your compassion after what I've experienced?"

Sentomoru's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

"But you chose me to judge your competition, not to interpret your ancient laws," Catilen continued. "I'm no mage, but I know it would be wrong for Damian to sacrifice his magic when he has fulfilled every obligation assigned by your contract without argument. Even you would be hard pressed to find fault with his performance."

"Indeed," Sentomoru agreed through clenched teeth, his fingers tightening around each other.

"I'm glad you agree." Catilen hadn't discussed her plan with Damian, only requested he arrange the meeting. He'd offered suggestions, but she was confident she knew what to do. She just wasn't sure she had the strength. "In light of recent events, I'm willing to endure the end of this competition if you change the terms of your arrangement in honor of Damian's upstanding performance. I assume your ancient laws allow the stakes to change so long as both parties agree?"

"They do," Damian affirmed before Sentomoru could contradict him.

"Indeed," the lord of the island grumbled. "But what terms does Damian find himself displeased with?" He narrowed his eyes in Damian's direction.

"I'm perfectly satisfied with the contract," Damian replied with a shrug.

"I'm dissatisfied." Catilen stood, unsteady on her feet, worried her knees would give out any moment. "About the part where Damian forfeits his life if he loses the competition. Out of respect to me, and the sacrifices I've made in the name of your contract," she spit the word with distaste, "all I ask is that you allow Damian to leave even if he fails to best you in the final challenge."

Sentomoru scowled. His lips formed the word no, but he pressed them into a thin line instead. "What, then, would be my reward for success? Will you offer to stay in exchange for your companion's life?"

Disgusted by the hint of hope in his voice, Catilen shuddered. *So you could have your way with me again? Or as often as you please?* Damian squeezed her hand and she tried not to hate herself for needing that reassurance. Tried not to feel unworthy of that simple kindness. *Have I fallen so far?*

"Your purpose has always been to separate me and Damian. If he ever had any influence over me, shattering it wouldn't change my perspective of your island. I would rather die than remain one moment longer than I have to." Her voice cracked and she took a deep breath. "While we talk of compassion, will you rob a man of his life after such admirable conduct? You've already agreed his actions are worthy of merit."

"What do you propose?" Sentomoru demanded, turning his narrow gaze on her.

"If you win, send Damian back to the mainland. Then take me to Atil'awr's homeworld. I can easily start a new life there." She didn't mention her intention to use the knowledge in those libraries to find her way back home. "The laws of our country will make Damian's life difficult if he returns without me, and you'll succeed in separating us for all eternity."

Another spark of hope lit Sentomoru's eyes. She'd crafted this request carefully, guessing Damian's continued suffering would appeal to the island lord. And if he still clung to some wild hope she might change her mind after the island shifted, she saw no reason to divest him of his delusions. They finally worked to her advantage.

"Those are your only terms?"

Catilen shook her head, took a deep breath and plowed on. "If Damian wins, the trouble I mentioned will plague us even if we go home together. So if he triumphs, you have to agree to take us both to a new world of our choosing." It had to be included in the contract so Sentomoru couldn't dump them in an uninhabitable wasteland.

"In addition, no matter the outcome of the contest, you must return the minds of all the soldiers from our world and send them home. I don't care how you do it. Deny them the right to stay if you have to."

"What about those to whom I've already granted permission?" Sentomoru interjected.

"Retract it. You rule here, they can hardly disagree with you. Also, regardless of the competition's outcome, when you leave this version of Earth, you must swear never to come back."

"That was part of our initial agreement," Sentomoru interrupted.

"Fine. But if you lay one more hand on me, physical or arcane, before I step off your island to the world of my choice, you forfeit the competition *and* your magic by default." The last she spoke through a growl.

Shocked, Sentomoru eyed them both. "And your companion agrees to these terms?"

"I think they're brilliant," Damian replied, voice brimming with pride. "And more than fair."

Relieved, Catilen sank back into her chair while Sentomoru chewed his bottom lip. She imagined the gears in his brain accelerating. The avenues which fulfilled his desires were disappearing rapidly. How could he cling to confidence? Didn't he realize what he'd done?

"Very well," the lord of the isle agreed in a querulous tone. "I will forbid your soldiers to accompany my island when it departs. Though I can't promise that will return their senses to them when they've gone. You are effectively abandoning your home, Catilen."

"A sacrifice I'm willing to make." Besides, there must be other gateways.

"Well then," Sentomoru said, "it seems we have one more challenge to discuss."

Catilen shook her head. "I don't think we should discuss the details of the third challenge."

"You've already determined the method by which you intend to measure our compassion?" Sentomoru leaned forward to express his interest. She hated the way he phrased it, as if he meant to use this challenge to prove himself, to make things up to her, despite all he'd done.

"As I said, I don't think we should discuss it. I'm afraid if you're aware of the details, it will skew the results."

Sentomoru smiled and it didn't seem forced. *If only it were so easy for me to forget.* "I have absolute faith in your abilities. All the resources of the island are at your disposal, including its magic."

"Thank you. But I don't need your magic." She repressed a shudder at the idea of touching any part of him ever again.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Damian reached for her hand. "I'm not sure what you're planning, but it seems outside your realm of expertise."

She snorted. "Like flash growing grass into a maze? I've known this was coming. I didn't waste all that recovery time reading nonsense. I just hope your faith in me isn't misplaced."

"It isn't." Damian grinned. "I think this entire afternoon is proof of that."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Damian hadn't expected Catilen to call him so soon. He didn't know how long it would take to finish her research. What magic could test their compassion? How would she access it? He didn't envy her the task. He couldn't fathom a single scientific approach.

There were psychiatric tests including inkblots and cryptic questions about turtles on their backs in the desert. But questions wouldn't work in this situation. They could very easily lie, though he supposed Catilen could detect deception with her empathy. *Besides we'd all like to act a certain way in given situations but, when push comes to shove, our performance doesn't always measure up.* Just like he'd panicked in the jungle instead of following logic.

Actions mattered. But how Catilen could test their reactions without creating real danger, he couldn't guess. *It's been less than twenty-four hours since we agreed to move ahead with the challenge. Maybe she just wants company for lunch.*

He met her in one of the small reading rooms adjoining the library. Each contained a desk, a window, a reading lamp, and a pair of comfortable chairs. It afforded privacy, and offered all the materials required for copying passages the old-fashioned way. He knocked before entering to warn Catilen of his arrival.

Something dark moved on the edge of his vision as he opened the door. Catilen called his name and he lost track of the motion. When he looked back, he saw no trace of another occupant.

The tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Backing up, Damian checked the hallway. It was empty. He glanced over Catilen's shoulder. Sunlight filled all four corners of the room.

His traveling companion blinked at him, confused. "Something wrong?"

Frowning, he peered down the hallway. Empty. He shook his head to dispel his lingering unrest. "I thought I sensed something," he replied, surprised she hadn't.

"I thought you were Sentomoru for a moment." Catilen hung her head. "I'm sorry, I still feel like he's stalking me everywhere. Maybe I accidentally projected?"

His heart twisted. *She shouldn't have to fear what she'll find behind a door.* "Don't worry about it." He flashed her a reassuring smile. "Did you want to grab lunch?"

Surging forward, Catilen seized his arm. She leaned forward, her lips hovering next to his ear. "I tested the challenge on Sentomoru this morning. That's why I'm so jumpy."

She glanced past him, confirming the hallway remained empty. Then she tugged him through the door and closed it in his wake. "I convinced him he lost, Damian. Don't ask me about the details, I'm afraid to talk about it while we're still on the island. I know it sounds crazy, but I worry he can hear everything we say."

Mind reeling, Damian tried to grasp the meaning behind Catilen's words. "I don't think it sounds crazy, not after all that's happened."

She squeezed his arm. "I used the magic shaping the challenge to convince him you undertook it at the same time and won. He agreed to let us leave. He said he'd load a boat with our luggage and have it prepare for the journey to the mainland. But we have to go now. I'm afraid what will happen if he changes his mind. Or worse, if he discovers what I've done."

Damian's jaw hung slack. Catilen was cleverer than he thought if she'd fooled the lord of the island. But still his hackles stood on edge. Something struck him as wrong. She'd insisted they complete the competition fairly. Had it been a ruse? She hadn't discussed her plans with him.

“What about my magic?”

She hesitated. “Do you think you’re in danger of losing it?”

“I don’t know. It’s cheating if I don’t participate in the challenge. And I’ll break the contract if I leave before the duel’s finished.”

“But Sentomoru believes it’s finished,” Catilen insisted. “If he’s supposed to initiate some punishment-”

“That isn’t how it works. The rite is supposed to maintain itself. Whatever mechanism revokes our power, whatever magic is involved, it happens on its own. Even if Sentomoru believes the competition has run its course, I might lose my magic if we leave. I thought you wanted to avoid that.”

“I do.” She bit her lower lip. “I didn’t plan this. I just took advantage of an opportunity. There’s no way you could have lost this challenge, Damian. While I had the force of the magic behind my empathy, I... I impressed the importance of letting us leave. I know it’s wrong, but I’m afraid he wouldn’t let us go otherwise.” Her voice was a frantic hiss. “I couldn’t take the risk he might try to kill you. I love you. I don’t want to go home without you. He has to have violated the terms of the contract by now. If he hasn’t been punished, surely you won’t be.”

The desperate, pleading look in her eyes convinced him. With a smile, he brushed several stray hairs from her face. “I’m proud of you for standing up to such a daunting task. I don’t care if it costs me my magic. Let’s go.”

He wrapped his arm around hers and took her hand. Together they opened the door, checked the hallway and hurried for the stairs. While the bathhouse’s labyrinthine nature made navigation difficult, Damian discerned a quick way of getting outside; take the nearest staircase to the ground floor. Entrances seemed to be located near stairways for guest convenience. Once outside, the beach and adjoining dock were easy to locate.

True to Catilen’s word, one of Sentomoru’s servants waited in a rowboat that bobbed with the tide, tugging against its tie. Their luggage had been strapped between the back seats. The boatman gripped a large pair of oars. Damian hadn’t realized they were close enough to the mainland to make the journey without a motorized boat. Then again, Sentomoru might have enchanted the man, the boat, or both to make the journey faster.

Damian helped his companion board and stepped down behind her. When they settled on the front bench, another servant released the dock tie. The boatman cast off, using powerful oar strokes to set them in motion.

Catilen stared at the dock, wringing her fingers in her lap until the island fell out of sight. Then she turned her gaze toward home. An eager light shone in her eyes. She almost smiled.

As the boat cut through the waves, Damian relaxed. The rock and sway of the sea didn’t bother him at this slower speed. Profound relief filled him. Catilen’s hope reassured him. He didn’t reach for his magic, not caring if it fell away while they crossed the water. He had Catilen and the opportunity to build a life with her. If his magic was the cost, he judged it a worthwhile sacrifice.

“We’ll have to figure out what to tell the police.” Catilen shifted anxiously. “We have a lot to account for and no evidence to offer.”

“We’ll wait until Sentomoru sends the soldiers home.” Damian laid a hand on her knee. He wasn’t worried about the police. They seemed a small obstacle in comparison to escaping the island. “He has to do that because of the alterations you made to the contract. Some of them saw us. I’m sure they’ll be able to put everything straight.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Some of the tension eased from Catilen’s shoulders. “Though it

might-”

The roar of the ocean devoured her words as a large wave smashed into their boat. Somehow the small vessel remained upright, though the water swept the boatman from his seat. Splashing and spluttering, he toppled into the sea, quickly dragged away by the current.

Flung by the force of the impact, Catilen’s head bounced off the vacated bench. Limp as a ragdoll, she slumped to the bottom of the boat. Throwing his arms over his head, Damian banged his elbow instead. He ended up beside Catilen, stunned for a moment, panting to catch his breath.

Before he had a chance to recover, a second wave battered their boat. Damian threw himself across Catilen’s prone form, clutching her to close in case their vessel capsized. Salt stung his eyes. It took several minutes for his vision to clear. Coughing and choking on foul tasting water, Damian sucked deep breaths while he swiped sopping hair out of his face and tried to get his bearings.

Somehow their boat remained afloat. It rode low, half-filled with water. Hands shaking, Damian pressed his fingers to Catilen’s neck. He held his breath until he felt the flutter of a pulse beneath his fingers. He positioned his wrist beneath her nose, hoping to catch a sign of breath, but with water dripping from his skin, even the gentle breeze felt like a whirlwind. With a quiet curse, he draped her over one of the benches to keep her from slipping into the water.

Knowing time was short, Damian fumbled for the hunting knife he kept in a zipper pouch on the front of one of his bags. He used it to cut the ropes securing their luggage, dumping it all over the edge. That bought them a couple extra seconds. He considered bailing out the boat, but he didn’t have anything to use. Every time he scooped up water with his hands, more sloshed in.

He glanced at the sun, trying to gain a sense of direction. He believed the island was to the west, his right, and the mainland was to the east, his left, if he hadn’t misjudged their direction before the incident. The sky was stunningly blue, clear of clouds, no hint of rain in sight.

Where had those waves come from? What roused the calm sea on a clear, sunny day?

Earthquakes were common on the ocean floor. Even one too small to be felt on dry land could wreak havoc on the tide. But if there’d been an earthquake, the sea should remain choppy. It seemed calm to him. Perhaps the waves had been rogues? No one knew what caused them, but large rogues could endanger full-sized military vessels. These had been tame in comparison.

Speaking of military vessels, I wish one of those patrol ships would happen by...

He shook his head. *It doesn’t matter where the waves came from. I need to get Catilen to safety.* The oars disappeared with the boatman. He’d have to swim for it.

Even if the boat was enchanted, they must be closer to the island than home. *The last place either of us wants to see is our best hope for survival. It isn’t so easy to escape the island after all.*

As he lifted Catilen, his heart dropped. *What if the island’s departure caused those waves?* Sentomoru could have sent the soldiers back to their patrol ships. He had no reason to linger after that. The sudden appearance of a large chunk of land would displace a great deal of water. Its disappearance would cause equal disturbance. *I doubt I could swim to the mainland from here, but it won’t do us any good to swim toward the island if it’s gone.*

Panic threatened to overrule his good sense. Should he try bailing out the boat? *That’ll just waste time and energy, both of which are in short supply.* He had to try magic and hope he still had his hold over it. He’d try to summon help. Failing that, he’d find a place for them to go.

Damian drew a deep breath and held it, forcing himself to focus on that task. He had no time for doubt or worry. His awareness filtered down his arm, into open air. Familiar energy tingled against his skin as he *reached*.

He exhaled a surge of elation. Both his magic and the island remained where he expected them to be. There was no one close enough to summon, but they weren't devoid of hope. Fumbling with the fastenings to Catilen's clothing, he tossed the saturated garments into the sea with the rest of their belongings. Then he stripped and tossed his clothes aside as well. They'd move faster if they weren't laden by the extra weight. They'd move faster if Catilen woke, but he didn't know how bad a blow she'd taken.

He propped Catilen on the edge of the boat, then lowered himself into the water. After several seconds of maneuvering, he situated Catilen on his back. Satisfied he could keep her in place with minimal effort, he pushed off the boat to gain momentum.

Carrying Catilen made swimming awkward. Waves washed over him, threatening to sweep his precious cargo in the opposite direction. Salt water assaulted his nose, mouth and eyes. He couldn't see and could hardly breathe, but he refused to give up. Powerful strokes of his arms and legs inched them closer to their destination. He would not let Catilen die. He swam until his arms burned and his lungs ached. It grew increasingly difficult to keep his head above water.

Their progress slowed until, finally, he could advance no further. Damian barely had the strength left to tread water. Any moment now, his grip would fail, and Catilen would sink to the ocean floor. Soon, he'd follow her. Together they'd lay at the bottom of the sea for all eternity, less than bones, every bit of them carried away by sea scavengers.

What can I do? I must have missed something.

His body was spent. Magic and determination were all he had left. If only he could wake Catilen. She might be able to make it to shore. But he'd never tried to manipulate biology with his magic. He didn't have the knowledge. If she had a concussion, waking her might make it worse.

She's dead if I don't try.

Shifting Catilen, he clutched her against his chest. It took all his flagging strength to keep both their heads above water. He laid his free hand on the back of her head and let his magic flow through her. For an agonizing moment, nothing happened.

Gasping, choking on sea water, Catilen lifted her head.

As soon as she could keep herself afloat, he shoved her in the direction she needed to swim. With a last surge of strength he pulled himself up, sucked as deep a breath as he could, and plunged below the water's surface. If she didn't see him, she wouldn't argue. Neither of them had the time or energy to waste.

He closed his eyes against the ocean's biting sting. <Swim,> he hissed into her mind. He gave her an impression of the proper direction, the sun at her back, the island looming in the distance. <Swim, Catilen, as fast and hard as you can. You can make it to shore. I know you can.>

He couldn't sense her emotions, but he caught hints of her thoughts. Her mind was in turmoil. She wanted to know where he was and how she'd ended up alone in the middle of the ocean. But she listened to his command without question. She believed he waited for her on the island, using his magic to guide her to safety. He saw no reason to correct the misconception.

As his lungs began to burn, Damian siphoned his magic toward Catilen to speed her frantic flight. He expended his energy to increase hers, granting her strength and speed she couldn't summon on her own. Enough, he hoped, to get her to safety.

He gave her everything he had. When he finished, he couldn't summon the strength to pull himself back to the surface. His lungs used the last of their oxygen. His brain demanded he draw breath. He choked on sea water.

The pain of drowning seemed dull and distant. It wasn't part of him. It didn't matter. Catilen was going to live. Nothing else mattered. She'd crawl onto the beach. Sentomoru's servants would rush to her. She'd have a long struggle ahead, but she'd get home. She'd be with her mother. It wouldn't matter what she told the police. She'd rebuild her life. She'd be happy.

He held on long enough to ensure it, clinging to their link until he sensed her relief and the impression of solid ground beneath her feet. Instead of death's agony, he felt intense fulfillment. All his life had led to this moment. If his only great accomplishment was to save Catilen's life, he accepted it.

Darkness closed around his vision.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Moisture splattered against his cheek, trickled across the angles of his face and grazed his lip. It tasted of salt, but not the bitter, pungent salt of the sea. He cracked his eyes open.

Sunlight filtered through a window, illuminating the small room in which he lay. One of the library reading rooms. He was warm and dry. No salt burned his eyes. No water stung his throat. Catilen knelt beside him, face buried in her hands as she sobbed.

Somehow she'd pulled him from the ocean in the moments before he died. Somehow she carried him back to the safety of the bathhouse. *Somehow she retrieved our clothing from the bottom of the sea and dressed me.*

It wasn't possible and he knew it.

"Shh," he murmured, reaching for one of her tear-slick wrists. "Don't cry, Cat. It's okay."

"I'm so sorry," Catilen stammered between sobs. She drew a shuddering breath and sniffled as she fought to regain her composure.

Still suffused by that preternatural calm, Damian sat up and wrapped his arms around Catilen's shoulders, pulling her close. "Why? I'm here, aren't I? I'm alive. What else matters?"

Catilen's shoulders shook for several minutes before her tears subsided. She lifted her head, swiping moisture from her cheeks. "You needed to think it was real."

"You don't have to explain." Smiling, he brushed tear-matted hair from her face. "It felt good to wake up. I didn't think I would."

"To accurately judge," she choked on the word, "I had to wait until I was sure. I worried Sentomoru would dispute the results otherwise."

"So the competition is over?" He should have been excited, but his pulse didn't quicken. In his state of zen-like calm he felt only relief. "You really did test Sentomoru first?"

Catilen nodded, drying her puffy, red eyes with her sleeve. "I gave him a similar scenario. I told him I wanted talk about what happened between us in private, somewhere away from the island and all its power. He agreed eagerly, of course." She shuddered and Damian squeezed her shoulder. "The test played out much the same. Two waves came out of nowhere, washed the boatman away, left me unconscious and the boat about to sink."

"So you're judging us based on our reactions." Now he understood why there'd been no logical explanation for the waves. And why he hadn't lost his magic. *Though I doubt I actually worked any.* "Did Sentomoru just float the two of you back to the island, dry as a thistle?"

Catilen shook her head. "He tried, but he couldn't. I designed the challenge so that neither of you could easily solve the problem. Your actions were quite similar. He didn't think to strip my clothing, thank goodness. He kept promising he'd prove himself to me, the whole time he swam. Until he couldn't breathe enough to speak. When he reached the point where he couldn't go any further, he balked. He didn't seem to comprehend an unsolvable scenario. He kept trying to push forward after little rests, but of course I also designed the scenario so that it was impossible to save us both. Eventually his strength gave out."

"He died for you?" That shocked him. He'd never considered the lord of the island capable of self-sacrifice. He'd assumed Sentomoru would abandon Catilen in favor of saving himself. *And justified it as another matter beyond his control.*

"Well, with me," Catilen corrected. "It baffled me too. I can't imagine treating someone I cared about the way he's treated me. Then again, it makes a twisted sort of sense. He's never known anyone who didn't grovel at his feet before we showed up. Some of his guests might

resist the island's pull, but look how selfish and driven they are. I'm starting to wonder if he's ever seen an example of genuine love that didn't spring from his crafting."

"That doesn't justify anything he's done." Damian's words lacked their usual heat. Something about his recent experience clung to him, casting events in new light. His hatred faded, replaced with cold clarity.

"Of course not." Catilen shot him a sharp look. "Nothing ever could. But it does explain his irrational justifications. He's probably never had to explain himself before, not to someone who wouldn't just accept his word. In any case, based on his actions I had to judge his potential for compassion much higher than I anticipated. Though I realize now it was an inaccurate test; I doubt he'd have saved anyone else. He certainly wouldn't die in the attempt. Valuing me isn't the same as valuing life."

"You could extend the challenge. He's in no position to protest."

"I don't think it would work a second time. Besides, it wouldn't matter. You've already won."

Smiling, Damian cupped her face between his hands. Anxiety lines savaged her pretty features. Her usually shining eyes were haggard, the set of her lips pinched. He hoped it would all ease when he carried her away from here. Without a doubt, he would sacrifice himself to keep her safe. He never wanted to see sorrow mar her face again. "How did you manage all this?" He gestured at the reading room. "I take it we never left?"

With a chuckle, Catilen slid to her feet. Tugging his arm, she helped him stand and pushed him into one of the padded chairs. The soft upholstery was more comfortable than the floor. His back ached. *How long did I lay there?*

"It was all a dream," Catilen explained, glancing across the room. "Everything after you opened the door."

Something moved in the corner as he followed her gaze. With a strange sense of déjà-vu, the tiny hairs on the back of his neck jumped upright. His skin prickled. He gripped the arms of his chair, trying to sit still.

It was no animal, shadow or creature that rose from the floor. It was a woman. Damian didn't recognize her.

"Zaliez has the unique telepathic ability to manipulate dreams," Catilen explained. "Atil'awr introduced us after I told her what I needed to do. She's been very understanding, not to mention distressed, about our situation. She offered her assistance; I couldn't have done this alone."

Zaliez closed the distance between them, bowing when she stood in front of Damian. Her skin was golden bronze, her hair midnight black. Gold glinted beside her nose where it was pierced, a chain connecting the stud to a gold ring through her earlobe. It was only after she folded one arm across her waist, Damian realized she had four all together. The other three spread beside her, conjuring the image of the Hindu god Shiva. Had her people inspired the myth in the days before the island stopped visiting Earth?

"I was hesitant at first." Zaliez spoke with a light accent, rolling her r's and holding her s's. "But Atil'awr is a good friend and Catilen is kind."

"I used my empathy to knock you out when I answered the door," Catilen resumed her explanation. "I had to do it fast. The transition needed to be seamless. Zaliez wove the dream for us and I told her how to adjust it based on your reactions. We tested it on Sentomoru because, frankly, I wasn't certain it would work."

Damian glanced at the wiry, too-many armed woman and bowed his head. "Thank you for your assistance."

“Better luck in the rest of your travels. I shall not visit the island again, I think. Not while Sentomoru rules.” Zaliez made a graceful gesture with her two left arms before turning to depart.

“What now?” Damian asked when they were alone.

Catilen shrugged. “I guess we go tell Sentomoru the results. But Damian, I almost wish what I said in your dream was true. I don’t think he’s going to take this very well. You should have seen how pleased he was when he left.”

“I’m sure he convinced himself he won.” Damian sighed, the usual fire absent from his gut.

“That doesn’t worry you?” Catilen sounded nervous.

He shook his head. “I’m confident we no longer have anything to fear from the lord of the island. Everything’s going to work out the way it should, Cat. I know that now.”

She gave him an odd look, but he slid to his feet and took her hand. Drawing a deep breath, he squared his shoulders, steeling for the task ahead.

Catilen set her jaw, probably performing a similar ritual of preparation. “There’s no sense delaying,” she murmured, though she sounded uncertain.

Damian squeezed her hand. “This is everything we’ve wanted since we left home. We’re going to discover a whole new world together. Don’t let the past few weeks trouble you anymore.” Before she had a chance to protest, he strode through the door.

* * * * *

While Damian faced the coming task like a mountain weathering a storm, Catilen was more like a palm tree, bent by strong winds. When they arrived on the island, the mysterious Sentomoru seemed kind, generous, even friendly. *Was any of it genuine?* Without his mask he was angry and selfish, full of jealousy and bitterness, his temper volatile.

He’s not going to let us walk off this island together, even if we ask to leave now. This wasn’t the end of their nightmare; it was the beginning of a confrontation she’d spent weeks trying to avoid.

They asked the first servant they encountered where to locate the island lord. The young man indicated the gardens. Though the sprawling fields contained more blossoms than Catilen could identify, none of the hedges grew high enough to obscure Sentomoru in his vivid robes.

He greeted them with a pleasant nod, failing to comment on the way Catilen clung to Damian. Still, there was venom in his smile.

“The competition is over,” Damian announced when she didn’t speak. Catilen nodded confirmation.

“Excellent news.” Sentomoru folded his arms into his sleeves. “I’m eager to hear the results.”

“It was a difficult challenge to judge.” Catilen forced herself to make eye contact with the island lord, choosing her words with care. She didn’t want the tired old tirade about Damian controlling her. “Both of you performed admirably.”

“But you have chosen a winner,” Sentomoru prompted, eager to be named champion. A disgustingly smug smile curled his lips.

Catilen held her breath. “Damian is the winner.”

Sentomoru’s smile evaporated, storm clouds obliterating his sunny disposition. Lightning flashed in his eyes. “Excuse me?”

“You heard the lady,” Damian replied, steadfast in whatever trance had taken him. “Let’s not practice poor sportsmanship. Catilen only did the job we asked her to.”

Willing her pounding heart to calm, Catilen lifted her chin, trying to project a false sense of

confidence. "If you didn't trust my judgment you should have chosen a better judge."

"I find it hard to believe Damian exceeded my selfless sacrifice," Sentomoru replied through clenched teeth. "I gave my life for you, Catilen."

"You died with me," she corrected, in no mood for childish hysterics. He'd long since spent her last shred of sympathy. Indignation made her strong; one false act of near-heroics didn't erase years of egotism. "Damian gave his life in exchange for mine. Look into my mind if you don't believe me. I've nothing to hide."

Even as she slid her shields aside, the familiar energy of Damian's mystical barriers surrounded her. If Sentomoru tried to penetrate an inch deeper than she willingly allowed, she could repel him. But she'd need Damian's protection if he lobbed magical retaliation in her direction.

With a growl, Sentomoru reached for her surface thoughts, his mental touch like a vise. She concentrated on the dream, raw emotions still clinging to the fresh memories. Her terror Damian would fail. Her elation he refused to relent. Her sorrow at his sacrifice.

As her recollections played across Sentomoru's second sight like an old video recording, she sensed his corresponding reactions. Disbelief the judgment was genuine. Irritation Damian thought of something he missed. Outrage to have been bested. As he pulled away, Catilen caught a glimpse of grim resolution; he wouldn't allow himself to be defeated.

"Preposterous!" Sentomoru snarled. "A ruse to abet your escape! This entire competition has been a farce. Neither of you ever intended to fulfill your roles in the contract."

Catilen opened her mouth to remind him she'd never been party to the contract, but Damian beat her to it. "We've fulfilled it and more." His voice lacked the usual angry edge. Sentomoru turned a deeper shade of red. Undaunted, Damian faced him like a newly opened blossom at the base of an oak tree. "Complaining about the results won't change them."

"We're eager to leave," Catilen added, hoping to lay the argument to rest. "I think it's time you sent the soldiers home."

"I think not," Sentomoru replied, his voice flat and emotionless. "You will stay, Catilen. And this interloper will die for interfering with the island's desires."

Damian strengthened his shields into a solid, visible bubble surrounding the two of them. At the same moment, Sentomoru hurled a lance of purple energy in their direction. Action or reaction, Damian's quick reflexes paid off. The crackling mage force bounced off his shields. The energy fizzled as it struck the ground, burning the grass like sparks thrown from a fire.

Sentomoru's rage was a palpable force. The ground shook. The mountain groaned. Shifting rocks skittered down cliff faces. Trees trembled. The waterfall spluttered. Behind them, the solid marble of the bathhouse creaked in protest.

The lord of the isle seemed like a giant, one foot poised over their heads. In a moment, he would unleash his fury. Damian couldn't hope to defend against that terrible force.

Catilen shivered, sensing Sentomoru's mystical might as he loosed it. She lingered over a deep breath, certain it would be her last.

The arcane force slammed against Damian's shields. Before they had a chance to buckle under the strain, Sentomoru's attack dissipated. One second it flew like a spear aimed at Damian's chest, the next it fluttered on the wind in a thousand pieces, dispersed like dandelion seeds.

If not for the devastation on Sentomoru's face, Catilen might have believed he came to his senses. Sorrow tinged his rage-twisted features. Unshed tears glimmered in his glossy eyes, so wide they looked ready to roll from their sockets. His jaw hung slack, lips forming a silent plea

of protest.

Loss emanated from beneath those frozen features, so utterly profound it would have cracked her heart if it came from any other man. Only one thing could reduce an arrogant man to tears; someone had finally taken something he cared about.

Damian hadn't done anything. He wasn't capable of rebuffing that kind of power.

Lifting both hands in supplication, Sentomoru released a strangled wail of desolation that twisted Catilen's stomach. "What have you done?" he howled, narrowing his eyes at Damian.

"Nothing." Damian shook his head. "You broke our contract. The ancient powers punished you for your treachery. You brought this on yourself."

"So it's true?" Catilen stared at the once proud lord, reduced to a wild wreck of a man. "If we'd tried to leave, this would have happened to you?"

Damian shrugged. "It's hard to say how they would have judged us. This is proof you made the right choice. He can't hurt us now, Cat. He can't hurt anyone anymore." Damian's tone suggested he found the man's fate fitting.

No wonder he came so calmly to this confrontation.

"I cannot be defeated so easily!" Sentomoru clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. Veins became visible along his wrists, neck and forehead as he strained every muscle in his body. "I am lord of this great island! Its power still answers my call!"

The island shuddered beneath their feet, slaying Catilen's hope he spouted empty threats. She fell. Damian caught her, cradling her against his chest as he fought to keep his balance.

How is this possible? She'd assumed the loss of his magic would sever Sentomoru's connection with his domain. Their bond must have been deeper than magic and governed by different rules.

Sentomoru may have coerced power free of his land, but he could no longer wield it gracefully. The earthquake's intensity increased. Trees buckled and fell like snapping bones. Stress lines appeared in the bathhouse walls. Guests and servants ran shrieking from the building, pouring into the courtyard and streaming into the gardens. Those who witnessed the mad rage on Sentomoru's face, quickly fled elsewhere.

Oblivious to the destruction, Sentomoru wrestled with the island, trying to turn that destructive force into a weapon he could use. Wood tumbled from the bathhouse awnings. With a rending crash, something gave way inside the building. *Internal floors collapsing*, she realized as Damian dragged her toward the wrought iron fence surrounding the gardens. The bathhouse crumbled. Marble and glass embedded themselves in the flowerbeds.

Those blossoms not crushed by debris bent and wilted. The color drained from their petals, leaving them sickly brown. Black tainted the green grass. The brittle stalks disintegrated beneath Sentomoru's feet as he advanced. Entropy spread in all directions. The island heaved. A jagged crack appeared in the garden moments before the ground gave way, opening a yawning void.

The demented look on Sentomoru's face suggested he approved of the chaos. His hair, free of its bindings, whipped in the wind like tentacles. An unholy light burned in his eyes as he advanced. He spread his arms wide as if to embrace Catilen, or Damian or, perhaps, total destruction.

"Stop!" Catilen screamed into the din. "Can't you see? This wonton disregard for life is why you lost the competition!"

If the lord of the island could hear, her words didn't reach him. He threw back his head and cackled. The sound echoed off the newly open spaces. Had the stripping of his power broken his mind?

Shuddering, Catilen clung to Damian as he tried to lift her over the fence. He might have intended for her to run, but she refused to leave him. He didn't have the strength to counter this wild power, but she knew he would try. It was the kind of man he was.

Finally untangling himself from her grip, Damian turned to confront Sentomoru. In stark contrast to the island lord's delirium, Damian seemed a pillar of calm. The eye of the storm. He ignored the wind and leaves lashing his cheeks, throwing stray locks of hair over his eyes. He stood firm, feet steady, face grim.

Catilen clambered back over the shuddering fence.

"I curse you by the oath you made," Damian declared, his voice flat. Somehow it carried above the clatter and Sentomoru's answering laughter. "By your true name, I call you to account for your betrayal."

Cold fingers clawed Catilen's heart. Was he trying to invoke another ancient force to sever Sentomoru's connection to the island? *Damian didn't have to summon that power. This must be an incantation.* But Damian couldn't finish it; he didn't know Sentomoru's name.

Blood rushed in her ears, filling the silence. *Goddess, he's waiting for me! How does he know Sentomoru told me?*

With all the talk of trust, and the power of true names, Catilen had been careful not to reveal Sentomoru's secret. Had she slipped?

The more important question was; could she betray that trust? This man had violated her in the most heinous way she could imagine. But if she shared this precious piece of personal information, would it make her as bad as him? What better way to punish his assault than betrayal?

What we do comes back to us in threes.

As if to emphasize her thoughts, a sharp crack drew her eyes to another seam in the earth. The new rupture swallowed a tree and a good portion of the wrought iron fence over which she'd just climbed.

Catilen swallowed hard. *If this continues, he'll tear the whole island apart. Everyone on it will die.* Sparing those lives had little to do with vengeance. Three times good and three times bad. *Spirit always knows our intent. Goddess, forgive me!*

"Kenjiro..." she pleaded, no hint of malice in her voice. "Please don't do this."

Oblivious to her plea, the lord of the isle extended a hand in their direction. Catilen flinched, anticipating a blow. Had he finally sucked enough energy from the island to exact his revenge?

"Kenjiro Sentomoru," Damian's voice boomed above the whining wind, though he hadn't raised it. "I bind you by the powers of old." Peeking past her elbow, Catilen saw he stood steadfast between the mad sorcerer and his crazed intent. His shoulders lifted as he drew a deep breath. He whispered, "Die."

While recovering her shields, Catilen read about Damian's magic. Part of it had been curiosity, but she'd also known she'd need to make use of it. The oldest form of magic was simply language. When man began to understand the world, he defined it with words. The right word gave an object meaning. That's what gave true names their power.

When the first sorcerers began to manipulate the world, they changed the meaning, and therefore function, of objects by giving them new names, by shaping them with the power of words. Properly spoken, properly respected, language could still wield that power. Even words could transform beyond their mundane definitions. The right word could take action.

That was the principal around which Damian's magic functioned.

When he spoke those words, they became a command. And Sentomoru, powerless to defend

himself without magic of his own, was forced to comply. His eyes snapped toward Catilen. A brief flare of indignation dissolved to desolation and emptiness. “How could you?” he choked, falling to his knees.

Tears stung her eyes. She’d never expected to feel sympathy for him after all he’d done. He’d broken her, defiled and degraded her, left scars upon her soul she could never heal. She hated him in a way she’d never hated another living being. But seeing what he’d become in the wake of his frantic lunacy, she pitied him.

Sentomoru’s stolen power fled. A wave of invisible force rippled outward as he fell. With nothing to control it, nothing to define it, it continued with its last known directive; wreaking havoc on the land. Groaning and shuddering in protest, the island tore itself apart under the weight of its own power.

As he pitched forward, Sentomoru raised his arm again, this time in supplication. “Catilen...” he forced her name through his lips as he exhaled his final breath. The light went out of his eyes and his body fell limp, soundlessly impacting the ground.

Catilen clung to Damian’s arm as the island heaved around them. The unsteady remains of the bathhouse wobbled, threatening to fall on their heads. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Sentomoru directed his last curse at her. Damian had spoken the words but *she* had killed him. For all she’d tried to find a peaceful solution, to spare the island inhabitants from the dark desires of their lord, she had failed. Instead she’d murdered him. She’d destroyed Eden, corrupted as it might have been.

What have I become?

“Why hasn’t it stopped?” she called over the incessant rumble.

“I don’t know,” Damian yelled back, drawing her close to him again. “I thought his death would put everything back to normal. He must have drawn too much energy from the island. There may not be a way to reverse it.”

Catilen shook her head. After all their struggles, this couldn’t be the end. They had to salvage some good from this. “He told me once he felt like the island’s appendage. Like an arm or a leg.” She struggled to grasp the concept forming at the edges of her thoughts. “But what if he wasn’t? What if he was the island’s heart?”

Damian pulled her away from the fence, away from the island lord’s limp body, away from the crumbling bathhouse, down the only safe path he could find. “If he was the island’s heart, it’s going to die. We need to get out of here. We don’t have much time!”

“No!” With a savage snarl, Catilen pulled away, swatting aside Damian’s searching hands until she eluded his grip. The next tremor knocked him to his knees.

Something stirred in the mountain, an ancient, hungry beast, reawakened by the cataclysm, spitting ink-black smoke.

Catilen darted to the lifeless figure of the island’s former lord. Grabbing his shoulders, she shoved him onto his back. His sightless eyes stared at her. Swallowing hard, hands shaking, trying not to remember a man beneath a waterfall, Catilen closed his eyes and scooped his head into her lap.

“What are you doing?” Damian demanded, fighting to regain his footing.

“I can’t let the island die!”

If that terrible black taint belonged to Sentomoru, surely it died with him. There had been beauty here, they’d seen it. What about the library with all its gathered knowledge? She couldn’t let it be forgotten. What about the guests who spoke of such wonders, each one a potential teacher? She couldn’t let them die so far from their homes. What about the lost ones, the servants

who gave themselves to the island? She couldn't let the island continue to consume them.

Most of all, she couldn't let Damian die. He'd done his part to save them from Sentomoru. Now it was her turn.

"You can't possibly-" He froze as he regained his feet, staring at her, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. "No! Catilen, don't!" He lunged toward her.

He couldn't reach her in time. Her mind was made up. Sentomoru had been right about one thing; she could save these people. He'd been beyond her help. But she understood now. *Eve didn't defile Eden. She set us all free.*

And Catilen hadn't come to destroy paradise.

She'd come to save it.

Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, Catilen closed her eyes and reached for Sentomoru's mind.

He was gone, of course. There was no consciousness left to touch. Yet plenty remained to bombard her secondary senses. Darkness stirred in the wake of tragic death. Her mother called it the void and warned her never to touch it. An Empath could lose their mind in that swirling, chaotic vortex.

But today she took the risk. Sentomoru had been the island's life-force. It kept his heart beating nearly a thousand years. To live the island needed a fresh, still-beating heart.

It took only a moment for her to locate it; the one place inside Kenjiro Sentomoru that still pulsed with life. A glittering golden orb in the midst of frozen winter. A tiny sun in the vastness of space. She wrapped herself around that essence, let it seep into every part of her, pulled it to her chest and embraced it the way she would embrace a small child.

With a final shudder, the island fell still. Silence rung in her ears like the buzz left behind by loud music.

Warmth suffused her body. It started at the base of her neck, tingling as it thrilled down her spine and shot toward her fingers and toes. The flow of energy reversed. Instead of hurtling outward, seeking outlet, it rushed to fill the empty spaces in her body. The sensation drove the breath from her lungs.

If she couldn't bring that energy under control, it would tear her to shreds along with the island. She sensed the land now the same way she sensed her arms and legs. She experienced the agony of its wounds. It was cut and bleeding, battered, beaten and bruised.

Much as she was.

Forcing herself to breathe steadily, Catilen turned her awareness outward. Grasping the energy pouring through her limbs, she returned it to the ground. This time the energy flowed outward with purpose. The greatest purpose; to give life.

She sensed the holes in the island close. Strong roots pulled trees upward. Flowers she couldn't name opened new blooms. The river shifted back to its original course. The waterfall flowed from the mountain's high cliff, spraying the courtyard valley with mist.

Even the bathhouse became whole. It seemed to absorb the nearby debris, using it to form new walls. New floors rose from the ruins of the collapse.

She didn't know how long it took. She wasn't aware of anything outside her newly expanded consciousness. She viewed the island through her inner eye. She *felt* it come back to life, *felt* the plants grow, *felt* the pieces of the ecosystem the way she felt her fingers and toes. And she knew it required only a thought to rearrange anything within that system. She carefully avoided commands. She wanted the island green and beautiful. She wanted its people whole and sane. Let nature manage the rest.

After what could have been hours, or a single moment, Catilen felt equilibrium return to the island and her body. She exhaled and collapsed, cushioned by a thick layer of soft grass.

She heard footsteps and glanced up. Damian knelt at her side. She was too exhausted to protest when he drew her head into his lap.

“It’s over,” he said with a smile. Leaning down, he laid a kiss on her forehead.

“Yes,” she breathed, an answering smile splitting her lips. “It’s over, and it has begun.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Saving the island must have taken mammoth effort. After the physical and emotional strain of the past few weeks, it was no wonder exhaustion overcame Catilen. She fell asleep with her head in Damian's lap. He slid his fingers absently through her dark hair, marveling at her courage. A stronger person he'd never known.

He didn't know what the coming days would bring, and he didn't care. He'd be with Catilen. In the mean time, there was work to be done. Hard work. Back-aching, sweat-inducing work.

Gathering the sleeping woman into his arms, Damian carried Catilen from the circle of flowers summoned by her efforts. He gave the damaged bathhouse wide berth on his way to the courtyard.

To his surprise, he found the survivors already mobilized. Beds, cots and mattresses, salvaged from the bathhouse, littered the courtyard, many already occupied by the injured. It was easy to commandeer one for Catilen. Sentomoru's former servants stared at her as though she were a divine being descended from the heavens to sleep among them. Their distant connections with the island must have made them aware of her actions. With solemn faces, they promised to watch over her and he felt no qualms leaving her in their care.

He joined a party of brave souls venturing into the bathhouse to determine its stability. Catilen seemed to have mended most of the structural damage, but that hadn't undone all the destruction. Debris from the collapse still littered the floors, along with broken furniture and smashed artwork.

They pulled survivors from the wreckage and ferried them to the makeshift infirmary. Before anyone committed their safety to the building, they wanted to be sure it would hold. Stress cracks still lined the walls of the upper floors, higher up the mountain where the winds were strongest, but the lower floors proved sturdy. Damian and his party cleared the great dining hall, along with several other rooms on the main floor. While half the group moved upstairs to clear more rooms, the rest transported the makeshift infirmary indoors.

From then on, Damian contributed wherever his hands were helpful. He bandaged wounds. He assigned guests new quarters so everyone would have a safe place to sleep come nightfall. He even managed to soothe the frazzled nerves of a self-important guest, though his approach wasn't gentle. Appalled by the day's events, most of the inter-dimensional travelers had the good sense to accept lesser accommodations. There were no duchesses today; many would have to sleep in shared rooms, on mattresses salvaged from the wreckage.

As the sun sank below the horizon, Damian spoke with a delegation sent by the village to determine the extent of the damage. Several houses crumbled during the earthquake, but many remained strong and stable. The islanders were efficient and resourceful, Damian had to give them that. They'd already arranged to share houses, ensuring everyone would have food and shelter while they rebuilt. Those few who couldn't be accommodated were on their way to the bathhouse, along with injured villagers and medical supplies.

As he passed the dining hall to make arrangements for the new arrivals, he noticed a crowd gathered around Catilen's bed. On his way to disperse it, she sat up. He prepared to shoulder his way through the crowd, but it parted when he came near.

"Are you all right?" he asked, reaching for Catilen's hand. "Shouldn't you be resting?"

"I'm fine." Catilen reinforced her words with a dazzling smile. "I was just about to try my hand with the injured. Something tells me I'll be a lot more useful now."

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? This is all new to you. You shouldn’t overwork yourself and you might not recognize the signs of-”

“Damian, I’ll be fine.” Catilen pressed his hand between hers. “I have something of a guide. The island knows what it’s doing. All I have to do is show it what I want, remember?”

That produced a small pang of jealousy. *Was magic always so easy for Sentomoru?* Now Catilen, who’d never studied arcane weavings, could easily surpass him. “It’s been through its own ordeal,” he muttered.

“Nature is an excellent healer.” Catilen stretched and eased herself off the bed. “The best, in fact. That’s why I’m uniquely suited to assisting here.”

“Over here m’lady,” a young woman called above the buzz of conversation. A kimono-clad staff member stood beside a bed across the room, waving to catch their attention. When Catilen reached her, she pulled aside the patient’s blanket. Most of his leg was covered in bandages. Blood oozed through the gauze pads, the binding obviously unable to staunch the flow.

“His injuries are worst.” The young woman kept her voice low. “We feared he’d lose the leg if you slept too long. Especially with Doctor Quamoto...” She shook her head, choking on the words.

They’d found the wizened old doctor bent over his leather bag, crushed when the roof collapsed. He hadn’t been able to move fast enough to escape when the chaos started. He was one of many.

From the look of sympathy on Catilen’s face, someone had already given her the news. “Thank you, Ilar.” She laid a hand on the other woman’s shoulder. “And please, call me Catilen. It’s my name, after all.”

“Oh m’lady, I couldn’t!” Ilar recoiled, repelled by the suggestion. “You’ve taken Lord Sentomoru’s place. We all know it. Many of us can feel it. I do.”

Damian bit the inside of his lip. He had to let Catilen handle this, though sorrow clouded her eyes and diminished her smile.

“In some ways I have,” she replied, her voice soft. “I can never fully replace him, nor do I wish to. But I’m going to do my best for this place. Go ahead and tell the others what we talked about. I’m sure I’ll be a few minutes.”

Ilar grinned, half-bowed and ran back to the group they’d left behind. Damian heard her excited murmuring, but kept his focus on Catilen.

“What’s that all about?”

“The islanders want to give Sentomoru a funeral. They need to do it quickly to ensure the safe passing of his immortal soul into the afterlife. It’s important to them. I told them to do whatever’s necessary, so long as it doesn’t detract from the relief effort.”

Though Damian gave Catilen enough space to work, he leaned close and kept his voice low. Catilen’s patient looked glassy eyed, but he worried what would happen if someone overheard. “I’m surprised they haven’t turned on us for killing him.” Perhaps they didn’t know.

“I suspect the island has something to do with it. It takes an active effort to discourage that inexorable pull, and I don’t have much to spare at the moment. It’ll take years to wean the island’s inhabitants from that force and anyone who’s spent enough time here might never be the same, even if I’m successful.”

“So nothing’s changed.” Damian’s stomach fell. He took no pleasure from killing Sentomoru, though he’d longed to strike at the man for weeks. When he spoke the words, he reassured himself that good would come of it. But he’d only managed to preserve the status quo.

“Things have changed.” The corners of Catilen’s lips curled upward again. “For one thing, I

can do this..." She laid her hand on the injured man's leg.

If not for his mage sight, Damian would have wondered what she meant. Green energy flowed between her hand and the leg beneath the wrappings. The tint suggested both that it was earth-based energy and that it was meant for a natural purpose, such as healing or growing.

When the glow faded, Catilen peeled the blood-soaked bandages aside. Smooth skin lay beneath, not a scratch or scar left by the injury.

Damian grinned. "You're right. You're a natural."

Catilen discarded the soiled bandages and washed her hands in a basin set near the bed. "Other things are changing too. I can't instantly return these people to themselves, but I can keep the island from claiming anyone new."

As if her words were a summons, Ilar shot across the room. Grabbing the sleeve of Catilen's tattered t-shirt, she gave it an urgent tug. "M'lady, m'lady! There's a group of men down at the docks with strange weapons. We asked them to go back to their rooms, but they refuse."

Catilen laid a hand on her shoulder to calm her. "It's all right, Ilar. I'll take care of it. Move the patients most in need of my healing to the front of the room. I'll tend them as soon as I get back."

"The soldiers?" Damian fell into step beside her as she swept toward the door.

"Sounds like," Catilen sounded pleased. "So it seems we have made a difference after all."

The motley group of soldiers wore mismatched uniforms, some showing signs of recent struggle. Damian wondered what happened when they arrived. Had they tried to fight Sentomoru before he subdued them? They stood in a tight knot, whispering. Catilen came to a halt about ten feet from the edge of their circle. Several glanced in her direction and the speed of their hissing increased. Eventually, one soldier approached her.

"Tony," Catilen said before he had a chance to speak. She offered him a smile along with her hand.

"Lieutenant Miller," the soldier replied as he shook her hand. "I recognize you, Miss..."

"Catilen. Catilen Taylor."

"Miss Taylor," the soldier seemed relieved to have her last name. "I recognize you, but I'm afraid my memory's a bit fuzzy. Perhaps you could help me fill the gaps?"

"Until recently, we've both been guests at this bathhouse." Catilen jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the looming silhouette of the building jutting from the mountain. "I have reason to believe the former owner manipulated your mind. Yours and those of your men."

"Is that so?" Lieutenant Miller arched an eyebrow, a thoughtful look on his face. "I recall one hell of a vacation before the earthquake, almost like a dream. But I'm not in the habit of abandoning my post for a hot bath and a fancy dinner."

"I think you'll find the rest of your men feel the same. I wish I could tell you more, but it happened before we arrived." Catilen bowed her head and took a deep breath, steeling herself for the next part of the conversation. "Do you remember what happened to Paul?"

The lieutenant bowed his head in turn. "I'm not sure how we're going to explain that one back at HQ."

"We're pretty sure the former lord of the island arranged his death," Damian interjected, hoping to spare Catilen from relating the tale. "There's evidence he found a way to fight the mind control. He died in the line of duty. Perhaps that will help you write your report?"

"Thank you." The soldier nodded in his direction, offering a brief glimpse of the gratitude in his eyes. "I will. The more immediate issue at the moment is; what happens now? Some of my men are missing and we're all a bit anxious to leave."

“Some of your men may be among the injured,” Catilen replied. “You’re welcome to fetch them from the bathhouse, but I do ask that you put their health first. If they can’t be moved, I’ll see to it they’re mended and returned to the mainland. As for the rest, do you have transportation?”

“We’ll radio for backup, Miss Taylor. We worried we’d meet with resistance when we tried to depart.”

“You won’t,” Catilen assured him without hesitation. “The former lord of the isle can’t cause your men any more harm. He’s dead, in fact. Which puts me in charge now, I suppose.” Responsibility settled over her shoulders as she spoke. They sagged from the weight. *Perhaps she just now realized what she’s undertaken.*

“I’m happy you’re headed home. But please advise your superiors to keep their men away from these shores.”

Tony Miller wriggled his eyebrows. “Is that a threat, Miss Taylor?”

“Not at all. As you and your men can attest, this island is a dangerous place. I simply can’t ensure the safety of any soldiers who come back.”

The soldier gave her a skeptical look, tilting his head in a way that suggested he found her explanation unacceptable. But he nodded, and Damian relaxed. *Hopefully his experience is enough to make him wary.*

“I’ll do my best, Miss.” The soldier pressed his lips into a thin line. “But I can’t offer any assurance of my success.”

* * * * *

The islanders laid Kenjiro Sentomoru to rest at sunset three days later. The funeral arrangements were hasty, but still as grandiose as the recovering island dwellers could manage.

They built him a wooden bier the first day. Whenever someone found a free moment, they filed past, bowed their head and offered whatever flowers came to hand. The morning before the funeral, they transferred the body to its casket. The local carpenters worked around the clock to carve the man’s likeness into the lid. When they had time left over, they embellished the sides with a flower vine motif. Iar told Catilen the casket should have been carved from marble and inlaid with gold, but they hadn’t the time to devote to such extravagance. Whenever they despaired, Catilen assured the islanders the departed spirit would appreciate their preparations.

The villagers erected a trio of simple wooden archways at the grave site. She suspected they’d be decorated with carvings when time allowed. For the moment, they were hung with flowers. An unadorned headstone beside the fresh-dug grave bore only the man’s name. That too, she expected to change.

Catilen let the islanders handle the arrangements. It seemed fitting they lay their lord to rest. She hadn’t known him, hadn’t seen any of the good they spoke of. She hadn’t met the gentle, friendly guardian described in their bitter-sweet tales.

She shifted from foot to foot as they lowered the casket into the earth, ill at ease. She’d known from the start she couldn’t escape attending the ceremony. Those enamored with the island before Sentomoru’s death embraced her as his successor. They trusted her absolutely, looking to her for the same guidance, wisdom and protection they once found in him.

It was daunting.

She didn’t mourn Sentomoru’s passing. She saw despair in the eyes of his subjects and heard echoes of desolation in their choked sobs as they gathered atop the hill that would be his final resting place. Yet, she couldn’t summon a shred of emotion to contribute.

She couldn't forgive Kenjiro Sentomoru the actions of his last days. Even now she shuddered at the memory of his hands upon her. Nor could she forget the destruction he unleashed in his last moments. But she took no pleasure from his demise. This was not justice. It was a waste.

Was there no way he could learn from his mistakes? Death, devastation and injury, all of it could have been avoided. What drove him to this? Petty jealousy? Arrogance? Or had the island's heady power driven him over the edge? Will I face the same fate one day?

Power lurked in the back of her mind, ready to act if she but flexed her fingers. Power she didn't want. She didn't want to manipulate these people. She wasn't even sure she wanted to lead them. So far, the island seemed content with her decisions.

But she didn't begrudge the islanders their sorrow. They needed this outlet, this closure, so they could move on.

As the casket struck ground with a dull thud, all eyes turned to her. Catilen moved to the foot of the open grave and bowed her head. There was no one worse suited to this task and, yet, no one else Sentomoru would have chosen. She drew a deep breath as a chill wind caressed her cheeks.

"Kenjiro Sentomoru devoted his life to this island. Now we give him back to it. May his soul find peace while his body returns to the earth. May the trees and flowers carry his essence to all corners of his realm. And may the birds and bees allow him to fly."

What else could she say? She couldn't praise a man she didn't know. A man she hated. A soft, strangled sob drew her gaze. The islanders nodded approval. It was enough.

She fell back as the mourners stepped forward.

Without prompting, they formed a line. At the front of the line, a bent, gnarled old woman took a handful of dirt from the pile beside the grave. She sprinkled it over the casket as she passed. Then she lifted her dirty hand to wipe away a tear, smudging her cheek with the grave dirt.

As if it were a ritual, each of the mourners followed suit. Some murmured soft goodbyes, some tried to muster smiles and others whispered thank-yous. All raised their hands to their damp cheeks, smudging themselves with dirt as a final tribute to the lord they loved.

Catilen inched backward until she stood at the edge of the lantern light. She recognized Ilar and Lilianna among the throng, and the young gardener, Tenolin. Only Melana sought her when she reached the end of the line, briefly sharing a fond embrace. When it was clear no one would notice, Catilen retreated down the hill.

Night fell over the island like a cloak, but there was no one to light the lanterns down at the bathhouse. Every able body attended the funeral, all of them likely to linger awhile. All except Damian, who melted out of the shadows when she reached the bottom of the hill.

"I thought you weren't going to attend," she murmured, brushing a stray tear from the corner of her eye. *Where did that come from?* Damian hadn't provided a reason for avoiding the funeral, and Catilen hadn't pressed.

"I wasn't. I mean, I didn't." He shook his head. She wanted to believe the anxiety lines at the corners of his lips and eyes were just stress and fatigue from the past few days, but she knew him better than that.

"What happened?"

"The soldiers are back. Or maybe they're new ones. They don't seem to have the same commander."

Anger and fear compelled Catilen to move quickly. Damian didn't need to tell her where to

go; she sensed the disturbance. Tree branches swayed, a breeze kicked up by her agitation. “What do they want?”

“Nothing good.” Damian matched her stride for stride. “They want to talk to the person in charge. I told them I’d fetch you.”

Catilen didn’t reply. She wished the crescent of soldiers standing on the shadow-speckled beach surprised her, but they didn’t. When the military hadn’t ambushed them that first day, she’d hoped they’d accepted Lieutenant Miller’s warning about the dangers of the island. She should have known only bureaucratic red-tape kept them at bay.

Steeling herself, Catilen marched into their midst. She didn’t recognize any faces among the group, though the rims of their helmets obscured their features. “What’s the meaning of this?” she demanded, trying to sound authoritative.

Their commander stepped forward. “You’re in charge?” he demanded, folding his arms behind his back. The other soldiers gripped their guns, barrels lowered for the moment.

“I am Lady Catilen Taylor.” She presented her rejected title as a badge of pride. She wanted to seem official and she didn’t want them guessing where she came from. “And you are?”

“Colonel Lewis. I’m here on behalf of the United States of America. You people and your island are within our borders. We’ve come to secure your cooperation.”

“Is that so, Colonel? And just what do you want us to cooperate with? Surely you aren’t going to force us out of our home in the name of your government?”

“That depends on how willing you are to cooperate,” Colonel Lewis replied gruffly.

Catilen seethed. Clouds formed across the clear sky, obscuring the fading sunlight. As one, the soldiers activated the lights mounted to their gun sights.

“I’m willing to answer your questions, Colonel, but I’m afraid that’s all I can do. We’ve got a funeral going on here. You might not have noticed in your ships, but there was an earthquake here a few days ago.”

“I’m well aware, little miss,” the colonel snarled, apparently not fond of her tone. “But we didn’t come to be turned away. You attacked our men. Our government isn’t going to sit on its laurels and let you do as you please while you’re within our borders.”

“Then we’ll just have to move,” Catilen replied tartly. “And we didn’t attack your men. They were caught in the earthquake. We offered them medical assistance. Is this how your government shows gratitude?”

“That’s not the story I heard.” The colonel took another step forward. “Not only did they fail to report for weeks, our men returned with wild stories of subversion and mind control. We’ve had casualties. Someone has to answer for that.”

“Someone has answered for that,” Catilen snapped, refusing to be cowed. “Our former ruler wasn’t as diplomatic as I am. He paid the ultimate price for his heavy-handed tactics. I’m sorry for the loss of your men, it grieves me greatly, but now I have to ask you to leave. If you do so peacefully, we’ll depart your waters as soon as we’re able.”

“Is that a threat?” At a motion from the colonel, the soldiers raised their guns. Damian took a half-step forward, trying to put himself between her and danger. *As if it would make a difference.* She raised an arm to keep him back and narrowed her eyes at the colonel.

“It’s a suggestion. Here’s another one; put those away.”

“I’d like to take your word for it, little lady, but I’m afraid that isn’t how we work. You will submit to a search or you will all be detained.”

Thunder rumbled in the distance, as if the island offered answer. Catilen fought the urge to smile. Those supernatural responses to her private thoughts would be useful this evening. “I

don't think you want to try that." A gust of wind tore through the group. The trees on the hill remained still.

"Those are my orders, missy, and I intend to follow them." Colonel Lewis motioned his men forward.

In unison, the soldiers took a cautious step forward, complying with their commander's orders. Before they got any further, the clips fell from each of their guns simultaneously. As they glanced at each other, lightning struck the beach twenty feet to either side of their formation.

<Nice touch with the guns,> Catilen sent silent gratitude to her companion.

<I thought the same about the lightning,> he replied, his tone suggesting a grin.

"Leave," Catilen commanded, turning her back now the guns were useless. "You and your weapons aren't welcome here."

"This isn't over," the colonel snarled. "We won't be cowed by parlor tricks!"

Ignoring him, Catilen retreated up the beach, her pace measured. She sensed the soldiers moving in the opposite direction. She never looked back to check.

Damian caught up with her halfway back to the bathhouse. "Their ships are close, Cat," he said, breathless. "I think they're moving to attack."

Goddess!

A sharp crack split the night, confirmation of Damian's suspicions. A moment later a shockwave swept across the island. A plume of smoke blossomed in the distance. Screaming mourners abandoned the half-filled grave and darted for the safety of the bathhouse.

"We can't stay here." Damian gave her a significant look.

"I don't suppose it's as simple as unloading their guns this time around," Catilen agreed.

"I'll hold them off as long as I can." Damian squeezed her shoulders. "Can you get us out of here?"

"I'm going to have to." Lifting her chin, she set her jaw with grim determination. "I won't let this come to naught." She laid a hand on his cheek. "Don't get yourself killed."

Damian flashed her a grin before he took off toward the beach. Catilen hurried in the opposite direction. Frantic islanders mobbed her as she approached the bathhouse doors. Several people tugged on her sleeves while others demanded to know what was happening. She tried to shoulder her way through them. She didn't have time for pleasantries or kindness.

"Get to the dining hall," she commanded over the din. "Help each other. Don't panic. I'll take care of it."

A stern figure detached from the crowd, batting the seeking arms away from her. "You heard the Lady," Tenolin proclaimed, clearing a path through the crowd. "She can't work if we delay her."

The commands echoed through the crowd and the press shifted. "Don't push!" Melana cried, bending to help a fallen patron.

"One at a time!" Ilar called further down the hallway. "There's room for everyone."

Darting down the clear path, Catilen claimed the first available room and barricaded herself inside with a chair. Sentomoru's former office was the last place she wanted to be, but she needed privacy and what little peace she could get. She knelt on the floor and placed her hands in front of her.

What do I do?

The island never answered in words. Its impressions were easy to miss if she wasn't *listening*. She repeated the question several times, trying to focus. *Deep breaths, in and out.* Her mind fell into the familiar pattern.

We have to leave. How do we do that?

A round of weapons fire shattered the stillness, the sound barely muffled by the thick walls. Nothing struck the bathhouse, but screams erupted down the hall.

Concentrate!

The world fell away. Her perception shifted. Much like when she crafted the maze, Catilen viewed the island as though she floated above it. This time she saw her entire domain; trees, canyons, rivers, the mountain and the bathhouse. It all rested in the center of a churning, turbulent mass. *Not liquid*, she realized. *Not the ocean*.

Power. Waves and whirlpools of pure power, surging and eddying around her tiny chunk of land. And beneath it all, the anchor that held the island in her world, buried in the center of crisscrossing lines of energy, brighter and stronger than the pool where the island floated. *So Damian was right; the island does travel on ley lines!*

Zeroing in on those thick avenues of power, the island enhanced the details. Every couple seconds a flash rushed past the island, like pulses of electrical power hurtling through copper wires. This must be the force she used to propel the island elsewhere. She received a strong sense of affirmation. *Thank the goddess the island knows what to do!*

But how to release the anchor? Did she simply will it to happen?

The island's revulsion knocked her off-balance. Head reeling, stomach churning, Catilen closed her eyes and swallowed the bile in her throat. The island didn't want to leave. *Too soon*, she kept thinking. *It isn't time*.

Another round of weapons fire filled the night. The blasts sounded closer and the ground rocked with impacts. *It doesn't matter if it's too soon. We have to leave. Now*.

As long as the bathhouse remained unscathed, she didn't worry about Damian. His magic held the military at bay somehow. *Perhaps he's led them on a merry chase*.

Forcing her focus inward, Catilen grasped the image of those surging power lines. She imagined the anchor disconnecting.

With a shudder and a groan, the island responded to her command. For a single terrifying moment, she felt unhinged. The island floated askew in some nether limbo, flirting with the edge of oblivion.

As her head cleared, the island formed a new image; the crisscrossing grid of ley lines, power pulses surging between them. She had to choose a destination residing on a line that intersected the island's current location. Though the island touched only a handful of lines on the grid, there were still thousands of options to choose from. Faced with near-infinite possibilities, Catilen balked.

How do I identify a safe destination?

The floor lurched beneath her knees.

<*Now would be a good time to leave!*> Damian's silent interruption replaced the grid with a formation of jets zooming toward the island.

Catilen didn't have time to respond. She slammed up an extra set of shields, hoping Damian would get the message. Then she recalled the grid of destinations. *Anywhere is better than here*. She reached for a destination at random.

A power pulse caught the island in its momentum as it surged along a ley line. The impact nearly tore it to shreds. The ground heaved. The wind howled. The bathhouse walls creaked. A terrifying rumble echoed deep inside the mountain accompanied by a surge of heat from beneath the surface.

She'd done something wrong.

If the volcano erupted, they were all as good as dead, even if the island moved. There'd be no time to evacuate in the new world.

Stop! she pleaded frantically. *Go back!*

The earth fell still. The wind died down. The mountain rumbled like an upset stomach before it settled. The anchor snapped back into place.

The thunder and quake of weapons fire shattered her moment of relief.

<I don't know how you managed it, Cat, but those bombs just passed right through us!>

<We were almost gone. But I did it wrong, Damian. I'm afraid if I try again, the volcano will erupt for sure. Sentomoru almost set it off when he went mad.> Or perhaps he hadn't awakened it. He may have tamed the volcano through sheer force of will. Could she do the same while the island was in motion?

<You can do it, Cat. You have to. Those planes are coming back for another pass and I can't distract them for long.>

All she wanted to do was sleep. The floor suddenly seemed inviting. She could curl in a comfortable ball and sleep for a week. *Or never wake up.*

Determination swelled in her chest, erasing her fatigue. She would not lose another life to a pointless conflict. Whatever force, whatever choice, whatever random chance brought her here; it was where she belonged. As caretaker to the island and its people. As an explorer uncovering the wonders of the universe. As Damian's partner for the rest of the journey. *I won't let them take it away. Not when the letter I wrote my mother is finally true. Not while there's something I can do about it.*

Clinging to the image of those power lines, Catilen clawed the island's anchor free. Holding a deep breath in her chest, she turned to her ever-present guide. *Take us someplace safe. Somewhere we can recover. Somewhere we can rest.*

The island knew where to go.

Power hurtled down the ley line just as Damian sent her another frantic message. The wave caught the island and carried it along the grid at mindboggling speed. But the bathhouse didn't seem to be moving. The floor was steady beneath her, untroubled by the incessant quake of gunfire. *Maybe the island isn't moving. Maybe the universe is shifting beneath us.*

They reached another grand junction of swirling arcane eddies and the island caught hold. She prodded the new anchor, testing its security. Satisfied they wouldn't slip into the nether, Catilen returned to herself.

For a long moment she lay on the floor, gasping to catch her breath. Silence ruled. There were no cracks of gunfire, no shouts or screams. No more manic telepathy. When she regained equilibrium, she stood and ventured into the hallway.

A sea of excited islanders carried her out the door.

The military ships were gone. As were the blue sky and cerulean ocean. Violet waves broke across the beach. The last hints of burnished copper burned on the far horizon. The outline of twin moons grew crisper as the alien sun fled. Strange star formations dotted the sky. New birdsong filled the air.

Weak with relief, Catilen's knees buckled beneath her. Shouldering his way through the crowd, Damian caught her moments before she fell. He swept her into his arms, off her feet and around a full circle.

"You did it!" He grinned. "By whatever gods there may be, Catilen, you did it!"

"I did," she breathed. "We did it. We're free now. Safe. That's all that ever mattered." She kissed him on the lips, not caring anymore who saw.

“I get the feeling it’s going to be a long journey.”

For the first time in ages, Catilen breathed easily. It didn’t matter what challenges accompanied the new sunrise. She’d greet them with open arms. With Damian at her side.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, my love.”

Author's Notes

Megan here! On behalf of both myself and James; thank you so much for reading the first book in the *Mystical Island Trilogy*. This is my first book and hitting the publish button took a lot of courage and sleepless nights, let me assure you. It's been a fantastic adventure sharing our work with the world and I couldn't be happier we decided to do it.

Please leave a review to let us know how we did; knowing what we did well and where we fell flat helps us improve as writers. Plus it would mean the world to us to know what you thought!

While *Island of Lost Forever*s started out as a stand-alone book, both my co-author and I agreed that there was far more story left to tell by the time we got to the end of the book. The series will ultimately be a trilogy, with the second book forthcoming next year (2015).

If you'd like to keep up with future releases, please sign up for my mailing list: megancutler.net/free-book/. In addition to news about future projects, I like to offer my subscribers special deals from both myself and others.

If you'd like to leave feedback on your favorite parts of the story, or see sneak peeks of upcoming projects, consider joining me on Facebook (facebook.com/megancutlerauthor/) or Twitter (twitter.com/Megan_Cutler); I'd love to speak with you! You can also find James over on Twitter as well (twitter.com/blackguardpress).

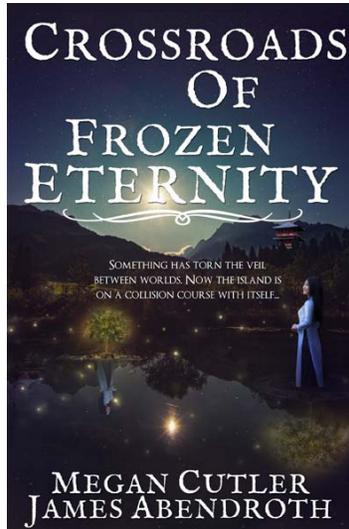
For more of me check out megancutler.net where I blog every Monday and release free short fiction every Friday. For more of James check out blackguardpress.com where James posts tons of RPG resources.

Thanks again for reading our book, and thanks to my co-author James for taking this journey with me. We hope to see you next book!

~Megan Cutler

Catilen and Damian's adventures continue in:

Crossroads of Frozen Eternity



[Purchase on Amazon](#)

Find details and sample chapters at: megancutler.net/cofe or via [InstaFreebie](#)

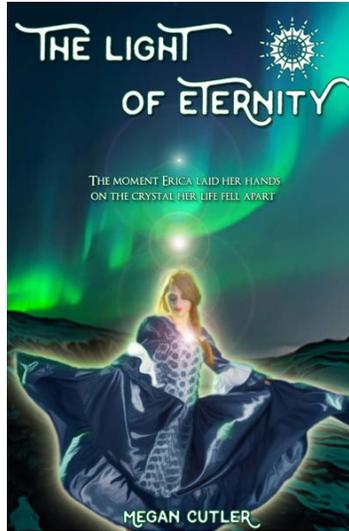
In the eight years since Sentomoru's death, the island has flourished under Catilen's rule. But Damian can't escape the former lord's shadow. It haunts him keenest in the form of Catilen's seven-year-old daughter, Morulin. Damian desperately wants to be part of her life, but fears rejection when she learns the truth about her father's death.

With the island at her back, Catilen thought she could avoid any problem larger than Damian's insecurities. But something has torn the veil between worlds, setting the island on a collision course with an alternate version of it itself. Face to face with the man she's spent the last eight years trying to forget, Catilen can no longer dismiss Damian's concerns as paranoia. Worst of all, the island's predicament has infected Catilen's daughter with a mysterious ailment.

Catilen must find a way to put her personal strife aside, and stop Damian's from consuming him, before the sickness infects the rest of the island's inhabitants. But old wounds still remain and it seems their struggle against Kenjiro Sentomoru is far from over.

Also by Megan Cutler...

The Light of Eternity
Book 1 of the Eternity's Empire Collection



[Purchase on Amazon](#)

[Download the first chapter FREE on Amazon](#)

[Download the second chapter FREE via Instafreebie](#)

The moment she laid her hands on the crystal, Erica's life fell apart.

The special archaeological dig in Antarctica was supposed to be a path to redemption for Erica Brown, a chance to escape university conduct probation and looming threats of expulsion. But a chance to explore the dig's prized temple ends in disaster when Erica damages the site's most valuable artifact.

Now she and her friends are haunted by strange visions and stuck in the center of a bizarre series of events. While her friends appear to have acquired magical powers, Erica isn't so lucky. Her next misstep could be a death sentence and she's powerless to help her friends. United by their plight, the girls struggle to make sense of the situation while preventing further catastrophe.

Can Erica discover her hidden strength in time to solve the mystery?

This book contains chapters 1-5 of the *Eternity's Empire* saga (*Crystal Shrouded Goddess*, *Light of Eternity*, *Curse of Chronos*, *Dance with Death*, and *Dark Rituals*), previously published separately.

About the Authors

Muse tamer, character wrangler, creator and destroyer of worlds, Megan Cutler writes the kind of science fiction and fantasy stories she has always enjoyed reading. She grew up in a small town in central Pennsylvania and moved to Canada after marrying the love of her life. In 2013 she published her first book, *Island of Lost Forever*, the beginning of the *Mystical Island Trilogy*. She spends her days honing her craft, trying to develop enough ice crystals in her blood to stop feeling the cold during Canadian winters and hoping to appease her characters enough that they will allow her to sleep. Her latest project, *Eternity's Empire*, follows a group of college students who discover they possess the power of ancient mythological goddesses.

Find more of Megan's work at: megancutler.net

Follow Megan on Twitter: [@Megan_Cutler](https://twitter.com/Megan_Cutler)

James Abendroth is an avid reader and tabletop role playing gamer. In recent years he has tried his hand at writing both novels and role playing games. He lives in Dallas with his wife of 16 years. They also share their house with two cats and a dog...which is far too many animals.

Find more of James's work at: blackguardpress.com

Follow James on Twitter: [@BlackGuardPress](https://twitter.com/BlackGuardPress)