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BLOOD LEGACY:
HEIR TO THE THRONE

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BLOOD

LEGACY

*HEIR TO
THE THRONE*

by **KERRI HAWKINS**

CHAPTER 1

THE BOY RAN SWIFTLY ACROSS THE TERRACED STEPS, his sandaled feet barely touching the smooth stone. The hem of his robe was embroidered in gold and stained with blood. The smell of smoke was acrid in his nose and his lungs burned all the more in his exertion and terror. The screams of the dying echoed throughout the city.

He saw soldiers ahead of him and felt a flicker of hope. But before he could start toward them, the soldiers were ambushed by barbarians. The marauders were huge, their size magnified by the pelts of animal skin draped over their shoulders, the filthy hair that ran down their backs and the wicked axes and clubs they wielded. The guards, armed only with pikes, offered little resistance and were beaten to the ground. One was impaled, the other beheaded.

The boy shrank back into the shadows. He knew the barbarians would not spare him. He had already seen them slaughter women and children; they were sparing no one. The fortunate died instantly before they could be tortured or raped. The cries of the less fortunate told him which fate he would prefer.

As the boy hid in the shadows, it did not occur to him to include himself in the category of “children” although he was but 12 seasons. He had been schooled for great responsibility since his birth and acted accordingly.

This thought gave the boy pause. He steeled himself, willing the trembling of his body to stop. He peered around the corner through the smoke and haze. The barbarians had moved on.

He darted from the shadows and sprinted down the corridor. He leaped the dead guards, skidding as he landed in a pool of their slippery blood. He regained his balance on the run and darted for the back stairway, one that was concealed to casual observation.

He took the stairs two at a time and was quickly at the parapet. He stood on the great wall and started across the walkway that led to his household. He glanced down into the city and stopped, stunned.

The city was on fire, the great statues toppled, the beautiful buildings defaced. The temple was defiled and the bodies of priests and guards were strewn about the steps.

The boy shook himself free from his horror. He had to get home. He hurried across the walkway, cautious lest anyone should see him. When he reached the other side, he pushed through the heavy wooden door.

A beautiful woman turned at the sound of his entrance, fear on her refined features. The fear was replaced with relief as she rushed toward him, pulling him to her breast.

“Ambrosius, I thought for certain you were dead.”

The boy held his mother tightly, unable to speak of the horrors he had seen. When his mother finally loosened her embrace and leaned back to look at his face, he knew she was aware of the terror in the streets below.

The woman gazed down at her son, running her fingers through his silky black hair. People said he favored her, but she felt he possessed the beauty of Apollo himself. Her expression darkened. A beauty that could only hurt him in the present situation.

They both started as the door downstairs was smashed inward. They could hear the shouts of the barbarians as they began ransacking the house. It would be a matter of minutes before they found the stairway leading to the upper passageway, then their room. She withdrew a knife from her robes.

The boy took a step backward, gazing with resignation at the

blade. He would accept his fate with bravery and honor. He was surprised, however, when his mother turned the blade in her hand and handed it to him hilt-first. She knelt down, holding him by the shoulders.

“There is a door at the base of the stairway. It leads to a hidden passageway that will take you away from the city. You must wait for me to distract these men, and then you must flee.”

The boy shook his head. “Come with me. I cannot leave you behind.”

The woman’s expression was sad. They might have made it earlier, but now it was too late. Neither of them would make it without a diversion. She held the boy tightly.

“Listen to me. You must live, and you must grow to become the man I know you will be.”

The boy felt tears begin to form and he fought them back. “I will stay here and protect you.”

The beautiful woman shook her head. “No,” she said, her jaw clenched, “You will leave here now.” She felt her own tears threaten to flow. “And one day you will avenge me. Promise me that.”

The boy angrily brushed the single tear that slipped out. His own jaw clenched and he nodded his head mutely, unable to speak. A loud noise in the hallway startled them both.

“Hide over there,” the woman commanded, “and as soon as you are able, run.”

The boy barely had time to duck behind the curtain when the door smashed inward and two burly, filthy men filled the doorway. The first came through the door bearing a bloody battle axe. The second was close behind.

The woman gazed at them fearfully, but with a proud tilt to her chin. She would not give these men the satisfaction of knowing her terror.

It did not matter to them. The first glanced at the woman, noting her exquisite beauty. His gaze settled lewdly on her cleavage visible beneath her robes. He noted the purple color of her garments, and grinned broadly. He set his axe aside and reached for his belt, loosening

his pants.

The boy tried to drown out the sounds, tried to block out the grunts of the man and the cries of his mother. His tears burned through his eyelids, and his breath came in ragged gasps as the air seared his throat. He clenched the dagger, wanting to rush from his place of hiding and impale it in the grunting man's back.

But he would not. He stood upright, his bitterness again nearly overwhelming his resolve. But he had promised his mother. He forced himself, just once, to look into the room, memorizing every detail of the horrific scene. And then he fled, his tears blinding him as he sought the hidden door.

He found it exactly where his mother had said it was and pushed it inward, smelling the welcome smell of fecund earth. He pulled the heavy door closed behind him, and although the passage was completely black, he began staggering forward in the darkness.

Ryan sat up in bed. The dreams were so frequent now, and so strange.

She stood upright, a lithe figure unfolding to six feet, if not more. She was a striking young woman, moving with preternatural grace as she pulled on a plain white shirt and a pair of simple cotton slacks. It was a testament to her extraordinary beauty that the outfit on her was stunning.

She brushed blonde hair from her eyes and did not bother to glance at the mirror as she left her room.

Ryan stepped down the elaborate staircase, absently running her hand along the smooth mahogany railing. She was somewhat surprised it was dark outside. It seemed as if it had just been morning.

She moved into the den, pleased to see the fire burning in the fireplace that took up the entire west wall. She settled into the chair before the flames, reaching for the glass of wine that was placed at her elbow.

“Thank you, Edward.”

Edward bowed low. He had served his master for centuries now and although she needed little, he could anticipate most of what she might want. It was that familiarity which communicated to him her current mood, a certain preoccupation that although not unusual, was generally significant.

Edward cleared his throat. “Is there something troubling you, my lord?”

Although the masculine title should have seemed anomalous, somehow it did not. Although most of their Kind possessed a degree of androgyny, Ryan was the epitome of it. When Edward first met Ryan centuries before, she had been traveling as a handsome young boy, a deception she perpetuated without effort.

Ryan was thoughtful. “I am having odd dreams.”

Edward nodded, settling into the chair across from her. Some might have been shocked at the casual way in which the manservant interacted with his liege, but he did so only because Ryan demanded it. And he engaged in such informalities only when they were alone.

Ryan turned to Edward, and to the casual observer it would appear a youngster seeking the advice of an older mentor. But a glance into Ryan’s eyes told a different story, that of someone far older than Edward, one of immense power, one who in all likelihood needed little advice.

What Ryan did require, however, was a confidante, a role Edward had ably performed for centuries.

“I am dreaming through someone else’s eyes.”

Edward nodded again. It was not unusual for their Kind to see through the eyes of those they had Shared with, and no one possessed the gift as Ryan did. When two were locked in the act of transferring blood, it was possible for one to see through the mind of the other, not merely experiencing what the other had seen, but experiencing it as if it were firsthand.

Ryan continued slowly. “The eyes of someone I have never Shared with.”

This gave Edward pause. It was possible for someone who was

extremely gifted to see the Memories of the one engaged in the act, and also the Memories that person had obtained through Sharing. In other words, someone like Ryan could see not only with the mind of those she Shared with, but with the mind of everyone that person had Shared with as well.

However, Edward had a sense that Ryan was speaking of something beyond that, and he had misgivings over what she would say next.

“The eyes of someone no one from our Kind has ever Shared with.”

She said it matter-of-factly, belying the extreme import of the comment.

“Are you sure?” Edward asked, uncertainty in his voice. He was not one to doubt his master, but no one had ever described this type of event. “Perhaps they are just dreams?”

Ryan shook her head. “No, they are definitely Memories. Thoughts, emotions, events, just like the kind seen when Sharing. But they are of a time and place that I have never seen, a time that pre-dates even my father. And I do not know to whom they belong.”

“Can you place the time period?” Edward asked.

“Not exactly,” Ryan replied, “I see clothing that makes me think of the Roman Empire, but having no direct experience of that time, I cannot confirm it.”

Edward nodded his understanding. Historians rarely got common garb correct, having so little to go on. Someone like Ryan, however, had firsthand experience of the last 1500 years. She had direct experience from the time of her birth in the 14th century, and the indirect experience she had from Sharing with the Others, the most ancient being her father. A question occurred to Edward.

“Do you know when Victor was born?”

Ryan shook her head again. “No, he does not even know.”

This surprised Edward and Ryan explained. “There seems to be some type of ‘event horizon’ in the Memories of the Old Ones. The most ancient, Victor, Abigail,” a complex mix of emotions flitted across Ryan’s face, “Aeron—nothing in their minds gives hint of where they

came from.”

“Is it possible they are hiding it from you?”

Ryan nodded. “I have considered that possibility and I do not believe it to be true. I get the sense they do not know how they came to be.”

Edward wished to continue the fascinating conversation but he sensed a presence in the hallway. He stood and moved to the entry, pulling the heavy door inward.

Ryan smiled, Edward did not have to say anything. She, too, had sensed the approaching presence. Edward made the announcement with formality, anyway.

“You have a gentleman caller.”

Ryan did not turn around. “Please send him in.”

Edward glanced down at the tiny figure grasping his pant leg. The toddler looked up with earnest blue eyes, and when Edward nodded to him, the boy ambled into the room toward the chair.

Ryan felt the presence at her elbow and reached down. She grasped the small boy by the back of his shirt, lifting him with one hand, much like a lioness would grasp a cub by the back of its neck. She dangled the small boy in front of her, gazing at him in mock seriousness.

“And what do we have here?”

The little boy gazed at his mother in adoration. He could not yet speak, but shared a mental bond with her so great he did not need to. A mischievous smile played about his lips, a smile so much like Ryan’s that, if that were the only similarity, it alone would give his lineage away.

Edward watched the pair. That was far from the only similarity. Although the boy had jet-black hair and deep blue eyes, he looked so much like Ryan it was astonishing. In fact, it was probably good the boy had the slight physical variations because otherwise it would appear Ryan had cloned herself.

The dangling boy giggled and Ryan relented. She settled him onto her lap and he immediately pressed against her, curling into the curve of her arm. As Edward watched them, the analogy of the lioness

and the cub returned to him. Ryan was not even close to a traditional maternal figure, rather she cared for the boy with a combination of fierceness and tenderness that evoked the image of the great cats. The boy, for his part, responded in kind. He was fearless, full of spirit and limitless curiosity.

Edward hated to disturb the familial scene, but he did have a job to do.

“Has the boy eaten?”

Ryan smiled to herself. Edward knew full well that Drake had not eaten. It was just his way of reminding her that the boy did in fact need to eat. Requiring no food herself, she occasionally had to be reminded. She gazed into the blue eyes of her son, eyes far warmer than those of his father.

“It is not as if you will let me forget, hmm?” She bunched the back of the boy’s shirt and again lifted him with one hand, sending him into giggles once more. She handed the dangling boy to Edward, who took him with far more caution than Ryan displayed.

“Come along, young master Drake,” Edward said. His aristocratic demeanor masked his affection for the boy, but the toddler knew him too well. Drake peeked over Edward’s shoulder at Ryan, who winked at him as he was carried off. The boy giggled again.

“I will be upstairs, Edward.”

“Very well, my lord.” Edward said. He knew she would be in the room adjacent to her own, returning to her ceaseless vigil.

Ryan pushed through the double doors, stopping for a moment to stare at the prone figure on the bed.

It was a man, dark-haired and devastatingly handsome, his fine features in quiet repose. His long form covered the length of the dais he rested upon, and although his chest neither rose nor fell, he appeared to be peacefully sleeping. He had slept so for months, neither dead nor alive, neither corruption nor animation touching him.

Ryan went to the fireplace, kneeling down to neatly stack the wood. She arranged the kindling, then expertly lit the flame with a flint. In less than a minute, the wisps of smoke had turned into a blazing fire.

Ryan settled into the chair near his bedside where she had spent hours that had turned into weeks that had turned into months, all the while willing his consciousness to return. She stared at her father's handsome visage, aching at his absence, tortured by the thought that she had contributed to his condition.

Ryan sat back, rubbing her eyes. The last few years seemed a dream. She had only been recently reunited with Victor, having thought him dead by her own hand centuries before. She had been tried for his murder, but he had reappeared at her trial, revealing for the first time that he was her biological father as well as her mentor. Ryan had known, but the Others had not. The revelation of her birth explained much about her that had puzzled the Old Ones, her unique gifts, her unusual power, and the fact that Victor had been able to Change her long after his blood should have been poison.

Ryan remembered her first introduction to her Kind, to the hierarchical web of power and position that held them all. Three things determined the strength of each One. First and foremost was the power of the One who initiated the Change. Under normal circumstances, there were limitations that regulated this advantage. Young Ones, by definition, were those whose blood was not powerful enough to initiate Change. Old Ones were those whose blood had grown too powerful and would kill any human. Only those occupying the middle ground could initiate Change, so there was a narrow window of reproductive potential.

Under normal circumstances.

Victor had proved the extraordinary exception, able to Change Ryan when he was already an Old One and the most powerful of their Kind.

This brought Ryan's thoughts to the second determination of power. One gained strength by Sharing the blood of someone more powerful. Sharing was always pleasant, and the seduction even more so.

As a result, the more powerful were occasionally willing to Share with those younger than themselves. These unions were extremely dangerous to the younger of the pair, however, because Sharing to the point of death was a great pleasure, and their Kind was an inherently predatory species. Most Young Ones did not survive because their mentors lacked the desire or self-control to keep from killing them, or merely failed to protect them.

Again, Victor had proved the exception. Although his desire for his child was great, he had protected Ryan and kept her from the Others when she was a Young One. There were those who said Ryan had never truly been a Young One, so powerful had she been even as a child. Although their Kind eventually moved beyond the point of death, there were those who said Ryan had never been vulnerable to that fate.

And so Ryan had Shared with the greatest of their Kind for centuries, every union making her stronger. And those centuries only added to her power, because the final contribution to strength was age. The older one lived to be, the more powerful one became. Although Ryan was seven centuries old, her power rivaled that of those twice her age.

Ryan was thoughtful. She had once wondered why there were not more of their Kind if all eventually became immortal. She now understood the deadliness of the Change, the irresistible, predatory urge to kill one another, and the limitations on reproduction that served to check their population.

And then there was the purge.

Ryan frowned. That had been barbaric, even for their Kind. Until very recently, Ryan had been unaware of the purge. It was a tradition amongst their Kind, a kind of “thinning of the herd” in which the weak and unacceptable were destroyed. Ryan had been tasked with the last millennial purge. She had not wanted to obey the Grand Council, but at the direction of her father, she accepted the undertaking and proceeded to wipe out their Kind in staggering numbers. Most of the smaller purges concentrated on Young Ones, but Ryan had moved into the ranks of the middle, and even into the ranks of the Old Ones, an

act once thought impossible.

This line of thought brought her to Aeron, and she felt a cold satisfaction at his fate. Aeron had been her father's greatest enemy, and hers as well. He had attempted to assassinate both Ryan and Victor by turning their unique anatomies against them. Ryan's body had fought off the genetically-induced virus, but her father had not been so fortunate. As Ryan recovered, Victor remained in his suspended state, neither alive nor dead, but showing no signs of decay.

Aeron had poisoned Victor with a genetically modified virus. But the virus had been made from Ryan's blood, and she felt it was her negligence that allowed the blood to fall into Aeron's hands. Ryan also felt she had weakened her father in an earlier attack and did not think he would have succumbed otherwise. Victor was more powerful than she was, yet she had fought the illness off sufficiently to take revenge on Aeron.

Ryan rubbed her eyes again. All of this led her to her son. She would have a fine time explaining to him one day why she had destroyed his father.

Ryan grew reflective once more. No one had ever been able to explain how Victor was actually able to sire a child, because none of their Kind had reproduced outside of the Change. Nor could she explain how she had replicated the feat with her son. Well, Ryan thought wryly, beyond the obvious mechanics of the act, which had been quite human.

Ryan grew restless. She stood, taking a moment to rest her hand on Victor's chest. She then started downstairs. Drake should be finished eating and she wanted to take him out riding. It was late, but his sleeping patterns were as odd as hers. And he certainly was not afraid of the dark.

CHAPTER 2

RAPHAEL STARED AT THE SOLID ROCK WALL before him. He had never been in the chambers of the Grand Council before, and it was overwhelming to contemplate the fact that he was six stories beneath the surface of the earth. It was more overwhelming to contemplate that few of their Kind had ever seen this place, and none as young as he had been invited here before.

Raphael swallowed. He had been “invited” here for a very specific reason, a task he dared not fail to accomplish. Failure would surely mean his death, as well as the death of the young woman in the next room, the latter paining him more than the former.

“Judging by your demeanor,” came the sultry voice from the shadows, “I would almost say you were nervous.”

Raphael caught his breath. The magnitude of the presence caused him to take a step backward.

The darkness seemed to shift as a raven-haired woman materialized from the shadows. Stunningly beautiful, everything about her spoke of seduction. From the tilt of her head, to the set of her perfect lips, to the sardonic glint in her eye.

Raphael went to one knee. He had met the mother of his line only once, and she had passed by him with barely a glance. Now she was in front of him, her power emanating outward and filling the confined quarters, wrapping itself around him until he could not

breath. Although he had no physiological need for oxygen, he felt the loss keenly all the same. He stammered out a greeting.

“My lady, I am honored. I had no idea to expect you.”

Marilyn stared down at the ebony-skinned young man, entertained by the effect she had on him. He was indeed handsome, a worthy addition to her line, even if he was little more than a Young One.

Not that young, Marilyn reminded herself. The youngster was about to prove that.

Raphael stood, but kept his eyes down-cast in respect. Marilyn was slightly taller than him and placed her finger beneath his chin to raise his gaze. She stared at him a long moment.

Raphael was lost the minute he made eye contact with her. Power and promise were in that sultry gaze, the promise of unimaginable pleasure coupled with death. Raphael suddenly understood why so many of their Kind were killed in the act of Sharing. He would willingly give his life for even a moment with this woman.

Marilyn smiled, revealing perfect teeth that made Raphael want to moan. He wanted those teeth at his throat. Marilyn released his chin, smoothing the front of his shirt as she lowered her hand.

Marilyn turned from him. “I thought it best if I supervise this little venture.” She glanced around the room, then turned back. “I understand this is your first time. As a member of my line, I can’t have you fumbling about like a school boy.”

Raphael could not hide his embarrassment. “I will not harm Sus—, Dr. Ryerson.”

“Hmmm,” Marilyn said, examining him. “We shall see. But I cannot leave such an important act to chance.”

Raphael understood her concern. Changing a human to one of their Kind was intensely dangerous, and even those that survived the initial transition often did not survive the complete Change. And this particular human was very special to the most powerful of their Kind.

Marilyn was thoughtful. “A pity I cannot Change Dr. Ryerson myself.” She glanced at Raphael. “But I believe you will serve as an adequate conduit.”

Raphael was uncertain. "Your blood is far too powerful my lady. You would kill Dr. Ryerson instantly."

"Hmm, yes." Marilyn's tone was entirely casual. "And as enjoyable as that might be, I hardly think Ryan would forgive me."

Raphael found his courage, even in the face of such overwhelming force. He was instantly protective of the young woman in the next room. "I cannot let you harm Susan," he said firmly.

Marilyn was amused, flicking him a glance. "You could hardly stop me, boy." She settled onto the couch. "But that is not why I am here." She glanced at him beneath long dark eyelashes. "Come here."

Raphael swallowed hard but could not have resisted if he wanted to. And he did not want to. He settled near her on the couch and that sultry gaze imprisoned him.

"My blood is too powerful for Dr. Ryerson, but I do not believe it is too powerful for you."

Comprehension at last dawned on Raphael, but he could not believe what she was suggesting.

"You are going to Share with me?"

"Yes," Marilyn said simply, "I am."

Raphael now understood completely. Marilyn could not change Susan Ryerson herself, but potentially could affect the outcome of her transition. The older the One who initiated the Change, the more powerful the offspring would become. With Marilyn's blood flowing through his veins, her mark on Susan would be powerful.

Raphael stared at the Old One before him. There were very few of their Kind more powerful than the seductress before him. He knew he might die in the act of Sharing with her. And he knew that she chose to Share with him for political reasons that had nothing to do with him.

At that moment he cared very little, and in subsequent moments, did not care at all.

CHAPTER 3

THE BOY WATCHED THE BUCK FORAGE in the undergrowth of the forest. He carefully removed the bow slung over his shoulder. The weapon, made from a combination of wood, horn, and sinew, was bound together with hide glue. He had learned to make it as a child when he had graduated from the bow made solely from wood.

He pushed thoughts of his childhood away and carefully removed an arrow from the quiver slung across his back. He fitted the arrow and pulled the string rearward, anchoring it skillfully close to his eye. He aimed at the deer's chest, lowering the arrow slightly so that if he missed, he would miss cleanly.

He did not miss. The arrow flitted through the air with such great force and accuracy that the buck took two sideway steps, then fell to the ground, impaled through the heart. Although the boy rushed forward to slit the deer's throat, it was not necessary. He knelt by the great beast's side, placing his hand on the still-warm body. He offered thanks to the Goddess of the Hunt, but also thanked the local forest god just in case. He did not wish to anger any deity, and extra thanks could not hurt.

Although still young, perhaps 15 seasons at the most, the boy was extremely strong. Even so, he would not be able to carry the carcass so he settled down to butcher the animal. He was proficient, carefully removing the pelt and hanging it to dry over a nearby tree branch.

He then removed every internal organ, setting them aside for different uses. In the end, he would use every part of the deer. Hollow organs would become pouches, sinews would become cords or glue, the meat would be served fresh or dried and salted for preservation.

The boy was thoughtful. He would take some of the fresh meat to the local forest dwellers. Although they thought him strange, a solitary figure living alone among the great trees, he had earned a grudging respect from them. In turn, he had learned much from them in the three years he had been on his own.

The boy's expression darkened. He had been taught as a child that the forest dwellers were pagans, inferior creatures in comparison to the advancement of the great Empire. But it was not the forest dwellers that had fallen when the barbarians came. They had wisely slipped away into the safety of their ancient trees. The boy had followed them, turning his back on the great civilization that crumbled like a dried leaf in a clenched fist.

Although it would take him several trips, the boy eventually moved all of his kill to his permanent campsite. Strategically located at the base of a hill, there was a small cave in which he stored his few possessions and where he slept when the weather was poor. When it was clear, he slept outside beneath the stars and the sweeping canopy overhead.

Finished with his chores for the day, the boy debated heading over to the forest dwellers camp. He opted for a swim first and headed toward the river. His favorite spot was a deep pool formed by a small but perfect waterfall. There were flat rocks on the shore, excellent for sunning chilled skin after bathing.

As attuned to the forest as he was, he nearly missed the figure standing upright in his pool. He stopped abruptly, ducking into the underbrush and hoping he was being quieter than he thought. He pushed aside a branch and peered out from his hiding place.

There was a woman bathing in his pool. She was facing away from him, but he could tell she was completely naked. Long, dark hair flowed down her back, clinging to her wet skin. She turned toward him.

The boy caught his breath. She was magnificent, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Statuesque, flawless skin, perfect breasts, a flat stomach...

He could see no lower because the rest of her was underwater. And when he raised his eyes once more to those faultless features, he was greatly embarrassed to realize she was looking at him.

The woman, however, did not seem the least bit embarrassed and made no move to cover herself. Dark eyes flashed with mocking amusement, and although it would seem he had the upper hand, the boy wanted nothing more than to flee.

"Are you spying on me?" she asked.

"No," the boy stuttered, trying to defend himself, "I was just—"

The boy's words trailed off as the woman made her way toward shore, each step revealing more of that perfect body. Although he knew he should look away as a matter of courtesy, he could not take his eyes from the faultless skin. She was coming right toward him, and he entertained all sorts of projected intentions until he realized her clothing was on the rock in front of him. He lowered his eyes in humiliation, willing the hardness between his legs to disappear.

The woman took her clothing and began dressing, still watching the boy. He was a gorgeous specimen, dark hair and dark eyes, a perfect mouth. He was at that age where he was just beginning to fill out, his chest and shoulders broadening, his back widening, his stomach taut and hard. She examined him quite unabashedly and he blushed beneath her scrutiny.

"You are not of the forest people," she commented.

The boy realized she was speaking to him in Latin, a fact his mortification had caused him to miss. She spoke the language strangely, though, and although he was familiar with many of the local dialects, he could not place her accent.

"My name is Ambrosius," the boy said, as if that offered some sort of explanation.

"Hmm," the woman replied, "My name is Ravlen."

"Ravlen," Ambrosius repeated, the name unfamiliar to him in any context. Everything about the woman was unfamiliar, the way she

looked, the way she carried herself, the way in which she interacted with him. Although he did not much believe in the local gods, or in fact any god, he almost wondered if one of the forest goddesses had come to him.

Even her garments were strange, which Ambrosius noted now that she was fully clothed. The flowing gown fit snugly in flattering locations, doing nothing to diminish the tightness of his trousers.

“Are you alone?” the boy asked, his voice a little hoarse.

Ravlen smiled. “Not really,” was all she said.

Ambrosius glanced around into the forest. As the woman spoke, there seemed to be sudden movement all around them. But he could see nothing, and the forest settled once more into peaceful quiet. He did note, however, that there were no birds chirping. He was not certain if he should be afraid. He turned back to the woman, who was gazing at him with a look that bordered on predatory. He gazed at her uncertainly, then unconsciously squared his shoulders and straightened to his full height. Even though she was a full head and shoulders taller than him, he stared her directly in the eye.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, “because I have food.”

Ravlen gazed at the beautiful little creature, impressed.

“Yes,” she replied, “that would be very nice.”

Ambrosius busied himself with preparations around the fire. He periodically rotated the spit of meat that hung over the flames. The woman was content to simply watch him with an unnerving gaze that did not seem to waver or require blinking. Ambrosius from time to time glanced into the surrounding forest, certain they were not alone. But he could see nothing.

Because he spent so much time by himself he was not adept at conversation, and thankfully, the woman did not seem to desire it. Finally, the meat was prepared and Ambrosius served her with what manners he could remember. He settled opposite her across the

campfire, watching to see if she was pleased with the meal.

She eyed the meat curiously, as if it were something she had never seen before. But she bit into it without hesitation, and after a moment of thoughtful chewing, a look of pleasure spread across her face.

"It is delicious," Ravlen said.

Ambrosius was greatly relieved and settled to eating his own meal. Under normal circumstances, he would gnaw on the bone like some savage, but this evening he was trying to remember the graces his mother had taught him. The woman watched him, entertained, and he had the uncomfortable feeling she could read his thoughts. There were so many things he wanted to ask her, but something made him hold his tongue.

Impossibly, the woman finished the entire chunk of meat he had given her. It was three times a normal portion, but apparently she had been hungry. He started to offer her more, but realized the hunger in her gaze was probably not for food. He shifted uncomfortably, then swallowed hard.

"You are a warrior," she said.

"What?" Ambrosius asked, surprised. He was not feeling very valiant at the moment. "No, my father was a military man. I have had but a few years training."

The unblinking gaze held him captive. "Yes, I realize you are still a child."

Ambrosius was not going to agree with this statement, either, but she continued before he could object.

"But I believe you to be a warrior nonetheless."

Ambrosius could not look away from those perfect features or that magnetic gaze. Nor could he resist any command she gave him.

"Come here," she said.

Ambrosius stood, then walked stiffly over to where she sat. He was mortified that once again his arousal was in full display. He hoped his trousers were loose enough that his desire was not evident, but he had no such luck. His waist was on level with her line of sight, and she glanced with curiosity at his pants. To his intense embarrassment, she reached up and placed her hand flat on the front of his trousers. He

certainly could not hide the hardness of his member with her hand on him.

She again had a curious expression on her face, as if assessing the experience. It was a dispassionate look, as if she were collecting scientific evidence. A look of enlightenment crossed her features and she smiled.

“Ah,” she said, glancing at him knowingly, “I understand.” With one hand she grasped a nearby pelt and snapped it outward, creating an instant bed. She pulled him downward on top of her.

Ambrosius had the strangest feeling this had not been her first choice of events, but he could not fathom what the alternative would have been. It did not matter as he began passionately kissing her, wanting to feel every part of that magnificent body he had seen in the river. She helped him by disrobing them both, an act so practiced it made Ambrosius hesitate.

“I—” his voice cracked with embarrassment. “I’ve never done this before.”

The woman pulled him back towards her, enjoying the hardness of his young body. “Neither have I,” she said with some amusement.

Ambrosius did not see how that was possible, but instinctively knew that on some level she was telling the truth. For the rest of the night, the two were intertwined, coming to passion more times than seemed humanly possible.

Many hours later, Ambrosius awoke to find himself alone. There was no sign of the woman, nor any indication she had ever been there. As he rinsed his mouth, trying to rid himself of a strange metallic taste on his tongue, he was quite certain of one of two things. Either he had been visited by a forest goddess.

Or he had dreamed the entire thing.

Ryan awoke with a start. She was seated in the overstuffed chair in her den. How strange. Not only was she dreaming through the eyes

of some stranger, now it seemed she was dreaming his dreams.

She sat upright and slowly turned her head to the side, cracking her neck. She turned it the other direction, and it gave another satisfying crack.

That had been quite the adolescent fantasy, Ryan thought. The dark-haired boy seemed familiar somehow, although Ryan knew she had never met him. And the woman she definitely had no recollection of.

A phone rang off in the distance. Although it was clear across the mansion, her hearing was so exceptional she could hear Edward's side of the conversation from the den. She heard his footsteps, purposeful in her direction, and felt his presence as he stood in the doorway.

"What news?" she asked, staring into the fire.

Edward paused, then said simply "She lives."

Ryan found herself releasing the breath she had been holding. She had maintained certain human gestures long after they had no purpose, and this sign of tension relief was no exception.

"And her condition?" Ryan asked, her tone deliberately casual.

Edward was not fooled. "Dr. Ryerson is well."

Ryan turned to look at him. "No complications?"

Edward cleared his throat. "No more than might be expected from Marilyn's presence."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Marilyn was there?" She then answered her own question. "Of course she was." She turned back to the fire, settling back into the chair. "Send a summons and my plane. As soon as Dr. Ryerson is well enough to travel, I wish her to return here."

"Oh, and Edward?"

Edward stopped and turned.

"I am sensing we will have a visitor very soon."

Edward frowned. He was not aware they were expecting anyone.

Ryan cocked her head to one side, her gaze focused on a very distant point. She appeared to be listening to something only she could hear. Her focus returned to the room, and then to Edward.

"You will need to prepare the entire east wing."

Edward's frown increased. There was only one person who traveled with such an entourage. He nodded stiffly.

"Very well, my lord. I will have the staff prepare quarters immediately."