

The Princess King



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The Princess King Part I:
The king blossoms most becomingly

By Cooper

Chapter One

King Holland Jordain sat on his balcony flanked by either side by his wife and daughter. Below him, tied to a stake atop an unlit pyre, Mary Skydaughter, head shaven, dressed in black rags, prayed out loud to the Goddess Demeter.

The crown on King Jordain's head glittered with gold and jewels, but his dark eyes were clouded with trouble. "I ask you again, Mary Skydaughter, to foreswear your cursed religion, to condemn the practice of witchcraft and to swear your allegiance to the crown."

"Great Goddess," Mary continued, "I am yours and will always be yours. You are my life, you are my mother..."

"Skydaughter, save yourself. Abandon your false Goddess and accept the true God, the God of your fathers and your father's fathers..."

Mary finally stopped praying. She looked up at the king and smiled. "Your God is a false God. Before there was Juno there was the Earth Goddess, the mother of all. She was there at the beginning. She gave birth to the world. She gave women dominion..."

"Blasphemy!" Shouted Julius, the high-priest of Juno, flaming torch in hand. "You speak blasphemy."

Mary looked at the man. Old and wrinkled, head bald and narrow, beady eyes sunk deep in his head, he looked like a starving vulture, waiting to feast on the flesh of the creatures the king killed.

"You," Mary said, "will bow at the Goddess' feet before the end of this year and beg her forgiveness."

Julius smiled wickedly. He'd long ago lost all of his teeth and the smile looked for the world like that of a demented newborn. "I'm going to enjoy watching you burn. You will be the first, but make no mistake, before this is over each and every one of your sisters will also die. Juno has won."

The king pulled at his beard, a mass of inky black curls. He glanced at his wife. "I'm going to have to do this," he said sadly. "We have got to put down the witches revolt."

Queen Cliona took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "Can't you please give her a little more time to recant? She used to be our governess and I hate the thought..."

"No," King Jordain answered with finality. "The witches pose a serious threat to this state and to my rule. I have to make an example of them."

To his left, fifteen year old Princess Claire sat stock still, listening but not believing what she was hearing. Mary Skydaughter, who she had known only as Aunt Mary, a threat to the state? The Sisterhood a threat to the state because they refused to accept the state religion? Because they argued that women should have the same freedom as men?

As a little girl, she'd seen more of Aunt Mary than she'd ever seen of her own father. He'd been off fighting wars, expanding his territory while her mother and Aunt Mary raised her. Claire knew how much her father had wanted a boy and how hard he and his mother still tried to have one. If anyone should die, she thought, immediately regretting the acid thought even as it crossed her mind, it should be him.

"Father," she finally managed, her voice shaky with nervous tension. "Please let Aunt Mary..."

King Jordain turned his eyes on his daughter, their depths boiling with anger. She quieted immediately, fearing that stormy temper that had scared her since she was a child.

"Mary, I ask for the last time, will you recant your false religion?"

Mary only laughed, then started singing in a child-like, sing-song voice:

King Jordain
pretty in his dress
His face is made up
His hair is a mess
He has to get ready
To dance at the ball
He hopes a cute boy
Will come to call

King Jordain
With a baby at his breast
One tugs at his skirt
One grows
under his vest
Jordain's husband
calls him a sweet girl
Jordain looks pretty wearing pearls

King Jordain raised his hand. "Burn her," he said flatly.

Julius gleefully put the torch to the kerosene soaked timbers, but Mary just kept on signing:

King Jordain
in his heels
is quite sweet
when he squeals
if he sees a mouse
he climbs on a chair
Jordain worries
it will run up there

"Let this be a lesson to you all," King Jordan shouted angrily above Mary's singing. "Those who refuse to obey the edicts of the state will be punished harshly. There will be no witchcraft practiced in my kingdom. Those who defy this rule will die."

The crowd burst into cheers, howling with glee as the flames climbed higher and, sucking the oxygen out of Mary's lungs, prevented her from continuing her song. Instead, she merely stared triumphantly at King Jordain, who looked right back at her and shook his head sadly.

Princess Clair felt sick to her stomach as the flames climbed and the smoke hid Mary from view. But she forced herself to watch because despite her horror at what was being done to Aunt Mary, the look of defiance in the woman's face as she died gave her a feeling of... hope.

She's not scared of my father, Princess Claire realized, her hands clasped to her chest as she watched. I don't have to be afraid of him either.

In the crowd below, there were several figures that did not cheer, but merely stared dispassionately at the death of their coven mother. Bundled in robes that hid their figures, faces shadowed by deep hoods, they watched until they were certain she was dead and then melted into the shadows, disappearing down alleyways as they moved, ghost-like, back to their secret meeting place at the edge of the city.

Princess Claire stood up, an attendant immediately rushing to open the door to the room off the balcony for her.

"Stay until the end of the burning," the king said, staring at the flickering flames.

"I don't care to," Princess Claire responded coldly, charging back into the palace without waiting for a response.

"She's upset," the queen said.

The king shrugged. It was the first time he could ever remember his daughter defying him, upset or not. This was something that he would need to address later. She had to understand that he was the king and she had to obey him.

Right now, though, he simply watched the fire burn and suffered, silently, more than anyone could know. It had been a long time ago, but his affair with Mary had been one of the most passionate, exhilarating parts of his life.

She'd asked him to marry her. Challenged him to give the kingdom away and come live with her in the forest. Had he been so young and crazy that he'd considered it, just for a moment?

Yet, he had finally broken it off, working hard on restoring his relationship with his wife and throwing himself into the work of Kingdom building. He'd wanted her to stay on working in the palace, but she had refused.

Instead, she'd disappeared into the forest taking her-- taking their son-- with her. He hadn't seen or heard from her until she'd been identified as the leader of the so-called Witches' Rebellion.

He had never seen his son again and now prayed silently to Juno that the boy would be able to forgive him.

Queen Cliona, who knew all about the affair but had never let on, prayed for her husband's soul. Deep down inside she didn't think there was any real threat from the Witches' Rebellion. They asked for the right to worship their Goddess. They said women should have the same legal rights as men. As far as she was concerned, it was about damn time they did.

That night, King Holland Jordain was like a wild stag, a bull, a lust-ravaged centaur. He ravished Cliona's body and soul, making love with a wild need and desperation she had never experienced. When he'd finally given her second orgasm of the night and collapsed on the bed with exhaustion, she'd caressed the sweat slick smoothness of his back, running her fingers along the ridges of muscle and noting a tangy, man smell, a smell of the male sex that she had never quite noticed before.

The next morning, King Jordain discovered that his beard was gone. He'd awakened early, a cool breeze blowing into his chambers, sending the silk curtains billowing into the room with each sweet smelling gust. Cliona lay next to him, a contented smile on her still, pretty face, her long black hair a passionate mess reminding her husband of the adventures the night before. As he'd gotten out of bed, he'd reached up to tug on his beard --a bad habit he'd been meaning to break for many years-- and found the smooth flesh of his chin.

Rushing to a mirror, he'd confirmed that the beard he'd worn for over twenty years was gone. His face, looking younger and strangely unfamiliar without the mass of bristling curls, was full of shock, surprise and anger.

Mary's song immediately sprang into his mind.

King Jordain wearing a dress

Returning to the bedroom, he looked for any signs of his hair. Maybe, he told himself, they'd snuck in and shaved it off as he slept.

He found no such evidence, confronted the possibility of witchcraft and rejected it-- primarily because he didn't want to deal with the fear. If they could do this to him without even getting close, what else could they do?

Cliona woke, saw a strange man in her room and almost screamed for the guards before she did a double take and realized it was just her husband. She reached toward her own face with her hand and pretended to pull on a beard.

"Your beard!" She smiled broadly. "You finally decided to shave it off."

"Yes," Jordain lied, thinking it would be better not to panic his wife. "I needed a change."

Cliona got out of bed, her tall, slender body still naked, and ran her hands over his smooth chin. "I've been asking for this for twenty years," she said, giving him a kiss. "You look a lot younger."

Jordain watched her as she sauntered into their bathroom. "I really enjoyed last night," she said.

"I did, too," Jordain answered.

Once the servants had drawn their baths, the two bathed and then had their breakfast in the garden. As soon as it was complete, Jordain made his way to the chambers of the court wizard, Agreggio.

Agreggio listened intently as Jordain explained what had happened. "So," the stoop-backed, elderly wizard said, scratching at his own long, gray beard and causing a storm of dandruff to shake down on his parchment smothered desk. "You think that maybe the witches used magic to take your beard?"

"Yes," Jordain nodded, feeling nervous.

As a warrior, Jordain had always looked upon magic with suspicion. He was a man of action and he preferred to place his faith in arms and men rather than the shadowy world of magic, but the threat of rival sorcerer's had made it necessary that he employ some kind of magician. He'd chosen Agreggio because the man had been good at what he did and because Jordain had trusted him. Now, after ten years of peace, it was obvious to him that Agreggio was not as strong as he had once been.

Agreggio retrieved a wand. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten all about me," Agreggio said. "Haven't seen you in years it seems like, though I've been right here in your compound for all this time."

"I grew neglectful in the years of peace," Jordain admitted. "And I have never liked magic."

The wand flared when Agreggio passed it over Jordain.

"You've been spelled all right."

"Can you protect me?" Jordain asked.

Agreggio nodded. "I'll need access to your chambers. I can put some protections around the room that should proof it against any spell work. Also, I can give you personal protection." He went to a cabinet covered with runes and retrieved a leather strap with a crystal on the end. "Wear this under your shirt against your skin. It will repel magic."

Jordain took the necklace gratefully. "You had many of us wear these when we were at war with Kragh Mohr."

"Oh yes," Agreggio said absently. "That's right. They had that wizard who specialized in spells that caused boils. Odd fellow."

Jordain slipped the necklace over his head. As he remembered, it felt cold against his skin.

"What about the rest of your family?" Agreggio asked as Jordain started to leave. "Your wife? Daughter?"

"I don't believe they are targets. I also don't want them worrying about what's going on."

Agreggio retrieved two more necklaces from the cabinet. "If they can't get you, they'll go after those you care about. Protect them."

Jordain nodded. "You're right," he said, taking the necklaces. "I should visit you more often, wizard. You are very wise."

When Jordain gave the necklace to his daughter, Claire, he explained that he was worried the witches might try and attack his family using spell craft.

Claire shrugged and put the necklace on the little table next to her chair. She'd been sitting with some other young women, chatting and sewing when Jordain had come in. She'd argued bitterly with him when he'd asked the other girls to leave.

"Claire, put the necklace on. It won't protect you otherwise."

Claire glared at him. "Daddy, I didn't do anything. I don't think the witches are after me."

"Young lady, you have really developed a most unflattering tendency to argue. Now, be a good little girl and obey your father. Put the necklace on."

"What are you going to do if I don't?" She asked. "Burn me at the stake?"

Jordain bristled. "What happened to Aunt Mary..."

"What you did to Aunt Mary..."

"What I did to Mary, I had to do. You need to know that it pained me far, far more than you can imagine. Don't you think I hated to have to do that as much as you hated to see it?"

Claire picked up the necklace with her fingertips as if she were holding a dead rat and examined it, her face twisted with disgust, before she finally put it on. Then, crossing her arms over her chest she said, "Happy?"

Jordain sighed. My daughter hates me, he thought to himself. Maybe she has good reason. "Honey, I have to protect my kingdom."

Claire picked her sewing back up and started to angrily rip out some of the stitching. "I'm not scared of you anymore," she said bitterly. "I don't have to be."

"I don't want you to be scared of me," he lied.

Claire wasn't listening, so Jordain stood and walked out, the other girls rushing back into the room as he came out.

Chapter Two

"Give her time," Cliona advised her husband when he told her about Claire's anger and defiance. "She's very upset over what happened to Mary. She doesn't understand."

Jordain grunted. If only he'd had a son. A boy would understand that sometimes you have to make hard choices.

Cliona woke Jordain the next morning with a terrified screech. "What is it?" he said, snapping immediately awake and alert and looking about the room frantically.

For a moment he thought he was in his tent on a battlefield and looked for assassins, but then he realized where he was and, seeing an empty bedroom, turned to his wife.

She was staring at his head and now pointed at it even as Jordain realized that something wasn't right. It felt like he was wearing a big hat.

"Your hair..." Cliona managed. "The witches."

Reaching up, Jordain felt a towering mass of hair that seemed to rise up at least a foot from his head. "What the hell did they do?" He felt anger boiling up inside him. How dare they continue to play these games.

"Go look," Cliona said. "I can't explain."

Jordain cursed Juno when he looked in the mirror. He now had a glittering mass of golden blonde hair on his head, arranged like a woman might wear to a fancy ball.

"Those bitches!" He growled, reaching up and finding the hairpins with his fingers, yanking them out and letting the hair pour down over his shoulders in a great waterfall.

Tugging on it, feeling his scalp, he realized it wasn't a wig. The witches had transformed his hair into the mass of girlish curls and bangs that now framed his smooth, still beardless face. A face without even a hint of stubble.

His face is made up
his hair is a mess

"It's real," he said, turning to his wife, who was still in bed, the covers pulled up modestly over her chest, her mouth open in an "O" of pretty concern.

"It's not a wig?" She finally managed.

"No." He walked back and sat down on the bed. Pushing the hair back over his shoulders so it fell down his back, he put his chin on his fist and thought. Agreggio's wards and necklaces had done nothing. He had to find and kill the witches.

Cliona crawled across the bed and, pushing his long, golden hair to the side, wrapped her arms around his chest. "Jordain, that song Mary was signing..."

"I know," he said, kissing her hand. "Call the barber."

"Maybe you should make peace with the witches," Cliona said softly.

"Call the barber," Jordain repeated.

When the barber arrived, he was sworn to secrecy on pain of death. He knew better than to ask what had happened and so merely cut the hair off the king's head. It will make a beautiful wig, he thought to himself as he gathered up the long, gorgeous tresses. Some lucky woman would soon be able to walk around town wearing the king's golden locks. The barber decided then and there he would call this color Royal Blonde.

Jordain, head completely shaven, felt a little bit better. Looking in the mirror, though, he realized that his eyebrows had also turned blonde.

"Cliona, what do you use to change the color of your eyebrows?"

Cliona, looking up, realized what her husband was concerned about and got some dye from her dressing table. "This will make them look black," she said.

"You do it," the king said, almost trembling with rage.

The king sat on his chair, face upturned, eyes closed as his wife used a feather brush to apply the make-up to his face. When she was done, he looked in the mirror and nodded.

"That'll pass," he said.

"People are going to wonder about all these changes," Cliona said. "The lack of beard. The shaved head."

"I know," Jordain said. "I'm going to take care of those witches and their damn sisterhood once and for all."

Jordain met with his top officers. His message to them was simple. "I want an all out war on the Witches' Rebellion. I am declaring a state of martial law. I want you going door to door, searching

houses looking for evidence. Anyone you suspect may be a witch or may be connected to them, bring them in and turn them over to Hilderburgh."

Hilderburgh, a pale, greasy man with soft white, milk teeth, grinned and rubbed his hands together. "I'm looking forward to this very much."

"Spare them nothing," the king said. "Nothing."

Hilderburgh licked his lips. "Oh, you are such a fine king. It will be my pleasure to serve you in this matter."

Julius, the high-priest, stopped Jordain after the meeting. "You are doing the right thing," he assured his monarch. "The Demeter cult is a dangerous cult that must be destroyed. Juno will reward you for your devotion."

"You better be right about that," Jordain said, wondering to himself where Juno was when the witches had changed his hair. "I suggest you and the brothers do a lot of praying for this cause."

"We will," Julius assured the other man. "We will."

Jordain went to see Agreggio, intending to berate the old fool for his ineptitude. But, upon entering the wizard's chambers, he saw that the old man now sported a pair of long, white rabbit ears.

Agreggio reached up and, taking his ears by the tips, bent them down until they touched his shoulders. "The witches seem to be a little more powerful than I imagined," he confessed, his voice a mixture of embarrassment and regret.

"They also affected me last night," Jordain said.

"Made your hair fall out." Agreggio said, his nose twitching.

"Actually," Jordain admitted, "they made it grow long and blonde."

"Blonde hair?"

"Agreggio, I tell you this in strictest confidence, but I am afraid the witches plan to turn me into a woman."

"I see. Yes."

"What I need to know is, can you stop them? Can you protect me from any further changes? Can you reverse what they've already done."

"Reverse it? I need to read up and study the matter," Agreggio said, waving at a wall full of books. "Shape changing spells are not my specialty."

"What about protection?"

"I... don't think I can do it. I'm just not the wizard I used to be."

Jordain rubbed his temples. "I need you to find another wizard for me. Find someone who can help me fight this."

Agreggio smiled with relief. Jordain noticed that his front teeth were now a lot bigger. "I can help you there," the wizard said. "I'll find someone."

That night at dinner, Princess Claire kept looking at her father.

"What is it?" He finally asked.

"I was just wondering if you're wearing make-up."

Jordain's mouth fell open. The queen stopped eating.

"Of course your father isn't wearing make-up," Cliona said. "What a silly question."

"His eyebrows just looked different is all," she said, turning her attention back to the roast pheasant on her plate.

Jordain decided to ignore it and went back to eating his own dinner. When the family had finished and Claire was leaving, she started to hum a tune. Both Jordain and Cliona recognized it immediately. It was Mary's song.

"I'm losing control," Jordain said as his daughter and the haunting tune disappeared down the hall. "I'm losing control of my daughter. I'm losing control of my kingdom. I'm losing control of my body."

He felt that he was almost near tears, but fought off the urge contemptuously and looked up at his wife. "If the changes continue, you may need to rule in my place. Meet with my regents-- as you used to do when I was away at war. I can't let anyone know what is happening. If my political enemies at court find out, all of our lives may be in danger."

Cliona nodded. "You know you can trust me," she said.

"Always."

That night after they'd gone to bed, Cliona climbed on top of Jordain. Her smooth, strong thighs straddling his mid-section, she'd kissed him hard on the lips, pushing his head down into the pillows. He'd hesitated at first, but then responded eagerly, his tongue darting out playfully to meet hers.

Running her hands over his chest, she'd then moved down, putting her mouth to his neck and sucking, then biting him hard. Jordain, grabbing the sides of the bed with his hands, had arched his back, feeling his manhood rising with pleasure, and moaned softly as Cliona had begun to tease one of his nipples with her tongue. Slowly, ever so slowly, Cliona increased the pleasure until, riding Jordain like a show horse, she'd brought him howling to a climax, arching his back and pounding the mattress with his fists even as tears of ecstasy escaped from the corners of his eyes.

The next morning, the changes in Jordain were dramatic. His body had shrunk down to 5 feet 6 inches in height. His skeleton had changed; leaving him with narrow shoulders and a slender, bird like chest. His arms were now slender tubes with little muscle and no definition. His legs were rounded, long and slender, like those of a frisky fawn.

And that damned hair had returned, cascading down over his shoulders to swish and sway above the small of his back. "I look like a teenage boy," he's said ruefully, slouching in front of the mirror. His face was still the face of a man, Cliona had thought, but he now had the body of a pre-teen girl and they both knew it. From behind, with that mass of golden curls, he would be taken for a girl by anyone who saw him.

"Should I call the barber?" Cliona asked as she dressed, preparing to meet with her husband's lieutenants in his absence.

"No," Jordain said, surprising her. "It will just come back anyway. I don't want anyone to see me like this. We can't risk the word getting around about what's happening.

"Alright," Cliona said uncertainly, wondering about what changes may have been taking place in her husband's mind.

"Cliona, find the wizard and send him to see me."

"I thought you didn't want anyone to see you?"

"He and you I can trust. No one else."

Wearing his now ridiculously over-sized bed clothes and robe, Jordain paced nervously back and forth in his chambers, idly playing with strands of his hair as he thought. His concerns were mounting. Though strong, he had a few powerful enemies at court, enemies who would use his current predicament to destroy him and his family.

Meanwhile, the previous day's efforts had obviously failed to intimidate the witches in the least.

Make peace, his wife had said. And maybe he should.

But, that, too, could fatally weaken his position. The Brotherhood of Juno possessed tremendous political power. If he allowed the open worship of Demeter, Jordain knew that they would throw their power behind one of his rivals.

And what of the foreign kings on the frontiers? Wouldn't they seek to capitalize on the turmoil to destroy him?

When the guards outside the doors announced the arrival of Agreggio, Jordain moved to a spot where they couldn't see him and called for them to allow the wizard to enter. A stooped, hooded figure bounced cautiously into the room, lifting its head and seeming to sniff the air until Jordain stepped out where he could be seen.

Agreggio threw back his hood and said, "Oh dear. Oh yes. Oh my," examining the shrunken form of the king who looked, for all the world, like a girl playing dress up in her father's over-sized clothes.

Agreggio himself now had the little pink nose of a rabbit as well as long whiskers. His skin was now covered with a soft, downy brown fur.

"Sit," Jordain said, still pacing. "Give me some good news."

Agreggio sat, but shook his head. "The news I have is not good. I don't think there is anything I can do about your metamorphosis. These spells," he waved generally at Jordain's body, "were never an area I studied. I learned flame walls, rock slides and spells of large scale warfare. Not this."

"Can't you learn?"

Agreggio shook his head. "I'm too old and, well, the witches have affected my brain somehow. I can barely work magic at all these days. Keep thinking about carrots."

"Did you try and contact other wizards?"

"I did," Agreggio said. "There aren't that many wizards around. It isn't hard to contact them all with my crystal ball. None of them want any part of this. Demeter-- this is something I learned-- she is moving, stirring from her slumbers. She is angry and she is enlivened by the fervor of the witches' worship. Demeter makes them strong with God-magic. The only thing to fight that is another God."

"What of Juno?"

Agreggio shrugged, again waving generally at Jordain. "He doesn't seem too happy with us right now. That, or maybe he is sleeping. The Gods are capricious."

Chapter Three

Meanwhile, Julius and the rest of the brotherhood had finished their morning prayers and, as he often did, Julius took his walking stick and headed out into the town. For years, he'd been taking these morning walks, telling the other brothers he did it to clear his mind and help him think pure thoughts.

In fact, after a few twists and turns down narrow, neglected alleys, he usually slipped in the back door of Lady Currant's House of Cards. Julius was always wracked with guilt when he entered the place. As a high-priest of Juno, he'd taken a vow of celibacy, but over the years as he'd gotten older he'd found himself weakening in his resolve and, finally, unable to contain himself, he'd succumbed to his desires and begun frequenting Lady Currant's.

Lady Currant was the only one who knew who Brother Julius was and she had kept that information in the utmost confidence, just as she did for all her clients. That is, until she had been converted to Demeter's worship.

Lady Currant led Julius up the stairs, down a narrow, dimly lit hall and into his usual room. The shades were drawn. The room smelled of incense. A new girl smiled seductively at Julius as he entered. She was a tall, slender girl with generous hips and a tiny, flat stomach. She wore only a black corset with crimson trimming, stockings tied to her garters and tall, black heeled sandals that stretched her impossibly long legs. Her hair was a riot of bright red curls outlining a doll face with big, mysterious green eyes.

As Lady Currant shut the door behind him, Julius stared into those eyes, felt himself falling into them, deeper, deeper and deeper.

"Come here," the woman said.

Julius walked obediently over to her.

"Look at my breast. What do you see?"

Julius looked down at her breasts, the tops exposed above the edge of the corset. He saw a tattoo of a thorny rose on her left breast.

"A rose," Julius whispered.

It was the sign of the coven. Julius realized in that moment that this was a trap. Revulsion sprung up in him. Fear. He wanted to flee, to get his men, come back and burn this woman. But he only stood before her, swaying as a rat sways when it has been hypnotized by a cobra.

"Get undressed," the woman said.

Trembling with indignity, Julius obeyed.

When Julius left the brothel, he looked the same as when he went in. He wore a baggy black robe that hung on his frame like a tent. But, a careful observer would have noticed that he seemed a bit taller than before. Julius also walked very slowly. He didn't understand why, but he found it terribly hard to breathe. It was like someone had placed a vise around his ribs.

The girl had certainly been nice, he thought to himself as he headed back to the temple for afternoon prayer. He thought about her mass of fiery curls and those eyes, those bottomless pools of green.

I wish I was as pretty as her, he thought, reaching up and patting at his hair. The thought didn't strike him as odd.

Chapter Four

After Agreggio left, promising to continue the search for help as long as he could, Jordain started to pace again. After only a few moments, he became aware of a growing commotion outside his window. Carefully peeking from behind a curtain, afraid someone would see him; Jordain saw that a large crowd had gathered outside the gates of the palace compound. They were milling about, shouting and occasionally even hurling things at the soldiers. Were the people rioting?

Just as Jordain was wondering about the crowd, the door to the room swung open and Claire burst into the room unannounced. One of the guards pulled the door shut behind her.

"Claire," Jordain said, moving away from the window and pulling the front of his robe closed. He felt his face growing crimson as his daughter noted the changes in him-- his small stature and the golden hair.

"Mother told me what was happening and I just had to see for myself." Claire walked up to Jordain, circled around him, clucking appreciatively. Like her mother, Claire was a tall girl already standing five feet ten inches. Jordain, now four inches shorter than his daughter, had to look up at her to meet her eyes. "My goodness you are blonde! Mother told me, but," she reached out and took a strand of her father's long golden hair in her fingers, "you're hair is so pretty! Any girl would love to have hair like yours. And you're so... small! I Love it," Claire said. "I love it."

Jordain felt anger boil in him. "You should be more concerned about your father," he said. "You should not be enjoying this. It's like you're on the witches' side."

"I am on the witches' side," Claire said triumphantly. "I think you deserve this."

"This could put you in great danger," Jordain said. "I have enemies and..."

Claire reached out and shoved her father. Jordain stumbled backwards.

"Claire!"

Claire advanced, shoving him even harder, causing him to stumble backwards, trip over the hem of his too long robe and plop hard on his fanny.

Golden ringlets falling into his face, Jordain glared up at his daughter through his tangled hair. "I am your father!"

"You were always a bully," Claire spat. "You never loved me. You always scared me. You have it coming."

As Claire advanced on him again, Jordain struggled to get to his feet, but he was too slow. Claire grabbed a handful of his hair and dragged him to his feet. He flailed at her with his tiny fists, hitting her in the ribs, but Claire only grunted as if mildly annoyed and smacked him hard across the face. Then again. And again.

Jordain, face flush from the blows, tried to wrench free of Claire's grip but she had a firm hold on his hair and wouldn't let go. "How does it feel?" Claire screamed. "How do you like it?"

She slapped Jordain one more time and then pushed him backward until he fell onto the bed.

Jordain, partially in shock, just lay there on his side, his breathing ragged, staring up at his daughter with disbelief. What had he done to make her so angry? What had he done to deserve this?

"I never beat you," he hissed.

"You tortured me, mentally. You made me hate myself."

"I never hit you," Jordain repeated.

"You were bigger than me, then. You were a man. You didn't need to hit me. The violence was there - in your eyes."

"I'm still a man," Jordain said defensively.

Claire laughed derisively and raised her hand as if to strike him again. "I couldn't do this to a man..."

Jordain leapt then, trying to race past his daughter and get to the bathroom where he could lock the door and get away from her.

But, Claire was too fast. She darted in front of Jordain's slender figure and blocked his path to the door. Jordain tried to run right through her, but Claire blocked him, her larger mass sending him bouncing backward.

He darted left. Right.

Claire, smiling, enjoying the game, darted with him.

Finally, tears of frustration welling up into his eyes, he started swinging his little fists at Claire, trying to pound on her chest. "Let me by!" he said.

Claire grabbed his hands and pulled him close, twisting his wrist until he went down on a knee. "Look at her cry," Claire said. "She cries just like a girl."

Jordain, one arm bent above his head, looked up through his tears at the leering face of his daughter. "I'm a man," he sobbed. "I don't deserve this."

Claire let him go then, watching as he crumpled to the ground and lay there curled up on his side, weeping, gorgeous golden locks pooling around him.

Her anger flushed from her, the first sick feelings of guilt consuming her over what she had done, Claire fled from the room.

Jordain fell asleep crying. He didn't know how long he's slept. He slowly go to his feet, feeling more exhausted than ever. He could still hear the rioters outside. His wife would probably be away all day trying to get a handle on the affairs of the state. He was worried about her, worried about himself, he was feeling guilty over his failures as a father.

Jordain didn't know what he'd done exactly, and maybe it was what he hadn't done for Claire as much as anything, but with the memory of each stinging blow, with the thought of that once angelic face twisted now into rage, he told himself that he had deserved it. I was a bad father, he said, I made her angry. She can hit me if it makes her feel better. I owe it to her.

The worries, the problems, they were all too much. Jordain crawled back under the covers, nestled among the pillows and drifted back off to sleep.

Claire burst into her own rooms and immediately demanded that her servant-girls leave her alone. Grabbing a thick, leather bound book from the table by her bed she hurled it against the wall, then threw herself onto her bed and pounded the mattress with her fists before breaking down into tears. Damn him, she thought, damn him, damn him! He'd killed Aunt Mary; he'd killed hundreds of people.

But why did she feel so guilty about what she'd just done to him? Why couldn't she punish him the way he was meant to be punished...

"He's not being punished," a clear, feminine voice called out. Mary spun onto her back, propped herself up on her bed and looked around her room.

"Who said that?"

Then she saw it. A sleek, black cat sitting in the corner by the window, its tail swishing playfully across the marble floor, yellow eyes bright. "Your father is not being punished," the cat repeated, its fangs sharp and white against the redness of its tongue.

"Are you a familiar?" Claire said breathlessly, clutching a pillow to her chest, but leaning forward, her own eyes bright with excitement.

"No. I'm a witch."

The cat immediately began to grow and expand until a tiny woman stood before Claire. She was wearing a tattered dress dyed with forest colors of oak and berry, and she had twigs and dried flowers

and leaves woven haphazardly into her hair. In her hand she held a staff made of several branches, woven together and tied tight with vines.

Claire felt no fear. The woman looked as harmless as-- a kitten.

The woman giggled at nothing, then did a little spin and threw herself on the bed next to Claire. "I knew your Aunt Mary well," she said with a smile. "I wanted to come and talk to you."

At the mention of Aunt Mary, Claire felt the anger and sorrow that had tormented her since the execution well up and threaten to overwhelm her. Tears poured from her eyes and down her cheeks.

"Aunt Mary..." she whispered, picturing her sweet, happy face, but imagining her as the flames burned her body.

The woman reached over and put a finger gently to Claire's forehead. Suddenly, all the anger, the pain, the hate and the fear vanished. She laughed, smiling at the woman, and threw her arms around her small body and they laughed together.

"She isn't dead," Claire burst. "She's fine. She's happy, and she's with friends and she loves me."

"Yes," the woman said, joyfully. "Yes... yes... death is just a sunset. The sun always rises in the morning."

Claire pulled herself up and sat cross-legged, wiping her face and smiling. "Thank you. Thank you so much. I don't know what to say..."

"I came here for many reasons," the woman said, now growing serious. "I need your help with a few things."

"Yes," Claire said. "Anything."

"I want you to help your father become the young man he must be now," she said frankly. "I want you to be there to support and encourage him."

"Is he going to stay like that? Forever?"

"Forever." She shook her head no. "For forever to exist there must be change, young one. There will always be change. But, don't you remember Aunt Mary's song?"

Claire did remember it. The words and tune came back to her. "You mean he is to marry? To bear children? To become a wife and mother?"

"Yes."

"But you said that he wasn't being punished."

"He is being saved," the woman explained. "All of us exist as many selves, some on the surface and some buried deep inside. Your father, for his whole life, denied his feminine self. He buried all of the aspects of his female persona. We simply released the female nature that was within him for all these years, frustrated and unfulfilled. Becoming a woman, bringing life into the world, these are things that will make him a stronger, happier spirit. He is going to be a better soul. We are saving him."

Claire shook her head. "My father never wanted to be a woman. He was..."

"I didn't say your father wanted to be a woman. I said that deep inside he was a woman. Male and female. We all are, and in order for us to become all that we can as spirits we must allow all aspects of our spirits free reign."

"So all men have a woman inside of them?"

"And all women, a man."

Claire wondered about that. She thought that boys had it easier than girls. That they got to have more fun. To do more things. But she had never wanted to be a boy. She thought being a boy would be gross. But this woman seemed to know so much and to be so sure that Claire found herself wanting to trust and believe her.

"And you want me to help my father?"

"Yes. For now, though, keep our conversation a secret. There are many things happening in the kingdom now, many changes and many dangers. We don't want anyone to know that we are here in the palace just yet."

The witch stood up and headed toward the window. "I have to go."

"Will I see you again?" Claire said, eager to talk to her some more, wanting to keep and fix her presence, so warm and comforting. "What's your name? Where did you come from?"

"So many questions. So many questions." The woman nodded. "We'll be seeing a lot of each other, young one. And I am called Spring Rain."

Chapter Five

That afternoon, Julius led the monks and the public in one of the most widely attended services at Temple Juno in many years. It was obvious to Julius that people were afraid of the witches and were rallying around his temple just as he had hoped when he'd first raised the alarm over the growth of Demeter's cult. This attack on the witches would serve to increase his political power tremendously.

The first half of the ceremony consisted of ritualistic chants and prayers. Julius hardly thought paid attention. He was mentally rehearsing the speech he would make before the sacrifice to Juno. It would be a speech where, once and for all, he turned all these people against the witches and to the worship of Juno. He would bury the memory of Mary Skydaughter forever.

The final chant ended, the great hall grew quiet. Julius waited just long enough to build some drama, then strode awkwardly to his place before the bloodstained altar.

"I come," he started, but instead of his famous voice, the words had come out in a soft, high-pitched voice. A higher end alto.

Julius cleared his throat.

"I come to speak to you of Juno---" The voice was still high pitched. Like a woman's, or maybe a girl's.

Julius reached up and massaged his throat, looking around embarrassed as nervous murmurs filled the fall.

"I come to speak to you-- what sorcery is this!" He stamped his foot angrily, his voice rising into a feminine screech of anger at the end.

"I'm sorry, but I seem to have been... I'll just continue."

People began looking around nervously. Mumbling. That was obviously Julius at the front of the room, but the voice coming from his mouth was impossible. It was the soft, liquid voice of an enchanting young woman.

"I come today to speak to you of the great Goddess," Julius said, "Demeter, earth Goddess, mother of all, who gave women dominion over all men."

A commotion erupted. Some people began to nervously file toward the exits. The monks-- the eldest of which sat in rows along the front of the church, gazed up at Julius as if he'd lost his mind.

What's wrong? Julius wondered. This isn't the response I expected at all. He raised his arms, signaling for silence. As the sleeves of his robes slid down to his elbows, more than a few people

noticed that Julius arms were now thin, with young, milky white skin. His hands were long and slender.

"I will show you the power of the Goddess," Julius said when the room had quieted. Reaching up, he undid the top of the robe and let it fall to the ground at his feet. The room gasped. Beneath his robes, Julian wore a pink and white corset that amply displayed the dramatic curves of his very female body. On his legs he wore white hose, and his feet were perched delicately on glossy pink sandals.

"Juno save us," a monk in the front row murmured.

"Demeter has won," another said, getting up and starting toward the door.

Julius, planted one fist on his hip and put a delicate finger from the other to his lips. "What is wrong with everyone?"

The spell broke, then, the spirit of Demeter leaving his body. Julius looked down to see the twin swellings of his breasts, cruelly crushed in the confines of his pretty pink and white corset. Felt the cool air of the temple swirling about his stockinged legs.

"Juno!" Julius screamed, his voice that of a frightened female.

Arms over his chest, Julius turned and rushed prettily from the alter, going out the back door that led to the room where the priests kept their vestments and waited for services to begin.

By the time he reached the vestments room and slammed the door behind him, he looked in the mirror to see that the changes were complete. He now had a head of fiery red hair. Deep, bottomless green eyes. The smooth young face of the girl from the brothel.

On his left breast he found the tattoo of a thorny rose.

"Bitch," Julius hissed, slamming his fist into the mirror and shattering the image to pieces.

Chapter Six

Queen Cliona returned to the royal quarters with a sigh of relief. It had been a long, trying day with her trying to deal with one crisis after another. The moment Cliona walked into the gilded chamber that served as the gathering place for the kingdom's regents she'd felt the fear and the ambition, in equal amounts, from the men that surrounded her. The people of the city, outraged at the imposition of martial law in the face of a threat that seemed to them so minor, had risen in open revolt. Some of the outer provinces, sensing the weakness at the heart of the empire, were already making separatist notions.

Efforts to capture the witches, which her husband had started the day before, had been all but abandoned as the city guards had been forced to turn its attention to the rioters in the street. The Imperial Army, shrunken with 10 years of peace, was standing ready to put down any revolts that began out country.

Then, to top it all off, had come news of some great disturbance at Temple Juno. Reports were varied and seemed tinged with the fantastical, but more than one had included details of the high-priest Julius being transformed into a woman before the very eyes of the congregation. While some of the generals at the meeting had openly scoffed at the reports, Cliona had only to think of her own husband, his shrunken body and woman's hair, and she knew that the story was likely true.

In any case, Julius had vanished and the rest of the leaders of the church, fearing they would be the next targets of the witches, had fled and gone into hiding. The primary religious institution of the empire was, at least for the time being, dead.

And, of course, there was Holland to worry about. He'd looked so sad, so helpless when she's left him that she was afraid, afraid of what he might do to himself in the face of the witches' vengeance. More than once, she'd had the image of Jordain lying in the tub, the water crimson with the blood flowing from his slender wrists.

Please no, she'd thought. Please let him be safe.

It was a great relief for her, then, when she returned to their room and found her husband sound asleep. He'd burrowed down deep into the blankets and pillows as if digging a cave to crawl in and hide from the world.

She let him sleep.

The next morning, Cliona was surprised. She'd really expected to wake and find her husband now sporting firm, handsome breasts, but his chest was still skinny, hairless and flat. Instead, the witches' magic had worked its charms on his face. There was no trace of King Holland Jordain in that face anymore, she mused, as she watched him sleeping. The lips were now possessed the ample, bee-stung softness of a girl. He had just the ever so subtle hint of a nose-- a cute little thing that Cliona couldn't resist but to reach out and touch with her index finger. His eyebrows were slender, graceful

arcs of surprise. His swan's neck was a length of sweet, feminine perfection. His skin was perfectly flawless.

As Cliona looked at him, enjoying the sight of such a beautiful woman's face even as she rued the fact that it belonged to the man who had been her husband, she wondered what they should do. If one of his enemies found out what had been done to Holland, she feared for what cruel and evil acts they might seek to practice upon him. Further, his change might give one of his enemies to pretext and the courage to stage a coup.

Cliona wasn't certain what she should do, but she was certain of one thing. She and Holland had no way to fight what was being done to him. For a while, at least, he would have to endure the changes and they would have to find a way to function during that time-- however long it lasted.

As she was dressing, King Jordain finally stirred. Sitting up in bed, his head fuzzy, he called out, "Good morning," when he saw his wife, already dressed, sitting at her table working on her face.

Holland Jordain's voice rang out high and thin as fine crystal. He now had the voice to match his small body and pretty face. He shook his head in dismay.

Queen Cliona filled Jordain on all the events of the day before. He listened patiently, hands in his lap, nodding silently as the bad news was piled on worse.

"Anyway," Cliona finished and stood, "I must get down to the regents meeting. Be thinking about our problems. We'll talk tonight."

Cliona opened her arms to offer her husband a goodbye kiss and hug. She was almost six feet tall in her bare feet. In her high-heeled slippers, she towered over him like an Amazon giant. Jordain got up on his very tippy toes while Cliona stooped down so they could give each other a warm peck on the cheek.

"Bye," Jordain called softly.

"I'll be thinking of you," Cliona called back.

Jordain took a bath, ate some food that had been left from the night before. Then, dressed in a fresh set of nightclothes and a clean robe, he began pacing the room as he'd done the day before, turning the problems over in his mind, confronting the possibility that he'd lost, that he'd been beaten. He stared at his new face in mirror at those times and wondered, can I live the rest of my life like this?"

He caught himself glancing at the jars of face powders and lip colors on his wife's dressing table. "Don't be ridiculous" turned slowly to "maybe I am curious" to "no one will find out" to "I can't help myself."

He was just about to sit down at the dressing table and try some of the face paints when Claire burst into the room. Claire heard the sharp, frightened intake of breath from Jordain as soon as she entered, saw him turn his pretty blue eyes toward the bathroom, felt guilty all over again.

"You don't have to worry," Claire said. "I'm not going to hurt you again. I'm not mad at you anymore and, anyway, I want to apologize."

Jordain felt a sense of relief wash over him. He didn't know if he could endure another beating from his own daughter.

"No," he said, sitting down at his own dressing table. "You were right. I have been a poor father."

"Your voice..." Claire said.

"Yes." Jordain gave a little laugh. "That has changed, too. How do you like it?"

"It's pretty," Claire said. "Like your new face."

There was no malice in the words. She wasn't trying to hurt him.

"Thank you?" Jordain said softly, grateful for his daughter's friendship.

Neither spoke for a moment, then, suddenly, they were in each other's arms, both crying as they each struggled to explain all of the past hurts and fears and mistakes.

When the crying was done, Jordain and his daughter were lying sprawled out on the bed, feeling elated that they'd finally talked about all their past problems and resentments, but exhausted at the same time. It had been the longest conversation of their lives. Claire found herself feeling a new sense of protectiveness toward her father now, and knowing that he was to become a wife and mother, she wanted to do what she could to help him into his new life. It was sweet, she thought, and truly a blessing for him that having already been a man and father, he would now bare children of his own. She would enjoy watching her father's journey into womanhood.

"It has been ever so wonderful," she said, kissing her father on the cheek and giving his small, soft hand a squeeze.

When Claire got up, smoothed down her clothes and started to leave, Jordain had realized that he desperately wanted her to stay. He and his daughter had finally broken through, but all they done was bury the past. He was ready now to start building a future.

"Claire, please wait," he managed, casting about desperately for some excuse to keep her there.

"What?"

A stray strand of blonde hair found its way into Jordain's mouth as he started to answer and, extracting it delicately, he'd looked at it for a moment and had an inspiration. "Will you show me

how to braid my hair? It's so long it keeps getting into my face and I just don't know what to do with it."

Claire smiled. "Of course, though it will be a little strange for me to be teaching my father how to braid his hair."

Jordain giggled, practically skipping over to his dressing table. "No stranger than it will be for me."

First, Claire had Jordain brush the hair out thoroughly. He hadn't been taking care of it properly and it had gotten knotty in places. Then, she patiently showed all sorts of things to do with his hair. She showed him how to pin it up on his head if he was in a hurry or wanted to take a bath. She showed him how to braid it three different ways, how to tie it back in a ponytail and how to use a few strategically placed pins to let it hang down over his shoulders without hanging into his face.

For Jordain, it was like being introduced to some strange new science. He'd never suspected there could be so many secrets to dealing with long hair.

For Claire, it was strangely satisfying to know something her father didn't and to hear him compliment her on how smart and clever she was, and she was pleased, too, to see him taking this pretty step into girlhood.

When Claire finally did finish, she left Jordain with his hair tied back in a ponytail, tied with a big, black velvet ribbon. "Now remember," she'd admonished him.

"I know. 100 brush strokes a night. I won't forget. Thank you ever so much!"

When Claire left, Jordain admired his hair-- and his ribbon-- in the mirror for a moment. Then, getting up, he glanced over at his wife's make-up and decided, why not? It was mid-day. Cliona wouldn't be back for five hours. Why not play with the make-up a little? He could wash it all off and she'd never be the wiser when she got home.

Jordain had put on a little eye shadow and was just finishing painting his lips when, of course, his wife walked through the door to their chambers. Jordain, startled, jumped up from the dressing table, sending a jar of some fragrant powder crashing to the floor. Then, backing away embarrassedly, he began wiping his lips with the heel of his hand, trying to smear away the lip paint.

"It's alright," Cliona said, quickly taking in the scene and realizing what had happened. "It's alright."

Jordain fled into the bathroom, swinging the door behind him and then frantically trying to scrub his face clean in the washbasin.

"Holland Jordain," Cliona said. "You don't have to feel embarrassed. It's part of the spell. I know that."

Holland stopped. Oh my, he thought, realizing that his heart was beating in his chest as rapidly as a frightened blue jays. "The spell?" he asked.

"The spell is causing certain changes in your personality. You can't help it."

Jordain came out of the bathroom, smiled sheepishly. "I was really just curious," he said. "I'd seen you do it."

Cliona threw an arm around Jordain's shoulder and led him back to their bed, where she had him sit down. She knelt at his feet. "I really like what you've done with your hair."

"Claire helped me," Jordain said, reaching up and daintily tugging at the bow to tighten it. "I was getting so tired of it just flapping around me."

Cliona took Jordain's small hand and squeezed it between both of her own. "I have to talk to you about the future."

Jordain nodded.

"We can't keep you in hiding like this forever. Already, rumors have spread about the girl I have been keeping here. People are wondering where you are. Someone will put two and two together after what happened to Julius."

"Am I going to have to leave the city?" Jordain asked, eyes wide.

"I thought of that, but then I thought of something else. I want to hide you right out in the open."

"What?"

"I want to live here in the palace-- as the girl you are about to become."

Jordain felt of rush of conflicting emotions. "I don't think I can live as a girl... I mean, I'm not sure I can fool people. Someone might realize..."

"I thought the same thing," Cliona said, "until I saw you sitting at my dressing table just now working on your make-up. The spell will help us here," she continued, "it is giving you the ability to pretend to be a girl perfectly."

Jordain shook his head. "I'm a man, Cliona, I'm worried..."

"You're worried that if you act like a girl for too long, you'll lose your manhood forever. That you will never be able to return to your old life?"

Jordain nodded.

"Jordain, you were simply the most masculine man in the world before all this happened. The only thing changing you now is this powerful magic. Once we find someone to break this spell and return you to your rightful shape, you'll be your old, swaggering male self again in no time. No one could take the manhood away from Holland Jordain. No one. Just think of it as being in twilight for a time."

"You make it sound so easy. But, when I picture myself in petticoats, curtsying to some stupid boy, I just don't know."

"Jordain, I want you to try it for me. We'll give you a suite of rooms downstairs. I'll announce that you are a cousin from the great northern kingdom of Frost-- a royal cousin. You will be treated with respect. You will be afforded all the creature comforts. In the meantime, you can continue to advise me on decisions affecting the state. I need your help."

Jordain finally nodded. "When?"

"When the transformations are complete enough for you to pass. In the meantime, Claire will visit you each day and teach you some of the things that a young lady needs to know."

"After?"

"You will have the freedom to decide. You can remain in hiding, join the other young noble women of the place in their activities, walk in the gardens or pray all day. You will still be king," she said confidently, "you'll just be in hiding."

Jordain thought of himself sitting in a circle of girls, needle-point in hand, of passing lords in the hallways, they glancing down at him with his blonde hair, and he shook his head in shame and fear. "No," he said. "No."

"Jordain," Cliona said taking his hands and looking him in the eyes. "I need you to trust me and do as I say. I know this is the right decision."

"Okay," Jordain said, as he began to cry. "Okay. Whatever you think is best."
Cliona hugged her pretty little husband, and wiped away his tears.

The next day finally brought Jordain the breasts that he and his wife had both been expecting. Jordain had woken up first and become aware of the sweet swellings of soft flesh that now graced his chest. Looking at them nesting on his chest while he lay in bed, he thought they looked a little overly large. They were like big, pink mud pies someone had made and left still damp and wobbly on him.

Getting up, he'd stripped out of his shirt and examined himself in the mirror. Standing, the breasts were drawn downward a bit-- though as he turned and examined his profile he decided they were definitely young and perky-- and they didn't look too big. They were just right, of course, like

everything else the witches had done to him. They would draw a great deal of attention from men, he thought ruefully. He supposed he would get used to it.

The spell had also given him his figure-- his hips now poured out in pretty, rounded curves and his tummy was much smaller.

Waking, Cliona had looked over and seen Jordain examining himself. Using the skills Claire had already taught him, he'd pinned his hair up the night before. Saving a strand or two that had gotten loose in the night, it was still up there in an incredible pile of glittering ringlets. The morning sun pouring through the curtains of the balcony doors now washed over him, lending his pale, near hairless body a golden tone and high-lighting the curves and crevices of his body with dramatic depths and shadows.

Jordain was turning on his tip toes, his shoulders thrown back, looking at his breasts. Cliona could see them in the mirror, and felt a twang of envy. Then, her eyes drifted down his slender shoulders to his back-- it was beautiful. He'd be the talk of the town when he wore a backless gown. The small of his back, a tiny patch of golden down, barely prepared Cliona for the stunning swelling of those young, girlish buttocks.

Jordain lifted his arms and placed them above his head. He liked the way that raised his breasts and, admiring his firm, shapely body, he spun on his tiptoes like a ballerina, stopping abruptly when he realized that his wife had been watching him the entire time.

"Oh," he said, biting his lip. "I didn't know you were awake."

"I'm not sure I am," Cliona answered, "you look like a dream to me."

The King blushed and looked away.

That morning, the king and queen ate together feeling, for the first time in a long time, as if things were looking up for them. Jordain now felt certain that Cliona would remain in power, his own absence being explained as a secret mission to find and destroy the witches' base. He'd out among you, the people were told by town criers far and wide. If you recognize him, don't tell anyone.

Of course, sightings of the king began to pour in from all corners of the kingdom as mysterious figures rode into towns, roused brigands and turned over their stolen goods to the grateful people.

Because Cliona had always sat at council for Jordain when he'd gone campaigning, she was known to most of the principals and knew them as well. With the civil unrest dying away, martial law had been lifted.

Cliona did not tell Jordain that she was seeking to make a peace agreement with the witches. Nor did she mention that she'd decided to move ahead with action on women's rights and that had led Lord Cableron to begin organizing his own armies and to make noises about a revolt. It made no sense to worry Jordain when he had so many worries right now-- what with being fitted with dresses, moving

to his new rooms, learning to be a proper young woman and all. She'd tell him when she felt he was ready.

Besides, if there was no relief for Jordain, if he was stuck in that body, she felt certain that she could defeat Cableron and, seizing his lands, offer them as dowry to whatever man took Jordain's hand in marriage. That would ensure that at least Jordain would get a fine husband.

While Cliona spent the morning dealing with the problems and the intrigues of the kingdom, King Jordain spent an exhausting morning getting fitted for dresses. In fact, it had been the first time he'd ever worn a dress and, standing perched on a stool in a pair of slippers while the ladies nipped and tucked, he'd felt something like a ridiculous museum piece.

Finally done with that, he'd been rushed to Claire's chambers where she'd got him into his underclothes-- he still had one more change to go through after all-- and then had her girl handle the rest of his dressing. Shortly after noon, Jordain stood before his daughter in a dress the latter had borrowed from a girlfriend she knew was about her father's size. The skirt was full and billowing, a soft blue that complimented his eyes, coming to end just above his ankles and exposing the slippers her wore on his tiny feet. The top of the dress was sleeveless and the neckline very modest, but the material clung to Jordain's abundant new curves.

"You look lovely," Claire said.

"Thank you," Jordain answered, eyes downcast modestly, a closed mouth smile on his lips as he started into a curtsy.

"No... no..." Claire said.

"You did fine with the maidenly, downcast eyes, but your curtsy doesn't need to be so formal. Think cute. Rushed a bit."

"Okay," Jordain said, nodding.

"You look lovely," Claire repeated.

Jordain responded as she had instructed him.

The whole day was spent like that. Jordain practiced walking with a book on his head in his heeled slippers, curtsies for different occasions and different smiles for different situations. He learned a bit about being a proper hostess and listened intently during Claire's talk about the rules of courtship-- what to do if he met a boy in an otherwise empty hall, for example.

Finally, as dinnertime approached, Claire announced that the day's lessons were over, but that Jordain would have homework.

"Homework?" He asked petulantly.

Claire handed Jordain two heavy volumes. "The first of these books is a book of poems, mostly love poems. Every educated girl reads these. You will be expected to know them. The second is a book called "The Princess' Folly." It describes all of the proper behaviors for a maiden. The stories in this book are supposed to be our guide in dealing with all kinds of different situations."

King Jordain, discovering that the books were very heavy, cradled them against his breasts. "Like what?"

"You'll love it," Claire said sarcastically. "There's one where Princess Folly offers advice to her husband on a matter of state and then nags him until he tries it. Of course, the whole thing is a disaster and the man has to solve all the problems. At the end, Princess Folly tells herself she has learned her lesson, 'I'm just going to sit quietly at my husband's knee and let him make all the decisions from now on!'"

"I don't think I'm going to enjoy this very much."

"It's a rite of passage for all the girls in the kingdom," Claire said, walking Jordain back to the doors leading to his room. "We sit around and make fun of it when we talk."

"Thanks for all your help today," he said as he and Claire parted ways.

"Will you join us for dinner?" Claire asked hopefully.

"No," Jordain answered, looking at the floor. "I'll be eating in tonight."

"Remember that tomorrow you'll learn to dance the girl's parts."

"I know. Goodnight."

"Night."

That night, Jordain dreamt that he was hurrying through a damp, tangled forest. He was wearing a white silk dress with an airy, diaphanous skirt and a neckline that plunged just enough to reveal the first swellings of his breasts. He wore elbow length white gloves and could feel the long, crystal earrings bobbing at his lobes as he hurried, halfway between a walk and a run.

High overhead, a full moon hurled its pallid rays down to the earth, lighting the path Jordain hurried along with an eerie, silvery light. King Jordain couldn't remember how he'd come to be on this path or in this forest, but he knew he was hurrying along because he could not be late for the grand ball at the palace that night.

Yet, as he hurried along, his silk skirt rustling busily, almost seeming to whisper in the still night, he feared more than anything falling down and getting dirt on the perfect whiteness of his gown.

With one hand, Jordain pulled up his skirt so that he could hurry a little faster. The other swung at his side, his hand raised at the wrist and fingers touching, as if he were holding a fly by its wing.

Occasionally, he caught a glimpse of the palace in the distance, rising above the forest in a glorious blazing of light. He even thought he could hear the distant sound of party chatter. Yet, though he hurried and hurried and hurried along the twisting path, a white, wispy ghost of a girl floating among the dark trees, each time he caught a glimpse of the palace it seemed no closer.

What shall I do? He wondered. I have to get to that party.

Just then, Jordain heard an animal grunt in the forest off to his left. He stopped moving and stood stock still, like a fawn, trying to quiet his labored breathing.

He listened.

Nothing.

Jordain put a hand to his heaving bosom and breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness.

Then he saw them. A pair of feral eyes, glittering red and malevolent in the depths of the forest. He couldn't see a body, just a pair of eyes seeming to float, close to the ground, watching him.

Jordain took a hesitant step forward along the path.

The eyes followed.

He carefully took another step and then another, slowly moving forward along the path in dainty steps.

"I'm going to get you," the creature growled, suddenly charging forward, crashing through the brush.

Jordain screamed, running forward as fast as he could, still worrying over every step, though, lest he should dirty his gown before the dance. He glanced back and saw the creature as it burst onto the path. It had the body of a man, long, lanky and muscular, glistening with sweat, but it had the head of a wolf and it howled, causing another scream to burst from Jordain's lips and giving him an extra burst of speed.

Jordain didn't dare look back, but just ran as fast as he could, looking up at the moon and screaming, "Help! Someone!" whenever he could manage the breath.

He could hear the Wolfman getting closer, the sounds of its feet pounding the path, thought he could even feel its hot breath on the back of his neck.

And then, suddenly, nothing.

Jordain slowed. Spun around, his whole body tense, ready to run again should the awful beast still pursue him. But there was nothing at all...

"I have you now."

Just as Jordain turned, he bumped into the big, sweating form of the wolf man. Jordain screamed as the creature grabbed him by the shoulders and leaned down, his maw opening to reveal a blood red mouth lined with razor sharp teeth. The creature's tongue was impossibly long and it rolled out, hot and wet against Jordain's cheek.

"Kiss me," the creature said. "Kiss me now."

Jordain closed his eyes and turned away, struggling against the creature's powerful grasp. "No," he panted. "Never."

"Unhand her," a deep voice said calmly.

Jordain opened his eyes and gasped. Behind the two of them now stood a knight. He was wearing armor forged entirely from sparkling jewels-- diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds that cast off their own light, flooding the clearing with their glorious, prismatic spray. In his hand he held a flaming sword that dripped tongues of fire onto the forest floor, but didn't ignite it. In his hand he held a jeweled shield with his insignia-- a thorny rose.

The Jeweled Knight glittered in Jordain's eyes, so tall, so powerful. "Help me," Jordain called, still locked in the Wolfman's grip. "Please."

The Wolfman let Jordain go and tiny Jordain rushed to the knight's side, throwing his arms around the man's torso and placing his cheek to his breastplate. The Jeweled Knight put a big, powerful arm around Jordain's shoulder. "You're safe now," he said, his voice so deep and reassuring.

"I know," Jordain said, looking up at the knight's glittering helm, eyes wide with admiration.

"Stay here."

The knight advanced on the Wolfman, who howled at the moon and then leapt ferociously at the knight.

Jordain, his hands clasped at his breasts, yelled, "Look out!" in his high, clear voice.

The Jeweled Knight easily sidestepped the Wolfman's lunge and then swung his flaming sword in a huge, fatal arc. The Wolfman howled with pain, collapsed to the forest floor and then seemed to evaporate into a misty cloud of pale yellow smoke.

The Jeweled Knight walked over to Jordain, sheathed his sword, and swept the tiny woman up into his immense arms. Jordain, thrilled at the feeling of being so light and airy, threw his arms around the Jeweled Knight's neck and kissed him on the side of his helmet.

When King Jordain awoke, he felt disturbed and elated by his dream, but he didn't have much time to worry about it. He quickly realized that the final change had taken place. He was now a woman in every physical way.

Soon, his girl arrived and drew his bath. Jordain allowed her to bathe him and dress him, all the while thinking about the knight in his dreams and wondering what it all meant. When he arrived in Claire's room for his day's lessons, he tried to push the knight out of his mind and concentrate.

No sooner had Claire greeted her father than he let out a high-pitched scream and, leaping onto a chair, stood on one leg. "Mouse," he screamed. "Mouse."

Claire, stunned, looked and saw the little brown rodent dart out the door.

"It just ran out the door," Claire said, as her father stood, one hand to his heaving bosom as he tried to regulate his breathing.

Jordain, looking carefully about to make sure there weren't any more, let her help him from the chair. When he'd seen the mouse, Jordain had had the strangest, most irrational fear. He'd thought it would climb up his leg and somehow get inside him.

"I'm sorry," he said, though he stood with his knees protectively together. "I just got... scared."

"It's okay. You're safe now," Claire said, looking at her father as if for the first time, giving him a hug. "Are you ready to learn to dance the woman's part?"

"Yes," Jordain said, forcing a smile. "I think I am."

Chapter Seven

Julius wandered around town for hours. He didn't know what to do or where to go. He was a woman now, and didn't want to face anyone who knew him, to have them see his shame-- these breasts, this face, this body.

Woman. Woman. Woman.

It didn't seem possible, but it didn't seem impossible. The thought of this body-- the slit between his legs-- made him nauseous. He thought about leaving the city altogether. Simply walking out the main gate and wandering into the forest until he found a new place where no one knew him. But the thought of wandering alone brought back the problem of his body, and he pulled his robe tightly around himself and shuddered when he imagined what might-- would happen-- if some men came upon a lone woman wandering in the forest.

The bitch had predicted that he'd run to the witches and beg forgiveness. To hell with that. That he would never do. And Juno? He'd betrayed Juno. He'd broken his own vows and disgraced the ancient religion with his drinking and politics and-- whoring.

Julius was wandering down a narrow side road, lost in thought, and a man pushed past him, sending him crashing against the wall of a shop which he hit hard, slid down and ended up squatting on the street. Hot tears burned in his eyes and he hugged his knees to chest, rested his head against his knees and sobbed bitterly. A few people noticed the redheaded woman curled up against the wall, weeping, but they just made odd faces or laughed as they stepped over her.

When Julius felt the tears start to dry up he raised his head, putting his chin on his knees. The tear-blurry world rushed past him, men and women rushing here and there, children running, people laughing and talking. This, he realized, was where the poor people lived and worked. This was how they lived. These dirt streets and crumbling buildings.

Julius saw several women carrying jars of water on their heads, and he walked down the street in the direction they'd come from. He found a small fountain. There were people all around it. Stalls where people sold different foods, spices and tools. Self-consciously, he walked out to the well and started to reach in with his hand to get a drink of water.

"Hey," a man yelled, grabbing his arm. "What the hell are you doing?"

Julius felt scared, and tried to pull his arm away, but the man tightened his grip and Julius felt his knees getting weak as he sagged toward the ground. "Please," he begged in his soft voice, "I just wanted some water."

The man, Georgio, seeing how frightened the young woman was, threw an arm around her waist and helped her regain her feet, letting go of her arm. "Don't use your hands," the man said. "We all drink from this fountain."

Julius felt uncomfortable with the big man's arm around his waist, and was frightened for a second that the man was going to want sex from him, but when he stepped away the look on the man's face softened and he smiled.

"I didn't know," Julius managed. "I'm sorry."

"You seem so scared," Georgio said softly. "Calm down, okay? I can get a cup for you if you're thirsty. How about that? I'll ask my wife for one. Would that be okay?"

Julius smiled gratefully and nodded. 'Thank goodness,' he thought, as the man walked over toward a stall, calling to his wife. 'Thank goodness the man is married.' He did feel thirsty, he realized. Very thirsty. And hungry.

Georgio came over with his wife, who was curious to see who this mysterious young woman was her husband was talking about. "Hi," she said. "I'm Karia and this is Georgio. I know he didn't have the sense to introduce himself."

"Hi," Julius answered nervously, taking the cup the woman offered and, dipping into the fountain, quickly drinking down one cup and then getting another.

Georgio and his wife laughed. "She's like a thirsty kitten," Georgio boomed. "Haven't you had anything to drink today?"

Julius shook his head no, but was too busy drinking to answer. Karia gave a concerned glance to Georgio, who wandered back toward their stall. "Honey," Karia said to Julius, "What are you doing out here in this part of the city? Are you a runaway or something?"

"No," Julius answered, glancing around at the little courtyard. "I guess I'm just a little lost."

He pushed the thick red curls back from his face, trying to get his bearings. He actually had no idea where he was, and he couldn't see the palace compound-- up on the highest hill-- anywhere.

"Well, you're wearing a priest's robe, sweetie. I've never seen you around here before, but you talk like an aristocrat. Are you sure you aren't running from something?"

Julius didn't know what to say, but he glanced down at his robe and realized that it must have looked very strange for people to see a young woman dressed like this. "I don't have any other clothes," he admitted, tugging at the sleeves with a slender hand. "I just found this and started wearing it."

"You don't have any place to live, do you?"

"No," Julius said in a very small voice. "No, I don't."

"Why don't you come and stay with us?" Karia said. "Now, we don't have much, and I'm not offering you charity, but if you'll pull your load then you can stay."

Julius didn't know what to say. He didn't have anywhere else to go. He was scared and alone, and at night the streets would be cold and dangerous. "Thanks," he almost whispered. Karia gave him a hug.

Georgio and Karia-- they didn't have a surname-- ran a small farm just outside the city. It was late afternoon, so they packed up their goods in a wagon and headed home, Julius riding in the back of an open wagon with the goods and a few chickens that hadn't sold. It was smelly and uncomfortable, but he didn't feel like complaining. This was a lot better than he had hoped for, and maybe after a day or two, he thought as his breasts bounced around with each bump in the road, "I'll have the courage to kill myself."

The Princess King

Part II

Jordain was late for his latest lesson with Claire. He hadn't been satisfied with the way his hair had looked and he'd had his girl completely re-do it twice before he's finally pulled on his white gloves and scurried up to Claire's rooms. Claire greeted him wearing men's breeches, a white, man's shirt and a coat. She had her hair tied back in a tight bun, and she looked almost like a boy.

"Claire," Jordain said in genuine surprise, "whatever have you done?"

"I woke up this morning and decided I didn't want to wear a dress," she answered confidently. "So. You look very pretty, father."

Jordain smiled coyly. "Thank you. I rather like this dress. It's elegant, but not gaudy."

"Yes."

"Well, this seems so strange with me in my prettiest dress and my daughter in her pants and coat. I'm not sure what to make of it."

"It's a new world, father. Are you ready to start?"

"Yes," Jordain said eagerly, assuming the pupil position with his feet together, hands behind his back and his chest out. "What shall we work on today?"

That day, Claire continued to help Jordain with his walk and his curtsies, but they also focused on making small talk. Finally, she showed him how to sew, to crochet and to quilt.

"Many of the young girls gather to sew together. They make tapestries and embroidery. Really, it is just an excuse to chat and gossip. Still, you should know how to do these things, as they will be expected of you by some girls."

Jordain picked up the skills quickly, taking some material to work on that night in his room. As he was about to leave, Claire bowed and he curtsied.

"Jordain, I can't tell you how proud I am of you. I can hardly believe that you are my father. You are really shaping up to be a very refined, self-assured young lady."

Jordain blushed furiously. "Oh, you're being too kind."

"No. You are just the sweetest little thing in the world."

"Well," he said, eyes sharp with feminine pleasure, pink mouth in a dimpled grin. "Thank you."

"Will we see you for dinner tonight?"

"Yes," Jordain said, just then deciding. "Yes. I will join you."

"Good."

When Jordain left, Claire smiled to herself, straightening her coat in her looking glass. He really was coming along nicely, she thought. And he was so pretty and girl-sweet. It made her feel happy that he was doing so well, accepting his new role with such fervor. It would be a shame when he married and left the household. It was so stimulating to have a pretty young woman around.

She went up to meet her mother, who gave her a mischievous grin. "Dressing like a man now?"

"No. Dressing as I care to. It doesn't seem to me that there are such things as male or female these days."

Cliona nodded. "I take your point. And how is your father?"

"He," Claire said, "is as soft and pretty as a pony. He is really coming around nicely. You should see him in his floor length dresses and sharp white gloves, all that golden blonde hair spilling down over his slender shoulders. I think he's the smartest young woman in the palace, really."

"Good," Cliona said, thinking. "Good. It will make it easier for him."

"You're going to marry him off," Claire said, "aren't you?"

"I have the idea under serious consideration."

"It's supposed to happen, mother. The witch-- I mean, remember Aunt Mary's song?"

"Yes, I remember. It's just that, I guess deep down I still love him. I keep hoping against hope that maybe this is just temporary. That once he learns his lesson, they'll make him a man again."

"They won't, mother. I'm certain of that. He is to marry and become a mother. That's the prophecy."

"A mother. A mother! Dear God, it's so hard for me to imagine."

"It won't be after you see him tonight."

"Is he coming to dinner?"

"Yes, and I think you'll see that he is every inch a girl now. I think that ultimately he will want to marry. He will want to have babies. It's what he is now."

"I'm worried about Cableron. He claimed he was sick and sent an envoy to meet with the rest of the regents."

"He's planning on overthrowing your rule."

"I know."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Cliona paced the room, glancing back at her daughter.

"I'm not sure," she finally managed. "He has allies, and he is getting more. He insisted that King Jordain return and address the Regents in person. He promises the other men that he will drive the witches out of the kingdom and restore Juno. I haven't been able to produce the results they want to see."

"You need to make an alliance with the witches. They have the power right now."

"They haven't answered my letters."

"They will."

Chapter Eight

Julius, Sascha, Brianne, and Fiona came out of the henhouse with their aprons full of eggs and walked carefully up to the farmhouse. The sun had not yet risen, but it was one of the duties of the females in the family to get up before light and collect the eggs so that mother Maria and they could use some of them to cook up a big breakfast for the men. Whatever eggs weren't eaten would be traded to folk who came around from nearby to barter their salted pork, corn or baked goods for the family's famous eggs.

Upon arriving at the farm with Georgio and his wife, Julius had immediately found himself dumped with the women of the family. Fiona was the oldest-- she was probably physically the same age as Julius now found himself and she'd taken one look at Julius' heavy breasts, wide hips and milky complexion and hated him. Brianne, just beginning to develop her figure, seemed intrigued but cautious while Sascha, just a baby really, had run right up to him and asked if he would hold her.

At the instruction of their parents, the girls had taken Julius out back and given him a cold bath before dressing him in some of Fiona's old clothes. The girls were amused as how bashful Julius was about his body-- even more amused when he didn't know how to put on the simple undergarments they gave him nor any of the other girl's clothes.

"You're practically helpless," Fiona barked, "you silly girl! Have you been wearing men's robes all your life?"

"I..." Julius was standing there with one slender arm across his full breasts, another placed modestly between his legs. "I never had to... dress myself before..."

Teasing, tickling and laughing, the girls helped him and soon he found himself in a long brown cotton skirt, a stiff white cotton blouse, and an apron, his long red curls tucked up under a bonnet that matched his bark-brown skirt. The under things were not one designed to enhance his feminine shape, but intended to provide support to his back and breasts-- support that he, feeling for the first time, was quite gratefully for. These women worked, he realized, and their clothes were intended to help them work.

Still, he felt defeated and humiliated in this dress, and his humiliation became even more complete when he went inside and not only helped the rest of the females cook, but then spent the first half of dinner serving the men of the family, only sitting down to eat himself when the men were done. Georgio, who seemed nice enough, had five sons. Four were too young to concern Julius, though they were all loud and full of themselves, but the oldest, Jarak, made Julius nervous.

When the boys had come in from work, tossing their gloves and boots and jackets all around the house in a wild mess, Fiona had told Julius and Sascha to go in and pick up after them. Just as Julius had walked through the door, Jarak had looked up at him and Julius had frozen stock still. He'd

never seen a look like that before-- such a penetrating stare. Jarak just stared right at him-- right into his eyes until Julius had been forced to lower his own gaze, and then Julius had stood there as Jarak's eyes had slowly, carefully, probed every inch of Julius' body. Julius felt like little ants were crawling all over him, he could tell that Jarak was imagining him naked, and he felt a nervous tingle between his legs and a jolt of fear as the thought struck him.

Snapping out of his almost trance-like paralysis, Julius looked up, his cheeks hot, hoping to fix a defiant stare on the young man ogling him, but Jarak had turned to leave the room and all Julius saw was a glimpse of a forest of curly black hair and broad, muscular shoulders.

During dinner, Jarak continued his silent feast. Julius could feel the boy's eyes on his breasts, his neck, his back. He wanted to say something, or to stare back, but he found himself just ignoring it, his cheeks burning with embarrassment and shame. This is what it is to be a woman, he thought bitterly. To have men look at you like this. To serve them, and to provide them pleasure.

He thought back briefly to when he'd been a man, how he'd cast his own ravenous looks on the young girls at the brothels, how he'd used their bodies...

...but he forced the memories from his mind as he felt his nipples harden and strange new pleasures start to tremble somewhere deep in this dangerous new female form.

There was no room in the humble farmhouse, so Julius had to sleep in the loft. Sascha asked for permission to sleep with him and the parents agreed, somewhat to Julius' dismay. He was entertaining vague thoughts of escape, of getting away from Jarak and his awful stare. Of course, he was also afraid that Jarak might pay a late night visit to the barn, and he hoped that having Sascha with him might prevent that from happening.

It was dark, and even with the light of a half-moon the loft was nearly pitch black. Tired and confused, Julius mashed hay into a makeshift pillow and then drew some over himself to keep warm. Feeling his underclothes pinching him, he pulled his blouse out of his skirt, reached up and loosened his top, sighing with relief as he breathed easier and his crushed breasts swung free after their time in prison. As he sank back into the hay, he could hear the throbbing pulse of the night insects, the chirping and buzzing. A frog croaked somewhere. It disturbed him.

Sascha's tiny voice broke the silence.

"How many babies do you want to have?" She asked.

The question stabbed like a jagged shard of glass.

"What?"

"I want to have at least eight babies," Sascha said, oblivious to the defensiveness in Julius' voice. "Four boys and four girls. One with black hair, one with red hair, one with brown hair and one with blonde."

Eight babies? Juno be damned! Julius was reaching under his shirt still, pulling his breasts completely free of his undergarments and letting them ride. The cotton shirt scratched at his puffy nipples some, but it still felt better to have his breasts breathe a little. "Eight babies," he finally managed. "That's a lot."

"Unh-unh. Most women have at least eight babies out here on farms. And I want to have a husband who is strong enough to pick me up and carry me upstairs."

"He'd have to be very strong to do that," Julius said, baffled by her talk.

"And we'll have the biggest farm in the province, and I'll have my own horse. Do you want your own horse?"

"Of course," Julius answered, smiling to himself.

"Are you going to marry Jarak?"

"What?"

"I saw Jarak looking at you," Sascha said, her voice playful. "You're so beautiful I think he wants to make you his wife."

"Maybe we should get to sleep. We have to get up early tomorrow."

"I hope I'm as pretty as you when I get older, so a boy like Jarak will fall in love with me."

"Okay. Okay. Time to sleep now. Be a good girl and go to sleep."

"Night."

"Night."

Julius stared at the ceiling, slightly terrified.

Jarak. Eight babies. He felt like his tummy was spinning over, rumbling, re-arranging itself. I cannot be a farmer's wife, he thought. I just can't let this happen. It made him hyper-conscious of this strange body-- the soft, creamy thighs, the heavy, maternal breasts, the soft voice, the smooth slit between his legs. Juno, he found himself saying, please forgive me. I know I did wrong. I know I failed you, but deliver me from this... from this... womaness... please don't make me become this woman you have made of me.

I beg you.

The next day Julius head swum with conflicting emotions, strange feelings and vague, fuzzy fears. It seemed to him that he was surrounded with mothers and images of female animal behavior. He collected eggs in the henhouse with the other girls, carrying them delicately in his apron while the rooster strutted and crowed around his ankles. He milked cows, sitting down on a stool and taking the rubbery, milk swollen teat in his hand, pulling on it and sending little streams of milk squirting into a wooden bucket--- sometimes as he pulled the cow would moan a little and he, almost feeling like he was pulling on his own heavy breasts, would shush her and say, "I know. I'm sorry girl."

One morning as he was walking with Sascha out to weed one of the gardens, he saw a mother goat stir from her sleep. Immediately, a half dozen tiny baby goats ran to her, greedily nosing for her teats, finding them and latching on, drinking hungrily, their tiny limbs trembling as she stood there, almost seeming to smile contentedly while her little ones fed.

It was toward the end of a day when he and Sascha were piling up fallen branches they'd removed from the pasture that he stopped to watch bees flying from sunflower to sunflower. The Monastery had had a small garden, so he'd seen bees and flowers before, but now it seemed to him somehow more significant as he watched them plunging their heads and feet into the damp, fleshy center of the flower, picking up and leaving off pollen. He put one hand gently to the round of his tummy as he watched, again feeling as if something was turning and changing within him.

Then he felt a strong hand take his arm and he spun around, skirt swirling around his legs, to look up into the Jarak's face.

"Jarak," he said, surprised. "What?"

But he again felt almost paralyzed, standing there motionless as Jarak pulled him closer and carefully examined his face. Julius felt his own mouth drop open slightly as he stared into Jarak's dark eyes.

"Kiss me," Jarak said, now taking Julius' other arm and pulling him against his own body.

Julius felt his soft breasts resting against Jarak's chest, their waists press together. He felt his head tilt back as Jarak swooped in, his mouth open...

...but at the last second Julius turned his face away.

"No," he said in a strangled voice. "Let go of me."

Jarak laughed, but didn't let go. "Why won't you kiss me?" He said.

"I don't want to," Julius said, struggling weakly in the big man's arms, but refusing to look him in the eyes again.

"Try it, it might be fun."

Julius stomped his foot in frustration. "Let. Me. Go."

"Let her go," Sascha said in an angry voice. "She doesn't like you, Jarak."

Suddenly, Julius found himself free, and he quickly retreated from Jarak's warm, musky presence. Once a little away, standing next to Sascha, he looked at Jarak defiantly, but he couldn't find any words. Jarak was standing, his shoulders back, the sun setting behind him in a ball of fiery red.

"I'm just playing around," he said. "See you girls later."

Julius smoothed his skirt watched Jarak go, then turned to Sascha, but she was staring up at him with happy, glittering eyes full of girlish mischief. She clapped her hands and then put them to her cheeks.

"He likes you," she said, "you are so lucky!"

Sascha threw herself into Julius arms giggling with excitement. He lifted her up, feeling the weight of her slender body even as she rested her head against the softness of his breasts, threw her arms around his neck and giving him a kiss on the cheek asked, "Can I be the flower girl?"

"I not getting married!" Julius said, flustered. "Ever!"

Chapter Nine

When King Jordain arrived for dinner, Cliona was surprised and even disappointed in the change she saw in him. He was wearing a white dress with a full skirt that almost brushed across the floor, and he moved so gracefully in it that it seemed he was floating rather than walking. She'd seen the young female body that was now his, but with him now walking with the grace and caution of a fawn, she could hardly believe that this was her husband.

"Jordain," she said, unable to hide her surprise as he walked into the dining room. "You look... wonderful?"

Jordain felt his cheeks flushing, but smiled, curtsied and said, "Thank you. Claire has been helping me learn to play my role."

She noticed that his speech was now inflected like a girl's, much more musical and ear-pleasing. Trying not to stare, she took in his appearance in nervous glances-- thick golden curls surrounded an expertly painted face, the soft pastel colors emphasizing his wide, innocent eyes and full, red lips. His tiny, shell-like ears sported glittering diamonds and his dress had a plunging neckline revealing his firm young breasts.

Could this really be the man I married? Cliona wondered, as King Jordain glided past her in a cloud of perfume and, lifting his skirts, sat daintily at the table. Could this be the man who once inspired fear in the most fearsome warriors in the land? The man who fathered my children?

It made her wince inside to remember him as the man he'd been, strong, fearless, and virile, even as he sat at the table with his tiny hands in his lap, his own womb now ripe for childbearing.

Just then, Claire sauntered into the room, still wearing men's britches and an officer's coat. "Mother, Father."

During the meal, King Jordain worked up his courage enough to ask his wife how the affairs of the kingdom were progressing. He was almost afraid to know. Since his change, he felt nervous and insecure; he'd lost his confidence and almost didn't want to know what was going on because he couldn't do anything about it, and it would just be upsetting.

Cliona explained the problems and the triumphs while Jordain sat primly listening, not reacting either way. When his wife was done, he asked in a near whisper "Have you heard from the witches?"

"No," Cliona admitted. "I have tried to contact them about Cablerone-- and your problem as well."

"I was hoping we might find out how long my 'problem' is to last," Jordain said.

Claire glanced at Cliona, who shook her head 'no'.

"What?" Jordain said. "Do you know something you aren't telling me?"

"Father," Claire started, "you seem to be adjusting so well. You're comfortable as a girl, aren't you? I mean, look at how you're dressed. How you walk. It isn't so bad, is it?"

The King felt suddenly very defensive. He glanced down at himself, at the swelling of his breasts and the pretty skirts flowing around his legs. "I've... I'm just trying to do my part. I don't want to stay like this."

"Maybe you won't have to, dear," Jordain's wife cut in. "And you are doing a wonderful job playing this role. You're just pretending to be a wonderful girl right now, and we'll just have to wait and see..."

"He should know the truth," Claire said. "We can't hide it from him forever."

Jordain clutched his hands together and held them to his chest. "Oh, please tell me what is happening. I want to know. I really do."

Cliona finally nodded. Seeing him sitting there like that, pleading like any young woman, she knew that he had to be told the truth. She stood and held out her hand to her husband.

"Come over and let's all sit by the fire. Claire will tell you then."

Jordain stood and in a rustle of skirts walked over and placed his tiny hand in that of his wife. He felt both relieved and frightened as Claire led him over to the fireplace-- where they had several large padded chairs, and indicating for Jordain to sit in one in the middle, she pulled her own up close and took his hands.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"Yes," Jordain whispered.

Claire stood before her mother and the girl that had been her father, the fire at her back. Jordain's eyes were wide and the flickering flames danced in their virgin depths.

"You are destined to live out the rest of your life as a female," Claire said bluntly. "You are destined to live out your life as predicted in the song of Mary Skydaughter."

The words of Skydaughter's taunting rhyme came back to Jordain. Dancing with boys at balls... getting married... mothering babies. He felt a strange twisting in his abdomen, a sharp dagger stabbing at his heart. He shifted in his chair, bringing his knees together tightly and straightening his back.

"I won't," Jordain said. "I refuse."

"Father, I am sorry, but you will become a mother. You will hold your children to your breasts and let them suckle. That is your destiny."

King Jordain looked at his wife. She was smiling and nodding. "It's going to be wonderful for you," she said. "Don't fight it. Don't be afraid."

"No," Jordain said, shaking his head, his voice strangled in his throat. "No! I'm a man..."

He tried to pull his hands free; he wanted to get up and run from the room, find a place to be alone, a place to hide from his shame and his sex, but Cliona was stronger and she tightened her grip on his wrists, pulling his slender, thrashing body to her. Wrapping his arms around him she pulled him into a warm, maternal hug and he began to weep against her breasts in great, heaving sobs.

Finally, the crying stopped. For a long time, Jordain just lay weakly against his wife's body while she stroked his soft cheek with the back of her hand. "There, there," Cliona whispered. "There, there."

Finally, Jordain pulled away from his wife, holding her at arm's length and looking her in the face. Cliona saw a single, silvery tear pool in the corner of his eye and roll down his cheek, dropping to puddle on one of his breasts. She wiped at the trail of the tear and then cupped her husband's pretty face, smiling.

"I'll never be able to make love to you again," Jordain whispered, sadly.

"I'll miss having you at my side," Cliona admitted, "but I'll be there for you through all of your experiences, good and bad."

"That goes for me, as well, Father," Claire said.

Jordain turned to look at her. "Are you ashamed of me?" He said, glancing down at his breasts. "To have a father who is a girl?"

"No," Claire said. "I'll never be ashamed of you. I think you are very brave and strong. A lesser man would have killed himself."

"I can't do that," Jordain said. "It would violate the sacred oath of the warrior-king. But I can't imagine myself living as you say I must, either. Claire, Cliona, you must remember that inside this body is still a man, a king."

"Look at yourself," Cliona said gently. "How you're dressed. Jordain the King would never have dressed as you are now. He never would have wept as sweetly as you just did. Jordain the King is dead. You are now Jordain, the maiden."

Jordain felt his face burn with shame. "You told me to dress this way," he said angrily. "You told me to play the part of the girl. To hide."

"And you agreed," Cliona said.

"Because you were afraid," Claire said. "And because you were obedient and compliant, as a maiden should be."

"You aren't!" Jordain said, turning on his daughter angrily. "You dress like a boy."

"Jordain," Claire said, sadly. "Jordain. You're upset..."

"I am not upset," Jordain screeched. "Leave me alone."

"Jordain," Claire began, but her father cut her off.

"I would like to go to my room now," he said. "I am feeling tired."

Cliona glanced at Claire. They exchanged a small nod. "Fine," Cliona said. "An excellent idea. We're all tired."

Jordain stood and faced the two women, making a point not to curtsy. "I am still a man," he said, smoothing down the front of his dress. "I am still the King."

"Goodnight," Cliona said in a voice devoid of emotion.

"Goodnight, father," Claire added.

When Jordain, pretty head held high, had walked out of the room, Cliona shook her head. "I don't think he's going to be able to go through with this. Maybe we should ask the witches to change him back."

Claire frowned. "I was supposed to keep this a secret," she said, "but the witches told me that Jordain's future is a way for him to achieve salvation. He must create life now to make up for the lives he destroyed before."

"So there will be no returning to manhood for him?"

"No."

"Maybe he could just admit what happened and continue to live here as a kind of spinster?"

Claire considered. "Look at how much he has changed in just a short time, mother. I am sure that over time he will adjust and accept his new station. I also think..."

"...that we should get him around some men?"

Claire smiled. "He is a very emotional girl, mother. He just needs a man on which to focus those emotions."

"Let's start arranging a debutante ball for him."

"Let's."

Jordain hurried back to his rooms, a cloud of conflicting emotions quickly solidifying into single-minded hatred of the witches. He knew that he'd become girlish, more girlish than his own daughter. With the triumph of the cult of Diana, women all over the kingdom had started adopting male clothes, but he'd found himself fascinated with lacy gowns and petticoats. He'd be ashamed, he realized, to be seen in public wearing britches. And his interests, from working on his needlepoint, to reading poetry to gossiping with the girls were all the habits and activities of a young lady.

He liked doing those things. But he knew it was part of the spell.

And now he was suspicious of his wife and daughter.

Surely, he felt, they were a part of the conspiracy. No wonder the witches had been so easily able to defeat his wizard's protections. His own wife and daughter had been conspiring against him from the beginning. And now, they were dressing him as a girl, trying to marry him off and get him pregnant. Pregnant! The King, belly swollen with child? Never!

How they would laugh at me, he thought, bitterly. To see the once mighty king birthing children.

Back in his rooms his girls helped him out of his layers of clothes. I'll show them all, he decided angrily, that I am still a man. When they gotten him into his evening gown and pinned his hair up for the night, he asked Mina to leave him alone with Kikana.

"Come here," he said to Kikana.

She was a tall, slender peasant girl with barely a figure to speak of, but she had gorgeous eyes and a fat, soft mouth. She was about the same age as Jordain now.

"How may I serve you, milady?" Kikana said.

Jordain reached up and put a hand behind Kikana's neck. She was a little taller than him, so as he pulled her face closer to his he stood on his tiptoes, finding her mouth and kissing her softly. It was the first kiss he's had since the change had become complete, and he felt a small charge run from his lips right down to his groin. Kikana knew what her mistress wanted. It was not an unusual request for a servant to receive. She let her arms slip around Jordain's waist and pulled him close to her, his

large, soft breasts pressing into her ribcage just below her own smaller bosom. He tilted his head back and his lips parted. She kissed him again, this time a longer, slower kiss. He wrapped his arms around her waist while she ran hers up and down his back.

Jordain went all soft and fuzzy. It felt good to be in Kikana's arms. She was tall and lithe. Muscular. Her hands were calloused from hard work. She led him over to the bed and pushed him onto his back, untying the top of his nightgown and pulling it open to reveal the sweet swellings of his maidenly breasts.

"You are so beautiful," Kikana whispered.

Jordain felt as if his insides were turning to bubbles, and giggled with pleasure. Kikana cupped the side of his face and kissed him again, this time giving one his breasts a squeeze with her hard, calloused hand. Jordain felt a jolt of pleasure again launch itself toward the place between his legs, and he arched his back with pleasure.

"Make love to me," he whispered when the kiss ended. "Ravish me."

Kikana kissed her compliant mistress on the side of her breast and went to work.

That night, Jordain dreamt that he was lost in the castle. He was wearing his white, silk nightdress, and rushing down long, dark corridors, looking for something, he didn't know what. In the distance he would see either a lighted archway or a flickering flame around a corner, and he would hurry toward the light, but when he reached it he would always find a sputtering torch and another long dark tunnel.

Stopping for a moment to push his thick blonde curls back from his face, Jordain said, "I wish there were someone here to help me!" But his high, soft voice echoed down the corridor before seeming to vanish like a coin sent flashing into the blackness of a deep well.

Just then, he heard the distant cries of an infant. With the sound of the baby's cries he felt a dagger of anxiety twisting in his breast. Suddenly, he realized that he had to find that baby, that's what he was doing wandering in the castle.

"Goodness," he said, stomping his foot on the hard floor of the corridor, and then he lifted his head and, listening very carefully, started to follow the sound of the baby crying.

Turn after turn, he made his way through hallways and vestibules, up stairways and over stone bridges, but the baby never seemed to get any closer. He felt tears of frustration building in his eyes and he dug his long fingernails into the palms of his hands.

"I've got to help my baby," he thought, "I'm such a bad mother. Why can't I find him?"

Everything started to look the same. His head was spinning, and the baby was still crying, so sad, so needy. Finally, Jordain just slumped against a wall, hugged his knees to his chest and began sobbing piteously.

"Father," a voice suddenly said. He looked up through his tears to see his daughter, Claire. "Father," she repeated, "why are you crying?"

"I can't find my baby," Jordain answered. "Can't you hear him crying?"

Claire reached out her left hand, palm open. She smiled. "I'll help you find your baby. Don't cry."

Jordain felt relief wash over him as he took Claire's hand and let her pull him to his feet. Claire immediately started down the hall, still holding Jordain's hand as he hurried behind her, practically being dragged along. Just like that, Claire led him into a brightly lit room where a baby lay in a big, blue bassinet; its tiny hands grabbing at the air as it wailed desperately.

Jordain rushed forward and swept the little infant into his arms. Then, cooing and shushing the tiny child, kissing him on the forehead, Jordain untied the laces at the top of his gown, pulled out a milk-heavy white breast and gave the baby a nipple.

"It's okay," he whispered, "Mommy is here now."

Immediately, the child stopped crying and began feeding, his puffy eyes flickering shut as he sucked on Jordain's teat. Jordain turned to Claire his face glowing with both gratefulness and fulfillment.

"Thank you," he said, "thank you for helping me find my baby."

Claire smiled, glancing at the baby at her father's breast. "My pleasure," she answered. "But I'm hungry, too."

"Oh, dear" Jordain said, carefully pulling his other breast from the top of his robe. "You, too."

Claire came forward and put her mouth to Jordain's teat, sucking easily and drawing his milk into her mouth. Jordain stood there, a pleasant heat building in his belly and spreading into his chest, his shoulders, his limbs and his head, his whole body bursting with pleasure as he nursed his children.

In the morning when Jordain knocked cautiously on Claire's door, she answered with a smile and handed him a wicker basket that matched the one she had slung over her own arm. She was in a dress once again, her hair up and face painted.

"That's a pretty dress," Jordain said with a smile.

"Thanks. I'm feeling a bit girly today."

"What's the basket for?"

"We're going to pick some berries. This afternoon, we will make a pie."

"What for?"

"Fun."

"Well, I shall have to go back to my room first. I need a hat."

"Oh, of course," Claire said, "your complexion. Here, pick out one of mine."

Claire led her father into one of her closets and he fussed about, trying on different hats before finally settling on a broad brimmed straw hat with a pink ribbon wide enough to protect not just his face but his bosom as well. Claire tied the ribbon under Jordain's chin.

"Lovely."

Jordain admired himself in the mirror, checking out each profile. "It's very cute," he admitted.

"Let's go," Claire said excitedly taking his hand.

"Don't you want a hat?"

"No. I don't care if I get a little sun."

Jordain, rushing behind Claire, could only admire her for being so bold an independent. A girl who wasn't worried about her complexion? Goodness.

Soon, the two were deep toward the back of the garden, carefully picking blackberries and raspberries, Claire picking the high one and Jordain the low. They'd only been there a half hour when a loud crashing sound came from somewhere behind them and loud; boy's voices could be heard.

"You idiot! Watch where you're going."

"It's only a bush, damnit."

"It's a royal bush, you ass."

"Well, if I'd known it was a royal Bush I would have bowed."

"If you'd have known it was a royal Bush, you would have stuck your fingers in it."

Jordain gave a start and looked to Claire, a hand to his cheek. "Did you hear that?"

Claire nodded. "Boys are so dumb."

Just then, the two boys came around the end of the row and, spotting the two young ladies, immediately turned, threw their shoulders back and, grinning, swaggered over to them.

"Claire, what are you doing on this fine morning?"

"And who is this pretty little thing?"

Claire did a little curtsy, Jordain following her lead. He found himself drifting closer to Claire, his eyes cast toward the ground. It was the first time he'd been around boys in a dress, as a girl.

"Cavanaugh, Lewellyn, this is Duchess Jennifer of Frost, she's a cousin visiting here for a time."

As was the custom, Cavanaugh and then Lewellyn took Jordain's hand and kissed it with a bow. "It is an honor to meet you, Duchess."

"The honor is mine," Jordain answered with another small curtsy. He glanced nervously at Claire who nodded approvingly, sending a rush of pride through Jordain's slender young body.

"We're picking berries," Claire said once introductions were complete. "We hope to make a pie this afternoon."

"What fun," Lewellyn said with a smirk.

Jordain giggled. It seemed such a funny thing to say.

Claire smiled. "Why don't you boys help us?"

"Gladly," Cavanaugh answered.

"Cav and I will work this row while Lewellyn and Jennifer work one of the others. Okay?"

Jordain's eyes grew wide and he started to protest, but Lewellyn grabbed Jordain's basket from the ground and took him by the hand.

"Come along, Duchess," he said without hesitating, half dragging Jordain back toward another row.

Jordain, afraid it would seem rude, didn't fight, but allowed himself to be dragged along by the tall, slender boy. He glanced back at Claire, though, his mouth in a circle of surprise, his eyes wide with apprehension. Claire waved as her pretty little father was dragged around a hedgerow.

"She'd a shy little thing, isn't she?" Cavanaugh said.

"Oh, she's not used to be around boys at all," Claire said. "She'll open up after a while. Thanks for meeting us out here."

"Not at all," Cavanaugh said, picking a few berries and dropping them into the basket. "Not at all."

Lewellyn led Jordain to a fresh row smothered in ripe, unpicked berries. He dropped the basket and smiled. "This will be a good place to pick, Lady Jennifer. We'll get plenty of berries for you girls to do your baking."

Jordain smiled politely. He felt funny being referred to as Lady Jennifer, or Lady anything, but the title came with his dresses, he supposed. "Thank you ever so much for helping." He stepped around the basket, putting it between him and Lewellyn, and immediately began to pick berries, glancing up at the boy from the corner of his eye.

'If he tries anything,' Jordain thought to himself, 'I shall scream!'

The boy was very tall, almost as tall as Jordain had once been, with broad shoulders and big hands; he'd make a good warrior someday, but as of now Jordain noticed he had only wispy hairs he was trying to cultivate into a mustache and beard to very little effect. It was actually kind of cute to see a young man trying to look more mature and masculine.

Lewellyn grabbed some berries and tossed them in his mouth, chomping them loudly, dark red juice spilling down the corners of his mouth.

"Blast," he said around the berries, leaning forward to keep the juice from dripping on his clothes.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, immediately threw more berries into it and once again seemed totally surprised when he began chomping and found juice pouring down his chin.

"You have awful manners for a noble," Jordain said crossly, vexed by the display.

Lewellyn grinned, his head cocked to one side. "Do you think my manners are awful, young miss?"

The term "young miss" made Jordain angry, and he stopped picked, placing his hands on his hips and turned to face Lewellyn. "Your manners are awful, Lewellyn. And I am Lady Jennifer, not young miss. I'm probably older than you!"

"You're just a child," Lewellyn laughed, "a little girl. Be serious."

"A little girl?"

"A little girl."

Jordain stomped his foot. "I am not going to stay here and listen to your rude comments."

Lewellyn smiled, grabbing Jordain's arm. "I am sorry," he said quietly, his whole demeanor suddenly changing. "I didn't mean to offend. I am just having fun, you know, Lady Jennifer. If you want me to leave, I will." He frowned and look toward the ground sadly, his dark eyes wide and soulful.

Jordain was caught off guard by the sudden change in attitude and felt guilty for making Lewellyn feel so bad. "Oh, no, you don't have to leave. I'm sorry. Joking?"

"Only joking. Trying to amuse a pretty young woman."

Of course, Jordain thought, he was just trying to impress me. "Oh, I feel silly now. I mean, I shouldn't have, I didn't want to..." He reached out and placed a comforting hand on Lewellyn's arm. "Please accept my apology."

"Only if you'll make a bet with me?"

"What?"

"I'll only accept your apology if you make a bet with me."

"What sort of bet?"

"Will you do it, yes or no?"

"What bet?"

Lewellyn grabbed the hand that Jordain had put on his arm and took it in both of his own hands, putting it to his lips and kissing it. Jordain's free hand went to his chest.

"Yes... or... no?"

"Yes," Jordain said, laughing. "Yes. But what is the bet?"

"I bet you I can jump up and reach that high branch."

Jordain smiled and laughed. He felt all giggly. Lewellyn was such a strange boy! "That one?"

"Yes."

"And what do I get if you can't?"

"You lie in the shade, while I do all the picking."

"And if you win?"

"I get one kiss."

"I should have known," Jordain said, trying to pull his hand away.

"What's wrong with a single kiss? Just one on the lips. Like a kiss from your brother."

"It isn't proper."

"Look how high the branch is. I'll never reach it!"

Jordain giggled again, in spite of himself. What a pushy boy! But he was just having fun, and Jordain was certain that he couldn't reach the branch. Besides, to jump he would have to let go of Jordain's hand.

"Fine, then."

"Excellent."

Jordain moved away as Lewellyn moved back, took a running start, leaped up and easily touched the branch.

"I can't believe it," he said grinning in wonder.

Lewellyn did a small bow. "I have many talents, Milady. Many. Now, pay up."

Jordain wanted to protest, but out here in the bushes, far away from other eyes, he shrugged and thought, why not? Just a quick, innocent kiss. Like a kiss from a brother. Lewellyn had won, fair and square, and Jordain would never welch on a bet, girl or not.

"Fine then. Kiss me. But you get only one."

"One kiss from a sweet young woman such as yourself will keep me happy for a month."

"Only a month?"

"A year! A lifetime!"

Jordain didn't really know what to do, so he stood still. Lewellyn stood close, put one hand around Jordain's waist, and pulled the young girl to him while placing another under her chin and tilting her head back. Then, with one hand at the small of the little female's back and the other stroking her cheek, Lewellyn leaned in and kissed her on the lips. Jordain closed his eyes and surrendered to the kiss, craning his neck, one leg coming off the ground as their lips met, and he lingered in Lewellyn's embrace. It seemed to go on forever, but Jordain didn't fight it, feeling like he was floating in a soft cloud of cotton, happy, peaceful and safe, a tingling in his fingertips.

When they finally separated Jordain blushed right to the tip of his nose and found he could not look Lewellyn in the eyes.

"That was more than a kiss from a brother," Jordain whispered breathlessly, slapping Lewellyn on the arm.

Lewellyn looked at the pretty little female before him and smiled as she cast her pretty eyes toward the ground and clasped her hands together. He knew it was the best kiss she'd ever gotten from a boy, and he'd felt her feminine need aching through her body as he held her in his arms. But he didn't want to push it, to scare off this shy fawn. No. He would be patient, because he was sure as shy and trusting as she was, that he would be able to talk her right out of her dress in the future, just so long as he played his cards right. So, he immediately he went back to picking berries.

Jordain stood close at Lewellyn's side, their arms often brushing against one another. He glanced up admiringly at the beautiful young man, feeling safe and foolish and altogether fascinated with this ridiculous boy.

It's the witches, something deep inside him protested. Fight it, man, fight it. But he glanced at Lewellyn's muscular arms, thought about that kiss, and no longer cared as the thrill of that moment rattled him once more. Something had been unlocked in his pretty little head, and he would find himself thinking often of boys from that day and the rest of his pretty life.

That night after he was undressed and in his nightgown, he waved at Kikana and said, "Hold me?"

Kikana smiled, stoked his smooth cheek and held him in her arms, smelling his pretty hair. She brushed his bangs from his eyes and stared into them, so wide and innocent, and Jordain smiled and blushed. Kikana kissed him, lowering him onto his back, and Jordain giggled as he bubbled over once more with feminine pleasure. But, when Kikana began to gently massage his firm, young breasts, he closed his eyes, bit his lip and imagined it was Lewellyn sitting on top of him, and he arched his back and sighed, thinking of being small and pretty and sweet, and in the arms of a boy. Kikana undid the laces on his nightdress and pushed it down, exposing his breast to the cool air of his

chambers, and Jordain pictured himself, pulling open his dress to show his breasts to Lewellyn, pictured the boy's eyes go hard and glassy, felt himself blush with the thrill of it all, the sweet offer he was making to the handsome young man, showing him his soft, white, maidenly breasts, and when Kikana put her hot mouth on his nipple and began to suck he dug his fingernails into her strong back and said, "Oh my goddess."

For the next few days, Jordain found himself frequently in the company of boys. They were always pushing and shoving each other, talking too loud, trying to impress the young ladies of the court, and Jordain stood with the other maidens, giggling and blushing, giggling over what fools the boys made of themselves as the same time his girlish eyes delighted in the sight of them.

And Claire, sneak that she was, kept arranging for him to find himself alone with different boys, all of whom had some tactic to steal a kiss. Jordain pretended to be flustered and annoyed each time, ever so unhappy that he had once again been forced to surrender for a kiss, but of course he loved it more and more, and he looked forward to his opportunities to both deny and surrender to the attentions of the young men of the court. They were so... cute. Genesius, with his copper hair and impossible freckles, always laughing and joking, making Jordain giggled until he almost passed out. Bartleby, with his dark, sad eyes and thick, straight black hair, who wrote tragic poems of lovelorn girls and their doomed lovers, and whose kisses seemed to Jordain to sing of sweet sadness. Tagalore, so tall! That was all Jordain could ever seem to remember, and he could not get over how much he just loved a tall man! And yet Millerfin, no taller than Jordain in his girl form, so intense and determined, such a fighter despite his small size.

He flirted and kissed, squeaked with outrage at their boyish impudence, and all together lost himself in his delight in playing the role of the young lady of the court, and yet, when he was away from the boys, his mind seemed to calm, and his blushes of desire turned to blushes of shame, and he clenched his little fists and insisted that no! No! He would not marry some silly boy and share the man's bed, he would not have a baby!

"But, father," Claire said, weaving a string of pearls into his glittering, golden hair. "You don't want to be an old maid!"

"I prefer it to being..." He held out his arms in front of his stomach and puffed out his cheeks, "a brood sow!"

"It's not like that!"

"They why don't you marry?"

Claire worked on her father's hair in silence. He had learned he could usually silence her on the topic of marriage by simply pointing out she was making no effort in the arena.

"That," Jordain said, his words clipped and cold, "is what I thought."

"Well, at least agree to have your debutant ball. It's not like you have to marry someone right there and let him impregnate you that night in the middle of the Matching Dance."

"I will not hear of it," Jordain said. "Men do not have debutant balls."

"Maybe you would have fun."

“I rather doubt it.”

Chapter Nine

Cablerone felt confident as he lay down to sleep. Very confident. He moved himself out to his country home, a small castle, easily defended, and as the situation in the capital seemed to spiral out of control, with the collapse of the Cult of Juno, the disappearance of the king, and the actions of his... wife... as she tried to assert her power, more and more nobles and knights had begun to join him, his army swelling rapidly enough that he was sure they could seize control of the city in a single day and with minimal bloodshed. After all, not a soldier in the city owed his allegiance to the Queen, and furthermore, none of them had much interest in seeing her army of witches seize control of the city. To undermine their confidence, he'd employed a minstrel to compose a song and spread it around the city, "Your Wife Will Wear the Trousers." And then the queen's daughter had been seen doing just that!

He dreamt he was in the forest, the royal forest. Sunbeams cut through the trees like great pillars of light, and a few leaves drifted down through the sun rays, flickering in the light. There were two does nearby, but they didn't seem at all frightened of Cablerone as he stood there looking at them, but then each lifted her nuzzle into the air, then bolted. Cablerone smelled it, too, a musky, damp animal scent he had never noticed before, a scent that sent his heart racing, and turning he saw a great buck striding toward him, a mighty rack on its head, a huge, white chest, and Cablerone felt a thrill run through his body at the sight of the mighty creature, and then some instinct seized him, and he bolted away from the buck, but with the thrilling thought in his mind, "I hope he catches me!"

Cablerone leapt and pranced, ran and sprinted through the forest, but the mighty buck chased and chased, and finally, panting, Cablerone stopped and looked back as the buck approached. Cablerone felt a hunger, a need, and he raised his hind quarters, and a thrill ran through him as the buck mounted him, and then Cablerone was seized with terror, disgust and shame as he realized he was a doe, and he was being taken for the first time...

"NO!" He sat up in a panic. His wife was standing in the corner, staring at him, her eyes wide, clutching the blanket to her chest.

"What?"

She pointed to the mirror. He got out of bed, looking down at himself and seeing that he was now covered in light brown fur, and when he looked in the mirror he saw a wet black nose, big, wide brown eyes—the head of a doe. "No," he said, reaching up to touch his face, shifting closer to the mirror. "No. No. No." He'd been at the temple. Had seen the body the witches had given the high priest, had heard his small voice, and he stared at his doe's face in the mirror, and knew that he would not long be a man. Unless...

He turned to his wife, and she shook her head in terror at whatever thing her husband was becoming, at the impossible power of the witches.

"Get me a robe!"

His wife stood there, terrified.

"Get me a robe!"

"Yes. Okay."

“I must see the queen,” he said. “Make her an offer. Get her to stop... this.”

“Yes,” his wife said, searching through the closet. “Of course.”

“Tell no one!”

“No. No, I wouldn’t.”

Cableron stood as his wife helped him into the robe, fighting back tears. He didn’t want to see her cry, couldn’t. It was upsetting enough, and he had to be strong for her. He pulled the hood over his head, and his wife hastily made arrangements for a carriage. Finally, as he was about to hurry into the carriage, she allowed her husband to hug her.

“Everyth--- ing,” he voice cracked. “Everything will be fine,” he finished in a soft, girlish voice.

“Hurry!” His wife said.

When Cableron threw himself into the carriage, the door closed, and he made sure the curtains were drawn. Only when the carriage finally lurched forward and started to bounce over the old dirt road did Cableron finally wrap his arms around his knees and start to cry. Not even a woman, but an animals? A deer? A doe? No. No. I don’t deserve this, he thought. I don’t. And he resolved to throw himself at the queen’s feet and beg her for forgiveness. He would do anything to save himself now, to save not just his manhood, but his humanity. “Wwwoooo,” he cried, “Wooooo.”

Chapter Ten

Duchess Lyandra Hallock's debutante ball came, and Jordain fussed over his dress and hair. "You're so excited!" Claire said as her father stood on a stool, the tailor's pinning his dress here and there, preparing to make sure it fit his firm little figure perfectly.

"Hardly," Jordain sniffed. "Lyandra is a friend of mine, or I would not even consider attending."

"Say it as you will," Claire said.

"You'll be the prettiest girl there," the tailor said.

"Thank you," Jordain answered, examining himself in the mirror. "This dress is exquisite."

"It's you who are divine," the man said, staring up at his gorgeous subject. "I could dress you in rags, and your feminine radiance would shine through."

"I agree completely," Claire said, enjoying her father's discomfort. "She is just the perfect young lady!"

Jordain smiled as prettily as he could and counted to ten, restraining his desire to tell off his impudent daughter. It would be unladylike and ungracious, and he would not offend his tailor, who was an absolute doll. "You're both too kind," he said.

Claire, certain that no one else could see her, stuck out her tongue.

And so a week later Jordain reached a small, gloved hand out of his carriage and was helped down by his attendants. He wore a cream colored gown with gold highlights that matched his towering crown of golden locks, and white gloves up to his elbows. Diamonds flashed from his ears and from a necklace, nestling in his cleavage, and the slippers he wore on his tiny feet flashed as he minced to the palace. He joined the girls as they chattered and giggled. He knew that nearby the men were gathered, smoking cigars and drinking brandy, laughing and preening, and as he sipped the long flute of champagne he'd been given he wished more than ever he were a man again, tall and strong, a leader and a fighter.

Wandering off to be alone for a moment, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. His long blonde hair arranged prettily on his head, curls dangling down on either side of his smooth, white face, face painted prettily, his soft breasts exposed by the top of his low cut gown, and he raised the glass to himself with an ironic little curtsy.

"Enjoying yourself?" Claire asked.

"Hardly."

"You look gorgeous."

"I feel ridiculous," he said, plucking at his dress with his free hand. "Claire, I want so badly to be me again. To be with the men talking of hunting and our past battles, to be respected and admired as a man and a warrior and a king. To be this... girl? I am not made for it."

Claire gave her father a hug. “You’re so brave,” she said. A bell chimed. It was time for the dancing, and Claire took her father’s arm, and said, “Let’s go out together.”

Jordain smiled gratefully up at his daughter, and they walked arm and arm out into the grand ballroom, beneath the flickering candle light, and the eligible girls lined up on one side as was tradition, while the young gentleman gathered across from them. The men bowed in unison, and the Jordain and the girls all plucked at their dresses and curtsied. How many times had I done this on the men’s side? Jordain wondered, now feeling small and pretty and silly in a dress, as the boys admired him and the other young women. The children then came out, boys and girls, and they imitated the ritual, training as they were for their future lives at court as gentlemen or ladies.

And yet, with the rise of the witches, Jordain wondered if he was witnessing the last of a dying tradition. After all, the king of the land now stood in a dress, and the very notion of what it meant to be a man or woman seemed to be in transition.

As the music began, Jordain and the other girls took their places, and he smiled and got ready for the First Dance. He looked over the young men, so many of whom he’d known as little boys, and so many of whom he’d since kissed in his new life as a young woman. They were all handsome, adorable, and absurd, and he could not imagine...

“Oh, goodness!” He whispered.

“What?” Claire said, and following her father’s gaze, she saw him, too. He was tall, the tallest of the boys, and he had a head full of flowing black hair that matched his deep, soulful, dark eyes. Broad shouldered, he had a chest like an oaken cask, and thick, powerful legs encased in too-tight pants. Most shockingly, a gold earring flashed from his right ear, and he wore a bright red sash across his slender waist.

“Who is... that?” Jordain asked, hoarsely.

“I don’t know,” Claire answered. “But he is quite a man!”

Jordain put his hands to his cheeks, his pretty, pink mouth hanging open, and he whispered, “I’ve never seen anyone more beautiful.”

Just then, the man, for he was a man, and not a boy at all, looked across the room, and his eyes met King Holland Jordain’s eyes, and the king felt his whole body flush with pleasure, and he dropped his own eyes in maidenly modesty, and when he glanced back up the man was still staring at him, and gave him a wink.

“The impudence!” Jordain said, confused and disturbed at the swarm of emotions buzzing in his head.

Claire put a hand on her father’s smooth, slender shoulder, and said, “He likes you!”

Jordain turned away, his head held high. “He had better learn some manners, whoever he is!”

And yet, as the dancing began, Jordain found himself glancing at the man, counting the seconds until he would be in his arms, and all the other young men ceased to matter, as each moment

he danced with another only served as torture, as he pined for the arms of the mysterious stranger, and each time they came together, and the man's powerful arm circled Jordain's slender waist, and he put one little hand on the man's muscular shoulder, while they joined their other hands, and the man smiled down, and Jordain arched his back so his breasts would press against the man's body, and he breathed in the magnificent masculine smell, and he felt himself again bubble over with feminine pleasure and excitement.

"What is your name?" The man asked, finally, the third time he gathered the gorgeous girl into his arms. "Holland...um, I mean... my name is Frost. Princess Frost."

The man laughed. "Do you have a first name, princess?"

"It's Jennifer."

"You are the prettiest girl I have ever seen," the man said.

"Oh!" Jordain said, shocked with pleasure to hear the words come from such a... such a perfect man! Just then, the time came to change partners, and Jordain found himself struggling to let go of the man's hand as another gentleman took his little arm. "Thank you," Jordain said as he was pulled away into the swirling mass of dancers, his voice rising into an even higher register. "Your... name?" But he had been swept away by another boy, who pulled Jordain to him and said, "Forget him, princess. You're with me now."

Jordain smile and said, "of course," struggling to control his wild emotions like a proper young lady should, but everyone in the room could see that the golden haired princess had fallen madly in love as only a young woman could.

They did not dance again that night, and try as he might the King did not get a chance to speak with him again. Later, as Kikana undressed him, he began to cry.

"What is it?" Kikana asked, taking the King's soft little hand in her own.

"Oh... I've fallen in love!" He confessed. "And... I didn't want to! But, oh, Kikana, he's so beautiful and perfect, and I must have him!"

"Who is he?"

"I don't know! I never saw him before, and I didn't even get to know his name!"

Kikana gave Jordain a hug, and kissed him on the cheek. She understood all too well the emotional turmoil of a young girl in love. "He will find you," Kikana said. "He will find you, and you will be together."

"How can you be so sure?" Jordain said, clinging to Kikana.

"Because, sweet girl," Kikana said, taking Jordain's pretty face in her hands and looking him in the eyes, "I know true love when I see it, and true love always wins out!"

Jordain hugged her then, and he held her tight, but he would not make out with her again, because he feared his future husband would not approve.

The next day, Jordain surprised his wife by joining her for breakfast.

“You looked like you enjoyed yourself at the ball last night,” the Queen said, dipping her toast in her tea. She’d seen how smitten he’d been with the mysterious stranger.

“I was merely doing my best to be a good guest,” Jordain said nibbling on a crumpet.

“Well, you looked stunning in your gown.”

“Thank you, dear. You were a vision in your dress as well. I heard everyone raving on how gorgeous you looked!”

“Oh, you do know how to make me feel good!”

“I was somewhat shocked at the behavior of that one fellow... what was his name?”

“I don’t know who you mean?”

“He was rather tall, and he had the most audacious earring.”

“Oh. That would be Lord Daring Cabrini, crown prince of Blessed Island.”

“Oh? A southerner? That would explain his fantastical... clothing.”

“Some of the girls seemed to think he was rather handsome.”

“Young girls are prone to fall under the spell of men like him, I suppose,” Jordain said, trying to seem indifferent. “Little matter. I suppose he has already set off to return to his own land.”

“Oh, goodness, no. He has come to study with Master Haldering and learn the art of engineering, it seems. He’ll be here for some time.”

“Oh?” Jordain’s voice cracked with excitement and he covered his mouth. “Well, little matter to me. Claire was quite popular with the boys last night.”

“Oh yes,” the Queen answered, hiding her smile at her husband’s attempt to change the subject, to seem so disinterested. He’d practically gasped with excitement at the news. “Our daughter is quite a prize. Perhaps I can arrange for him to call on Claire...”

“No!” Jordain said, accidently knocking over a water glass. The servants rushed forward to clean up the spill, and Jordain waved his little hands around nervously. “I’m just sure... I mean, Claire mentioned to me she did not care for him, so it would be a waste of time, but of course, you know best in such matters... goodness, but I did make a mess!”

When breakfast finished, Jordain stood and, as non-chalantly as possible, said, “I have decided I should like to have a debutant ball after all, if the queen approves.”

“Of course, darling. Would you then be accepting callers?”

“Oh, I suppose I must concede to the customs of the day.”

“Of course. Well, I will begin the planning! How exciting.”

“Good day, then, my queen.”

“Of course, princess.”

The Queen smiled watching her pretty little husband walk gracefully from the room. It would be so much fun to plan the ball for him; she couldn't wait to get started. Life truly was strange, and you never can imagine what it will bring, the Queen mused. Who would have thought the day would come where she would plan a debutante ball for the man she married?

It would be a triumph. And then he would start to see callers, and as pretty as he was, marriage would soon follow. Thinking of Cabrini, she felt a little jealous of Jordain. It would be a smart match, and she very much liked the idea of forging unbreakable ties to the island kingdom. The young lord was a man amongst men, and the queen herself couldn't do better, but, well, he was young, and she did want her husband to be happy. It just didn't seem fair he would end up with such an amazing man for a husband, and she? Claire would not be around as much, she was sure, and so her rooms would soon be empty. She would be alone for the first time in her life, a thought that both thrilled and frightened her.

The Queen gestured for her page to approach. “Send word to Princess Claire that I wish to see her. Tell her I have exciting news!”

“Yes, Milady.”

Now, she had only to deal with Lord Cableron, and she would feel things were in their proper places at last. She wondered what it might take to get the man to see things her way.

Chapter 11

“Am I sick?” Julius wondered as he lay in the hay, startled into wakefulness by the cock’s crow. His head ached, and he felt a little hot, like he had a touch of fever. Sitting up, he noticed his breasts seemed bigger, and they ached. He reached up and touched them, confirming they were, indeed, even more sensitive than usual.

Not too sick to work, he decided, and standing, he climbed down the ladder out of the loft and brushed the hay from his skirt and blouse. Then he felt it, and bent over, putting one hand to his tummy. It felt like something was scraping his insides, clawing at him. He squeezed his eyes shut and breathed until the feeling passed. “Oh my,” he said as he felt a hot flash. “I’ll be surprised if I get through the morning,” he thought, heading off to the house and chores, “but best not say anything. I don’t want people to think I’m lazy.”

Breakfast cooked, he joined the women, and they watched as the males gathered and ate. Julius had felt testy all through the morning cooking, but he’d managed to restrain his tongue for the most part, instead slamming down a wooden spoon, or slapping the counter in frustration when something irked him. Now, watching the men who had just rolled out of bed and were still bleary-eyed, wolfing down their food, Julius found himself seething with anger and resentment. “Mutton!” He hissed, repeating a word he’d heard the girls say when they were angry about something.

“What?” Sascha asked.

“We work just as hard as they do. Why should they eat first?”

“It’s just the way of things,” Fiona said. “That’s what it is.”

“It’s not fair,” Julius said, and he heard his voice crack, and suddenly he found himself crying, and the years confused and bewildered him, and he cried some more. “Just because they’re boys, they get everything, and we have to wait on them and ... and... have their babies! And why am I crying?”

“Oh, sweetie,” Fiona said, taking the girl in her arms and giving her a hug. “Oh, it’s okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Julius said. “You’ve been so kind to take me in, and I am grateful, but... oh!” He put his hands to his tummy again, the agonizing pain returning. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Sweetie? You do know, right? This isn’t your first time?”

“First what?”

“You’re having your visit from Aunt Scarlet, dear.”

The other females were watching with a mixture of sympathy and amusement. Could it be possible a girl as old as NAMEER? Seemed didn’t know what was happening? It had been obvious to all of them from the moment they saw her.

“Aunt Scarlet?” Julius said. “You mean... I’m...?”

“Yes, dear.”

And the tears came even harder, and Julius felt a deep, scarlet shame settle over him as he confronted this latest and most final evidence of his womanhood. He threw himself into Fiona's arms and clung to her, feeling small and scared, but at least not alone.

The men, vaguely aware of some sort of mysterious female drama unfolding, rolled their eyes and kept eating.

"I'm going to take NAMER? And have a little talk," Fiona said, leading Julius away. "You watch over things, Brianna."

"Of course," Brianna answered, giving Julius a little touch on the forearm.

Julius sat, knees together, hands clasped in his lap, as Fiona explained what was happening, what would happen, how he could prevent himself an embarrassing moment when his flow started. He listened in stunned silence, nodding occasionally, and wondering, again, if he would have the courage to kill himself.

Chapter 12

King Holland Jordain sat in a white dress the hugged, lifted and enhanced his breasts. The skirt was a diaphanous white material that seemed to almost float around him, and his delicate bare little feet peaked out from beneath the airy material. His long golden hair was arranged in a cascading chandelier of bangs and waves and curls, and keeping with tradition he wore no jewelry, though his face had been painted in natural, healthy girlish colors. He held a single rose in his lap, and he held a perfect, pretty smile on his face even though his cheeks had begun to ache with the effort. It was his virgin portrait, traditionally the last portrait a girl had made before her debutante ball, and he had found himself just as giddy with excitement and nerves as any other girl on his big day.

Cliona quietly entered the room and took up a position slightly to the left and behind the artist, Waken Falls, the best in the kingdom. The study was itself magnificent, fully bringing out the girlish innocence that had become her husband's essential character, and Cliona decided on the spot she would frame and hang the preliminary sketches of her husband in the full bloom of young womanhood. He was indescribably pretty, and it would be a joy to look upon these pictures. Off to the right the sculpture Plintus Yurl prepared studies for what would eventually be a status of her Princess King Cliona had some thoughts to placing in the royal ballroom.

If Jordain had noticed her entrance, he had not revealed it in the slightest, but had remained stock still as the artists worked. She admired his self-discipline, and the grace it would give him when he soon entered larger society as the first lady in his husband's court. A lady should never seemed startled or awkward, and Jordain's skill at controlling his body and face would serve him well.

Later, when the artists had finally given their pretty young charge permission to move, Jordain had sighed with relief. "May I see what you have done so far?" He asked sweetly.

"No! No! No! It is bad luck to see your portrait before it is finished!"

"Oh, pretty please?" Jordain asked. "I promise not to be upset."

Waken took Jordain's little hand and kissed it. "Sweet Princess, you are a rare beauty, more perfect and unique than a snowflake. And I will beg you to be patient and not to ask again, because you are so perfect and beautiful, such an ideal specimen of girlhood, that I will not be able to resist your charms and say no a third time."

"I, too, have not the strength to refuse you, princess," Plintus added, kneeling before the blushing king. "Do not make us betray our art! I beg you show us mercy!"

Jordain giggled. "Very well," he said. "Since you are both such charming gentleman, I will not ask again! But I promise I will scarcely sleep as I await my chance to see your work!"

He walked out, joined immediately by Kikana and a royal page, and as they turned the corner, Jordain saw HIM. Daring Cabrini. He was wearing tight black britches and a white, blousy shirt unbuttoned half way, open, and showing off a hard flat chest covered in black hair. Jordain stopped dead, his mouth falling open, the image of that chest sending a shock right down to his toes, and he turned and started to walk the other direction in a panic when he heard a deep, rich voice like chocolate call out, "Princess!"

Jordain stopped and turned, smiling. Poise. Poise. Poise, he thought, putting one hand casually on his hip. “Your highness,” he called out in his clear, pretty voice. “What a delightful surprise!”

Prince Cabrini grinned and approached the little princess. Taking her hand, he bowed and gave it a kiss. Jordain smiled and did a small curtsy. “You are a perfect beauty, and I deeply regret that I have not seen you since the ball,” The Prince said, “but I was told you have not been taking callers.”

Jordain tried not to show any reaction, as he’d been told young lady of birth should not, but merely kept smiling and said, “I have not yet had my debutante ball,” Jordain answered.

“Of course, princess,” Lord Daring said. “Will you promise me that after your ball, I can be the first of your callers?”

“I’m afraid, Lord Daring, that in our kingdom that decision will be made by my guardian, the queen.”

“Then I shall have to charm her as well,” he said. “Because it would ruin me forever were to lose you to another man.”

“Um. Well... goodness me...” Jordain felt his cheeks redden. “I’m at a loss... it would seem... for the right... does it seem hot to anyone else of a sudden?”

“Sadly, it is my duty to interrupt, and I beg your forgiveness, Prince Daring, but the Princess does have a pressing appointment of a private nature.”

“Of course,” Daring said, and taking the king’s hand, he kissed it again, bowed, and left the pretty little princess king standing there a blushing, pretty wreck of a young lady, madly, madly in love with “the most perfect man in the world,” Jordain whispered.

“Yes,” the royal page said. “He is rather perfect. He has quite a manly... chest.”

“Oh,” Jordain said. “Dear me. How many days until my ball?”

Chapter 13

Queen Cliona entered the royal audience chamber. The Lords stood, as per custom, and she noticed only one empty chair, the one that belonged to Cablerone. “Lords,” the Queen said with a smile, “express your standing.”

It was a tradition and a ritual, and each Lord stood and announced his loyalty to the crown. The Queen could sense the truth in some of their words, while others offered only a kind of resigned acceptance. The two Lords whose lands bordered on Cablerone’s lands, Bailwick and Coben, spoke in flat, dead voices that she knew meant they were conflicted in their loyalty.

“And the crown,” Cliona said when the last had spoken his allegiance and sat back down, “swears loyalty to you all. Should your lands face threat from man or nature, the crown stands with you.”

“Who has petitions?”

Lord Juniper rose and bowed. “Milady, I would ask...”

But then a loud clattering could be heard in the hallway, and a man that sounded like the captain of the guard yelling, “Miss! No! You can’t go in there!”

“I must see the queen,” they heard a young girl shout in a slightly strange, nasal voice, and then the door flew open and a hooded figure stood in the doorway.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Juniper said, placing himself between the girl and the queen.

The girl stepped forward, and the clattering of her hooves brought all of their attention to her feet, and an audible gasped could be heard. She reached up and threw back her hood, and they saw that she had the head of a doe. “Please,” she said in her strange voice. “You must help me.”

A large ring flashed on her finger as she reached up to throw back her hood, and now she stood, that hand raised pensively toward the queen while she took more nervous little steps into the room. She was clearly terrified, glancing about, sniffing the air, but forcing herself to step forward, her desperation winning out over her terror.

“That ring,” Queen Cliona said, suddenly shocked with recognition of both the insignia and the person who stood before her. It didn’t seem possible, and yet, “Lord Cablerone?” She asked.

“Yes,” the girl said, falling to her knees before the queen. “I am Lord Cablerone.”

The Lords gasped and stepped away.

“Please,” Cablerone said, tears pouring from her eyes. “The witches... I am turning into a hart... and I am so sorry, and I beg your forgiveness... I don’t want to be a hart,” she said, unwilling to call herself a doe, “will you please help me?” And with that, Cablerone threw herself around the queen’s legs.

“Privacy,” the queen said, and the lords filed out, each of them glancing back at the frightened little thing that had been made of Lord Cablerone, and each resolving himself to pledge

absolute loyalty to the queen, the witches and cult of the goddess lest they be the next one unmanned and turned into a... not one of them could allow himself to think the thought, either.

Inside the chamber, Cablerone looked up at the queen, his big brown eyes soft and pleading. It broke her heart, and she took his muzzle in her hands and smiled down on him. "Lord Cablerone," she said, "I am so very sorry..."

"No," Cablerone said. "Please."

"This, you, are the work of the goddess. I did not will it or ask for it, and I don't have the power to undo what I have not done."

"But, then... you mean... my situation is hopeless?"

"I would not say that, little one. No. Not hopeless. I believe that everything the goddess does is for the good, your good and the good of all, and you must trust that your life, your new life, is to be something wonderful."

"But I don't want to."

"I know. I understand. I will help make it as easy for you as I can. In fact, come with me, and I will introduce you to our court wizard."

"I have met him many times..."

"She is now more bunny than human, and I think it would be good for you to talk to her about her change, and how she has been dealing with it."

Cablerone didn't know what to do, think or so, so he just nodded, got one his legs, and reached up to pull his hood back over his head. The queen, though, reached up and took the hood down. "You must not be ashamed of yourself," she said, giving Cablerone a little scratch behind the ear. "You are simply a doll."

"I will do as you say," Cablerone said, and even managed a little bit of a smile. "I had hoped you would have the power to... save me... but I do appreciate your kindness, and it is more than I can claim to deserve."

"Let's go meet Bunny," The Queen said. "I think you two will make most excellent friends."

Chapter 14

The creeping days leading up to his debutante ball were agony for the Princess King. He found himself thinking constantly of Lord Daring, and each night he sat down and wrote letters to his crush, letters he would never send, but which poured out the love that overflowed his girlish heart and the hopes he had for their future together. Thank goodness the preparations for the ball kept him busy much of the time, and his days sewing with his girlfriends or playing croquet served to distract him, but wherever he went he found himself glancing about, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man he loved.

At night, he thought always of their first kiss, what it would be like to be there in Lord Darling's arms, his head held tilted back, their lips meeting... and then he would sigh and feel the despairing loneliness of a girl in love but as yet denied the arms of the man she wanted.

What if he doesn't love me? Jordain would think in a panic. *What if he should wed another?*

And yet, he told me himself that he would die if he didn't have me for a wife!

Boys say such things, though, freely and without regard for the delicate nature of a maiden's heart. How often had he, himself, whispered sweet nothings to a love struck girl before he'd lost his manhood? He'd no idea how- awful!- he'd been. Those poor girls! And now, perhaps this was the punishment, to have his own pretty heart shattered?

And yet he thought of the song, the prophecy... King Jordain, pretty in a dress... his husband thinks he's a sweet girl...

And so night after night he curled up beneath his soft, downy quilts, hugged his pillow to his chest and cried himself to sleep; the king now clung to the prophecy he once feared as his best hope, because he wanted, very badly, to be a wife and a mother, a wife and a mother to Lord Daring, and he did not know what he would do if his dreams did not come true, or if he had to settle for just some ordinary boy.

It would kill me, he thought, his lip trembling as he wept. I must marry Lord Darling! I simply must!

And so, after days and nights of smiles and laughter, tears and sighs, at long last the night of the ball arrived, a night that would be the talk of the kingdom for many years. A great crowd gathered outside the Royal Ballroom, drawn by the excited talk of the mysterious Lady Jennifer Frost, who'd suddenly appeared from a distant northern kingdom and had charmed all the capital city with her charm and beauty. Adding into the hysteria was the storm of change that had passed over the kingdom, washing away so many assumptions and beliefs, and magic could be seen everywhere as people found themselves changed, and more than a few men now arrived corseted and skirted, clinging to the arms of their wives.

And gentleman from all the lands had descended on the capital, eager for a chance to court the mysterious princess. The Queen herself had offered a generous dowry and lands, and adding to that the girl's rumored beauty, and she had become the biggest prize any single man could capture.

The procession began, and the crowd oohed and aaahed as one gorgeous carriage after another arrived, and the great names of the kingdom appeared. There were the ebony carriages from

the great Glass Mountains, and their shimmering lords and ladies, too bright to even look upon directly, and the elven king, Threnhold Ballertine, and his seven sons and seven daughters. A great wicker carriage arrived, and the crowd gasped as the mysterious Lord of the Owls emerged, flapping his wings and blinking as he looked around. The lord of the owls had not been seen in over 100 years, and he brought with him all the great bird lords of the mountain peaks, they all having heard word of King Jordain's beauty and longing to test the truth of the rumors, had come down and made the journey.

And then a hooded rider on a single great snow white horse trotted up, and people could see by his size and the perfection of his steed that he was something special. He remained in his saddle as he the groomsmen, and when the man took the reins of his horse, the man leaned down and whispered something, and the two laughed together. Then, he stood in his stirrups and threw back his hood, and the crowd cheered the sight of Lord Daring, who made nearly as much an impression as the young princess. Daring leapt from his horse, and unlike the others, rather than proceed directly into the ballroom, he walked about and shook hands with the gathered citizens, and the young were impressed and the old nodded with appreciation for his wisdom and diplomacy.

Finally, three carriages approached, two grand and one Imperial, and the excitement surged as they knew these were the last, and they would soon get a glimpse of the princess.

The guests from the first two carriages climbed out—relatives, cousins, and special guests, and the presence of mysterious magic made itself known again as two very pretty females shyly emerged, both draped in gorgeous dresses, and one seemed a doe, while the other a rabbit.

At long last, the Queen emerged and stood for her applause, the crowd bowing dutifully and clapping. The Queen then reached out, and the most slender, delicate white gloved hand emerged and the queen took that slender little hand, and King Jordain stepped from the carriage. There were gasps and cries, women and men fainted, for no one had ever seen such a perfect vision of a young woman, a young woman who combined her unworldly physical beauty with a radiant, feminine sweetness that shone right through her big, bright eyes and generous smile.

The king wore a gown of white and silver, and his long blonde hair was piled high on his head, a delicate net of silver and pearls woven among the strands, and blonde bangs hung to just above his thin eyebrows. Pearls also shone from his little ears, and a pearl necklace hung around his long, slender neck. His dress was low cut and framed his creamy, white breasts, and more than a few people would comment later on his impossibly slender waist.

King Jordain felt the love of the crowd wash over him, and he clutched his hands and his smile grew wider as he chirped, "Thank you. Thank you all."

The Queen took his hand and led him around the perimeter, people stretching out desperate to touch the, flashing jewel of unworldly beauty before them, and the king flushed with feminine modesty even as he kept whispering "thank you. Thank you." He had never felt so loved, so cherished, and it filled his heart to know the people loved him so much.

The night that followed was a blur of smiles and laughs, kisses and hugs, dances and dances, twirling in the glittering light, the music of the orchestra swelling and receding, and each time Jordain spun and found himself in the arms of Lord Daring his heart leapt, blood rushed to his cheeks and he and the lord laughed and smiled, staring into each other's eyes, filled with a perfect love and understanding beyond any words.

After, in the carriage and heading back to the palace, King Jordain held his daughter's hand, and the two shared stories and laughs over the night. "You are a triumph!" Claire said. "Everyone loves you."

"It was quite a night!" Jordain said. "I shall never forget it, and thank you and you, my Queen, for making my special night so truly special!"

"Of course," Cliona said, smiling, remembering her own ball, and that of their daughter, Claire, and so many others for so many girls over the years, and yet this had been the grandest of them all, and her husband had been the most perfect and delightful girl she'd ever seen. Even now, exhausted after the long night, he smiled prettily and radiated such a delightful feminine charm it was hard not to just hug him and hug him like the sweet little kitten he'd become.

A clattering of hooves could be heard, and suddenly Lord Daring appeared, riding next to the carriage, grinning. "Princess!" He shouted. "I could not wait! I must start courting you now!"

Jordain put his hands to his cheeks, and the girls all laughed, but then the Queen leaned forward and said, "You shall have to wait, young sir! The Princess is not some common girl you can court from the back of your horse!"

"If she were common I would not court her at all!"

"Goodnight, Lord Daring!" The Queen said sternly, though she could not hide the smile on her face.

"My heart is broken!" The Lord said.

"Wait!" Jordain called out prettily. Stripping one of his long white gloves from his arm, he held it out the window. "Something to remember me by!"

Lord Daring seized the gloved and held it to his lips. "Gracious lady, I am yours forever!" And with those last words he slowed his horse's gait and vanished from view.

"That boy is smitten!" Claire said.

"He's most impetuous," Jordain said, fiddling with his earring.

"He's gorgeous!"

"Isn't he?" Jordain said, losing composure. "I think he is the most perfect man ever!"

The Queen exchanged a glance with Claire. Their pretty little Princess King was in love!

"He shall have to call on you like any other suitor," the Queen said.

"Of course," Jordain said, recalling himself. "I wouldn't dream otherwise."

"Do you want to marry him?" Claire asked.

"Yes," her father said, biting his lip. "I do want to be his wife."

“Well,” the Queen said, “I never thought my husband would marry again while I was still alive, less still get married to a man!”

“Oh, dear,” Jordain said. “My dear, I am sorry... I fear I have... if you are hurt...”

The Queen took her husband’s soft little hand and gave it a squeeze. “I am only teasing. If, after a proper period of courtship, the two of you are still in love, I shall gladly give my blessing. I think Lord Darling a very smart match for you, my dear.”

“You do?”

“I do. Very much so.

“As do I, father.”

Jordain looked at his wife and daughter and smiled. “I am the luckiest man in the world!” He said, and then the talk returned to the ball, and who wore what, and who liked who and who seemed upset and all the sorts of things a young woman like the king found so fascinating.

Chapter 15

Julius got through his first cycle, just as so many girls before him had. But, he felt no sense of pride or relief in this sign of his womanhood, this evidence of his ability to conceive and bare children.

The word undoubtedly got around, and Jarak continued to tease him and find excuses to pester him. Often, he turned to find Jarak's eyes playing over his body, and he felt a tingling as the man would usually continue to stare, appraising Julius' the same way he would appraise any animal, and Julius knew the boy liked what he saw and wanted to lay with him. The thought disturbed him, but what he found more disturbing was that as the days passed after his first cycle he found himself thinking more and more of Jarak, imagining what it would be like to kiss him, to lay in his arms.

He tried to stop himself, but it seemed his mind had a mind of its own, as time and again the he thought of Jarak's strong, muscular shoulders, his hard behind, his thick, muscular thighs... the thoughts sent a feminine thrill through Julius' soft, curvy body, and he felt confused and ashamed, and so finally one day after a morning spent thinking constantly of Jarak, Julius wandered off, heading to the river, where he knew there was a steep ravine. He stood at the edge of the ravine beneath the swaying branches of a willow tree, looking down at the sharp rocks below. The river was low, and he could see bare branches among the rocks, driftwood, the silvery trickle of the stream. Jump, he thought. Jump, and free yourself of the curse of this woman's flesh. He looked down at his breasts, cupped them and felt revolted at this mounds of soft flesh, at the dress he wore, the mass of long red curls that hung down over his shoulders.

I am a man, and the witches can take my body and trap me in this weak and feeble shape, but I will never give myself to a man. And yet he lingered, afraid. Afraid. Just like a woman, he thought, the tears starting. Scared and crying, and no... no... no. He grabbed one of the willow branches, and holding it with both hands he tiptoed to the edge of the ravine, and then he leaned out over the slit in the earth, and he closed his eyes. His slim, weak arms already ached with the strain of holding him up, and he took a breath and thought, let go. Just let go and end this curse. Just let go....

"Forgive me..." He whispered, and he let go of the branch, and his heart leapt as he dropped forward into the empty space, and immediately he regretted it, and he flailed his arms and he screamed as he--- rose into the air!

Opening his eyes, he saw Jarak's face, and he realized he was in Jarak's arms, and in shock he threw his arms around Jarak's neck.

"What are you doing?" Jarak said, carrying Julius carefully away from the edge of the ravine. He set Julius down beneath a tree, but kept an arm around his slender waist. "You could have died."

Julius' heart was racing and he brushed the hair away from his face, a tangle of emotions in his girlish heart. As he'd let go, as he'd started to fall, he'd felt pure terror and instant regret, and then... Jarak saved me, he realized. Jarak caught me and pulled me to safety. "You... saved me..." he whispered, staring into Jarak's eyes, a strange new feeling welling up in his heart even as his eyes filled with tears.

"Of course," Jarak said, putting a hand to Julius' cheek. "I love you."

Love. Julius felt a warm glow fill him at the sound of the word, and he stared into Jarak's eyes—green with flecks of brown, and then over his face—his strong, square chin, high cheek bones almost like a noble—that thick brown hair... Julius started to speak, found no words, and just stared at the boy who'd saved him, who loved him... his heart raced, and he felt himself growing flush even as the tears of shock became tears of joy, a rising happiness filling him like nothing he'd ever felt in his life.

Jarak saw the light in Julius' eyes, saw the flush in his smooth cheeks, and he put a finger under Julius' chin and tilted his head back. Julius closed his eyes, and their lips met, and Julius had never felt so complete, so safe, so cared for... and he kissed the boy back, and then he felt Jarak's tongue slip into his mouth, and he sighed prettily as Jarak's hand slid down cupped his breast, sending a whole new thrill of pleasure through his soft little body, and when the kiss finally ended, he whispered, "I love you, Jarak. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone, and I want... I want to be your girl."

"You are my girl," Jarak said with a little smirk. "You always were. You just didn't know it."

"Kiss me some more!" Julius said, and he sank onto his back, as Jarak leaned down over him and they kissed, and kissed and cuddled until the sunset.

Chapter 16

The night before his first day of receiving callers, King Jordain sat in his nightgown and wrote in his journal, pouring out all his girlish hopes for a future as wife and mother. He had taken to praying to the goddess each morning and evening, asking her to bless him with fertility, that he might give birth to a strong, healthy boy for her husband, and a pretty girl for him. He hoped the boy would be dark-haired and handsome as his father, the girl as fair and pretty as her mother, and, of course, given the prophecy, he had reason to expect to bare more than two children, and the thought filled him with pride.

Finally, he continued work on his latest love poem to his future husband. He had begun the poem days before, but struggled to find the right words to express how he felt, how things had changed for him so quickly, so suddenly. He nibbled on the end of his quill between adding words to the page—

This king once tall and strong
stands now before you in a dress
once his pride was a slate hard chest
now he has a maiden's breasts
his small, soft hands no weapon can hold
and his golden hair falls prettily so
little that once gave him pride
remains to this small king turned bride
and yet he cries, not with shame or sorrow
but only because he must wait more morrows
before he blushes in his veil
and looks into the eyes of the daring man
and says I do I do I do love you
and I am happy to be small and pretty and sweet
because it meant that we could meet
and thanks be to the goddess who dwells above
Once an eagle, now a dove
This simple girl wants only love

Finishing his poem, the king pressed his journal against his soft breasts and smiled. I am no longer the conqueror, he mused. But the conquered.

He heard something clatter against his window, and looked up absently, and then barely suppressed a shriek at the sight of Lord Daring smiling from the other side of the glass.

“Let me in!” Daring whispered, rattling at the window.

“No!” Jordain said, rushing to the window. “You must leave!”

“Open up,” Daring said. “Or I’ll break the glass.”

Jordain saw Daring's eyes drop down, and realized that his soft white breasts were half exposed in his thin, pink dressing gown. He grabbed the top and pulled it closed. "You are very uncouth!"

"I can't help myself, princess. I am madly in love with you!" He rattled the window some more. "Open up!"

"Go home! You will see me tomorrow."

"I'll jump, then," Lord Daring said, hopping to the ledge of Jordain's balcony and balancing on the balls of his feet. "If I can't see you tonight, I would die!"

They both knew he was teasing, but Jordain's heart raced at the sight of his love in such a precarious position, and in a panic he unlatched the glass doors to the balcony and stepped out into the cool night air, reaching a small white hand out to the young lord. "Come down at once!"

Lord Daring hopped down and immediately wrapped his arms around the Princess King, pulling the other's small, slender body against his own and forcing the pretty little king to look up to see his face. Jordain pushed weakly against the man, but then surrendered, putting his hands on Daring's strong shoulders and sighing. "You are the most frustrating boy," Jordain said, enjoying the feeling of being in his arms, the thrill of breaking the rules.

Keeping the little female in his arms, Daring turned her and pointed to the moon. "Look," he said.

Jordain looked up and sighed. It was a full moon, and one of those moons that looked huge, three times its normal size, a few wispy silver clouds trailing across it, and it had a distinctive pinkish shade. "I wanted you to see it."

"Thank you," Jordain said, putting a hand to Daring's chest. "It's so pretty."

"Not as pretty as you." Daring took Jordain's hand and lifted it to his lips, kissing his palm, then his wrist, and then working his way slowly and sweetly up his little arm until their noses were touching, and they were looking into each other's eyes, and there beneath the light of the full moon, Daring kissed his Princess King for the first time, and Jordain felt his whole body tremble with pleasure as he stood on his tippy toes and accepted the sweet kiss.

"Anon!" Daring said, swinging over the side of the balcony.

"Careful," Jordain said, looking down, pulling his hair back.

Just before he reached the bottom Daring slipped and plopped onto his back, looking up from the grass with a huge grin on his face.

"Are you okay?" Jordain whispered, his voice filled with feminine concern.

"Of course." And with that Daring hopped to his feet and ran off into the night.

Jordain watched him go, took one last look at the big, pink moon, and then going back into his bed chamber, he threw himself onto his bed, giggling and laughing, pulling his knees to his chest

and replaying the kiss in his mind over and over and over again. It had been so romantic. So magical. I am such a lucky girl, he thought, again, and for what would not be the last time. "Oh, thank you goddess! Thank you! Thank you!"

He woke in a panic. A dream still clinging ever so slightly, like cobwebs in a breeze. It had been the day of his wedding, and his beloved fiancé had burst into the bridal chamber, brandishing a note:

"You lying wretch," Lord Daring shouted. "How dare you deceive me! Lie to me! Bring me to such shame?"

"What? I never! I don't understand?"

"Really, Princess Jennifer? Or should I call you by your true name King Holland Jordain!" And with that he threw the letter in Jordain's face and stormed out of the room.

"No," Jordain cried, watching Lord Daring storm from the room, watching all his hopes for love and a new life leave him, and knowing it was his own fault for lying to his future husband.

"I must tell him," Jordain thought awake and worried, hugging his pillow. "I must tell him who I am."

And yet... and yet... was it not already too late? Would Lord Daring not be horrified to know that the girl he'd been courting was once a man?

He got out of his canopy bed and made his way to his dresser, threw on his robe and rushed from his bedroom.

Claire was startled to wake to the sight of her father struggling in the arms of her bodyguard as he tried to fight his way into her bed chamber. "Let me go!" Jordain squealed, as the guard grabbed one of his slender arms and threw another around his tiny waist, lifting him off his feet.

"You cannot just rush into the Princess' chamber in the middle of the night unannounced," the guard said, an amused look on his face.

"I'm a princess, too!" Jordain shrieked.

"And that's why you should know better," the man answered calmly.

"It's okay," Claire said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Let him in."

The guard didn't seem to notice she referred to the little blonde girl as a he, but merely nodded and released her.

Jordain rushed the Claire's side and knelt beside her bed, taking one of her hands in his while brushing his long blonde hair out of his eyes with the other. "I must speak to you!"

"Privacy," Claire said simply.

As the room cleared, she ran her own hand through her father's long, pretty hair and cupped his soft cheek. "What is it?"

“I am... I think I need... I am trying to decide...”

“Calm down, dear. Take a deep breath.”

Jordain did as his daughter suggested, and then smiled. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“I feel I should tell Lord Daring who I really am.”

Claire smiled. “Oh. I see. You do? Why?”

“I feel like if I keep it a secret, well, first of all it is fibbing. But, also, I think it will always be a barrier between us! He’ll never really be able to know me, and I shall always have to hide so much from him!”

“And yet?”

“And yet I am afraid that if I do tell him, well, he will be scandalized! He will not wish to marry a girl who used to be a man!”

“It’s possible, father.”

“That’s why I am so confused and scared, and I can’t decide what I should do, and so, will you tell me? Tell me what to do, and I shall do whatever you think it best.”

“Oh, daddy,” Claire said, looking into his wide innocent eyes. What a girl he’d become! Unable to make a decision, begging his own daughter to tell him what to do. It was sweet and her heart went out to the sweet little girl her father had become. She kissed his little, white hand and said, “I can’t.”

“You must!”

“Father, you must trust your heart and do as your feelings tell you. I know if you just listen to your heart, you will know what to do. And whatever happens, just know that it is for the best.”

“I’m scared.”

“Of course you are. It’s a big decision, and anyone in your position would be scared.”

They stayed that way for a time, Jordain on his knees at his daughter’s bedside, the two holding hands, and then Jordain sighed. “I feel like a silly goose.”

“Oh no,” Claire sat up and pulled her father onto the bed with her. She kissed him on the cheek and then they hugged.

“I shall see Lord Daring in the morning,” Jordain said. “And I will do the right thing.”

“Do you know what that is yet?”

“No,” Jordain admitted. “But I think I will know when I see him, and then it will simply be a matter of courage.”

“And your heart will not fail you,” Claire said. “Of that, I am certain. You are a very brave girl. And I am proud to have you for a father.”

“Goodnight,” Jordain said, getting up. “And thank you, Claire. Thank you ever so much.”

Chapter 17

The former Lord Cablerone, now known throughout the palace as Lady Hart, found himself spending more and more time in the woods. He always nervous and afraid in the company of people now, and the confining spaces of the palace had begun to make him feel sad and frustrated. But, when he walked in the Royal Reserve, among the trees and vines, the brooks and stones, he felt at peace, at home, alive.

More and more, he dreamt of a life in the forest, of mothering fawns, of living as a kind of Queen among the deer, and more and more it seemed natural and right to him that he should. Often, he was joined on his walks by Bunny, but more and more she would hop off and explore, frolicking with creatures of her kind, and she seemed to be gradually losing interest in speaking in the language of humans.

Sometimes memories of his old life seized his mind, and he would feel a longing to return to his own castle, to see his wife and his company of soldiers again, but such feelings always seemed to fade rapidly, supplanted by an urge to walk a favorite deer path through the marble hills, or to go marvel at the great, sad willows or to visit with the wood sprites in the Silver Glen. He was making many friends among the spirits and the creatures of nature, and his new friends and discoveries soften the sorrow he felt at the loss of his old life.

Often, he found himself following the scent of Silver Buck, the great stag ruler of the forest. He kept his distance, always peering at the great, powerful beast from behind a tree, or through a hedge. Now and then, he would think Silver Buck was looking his way, and he would quickly scurry off, his heart racing with excitement, and though he knew what he was starting to feel, and the thought terrified him, more and more he found himself needing to see the great stag, longing for even just a glimpse of his chest, his massive rack, his noble hind quarters.

Rutting season would come soon, but Lady Hart told himself not to fret over it. "After all," he thought. "I am not truly a hart just yet, and certainly the great stag would choose any number of other pretty young females before he even thinks of me! My goodness! No. No. I haven't to even bother myself with such silly thoughts!"

Chapter 18

Jordain woke early, and he found himself surprisingly calm as his girl dressed him, fixed his hair, painted his face, powdered his chest, adorned him in jewelry and then led him by his soft little hand to his mirror, where he stood and smiled, delighted at how well his dress showed off his figure, his perfect, porcelain skin. He loved the way she'd fixed his golden hair—piled high on his head with ringlets hanging down on either side of his soft face, and yet no bangs, and there was something decidedly more mature about it, a style that suggested to the world he was now a woman, and no longer a girl.

“Kikana!” He gushed, giving the girl’s hand a squeeze. “You have outdone yourself!”

“Thank you, milady,” Kikana said, her voice breaking a little.

“Oh, what is it?” Jordain said, his own heart immediately responding to the other girl’s sorrow.

“It’s just... I wish I were a young man, so I could court you myself!”

“And if you were, I would marry you,” Jordain said, awarding the girl with his prettiest smile. “I do love you, sweet girl, and I know you will find someone, and we shall both be so very happy.”

“But I don’t like boys.”

“Oh, and you don’t have to, Kikana. Not anymore. Thank the goddess!”

Jordain was placed on a stool in the receiving room, which had been redone in colors and fabrics which flattered and enhanced his pale skin and blonde hair. He put his hands in his lap, and when the door opened he smiled brightly, as he had practiced so many times, and he did not have to fake the delight in his wide, pretty eyes as Lord Darling strutted into the room. And Jordain knew right then, just as he thought he would, just what he needed to do.

Ritual greetings were exchanged, the rules and expectations of proper conduct for a gentleman caller enunciated, and the Princess King felt a sense of calm and peace through it all. Finally, Lord Daring finally sat down, and the chaperone stepped outside into the hallway, offering them a little privacy but not so much as to permit anything untoward to happen.

“You look stunning,” Daring said, boldly allowing his eyes to drift down from Jordain’s face to his full, round breasts.

“And you are as handsome-- and rude-- as ever,” Jordain answered, arching his back to give Daring a better view.

“You drive me mad, princess. I can scarcely control myself.”

“I wonder what sort of a husband you would make given your lack of self-control,” Jordain said with a smirk.

“The kind who would...” Daring glanced back at the curtain, leaned forward and whispered, “...ravish every inch of your little white body morning, noon and night.”

Jordain felt himself flush with pleasure at the words, and was glad for his powdered face and breasts, that they hid his maidenly blushing.

“No whispering,” the chaperone said sternly, and Jordain covered his mouth and almost managed to stifle a giggle.

“I am so frustrated with all of these conventions and rules, and it all seems so much a part of the old world of Juno, of the horrible past,” Jordain said.

“I am sure you know well that I share your frustration with decorum, princess. But, we must always protect a young noblewoman’s reputation.”

“Yes. And a young man’s.”

“Of course.”

“I need to tell you something, Lord Daring, something about me. I feel it is only fair to you, and to all the gentleman who might call on me, that you know who I am. I must warn you, it is something scandalous, and I wish to offer you the opportunity to withdraw now, before hearing the news, so as to avoid any smirch falling upon you and your honor.”

Lord Daring had never seen the pretty little princess so serious, and so he leaned forward, put his hands on his knees, and said, “Princess. Whatever you tell me, I want you to know that I love you, more than I have ever loved any woman, and nothing you can say will change that. I would give up my kingdom, my title, my very life for you.”

Jordain nodded, took a deep breath, and said, “I am, was, until a short time ago, King Holland Jordain.”

Lord Daring stared into the pretty young girl’s eyes, saw the truth in them, and dropped his head. He sighed and clasped his hands.

No, Jordain thought. No. No. Oh, goddess, no. He started to stand, struggling to get up in his dress, “I should leave,” he said in a strangled voice.

“No,” Lord Daring said, looking up, tears rolling down his cheeks. “You misunderstand.” He stood and gently placing his hand on Jordain’s shoulder helped the king to sit back down.

The curtain pulled back, and the chaperone stood, watching warily. Several servants peered around the corner. Lord Daring sat back down, and the two of them glanced at the man and raised their palms. “It’s fine,” Lord Daring said.

“You may withdraw,” Jordain offered, crying now himself, scared and confused.

“No,” Lord Daring said. “Stay. I want a witness to hear this.” He leaned forward again, so that he and the pretty princess king were on the same level, and he said, “King Holland Jordain. I love you, and I want you to be my wife.”

“I accept?” Jordain squeaked.

The chaperone offered polite applause, and soon all the servants joined in, offering a great cheer.

“Come on,” Lord Daring said, taking Jordain’s hand and helping him to his feet.

“To hell with all of these rule and conventions. Let’s go ask your wife for her permission right now!”

“I’m not sure…”

But Jordain couldn’t finish, as his mouth was smothered by a gruff, manly kiss, and he clung to Lord Daring, and surrendered, because it was better to let his man make the decisions, especially when it was what he secretly wanted in his woman’s heart.

When the kiss finally ended, Jordain caught his breath and then said, “By the rules of…”

“There are no rules on how to properly court a king who has become the prettiest girl in the kingdom, you silly girl, so we don’t need to worry about any of that anymore! Let’s go!” Daring held Jordain’s hand and the two rushed off, the servants laughing and cheering. Daring led the way, practically dragging Jordain along behind him, hobbled as he was in his dress, and the servants followed, and more and more people joined, the lords and ladies of the court, minstrels and soldiers, and masons and midwives, and Lord Daring led his little woman to a great stone platform that stood beneath the balcony of the royal chambers, and the two stood, holding hands, and Lord Daring shouted out, “Queen Cliona! I must speak with you!” He turned excitedly to the audience, grinning, and shouted, “Good people. Help me get the queen out here! Let us call for her together!”

“Great Queen! Great Queen! Great Queen!”

The crowd picked up the chant, and soon the whole courtyard echoed and shook with the shouts, and the commotion brought more and more people pouring into the space, and soon a mass of thousands had gathered, and when a clearly amused Queen Cliona finally emerged, a great roar of approval rattled the windows.

The Queen raised her hands, and the crowd grew quiet. “Lord Daring. You never cease to surprise me.”

Lord Daring bowed. “Your highness. Thank you so much for seeing me on such short notice.”

“Princess,” the Queen said, nodding toward Jordain, who dutifully curtsied. The crowd calmed further, and the whole world seemed to stop moving. Daring found himself suddenly feeling a little shy, at a total loss for words. “Whenever you are ready, you may speak, Lord Daring.”

Laughter. Daring started to speak, glanced down at Jordain, and taking the king’s hand, he seemed to find the strength he needed. “Queen Cliona, I am here in front of all these people and the goddess to beg your permission to marry your husband, King Holland Jordain!”

The crowd gasped and murmured, and Jordain stood, proudly, next to the man he loved, smiling up at his wife, whose face radiated delight and pride.

“Good people,” the Queen said, “the radiant young woman who stands at the side of Lord Daring is none other than King Holland Jordain. Through a blessing of the goddess, he has been given the shape of a woman, and the love of a wonderful man who knows simply all of the best ways to break the rules.”

“Thank you, my queen.”

“Holland, do you wish to marry this man?”

“Yes,” Holland Jordain sang out. “More than anything.”

“Then I give my blessing, and I declare today a holiday in honor of the Princess King!”

The crowd cheered, and this time Jordain grabbed Lord Daring by the lapels and practically yanked him down so they could kiss, and again, it seemed like the best kiss ever.

Neither could wait, and as much as he longed for a big wedding, Jordain gave in to his husband and his heart. That night, dressed once more in his white, debutante gown, he stood next to his fiancé in the modest, royal chapel before the High Witch of the cult of the goddess. Many of his new girlfriends were there, along with knights and captains he’d once fought alongside. Claire, of course, and Cliona. Lady Hart and Bunny, shy and nervous and quiet. There were hugs and smiles, laughter and tears, and that night King Holland Jordain slipped his thin, silk robe from his shoulders and stood naked before his husband for the first time. Jordain looked down shyly, but he could feel Lord Daring’s eyes softly pass over this slender shoulders, his full, round breasts, his taugth tummy and wide, fleshy hips, down to his slit and his round, white legs. And then Lord Daring took his little bride by the hand and led him to their bed, and he lay King Jordain on his back and climbed onto him.

“I’m scared,” King Jordain admitted as he prepared to make love as a woman for the first time.

“It’s okay,” Daring whispered, kissing him and running a hand through the king’s long blonde hair. “It’s going to be wonderful.” He ran his fingers gently across the king’s jawline, down the side of his neck and down his chest, and then he cupped one soft white breast and gave it a squeeze.

Jordain made a soft, purring noise and arched his back, and whispered, “Be gentle.”

Daring kissed his wife again, still playing with his breast, and said, “Never.”

Chapter 19

Lady Hart woke, sat up, her heart racing. She was in her bed, in her dressing gown, but there was something... a strong smell, a musk, the sweetest thing she'd ever smelt, and her whole body filled with a need she had never known before. Standing, she rushed to the glass doors that led to the porch of his first floor rooms, threw them open and stopped, standing stock still, her heart pounding.

The Great Stag stood there, staring at her. Lady Hart's eyes went wide, and she felt herself grow hot with passion and need, a desire to have that mighty buck mount her and fill her. She couldn't move. Speak. Think. She only wanted to be taken.

The Great Stag nodded, and then he spoke. "It is time."

"Yes," Lady Hart gasped. "Yes, please, yes." Lady Hart fell forward onto her hands, and her arms grew longer even as her hands turned into hooves, and her whole body finally took on the shape of a doe, her nightgown shredding into pieces as she bounded over the stone rail of her porch and bolted towards the woods. "Catch me if you would have me!" She sang out, and the Great Buck watched her go for a moment, giving her a little lead before he shot off into the dark behind her, looking forward to the chase and the conquest.

Epilogue

And so the three leading men of the last Age of Juno found themselves each a female and a mother, mated to a man who loved her and made her happy. Claire chose to remain single, at least as of the end of this telling. She visited her father a year after he married and moved south to his new husband's island kingdom, and found him the perfect little mother and wife, happily breast feeding his new baby while attending to his domestic responsibilities. Motherhood agreed with him, and he had grown only more beautiful with the birth of his first child, his figure filling out into even more voluptuously womanly proportions.

She often visited with Lady Hart, herself the proud mother of a pretty white fawn, and she enjoyed feeding her corn and scratching her under the chin. She never tired of speaking about her fawn, and how pretty he was, and of course what joy the Great Stag took in his off-spring and his mate.

And one day as she'd been riding through the farmlands when a young woman with curly red hair carrying a baby on her hip had called out, "Claire! Claire!"

Claire rode over, smiling. "Do I know you?" She asked curiously.

"Yes! Yes. I have known you since you were a little girl, and I was a good friend of your parents."

"I'm sorry I don't remember you."

"No mind. You wouldn't. I was Julius, once, high-priest of Juno."

"Oh! Well, you make a beautiful woman."

"Thank you."

"And is this your baby?"

"Yes. Her name is, well, I named her... Mary. In honor of Mary Sky Daughter."

Claire looked at the little girl, with her own head full of fiery red curls, and she gave her little foot a squeeze. The girl smiled, pointed at Claire and said, "Pretty!"

"You're pretty!" Claire said. "She's a doll!"

"Thank you, your highness. Well, I had better be off. The work of a farmer's wife is never done!"

"So nice to see you!"

Claire rode on, thinking again of her beloved aunt, of that horrible day when she'd had to watch as the sweet woman burned to death. Of course, she would always miss her, and always grieve. She knew it has all been ordained, that in her sacrifice Mary had brought an end to the Age of Juno, with all its rigid roles for men and women, and its wretched rules for the creation and enforcement of status and division. It had been a noble death, and one that had resulted in so much

birth and life and change. Who would have thought that day that so many of the men in her life would soon be living so happily as mommies and wives and even a doe?

The sun was sinking behind the hills, and the air getting cold. Claire urged her horse to a trot, hoping to get back to the city before it got too dark to see on these lonely country roads.

And what of me? She wondered. She'd been saved from forced marriage and motherhood, from a tiny little life living under the thumb of some man. And she was free to roam about in the country, free to live life! Would she ever marry? Have children?

If I want to someday, I will, she decided. But for now, I will leave motherhood to the men, and I will have adventure!