

To save her, he must make the ultimate sacrifice

Beyond Every
Mirror
Anachronistic Dimensions Trilogy

Christine Church

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Book One
Anachronistic Dimensions

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ISBN-10: 0-692-78270-2
ISBN-13: 978-0-692-78270-5

First Printing September 2016

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Grey Horse Press



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Music is my greatest inspiration for creativity. This book is in thanks to all the rock bands whose music I worshipped (and still do) from the '80's (including, but not limited to, Queen, Aerosmith, KISS and many more). However, a band called Angel had the greatest influence. When I was 15 years old, inspired by Angel's albums, 'Helluva Band' and 'White Hot,' I wrote a short story about a rock musician who is shang hai'd into another dimension through the mirror in his hotel room. Throughout the many, many years since then, that short story grew and eventually, in 1996, became the first edition of this novel.

Thank you to my writer's group, who have long since disbanded unfortunately, due to deaths, illnesses and moves. But, without Laurie, Bea (RIP), Crystal and Leslie, I couldn't have continued on. They offered more than support; they offered friendship!

*The mirror reflects images,
Through false and mortal eyes,
But no image shows beyond the glass,
For the soul is in disguise.*

*The image in the glass is but,
A vision of the mind,
But within the fragile human soul,
Is of another kind.*

*Beyond every looking glass,
And inside every heart,
The truth is as a rainbow,
As a shining world apart.*

*To see beyond the mirror,
Is to see beyond your eyes,
A heart that flames with fire and ice,
A soul shorn from disguise.*

PART ONE

**November 24, 2014
South Carolina, USA**

The Ultimate Purpose

His day was going great—until he discovered he was dead. Not only had he looked forward for weeks to the opening of the new book and music store near his estate in Aiken, South Carolina, but the day also boasted the debut of his band’s seventh and most popular CD, *Shirtless*. Other than a song he was finishing for an upcoming tour, this one rare day was all his.

Or so he thought.

As he strolled across the parking lot, Dane Bainbridge felt an ominous tingle along his spine. The wind picked up suddenly and thrashed at his hair as he wrestled to pull it into a ponytail. Lightning screamed across the sky and a blast of thunder shook the steel as he palmed the handle and labored the shop door shut against the drawing wind.

Once inside, he swiped his hands along the rough material of his jeans. The thunderous din outside held back, the inner din that waited became far too clear. The music all too familiar. The voice, his own.

“Damn technology,” he muttered.

He knew what waited as he turned. Directly before him was situated a lofty display case of new CDs, and if the cardboard cut-out of himself and the rest of the band at its peak wasn’t enough, beside that stood a larger-than-life digital signage display that spilled out video images of his face—sweat soaked and contorted in concentration as he sang toward the camera.

Dane brought a hand up to scratch a feigned itch at his temple, in reality hiding his visage from the patronage of the store. Why did he leave his ball cap and colored contact lenses at home? Two features that almost always gave him away in public: his hair and his eyes. Most particularly his eyes.

At a fast walk, he navigated the safest route to the back of the store. The wondrous aroma of paper and leather, which he had no time to appreciate, unmistakable. Like a bat to a mosquito, he

found the book *History Department* without looking up. He plucked unthinking a leather-bound tome from the shelf and opened it to a random page.

All he had wanted was a quiet day of anonymity, hidden from the public behind tales of knights, kings and presidents. War, peace and poverty.

Though he kept his back to the exposed aisle, face lowered, it didn't take long. Dane's shoulders slumped in a sigh as a shiver clawed at his spine and the mental energy shifted around him. So much for obscurity. He was being watched.

Recognized.

Just a slight head tilt, a shift of his eyes. He saw only what his peripheral vision allowed, yet in his mind her face was unmistakable in its clarity—the silver coifed hair, well preserved face, sunken grey eyes. She was perhaps mid to late eighties and stood about ten feet away, gaping.

As a passing patron rushed the air in his direction, the scent of perfume swam by him; *Chanel No. 5*. How he recognized the name of the scent escaped him. His memory flipped quickly through the women's perfumes for which he knew the name. Less than a handful. To his knowledge, he'd never smelled the fragrance before.

And the woman—once again his mind scanned its files of people. Millions, maybe more, but his memory for faces was good. Nothing. No recollection of having met her in all his 29 years. People her age rarely were seen around the rock music scene. Yet somewhere, somehow he knew her—recognition not limited to the physical. Random information pumped so quickly through his memory he couldn't sift through, nor make sense, of it all. In an attempt to shake it off, he turned away and pulled the book closer to his face in an effort to remain hidden within the unassuming task of studying the pages.

But his mind refused to let the old woman go, and before he could dismiss the incident, the shuffle of footsteps came up behind him.

Chanel No. 5.

He suspired exaggeratedly. Attention from strangers was not unfamiliar, but generally within a younger demographic.

Habitually, he plastered a congenial yet fabricated smile on his

lips before turning to face this anachronistic fan.

The old woman gasped.

Dane's phony grin dissolved.

The step she took backward brought her to a halt against a table of well-stacked best sellers. Trade paperbacks and hardbacks alike swayed with the impact. Dane stiffened, as if even a whisper of movement would aid in sending the books crashing to the tiles. But the old woman's frail form couldn't do the job. Her stare remained fixed intently on his face as she shuffled a step or two forward. Dane opened his mouth, ready to converse, to ask what she wanted, when she spoke first.

"You're dead!" The old lady wagged a bony finger in his face.

Dumbfounded, no words came. Dane Bainbridge simply stood there, book in hand, mouth open, as unformed thoughts never reached his voice.

What do you say to such an accusation?

A crease above the woman's cockled brow furrowed as she repeated her accusation—loudly. "You can't be here! You died!"

Heat torched Dane's face and his forehead grew damp. Should he dismiss this woman as a crazy old broad and ignore her, call the police, run home? It wasn't like unconventional situations were unique to him. Beyond the norm of stardom, his was a life wrought with the bizarre. Even his conception and birth warranted an entry into *Ripley's Believe it or Not*.

When finally another human body came into sight Dane was not sure whether to be frightened or relieved. He tore his curious stare from the old woman to greet this newcomer to the Freakish World of Dane's Life. Female. Brown hair streaked with grey. Brown eyes. Fifties maybe—no matter.

Her arm wrapped protectively around the old woman's shoulders.

"Martha!" she blurted. "Martha, it's okay. What's wrong?" Her eyes lifted to meet Dane's and her mouth dropped open, russet eyes widening, in a repeat performance of Martha's own gaping appearance.

Terrific!

"Oh my God," she whispered.

This incident was not improving. Definitely not the day to

venture from the estate. Not the day to divulge in time to himself. He no longer wanted to find the perfect book to bide his off hours. All he wanted now was to scream for help. But who would come? Although everyone within hearing range stood frozen with books, electronic readers and cell phones in hand, no one moved a muscle.

But then the old woman's raspy voice shattered the silence, drawing his attention from the customers.

"You see, Barbara?" she squeaked. "It's him. The eyes...*his* eyes. It's him. He came back. *He came back!*" The pitch in her voice rose and fell and she sounded more like a five-year old child than a woman of age.

"No, Martha," Barbara's stare remained locked to Dane's face, her words lacking the conviction they claimed. "It's not him. He just—well, he looks like him. That's all."

Her expression finally softened apologetically as she drew the old woman close. "C'mon," she cooed. "We'll go home. We'll visit New York. Would you like that? It's been a long time. You miss New York, don't you?"

"New York. Yes," Martha piped, but her distraction was short-lived. "It's him," Martha pushed weakly once more. "I know it is. I can feel it. He came back." Tears welled on slender lashes and one fell, zigzagging like the path of a brook along the light creases of her face.

"Martha," Barbara drawled. "That was sixty-two years ago. This man's not that old. He resembles him, that's all." Her words were convincing, but within the depths of her middle aged eyes doubt sparked.

The crowd slowly lumbered back to whatever it was they had been doing—just a crazy old lady. Nothing news-worthy. And lucky for Dane, no paparazzi had decided to patronize this small South Carolina store.

Not even the rock star accused of being dead would make the news tonight.

Martha slumped against Barbara's shoulder and wept. Muffled words spilled out against the younger woman's floral blouse and made Dane realize that the rest of this day would be anything but ordinary. Typical.

The leather bound book he still gripped tightly had begun to

ache in his hands. He forced himself to breathe and relax. He would definitely need a massage after this!

“I’m sorry,” Barbara stated, finally. “But you do look remarkably like him, judging from the pictures I’ve seen—and a painting Martha has over her fireplace.”

“Wh—who do I look like?” *Besides myself?* A shiver ran up his arms and raised the hairs there.

Barbara glanced down at Martha, the older woman’s pallid face still buried in her shoulder, before meeting Dane’s gaze again. “Lance Keagan...” she paused as if waiting for a response.

Dane raised a brow but said nothing.

“He was a Broadway star in the 1940’s,” Barbara continued. She rubbed Martha’s shoulders as she spoke. “But he, well, he disappeared.”

Dane hugged the book closer to his body. That name. He was a fan of old movies, and he had visited many Broadway shows anytime a tour took them through New York. Lance Keagan. 1940’s? Long before his time. And yet—he must have heard something. How else would the name seem as familiar to him as his own?

“What, um,” Dane hesitated, almost afraid to ask. “What happened to him?”

Barbara’s shoulders rose and fell. “No one ever knew, but—” she stared into Dane’s eyes. He lowered his lids in automated response.

Barbara cleared her throat. “His face.” She shook her head. “*Identical* to yours. The dark lashes—the eyes so blue, with the same silver specks. I’ve never seen eyes that color on anyone before. The painting is true-to-life. They got the eyes exact.”

Once again Dane regretted forgetting the brown contact lenses he generally wore when out in public. His eyes tended to disclose his identity, even if his face didn’t. Only this time it was the identity of someone else being revealed. A dead someone.

Barbara continued her observation. She scanned the length of his slender six-foot frame, his pony-tailed hair, the black t-shirt boasting a Dark Myst logo, blue jeans, boots, then back up again.

“His hair,” she said, “was styled differently—black like yours. But the eyes...” She stopped again, as if suddenly realizing she’d already gone there. “He was extremely handsome.” Dane cleared

his throat, shifted his stance. “He had everything going for him,” Barbara continued, “looks, talent, versatility; could do it all, from comedy, drama, to serious romance. They said he could rival Clark Gable, but in the early 1950’s he disappeared—on his thirtieth birthday.”

“I’ll be thirty in another month,” said Dane, not really sure why he revealed that information.

Barbara’s mouth dropped open again, and Martha, who had finally ceased her incessant weeping, turned once again toward him.

“Um,” Barbara stammered. “Lance’s birthday would have been in a month—well, if he was still...” her voice trailed off.

A glance down again at Martha struck that same chord of familiarity. Dane blinked and forced his gaze back to Barbara. “She knew him?” He nodded in Martha’s direction, but didn’t look at her.

Barbara sighed. “He was her brother.” Her voice lowered to a whisper then, as though she were trying to keep Martha from hearing what she had to say next. “Martha’s mother died shortly after Lance disappeared. Never recovered from the grief, some said.” She offered an uncomfortable but sincere grin, then straightened and released a small cough. “I’m sorry Martha bothered you. Please forgive an old woman’s fantasies.” And with no further ado, Barbara guided the old woman at her side gently away.

For a moment after they were out of sight, Dane didn’t move. He was sure he might faint if he tried. This woman knew him, yet they had never met. And somehow he felt he knew her, yet he didn’t. He blinked quickly, attempting to clear the haze that bogged his brain and decided to get the hell out of there.

Forcing his hands to relax their death grip on the book, he strode to the cashier to make his purchase, hoping no one would make any inquiries as to the nature of what just happened.

Back to anonymity.

That would be good.

Home.

Surrounded at last by the metallic comfort of his 2013 Ferrari F12 Berlinetta, Dane drew in a deep breath and allowed the tension that had choked him in the store to release as he exhaled. Once

sufficiently calm enough to handle working machinery, he shoved the key in the ignition with his right hand, twisted and prepared to press the red start button with his left. Before the explosive roar of the 730 HP motor could catch, he stopped, his peripheral vision catching movement in the rearview mirror.

Mirrors. Nothing good can come of an image in a mirror.

Dane froze. The keys jingled out a rhythm in tune to his trembling hand. Slowly, he lifted his gaze to the glass, whispering, "Please, not now, not today."

No one was there. All the tension drained out in one sudden rush of relief and he was sure he would melt to the floor like Jell-O in July. Yet, deep down inside disappointment stirred. It had been a week since he had seen her last.

Beyond the Looking Glass

Mikaire

The smooth surface stretched upward, interrupting the blue of the sky, its grey shadows keeping her cool. Like vertical water built solidly into the burnt sienna cliff, she saw her own reflection—and beyond, his. A blink of her eyes, a command from her mind and the image rippled, fading the dark hair, silver-blue eyes, and then gradually cleared until the only reflection in the Main Looking Glass was her own. Meirah closed her eyes, shoulders slumped. Thankfully he had not seen her—not this time.

So often she had broken her own rule, the rule of her village and the wish of her mother. *The law of Sakkana!* But, what more could they do if they discovered her here? They could bestow no new punishment that would make her present existence any more of a never-ending battle between fear and hope. She was already doomed—cursed to spend the rest of her days watching the only one she would ever love die in torturous agony. She knew no other face behind the iron bars of the Prison Cell.

As if it was not enough to observe the blood drain from his body, the perfect pink flesh waning to a deathly grey, the spark of light fading from those soulful blue eyes that sparkled silver in sunlight as he silently pleaded to her, *please free me*. Each and every time, she had wanted only to die with him.

But she lived on, his demise a reassurance of her continued existence and the prosperity of her home land. This, however, did not excuse her selfishness. Each time her presence appeared in his looking glass, each time he caught her spying, his face was pinched with disconcertion at seeing her and it unsettled her with increased frequency. Bewilderment, terror and agony would too soon be Dane's life—or what was left of it—and so, when she saw him glance up, his chin raising slowly, she knew. He had seen her

movement, and soon he would see her. Although she could not feel his emotions through the barriers of the portal, she knew him. Something, she knew not what, had made him tense beforehand. So desperately had she wanted to reach out to him, through the glass and the Dimensions that separated them. To hold him, comfort him, ease whatever ailed his heart. But seeing her would only cause him more anguish. Quickly, she had closed the Glass, preventing him from seeing her. Today he would not know her presence.

Meirah stepped from the shadow of the Red Dust Mountain, shaded her squinted eyes as she gazed up. The day was bright and the temperature mild, which had allowed her a more than adequate excuse for a ride. Now as the sun descended into late after-noon Meirah knew she must head home. Of late, all eyes were upon her, and all lips spoke of her impending union with Kaeplan.

She tucked away a stray strand of tawny hair, straightened her dress, and brushed from her cloak the red sand that accumulated from the arid region; a sure indication of her whereabouts. Once satisfied with her appearance, she headed east to where her father's juspette was tethered to a tree, awaiting her arrival in the Eastern Field beyond the Dark Forest. The air smelled dry, the mountains having seen no rain for a fortnight now.

Her footsteps crunched lightly on the sand and gravel, and above a Screeching-Robin let out its signature wail. Otherwise, the Red Dust Mountain region was quiet today. Too quiet, which gave her mind a chance to wander into territories she did not wish it to go. Back to the year before, when last he came to Mikaire for Ritual. His name then, she recalled, was Jonah Graham.

They always spoke at length during her visits to his cell, and his tales never ceased to enchant her. Jonah had spoken to her of life in what he referred to as a "hippie age." She had not been sure what that meant, but he explained that the human year at the time of his abduction was 1983 and ten mortal years earlier, in 1973, he held a high position in something called a political movement, a National Peace Coalition against the war in a place named Vietnam. He became famous several years later not only for his ability to rally the people to his cause, but the music he played aired around the globe. His influence and charisma on the peoples of his world was beyond comprehension, and regardless of his

name or his occupation, this fact never changed. Sakkana chose him for his power, his strength, his will. This followed him through all lifetimes. His blood fed a nation, each and every time.

Jonah's hair fell free and supple, just below his shoulders, like the straightened web of a silk-ant and the rough hair human males develop on their faces had already painted his chin when he arrived in Mikaire.

The year before that, as Lance Keagan, he had relayed tales of his work on "Broadway." The ebony locks were cut short, yet forever unchanged were the affecting silver-blue eyes that watched her in love, in pain and in death. His eyes defined him. Whether his name was Lance or Jonah or Dane, or any other of the monikers for which she had known him throughout the years, and whether or not he remembered her as anyone other than an image in his mirror, the depth of his eyes held within them the very core of his being. Deep as the blue ocean for which she had only read. Only dreamt about. And within the dreams, those same eyes were forever integrated into the calm sea.

Dane danced on her memories as she walked, distracting her from the flora and fauna, and before she realized how far she had traveled, the Dark Forest Barrier sprang up around her. She stopped short before colliding with a bulky blackwood tree that had always been there. She stared at the jagged and withering black bark for a moment as her mind fought to catch up to the present. Finally, with a hardy grunt, she hoisted up her dress, and jerked her cloak free of the dense brambles as she stepped around the tree, reprimanding herself for such a lack of direction.

She glanced back, in the direction of the Main Looking Glass. Her heart clenched, eyes closed, tears burned. She could see nothing anyhow, save the endless expanse of moon-dappled forest that surrounded her since she crossed the Dark Forest Barrier.

Compose yourself, Meirah.

Wiping a sleeved arm across her face, she continued on until the forest disappeared and her dexter-hide shoes caught in the tangled grass of the Eastern Field Barrier. Grudgingly, she lifted her legs higher with each step, careful to avoid a bed of violet daffodilies that manifested just beyond the barrier's edge. Pawing the ground impatiently, the juspette stood on the west end of the field, its tethered reins pulled taut as it tried to reach the grass

beneath it.

Soft in Meirah's hand, the reins pulled free easily as she stroked the animal's soft muzzle, then up its forehead and around the golden horn. The creature arched its neck to her touch. Her head bowed, the juspette's soft snowy fur lightly tickling her forehead. Her stomach tightened painfully. In one short month she would have to wed Kaeplan, so it was arranged. One month. Several years by the mortal calendar. If only she could have that much time in which to think and plan, perhaps find a way out of this wretched union she dreaded and feared with every beat of her heart.

The tear that fell from her eye watered a single white wild roske that grew alongside the juspette's powerful cloven hoof. With a groan, Meirah reached down and plucked the plant from the ground, brought it to her nose. The perfume of the field and the fragrance of the flower she held aided in tranquilizing her senses to lend a mote of strength to face the night ahead.

With the wild roske in hand, Meirah fisted the hem of her dress and swung easily onto the juspette's back. Let the dress wrinkle, she thought defiantly. Mother would be furious if she knew Meirah was wearing the burgundy velvet celebration gown while out riding, but she did not care. Within her, rebellion warred with duty and at the present, rebellion was the victor. Let the dress get soiled. She did not wish to wear it anyhow! The symbolism it held nauseated her. The end of life as she knew it. More accurately, the end of her life.

The early evening moon peered from the tree tops as Meirah arrived home. She stabled the juspette and hung its tack. The wild roske remained tight in her fist, its petals slowly wilting from lack of nutrients, yet still its brilliance glowed brightly in the twilight. And she held onto it even as she slipped out of her shoes and padded quietly to her bedchamber on the second floor. Tossing her cloak on the large feather bed, she slumped down beside it, stern emotions churning within like the wild sea she had read so much about yet had never seen.

Twirling the flower in her hand, she gazed at the beauty which twelve years past would have caused her such joy. But now she could only mourn the dying blossom, its slowly withering petals a reminder of her lament. With a sorrowful cry, she tossed it across

the room. The flower struck the yellow and red frost of the stained glass window and broke apart, its petals fluttering softly to the floor like the weightless snow that had just begun to fall outside.

Meirah flopped back into the bed pillows and hoped for a reprieve from this pain, in the form of the sleep that had eluded her the last few nights. But it was to escape once more as her mind spun with images of her fated love. If only their circumstance did not bring them together only to have death tear them apart. In fantasies and daydreams, even at night, he lived on within her mind and they were united.

How unfair life is to own such desire and never can it be so.

She had never even seen his world. Many books had come into Mikaire, carried by those who had crossed the Looking Glass into the mortal dimension, and Meirah delighted in reading them. No barriers to interrupt the beauty of forest and field, and their time ran with the speed of a scittering eckpett, making Mikaire seem slow and sluggish in comparison. But, therein lay the complication; even if he were not fated to die, Dane could not survive in her world. Within a year, he would be as the petals scattered along her bedchamber floor, the glow of their radiance gone forever, grayed with death and decay. Few from his world had remained in Mikaire long enough to see such fate. Those whose blood did not serve Sakkana had been forced to slave in mines and fields for the few months their bodies were able, before age forced them down and they saw their end in agonizing execution, their flesh and meat served to feed the beasts of Sakkana's castle.

But Dane was strong, as he had always been. A man of power even amongst mortals. Meirah let herself grin with pride and devotion before once again succumbing to the pangs of guilt. He would not live long enough in her world to age. Within him pumped the blood Sakkana required. *Blood equals strength.* Sakkana's motto.

An Historical Future

Despite protests from his Ferrari, Dane drove home slowly, taking the back road of South Boundary, through the Avenue of Oaks. The canopy of old trees entwined shadows over the road and whispered a soothing breeze into the car that allowed Dane a chance to free his mind. South towards Hitchcock Woods, he enjoyed the sights, as he pondered the events at the store. Around him, the scents of country life, horses, flowers and trees coagulated like smelling salts to his senses. The reason he settled in Aiken ten years previous when he'd moved down from Connecticut. That and his love of horses and history. He breathed in the moist air that entered through the open windows and tried to make sense of what had happened at the store. It wasn't like he led a normal life. This incident with Martha, however, added insult to injury as the saying went. There had to be a rational explanation. *Yeah, just as there's a logical explanation for the Mirror Lady*, as he had dubbed her many years ago.

The old adage that everyone has a twin was the only conclusion he could come up with by the time the road curved right toward Hitchcock Woods and the Gothic Revival mansion came into view. The ashen stone center tower adorned by small turrets stretched up as one with the dismal grey sky, broken only by the stepped gables and crenellated battlements. One command from the remote within his car and the spider web wrought iron gate yawned open to allow Dane passage onto his estate.

He drove unhurriedly up the long, wide driveway, its landscaping of stone walls, side lights, jessamine and purple iris colorless in the grasp of upcoming winter. Nearing the garage, he noticed a familiar brown Ford, only the grill visible from its parking place next to the building. Edna's car. What was she doing at the mansion so early? He glanced down at the digital

display on the car's dash. One o'clock. Edna wasn't early, he was late.

Parked in the garage beside his Jaguar, Dane snatched the bagged book from the passenger seat and hopped out of the car. The delicious aroma of seafood and spices, carried by the breeze of the ceiling fan, wafted in his direction as he entered the side door to the kitchen.

"Making *Shrimp Créole* again, eh, Edna?"

The older woman spun on her heel. "Great day in the mornin'! Oh, Mister Dane. Ya done startled me." A chubby hand rose to her heart over the floral print dress that was visible from beneath her apron.

Within seconds, a fine-boned Doberman pinscher waddled crookedly into the kitchen, his back end wagging in the stead of a tail. He lumbered over to Dane and leaned against his leg.

"My watchdog," Dane chuckled.

Wolfe's instinct as a protector had been damaged along with his brain in an accident when he was a puppy. The dog had been unable to walk normally and Dane worked diligently rehabbing the pup until he could trod along once again on all fours, even if a bit kinked.

"Quick as ever, that one," Edna commented. Her gaze fell to the book in his hand. "Y'all been off to the new book store, I see?"

"Just wanted something fresh. I read all the others." He set the package on the serving island.

"Twice, I reckon," she said, brushing at the stained white apron that hugged her wide middle. "Ya know, this is the 21st century. They's got easier ways to read. And you can carry it all wi' ya on the road."

Dane ignored her attempt to drag him into the present. "The strangest thing happened to me today." He sat on a bar stool and crossed his arms over the package he'd just set down.

A grey eyebrow lifted curiously. "Stranger than usual?" asked Edna.

Dane's mind drifted back to the store, to Martha. "Hell, yes!"

"Did ya see *her* again?" She grabbed up two small spice bottles from a cupboard and added a pinch of each to the pot. Dane wouldn't know one spice from another if he tripped over them, but in the kitchen, even in his house, Edna was queen.

Dane shook his head. “No. I didn’t see her today.” He cleared his throat and straightened. “Thankfully,” he added quickly. “Other than the ones in my car, I didn’t go near any mirrors.”

“What in tarnation could be stranger ‘en that?” she asked, a small smile playing on her thin lips as she turned to look at him.

Leaning forward again, he relayed the entire tale, all about Martha and Barbara and the accusation that he was dead.

While he spoke she stirred, cooked and seasoned, but listened intently.

By the time he’d finished, she had taken the seat across from him, and carefully tucked a stray strand of gray hair back into place beneath her hairnet. “Ya don’t pay me to give ya advice, Mr. Dane. But I still say all this has to do with—”

“Not all that tabloid hocus pocus again,” Dane interrupted. Edna, bless her heart, continued to cling to the ridiculous notion that every word in every tabloid hailed as grandeur fact.

“I dunno.” She shrugged before standing. “If ya knew someone in a past life...” she bobbed a finger at him and he thought once again of Martha. He quickly shook it away. “Ya’all recognize ‘em in this one. And the mirrors.—”

“I know. I know,” was his sarcastic retort. As a kid, when other boys were thinking about model cars and icky girls, Dane spent his time pondering the image in his mirror. Not images of himself, but an image beside his of a pretty young woman with bright green eyes. He would remain transfixed long after the illusion—as he referred to it later in life—had faded. Until he’d grown up he never questioned seeing someone besides himself in the glass. Like anything that is a constant in one’s life, he took it for granted that everyone saw the same thing.

“Oh...” Edna said suddenly, snapping him from his reverie. “Bruce called. Said he’d be here ‘roun’ four.”

Dane glanced involuntarily at the clock. “Shit! I forgot he was coming out this way. I better get back to work!” His time at the store had taken longer than planned. He started to rise, but Edna placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and guided him back into the seat.

Dane glanced at her through long black lashes. “What?”

“Not afore you’ve had your lunch.”

Dane's stomach gurgled. The scent of Edna's wonderful southern cooking reminded him he hadn't yet eaten.

"I'll call Bruce."

He grabbed his cell phone and touched the button to Bruce's home on the coast. A feminine voice came on the line. "Kaitlin," he said. "Is Bruce around?"

"Yeah Dane. Hi. He's in the studio. Hold on..."

The phone clicked and the flowing rock beat of *Dark Myst* sounded in his ear. He closed his eyes briefly when he heard his own voice singing at him through the line. Bruce reveled in pushing their music on everyone who dared call his house. His cell phone also rang out what was known as a ringback tone with their music to entertain those on hold. But, as technologically advanced as Bruce was (particularly in comparison to Dane), he had no land line in his studio. No interruptions. He preferred to use his wife as messenger.

Dane sat. Sammy, one of many rescued cats that called the mansion home, took that as a cue to jump into his lap. He stroked a hand absently through the long silky white and gray tabby fur as he waited.

The length of time he would wait before Bruce picked up the line depended on where in the house Kaitlin had been when she'd answered. The intercom was for the help, and Bruce always left his cell phone elsewhere.

Bruce's home recording studio was on the far end of their manor, so word in that house traveled like a long distance carrier. Dane sighed and watched the minute hand on the clock tick by.

Three minutes. A click abruptly cut off one of their biggest hit mid-song, and then a voice came through the line, loud and angry. "Dane! Where the hell have you been?"

"Nice to hear your voice, too, Bruce." He rolled his eyes.

"Is it done?" No formalities. Right to the point.

Dane didn't have to ask what *it* was. "No. I have some finishing touches I want to do. Why don't I bring it there when I'm done? We have to go over it in the studio anyway."

A heavy exhalation sounded in his ear. Someone was in a mood! "Adrian can't make it that late."

"Oooh, does Mr. Androgynous have a date?" Dane joked, but Bruce did not laugh.

“Dane, I want to get this song in the line up for the tour!” Dane knew Bruce's petulance was due in part to anxiety over the coming baby.

“Bruce! It's not on the recording and the tour doesn't start for another month—”

“And we'll need at least that to get this ready. Dane, I wanted this song finished weeks ago.” Another sigh. “Kaitlin has to see a specialist in Augusta at four thirty. I was going to swing by before her appointment, but we will come after.”

“A specialist?” Dane asked with genuine concern. “Why, is something wrong?”

“No, just a precaution. The baby's a little low. I don't think there's anything to worry about.”

“Bruce, do you think this is such a good idea?” He dared ask before elaborating, “...having the tour so close to her due date?” Dane truly did care for Bruce's wife—and worried over Bruce's attitude.

“That's why I'm glad it's a short tour. She's not due until the beginning of January, and with the new album out, this is the best time and you know it. Hopefully, the baby will wait until I return. If not, I've hired nurses to stay with Kaitlin 24 hours.”

Bruce was a tad overprotective at times. It would be a rough trip, with him snapping at everyone due to his anxiety over Kaitlin and the baby—their first baby—and the first time she hadn't accompanied him in over four years.

“Twenty-four hours? Bruce, she will be fine.” Dane reassured.

“Just get that song done. I'll be there around six.” He hung up abruptly.

Dane informed Edna he'd be eating lunch in the music room while he worked at the piano.



The gate buzzer sounded promptly at 6pm. Once Bruce had gotten the reprimands for Dane's tardiness out of his system, he

informed Dane to be at his house by noon the next day to go over everything in the studio. Dane agreed with a curt nod as his friend took the music, recordings and notes and left.

The house now quiet, most of the help having gone home, Dane padded off to the kitchen and gathered up the book he had bought earlier in the day.

The memory of Martha's panic-stricken face still flooded his mind, the accusation he was dead, of being someone's doppelganger. Maybe a bit of reading would clear his head. He grabbed a fresh bottle of Merlot from the fridge.

The library was perfect for the rare times Dane actually found to relax—large and dark, patterned oak floors spiraled beneath a spectacular cathedral ceiling, and in between panels of white pine, carved with the intricate detail of horses, knights, mythical beasts and musical symbols. The epitome of Gothic Revival, adorned with art from many generations and cultures, intermittently scattered along the walls between towering shelves of books, both new and old. Dane took a seat on the velvet sofa by the large stone fireplace, just as Edna poked her head into the room.

“They’s leftovers from earlier, Mister Dane. Would you like me to heat ‘em for ya?” she asked.

“No, Edna, thanks. Just a tuna sandwich.” He opened the book – a comprehensive study on the lives and legends of knights in England – to the first page, then popped open the wine, took a sip from the bottle.

“Ya know, ya don't eat good.” Edna had stepped into the room but remained by the door. “Ya hardly touched your lunch.”

He looked up into her maternal brown eyes. “I already have a mother, Edna.” He smirked, then quickly added, “And do not start about the wine again!”

“I know. I know. It’s jus'at—you’re growin' thin, Mister Dane. And your hair is all mussed.”

“Edna, I could weigh 500 pounds and you'd think I looked thin.” Reaching back, he released his hair from its binding and let it spill freely. “It's tangled from the wind. I'll shower later. Can I have that tuna sandwich now, please?” Her pudgy shoulders rose and fell abruptly and she exited the room. He shoved a hand into his hair and leaned an elbow on the sofa arm before turning his attention to the book.

Skimming the Table of Contents, a chapter on knighthood in the 17th century “Kingdom of England” caught his attention. He immediately flipped through the pages until he came to it and began reading. He barely noticed Edna’s return as she set the sandwich by his elbow on the side table and mumbled a quick “good night.” Dane took a bite, but didn’t taste anything as he browsed a chapter on the reign of Charles I, King of England, Scotland and Ireland.

While skimming a section on the king’s struggle for power, Dane stopped reading. A wave of dizziness swept over him and the words in the book blurred slightly. He rubbed at his eyes, but could only focus on the date written before him. *24 December, 1642.* A cold chill ran through his body and he had to look away from the book. *Oh, what fresh hell is this?* The room, the books, even the dog curled up beside him on the sofa, felt strangely unfamiliar. At that moment in time, he existed in another person’s life. And it made no sense. He grabbed the wine bottle, took a long pull, placed it back on the table by the lamp.

24 December 1642. Dane’s birthday was December 24th, but that wasn’t it.

The year. 1642.

Something relevant happened in that year. Not the start of Civil War in England that was Charles I’s legacy. Something else. What it was, he had no clue.

Dane raised himself up and walked to the open window. Gazing out at the stable, he watched his horses playing in their pasture, the full moon’s silver rays reflected off their backs. Camelot, a black Andalusian he had imported from Spain. Kobbiejo, a grey overo American Paint he had rescued from Connecticut. The horses couldn’t be more different: in breed, in color, in conformation, and in history. Yet it was as if they had always known one another. Two souls bound by instinct and an inner language humans could never comprehend. Each shared a secret known only by the other.

Without provocation, the “Mirror Lady” stood before him. Not in a mirror, but within his mind. The sun caressed the cinnamon locks neatly plaited in a long braid that hung to her thighs. She was attired in familiar clothing, a khaki-colored tunic-style shirt that scooped to reveal the top of pale perfect breasts, a leather belt that

circled a thin waist, and what he could only describe as breeches, almost like those wore by English equestrians, hugged long slender legs. Even in his mind, her image aroused him. His breath caught and he closed his eyes, but she was still there. Like the horses, there was an inner understanding. He knew this woman, this figment of his imagination. They couldn't be more different—and yet they shared a secret known by no other. Dane only wished he too could be privy to that secret.

A soft breeze whispered into the open library window and he drew it in. It didn't help. His gut rumbled uneasily. A quarter of the tuna sandwich rested in a bed of crumbs on the plate by the book, but hunger escaped him. Wolfe sat staring at the sandwich, a small droplet of drool clung to the back corners of his muzzle. He wouldn't touch food without Dane's permission, no matter how badly he wanted it. "Take it," said Dane, and the small portion of sandwich was gone in an instant, the crumbs licked away.

Once again seated, Dane leaned back into the plush sofa and rubbed at his temples. *Maybe I'm coming down with something.* He flipped the hair from his eyes, gulped down some wine. Quickly, he turned the page.

A legend, thought at one time to be nothing more than the imaginative musings of minstrels, was recently proven true, at least in part. With the help of letters found in the long-abandoned ruins of an old English castle, historians have pieced together, on assumption as well as fact, the story of Lord Ereik de Bourgainville, whose estates were under almost constant threat from William Stratton. Power hungry and bloodthirsty, Stratton's sieges of Lord Ereik's villages almost brought the lord's reign to a halt if it had not been for the strength of his military, and the particular efforts of one man: Sir Kori Blackmore.

Dane flinched, his mind whirled, the words danced on the page, and the sudden vertigo almost sent him sprawling to the floor. His stare fixed to that one name. *Sir Kori Blackmore.* He brought the shaking wine bottle to his lips, drank down a quarter of the bottle.

"What fresh hell?" He mumbled.

He looked at the page in the book again. *Sir Kori Blackmore.* The letters that made up the name drew an immediate response; the way the eyes are automatically drawn to any sight of one's own

name. He touched the book to be sure it was nothing more than words printed on paper. And then, Martha was there. She rushed into his mind as if she were trying to relay to him a message. A 17th century knight in England. An old lady in a 21st century book and music store in South Carolina. Her brother—a look-a-like to Dane named Lance who was on Broadway in the 1940's. He knew, somehow he just knew there was a connection here, but a mental barrier prevented him from putting together the pieces of the puzzle. Did any of it really matter? Was there really a puzzle, and what did it have to do with him? *Nothing!* Just his crazy creative imagination. *Like the Mirror Lady*. He had learned long ago that chemical imbalances in the brain could cause a person to see images that did not exist—like people who thought they experienced ghosts—and could create feelings with no rationale. Though his mother had him see numerous psychiatrists when he was young, endure enough brain scans to cause tumors, and try medications that turned him into a zombie, none of it proved conclusive. None of it worked. He was simply—unique.

He returned to his reading. He refused to allow whatever undiagnosed mental illness he suffered from claim his relaxation time.

Before joining the ranks of Lord Ereks' knights, Kori Blackmore was a resident of one of Lord Ereks' villages. Far from being your ordinary villager, Kori Blackmore had the will and obstinate nature normally attributed to the knights of the times, as well as an unusual talent for entertaining.

History was made one fateful day in 1638 when William's men set siege upon the village where Kori Blackmore resided and worked as a blacksmith. In their effort to raid, conquer and pillage, William's men made a grave mistake in the rape and murder of Kori Blackmore's wife, Julianna. Driven by rage and grief, Blackmore left the village and traveled the English countryside. Living by his skills with a sword, handiwork with metals, and prowess for song and story, he saved every coin he could earn, carrying with him the hope that one day he could afford the armor he required, and the determination to prove himself worthy of Lord Ereks' order of knights.

It was three years later that Blackmore finally received his reward when a small army of Stratton's men raided the village

where Blackmore had taken temporary refuge. According to the legend, he hopped atop a black stallion he had recently shod and rode with fury, wearing the crude armor he had made for himself. Alone he dispatched five of the ten of William's men who dared challenge him. The rest of the men, it is said, "fled in fear" as Blackmore chased them away, aided by two other men from the village.

Hence, Blackmore was brought to Lord Ereke, where he was allowed to prove himself worthy of the lord's army; a task he fulfilled quickly, finally being granted the honor of helping Lord Ereke in his fight against Stratton.

Sir Kori Blackmore aided battle plans, fought with the will of hundreds and rode into battle beside Lord Ereke until Stratton's army had been deflated to the point of complete submission. Stratton's reign was finally renounced when his lifeless body hung limp from the end of Sir Kori's own sword in one last bloody battle that marked the end of that opposition.

After that battle, Lord Ereke and his knights settled back for some well-deserved peace of mind. Word of Sir Kori's "bravery and unusual good looks" reached every woman in all the surrounding villages, as well as at court. It is said they came from as far away as London if only to gaze at the knight with the "mass of jet black hair and striking eyes that shone silver like the moon and blue like the sky" Sir Kori, however, was "wed to his work" and never remarried.

Seven years after his induction into knighthood, on the thirtieth day of his birth, Sir Kori mysteriously disappeared. Despite Civil War, a celebration was forthcoming within a village 30 miles west of York, just south of the Dales, and Blackmore was to be one of the honored guests. However, he never arrived. His horse was discovered just outside town, spooked and alone. Did one of Stratton's admirers catch Sir Kori unawares? Did there exist a man or an army of men who were finally able to take down the knight many had dubbed "immortal?" Or did he meet with an unfortunate accident?

What happened to Sir Kori, no one will ever know. But his strong will and bravery shall be remembered throughout time.

The book slipped from Dane's fingers, and if it made a sound when it hit the floor, he wasn't aware. He heard nothing but the

pounding of his own heart. His mind spun with activity and emotion. Absentmindedly, he tugged at a strand of hair. Jet black, long wavy hair. He recalled his mother's words when he was eighteen, finally old enough to understand what the word rape meant.

"The year was 1984," she'd told him. March 29th to be exact. Van Halen, her favorite rock band at the time, was due to play at what was then the Hartford Civic Center and, as a gift, her husband had bought tickets for her and a few friends. To 'make her feel better,' he had stated. For one year to the day they had tried to conceive to no avail.

"That day I had been so upset," she had told her son. "but when your father presented me with those tickets..." Her eyes closed and she released a reminiscent sigh. "The concert was in full swing, but I had to go to the little girl's room. I remember how the thunder of the drums, the boom of bass and heavy rock guitar licks pounded the walls. Even the floor vibrated as I made my way through the crammed and bouncing crowd, through the smog of cigarette and marijuana smoke, and the scent of beer and vodka. Floor seating." She'd released a derisive snort. "How ironic. No one sat at a Van Halen concert. Oh, how different rock and roll concerts were back then, Dane," she'd reminisced. "You'd have loved it." Her gaze had turned to him then and an intuitive grin played on her lips. "No one left the hall, no one, but this was an emergency." She giggled and a blush found her cheeks. "How long could I hold in the beer and Jack Daniels? The marijuana didn't help, not that I had needed to smoke that bone with my friends—and the smell alone...well, ahem. What the hell? There was only one life to live, after all.

"The bathroom wasn't far. I danced my way there on five-inch stiletto heels, and a denim mini skirt—the fashion at the time, you know," she added as if needing now to clarify such seemingly whorish attire. Dane only nodded indifferently. He had already seen much of the rock scene himself, singing and playing in bands, sought after by girls and rarely sleeping in his own bed. He only had to put aside the realization that this was his own mother telling tales of drugs and rock and roll.

"The song Panama was playing. Do you remember that song, Dane?" He nodded acknowledgement but kept quiet. He loved the

heavy rock bands of the 80's, but Van Halen in particular, had been coerced upon him practically from birth. "The ladies room was empty. No wonder—everyone else was inside the hall enjoying the music I was missing. But I could hear it; The reverb of Anthony's bass and Alex's percussion pulsed through the walls. I remember closing my eyes, allowing the buzz to seize my mind, and dancing on the seat." She sniggered uncomfortably. "I swung my hair around—coifed and teased as high as the hairspray would hold it." Again came a laugh as she ran slender finger through her now shorter, thinner hair and raised it high in a mock attempt at an 80's style. Promptly her smile straightened.

"The bathroom was still empty when I came out. I swear it was! I went to the sink to wash up, but my hair had dropped a bit and I couldn't let David Lee Roth see me with flat hair." A mock grin played on her lips. "Aquanet. I swear they gave the stuff out with free samples in the mail. We all used it. I looked into the mirror and..." she paused, her throat jumping with a hard swallow, brows raising as her green eyes became orbs of redolent fear. "He was standing right behind me! I'd only looked away for a moment. I spun on my heels and tried to sound intimidating. 'Who are you? This is the Lady's Room!' He had long sienna hair and strange old style clothing. His eyes were yellow, like a wolf, and he glared at me in a most disturbing fashion. My heart was pounding out of my chest but I put on an air of false bravado. 'Did you hear me? The men's room is next door!' I said. I wasn't really sure if it was real. Maybe I'd gotten some bad weed! But then he stepped toward me, backing me into the sinks, and I could smell him! He smelled of woods and dirt and... and blood!"

Anna glanced away from her son and Dane could see the sparkle of unshed tears in her eyes. Speaking of this event was painful, but he also knew she had held it in long enough. He needed to know where he'd come from—he had plagued her with questions from the moment he'd learned to talk. Now was the time for answers. Anna cleared her throat harshly and continued.

"Wh-what do you want?" I asked. "I don't have any money!"

"And then he reached toward me. I acted out of impulse, lifted the can of Aquanet and sprayed him in the eyes. He let out a yelp of surprise, and covered his face. I spun toward the door, tried to run, but I'd took only a step or two before strong hands grabbed

my arm and yanked me backwards. My heels slipped on the tile floor. The ceiling lights swirled above, I saw sienna hair, yellow eyes and then I was being crushed by the weight of his body.”

Anna paused again. Dane remained silent and still. The pain in her eyes told him how difficult this was to relay to her own son. She drew a difficult breath. “I had no time to comprehend the reality of what was happening as he easily tore away my stockings. I tried to fight back, but his hands seemed to be everywhere; holding my arms, crushing me down. When he...well, he forced himself on me. I screamed, but his hand was on my mouth in an instant. I kicked out, but he would not budge, his body was like solid cement. His force was inhuman. It was excruciating. Like I was being torn apart.”

At this point, Dane wanted to stop her. He knew the conclusion—or at least he *thought* he did. He did not want to hear any more. But she had more to tell, and so he fought to urge to halt her next words.

“As he...well, you know... He roared out and a smile came to his lips.” A shadow of terror crossed over her face. “Dane, he had fangs. Like a vampire!”

Okay. He had not expected that. Perhaps the drugs had been making her see things.

“I was frozen with fear and agony,” Anna continued. “He brought his wrist to his own mouth and *bit down!* The blood flowed freely, warm sticky crimson dripping onto my face. I turned away, but he grasped my cheeks and forced my face back. He pressed his wrist against my mouth and the coppery taste of his blood dripped onto my tongue and down my throat. Nausea roiled in my stomach as I was forced to swallow.”

Now it was Dane’s turn to stare in horror at his mother. He knew he had been conceived by some rather unique means, but his ideas rested more along the lines of artificial insemination or even a test tube. Anything. Not this! Could she have really experienced what she claimed? It all seemed so crazy. But, then who was he to judge—he who had spent his life in the company of a delusional woman who plagued mirrors and seemed to know who he was, what he thought, how he felt. He listened intently now, as his mother finished her tale.

“Finally, he stood, casually retied his linen trousers and wiped

the blood from his mouth. I closed my eyes and wept. When I dared a glance only moments later, he was gone, as swiftly and silently as he had arrived. I don't remember much after that. I was told that I had been found an hour after I left, curled into a ball in the corner, staring blankly with shock, clothing torn, face and hands soaked in blood that was not my own."

Too much strangeness.

Dane pondered once more his mother's tale, told to him 11 years earlier, yet each detail given perfectly to memory. It explained why he looked nothing like his father, but he bore no resemblance to his mother, either.

According to his mother's tale, however, he also didn't look anything like her attacker. He did, however, resemble Lance Keagan and now Sir Kori Blackmore. Never one to let anything go unexplained, this scenario, the bookstore, the history book, all of it only presented more questions than it answered. Strange. Even for Dane's life.

The history book, which lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, held a clue within its words. His mind brought him back to the store. How he had grabbed that very book. Martha. He had not chosen the book by choice, but to keep himself hidden from the inevitable.

But really it had all started with his decision to visit the store in the first place. He had been working hard on the song when an unnatural fatigue fell on him and he needed to take a break. Memory of the recently opened book and music store he had passed the week before trespassed into his mind. He loved delving into the past. Paper books. Old fashioned. It seemed almost cliché in this day and age of electronics, and with his money he could certainly afford the latest and greatest gadgets. Though he owned a laptop computer, he used it only to write in his blog, which Stephan had talked him into keeping—"fans love it," Stephan had mentioned, "And it keeps the band on the map." At first, Dane wasn't interested, but gave in.

He preferred the old way of doing most things, and his predilection had been a never-ending joke with record executives and band members alike—Okay, so the songs he wrote were generally about dragons, knights and castles, he found Lady GaGa anything but a lady, and Dane preferred vinyl albums to CDs

(although he had never seen his own music on a record album), and he hated how drab most 21st century rock bands attired themselves; close cropped hair, blue jeans, ragged tee shirts. They looked as though they had just walked in off the street. Musicians, particularly in the rock genre, should stand out from the crowd onstage. Hair! Costumes! He loved the 80's glam rock, even though he was born in 1984.

Dane's anachronistic outlook and Juilliard education wove through the band's symphonic rock music like an intricate web that had succeeded in shooting them straight to the platinum stars. And not easily either. Wrist-slicing, throat-cutting, kick-in-the-ribs, ball-busting business, that's what it was to make it in the industry. To remain on top required even more slashed and mutilated body parts. And today had been one of those days.

He had worked all morning on the new song Bruce had been harrying him about. Over-tired. That was the explanation. It had to be. He was just—tired. At least, that's what he tried to talk himself into believing, but the coincidences were too strong. The familiarity of names and dates struck his mind as harshly as if a bus had run into him, and the description of Sir Kori Blackmore planted itself in his mind.

Edna had once said to him, in all her wisdom, "Ya ever think people are drawn to a certain era because they actually lived in it?" At the time he'd shrugged it off. His home brimmed with not just one era piece, but many: Medieval, Renaissance, Victorian. Paintings of knights adorned the parlor. A 1940's Broadway poster hung in one of his spare bedrooms.

He was a Broadway star in the 1940's...

Barbara's words crashed into his mind. And there it was again. Sir Kori Blackmore, Lance Keagan. Both had disappeared mysteriously, seven years into their careers. Both were thirty years old. A cold shiver vibrated down his spine. His band had made it to the top seven years before. And his birthday—his thirtieth birthday—was in a little over a month. He would be on tour, in the height of his career. Just like Lance. Just like Sir Kori.

On legs that threatened to collapse, he stood and left the room. With no memory of climbing the stairs, he found himself in his bedroom. As he stepped before the mirror—the largest of only two mirrors in his house—that rested behind his grandmother's antique

bureau, he caught a quick glimpse of his reflection and was suddenly struck with a recollection so deeply buried it couldn't possibly be his. But, then how would he know? How could he know such a thing? Slowly he lowered himself onto the bed and leaned forward onto his elbows. He rubbed his hands over his face. Mumbling to the dog at his feet, he glanced around the large empty room. "I know what happened to Sir Kori Blackmore."

The Perfect Dream

Just a few more sips and he would be dead. She needed to feel his death. Yet her love for him prevented her from greedily taking that last swallow. She paused and licked at her lips. *Ah, the taste of human blood.* In her mouth, on her tongue, warming its way through her body. She drew in a deep breath and raised herself from his throat. The sweet scent of red nectar embraced the odor of human flesh and caused a stirring in her loins.

He lay beneath her in complete submission and when she opened her eyes his dimming blue gaze met hers. Wavy black hair splayed out on the floor beneath his head. He was so beautiful, yet she knew he could not live. She needed his blood, his strength, and his power to fill her. And though he spoke no words, his eyes pleaded for mercy. *Please spare my life. Don't let me die only to rise again and feed your hunger repeatedly for all eternity.*

But that was the entire purpose of his existence. He should feel honored rather than frightened. No, not frightened. He felt no fear. Death had awaited him a very long time. *Sad.* He held great remorse. She saw it, felt it, lived it. He dreamt of an honorable death defending his kingdom. Not a death to feed a world of blood drinkers who understood nothing of human suffering and sacrifice. He was now mere sustenance to aid her strength, to make her the most powerful Wizard of all Worlds, to keep Mikaire the prevalent of all Dimensions.

How could she love him—a mere mortal born only for food, strength and immortality? Yet she had paused, for somewhere within the reaches of her subconscious, guilt nagged at her for taking his life. She shook it away and concentrated on the pulse, weak yet still pounding though his throat. No more waiting, time had come. As the need for ultimate power grew stronger, the urge to take that last drink overwhelmed. His heart would stop and he would be gone—for now. Within the next yearly cycle he would

return again, his blood more powerful, serving her needs yet again. Each year he would be there—forever.

Slowly, she sank her fangs into the soft flesh of his throat...

Meirah woke, crying his name. “Dane!” Her voice echoed from the drab walls of her bedchamber. Sweat soaked her night clothes, her hair stuck in wet wisps to her face, and she shivered uncontrollably. She brought slender fingers to her lips. Small drops of blood rested there and she licked them away—not human blood, but her own. She had bitten her lip.

The dream weighed heavily, pressing down on her like being crushed under the weight of a boulder. Her breath caught in her chest. She had been seeing through Sakkana’s eyes yet she was herself, feeling her own emotions. Tears welled in her eyes. Fear coursed through her veins. And yet, even after all these years, all she had seen, experienced, suffered through, she wanted to know the answer to the ultimate question; what did human blood taste like? She would never know. It was forbidden in her world – Sakkana’s world, where only he could drink from those that resided beyond the Looking Glass.

Meirah hugged her arms around drawn knees. “Dane,” she choked out. Soon it would be time and he would return to her world where she could touch his hair and look into his blue eyes—and time for her yet again to watch him die.

Love's Grasp

December 20, 2014

He remained perfectly still as the chains were wrapped around his body. The metal cooled the heated flesh of his bare chest. All around him echoed a cacophony of screams, bellows and stomping of feet that almost crushed him beneath its weight. The air tightened with the chains and a rush of collective exhilaration and nervousness swirled through his senses. He glanced quickly at the red-faced, muscular man standing beside him, who finished fastening the chains and stepped away.

He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. And then he waited, anxiety pounding in his breast. The air was thick with heat and sweat and smoke, but he'd grown accustomed to it through the years, as with the rest of the ritual. The one thing he could never get used to, however, was the flip-flop in the pit of his stomach that occurred as the platform he stood on slowly lifted into the air, revealing him to the anxiously awaiting crowd that crushed nearer. Starving animals before a feast. He looked straight out, refused to look down, lest the vertigo take him.

How he hated heights.

He listened for the eerie orchestration of strings and organ that marked the beginning of his leisurely descent back to earth. The notes began with a rhythmic resonance that was almost conquered by impatient bellows that quickly turned to a roar of frenzied excitement. As the platform lowered, a muzzy sensation circled Dane's mind and his throat felt as though his stomach had been hoisted up into it.

He held his breath in anticipation.

An amplified voice echoed over the din. "Ladies and Gentlemen. Through the misty storm they come. Battles rage and blood is spilled and tonight you will feel...the rage of the... *Dark*

Myst!”

The crescendo of notes rose with the screams and soon the vast crowd, shrouded in the mist of machine smoke and lighting from the trusses above, came into view. The platform touched the stage simultaneously with a deafening blast of canon fire, blinding light and searing heat from the pyrotechnics.

Dane thrust his arms outward in an ostentatious display of feigned strength and released his long held breath as the chains fell free of his body. As he leaped forward the crowd crushed against the stage, nearly 20,000 screaming fans all at once a serried mass swarming towards him.

Tingles of excitement clawed at his spine, a feeling that never waned with the years. He ran to the front of the stage and grabbed up the microphone as Bruce struck the first hard note on his Strat. The music pounded out its heavy rhythm and the audience's cries warred with its volume. Sharp beams of laser light cut a zigzag through the haze. Dane twirled around and his heart jumped.

Oh what fresh hell!

He was staring at himself!

The stage had been set up like a room in a lover's palace; giant mirrors everywhere—behind, to the sides, even above, stretching as high as the trusses. Due to a severe snow squall the truck carrying an important part of the band's stage set had gone off the road and gotten stuck. No one was injured, but the set had not arrived in time to be set up in the sold-out Target Center. Someone had decided the light show would look better reflected. Dane, however, was aghast. Not only was their stage set designed to coincide with most of their songs, but the effects of the colored lights continuously bouncing from mirror to mirror would inevitably result in the whole band plagued with a throbbing headache by concert's end.

Their manager had to have approved this—someone had to have approved it. No one had told Dane! The mirrors must have been erected last moment. Everyone associated with the band knew how Dane hated mirrors. But now, no matter which direction he turned, he saw himself in his black costume and ragged-edged cloak; which portrayed him as the yin to the band's yang. They were the mist, and he the dark storm.

To keep his attention from the mirrors, Dane fixed his gaze on

the audience and the speckled glow from thousands of cell phone flashes, resembling a sparkling star-filled evening that stretched out before him. But he knew he would eventually have to turn around.

By the third song it became maddening, not able to dance around as he normally would for fear of what might be hidden in those mirrors. But, thankfully, half way through the song he spotted one of the girls he'd met the last time he was in town. At last, something to keep his mind and eyes busy. In the front row she stood, arms raised toward him. The bulldozing horde had her pressed against the stage, long auburn hair fluttering about as she bobbed her head to the beat of the music. He smiled in her direction, despite his sudden dread at remembering the promise he'd made to her the year before. A promise—ashamedly—he had no intention of keeping.

He had never seen her before that night a year ago, so she hadn't been a regular. Conquering new territory was always fun. She'd displayed the looks normally reserved by the group of girls who always seem to know just how to be chosen above others and handed backstage passes. This one, however, had taken a different approach. She had approached him on the floor of his hotel as he made his way to his room. Fortunately he had been alone—a rarity. He had invited her in. Ample breasts and a nice round bottom offset by a perfectly slender waist. Dane knew he would be having a good time that night.

She had wanted too much, however, a commitment he couldn't give. Teasing him and denying him her favors until he'd made the vow. What else was there to do? And so he had said exactly what she wanted to hear. And, as naïve as she was, she had believed him. He couldn't, after all, say no. Not when she lay there in his hotel bed displaying all her luscious charms. But he couldn't keep his promise, either. There were plenty of women in countless towns, women the band's crew knew were his type. Women who would be offered passes just so he could meet them, drink with them, bed them. And there would be more waiting in the next town after that.

Now, a pass with the name of a local radio as sponsor dangled around her neck. So, she had won backstage passes this time. There would be no avoiding her tonight. What would he say to

her? He could not even recall her name. As her fiery glare burned through him, he absentmindedly turned away, catching Bruce's smug grin as he looked from the girl to Dane. He mouthed the words "there she is," as he switched guitars with an assistant for the next set of songs.

Dane smirked, shook his head at his friend, then strutted to the other side of the stage as the next song began—one of the band's trademark tunes that he wrote about a medieval land of lords and knights. He wielded a sword, one of many from his collection, and proceeded to dance around in choreographed mock swordplay as the hired orchestra played their bit.

At this point, his disappointment surged that the integral element of their regular stage set had not arrived. The video wall depiction of a castle and rolling green hills was installed. However, mirrors now replaced the large faux-stone steps that were to lead to the balcony above the stage, giving Dane the appearance of riding atop one of two red-eyed dragons that should, at that moment, be gazing menacingly down at the crowd, smoke, laser and fire effects erupting from the eyes and fanged mouths. Those that came for the show would be fervently disappointed.

During Bruce's brief guitar solo near mid-song, Dane closed his eyes for a moment and raised the sword high, drawing in the deep odor of sweat and heat. Machine-created fog crept along the stage and curled around his feet like a chill mist in a graveyard. The lights were so dim he could scarce see even the front row of the audience as the laser lights sliced through the stadium and across his body like sharp-edged blades.

In accordance with his routine, and without second thought, he twirled around—and was suddenly staring right into one of the tall mirrors that littered the stage. The lights brightened. His craggy-hemmed cloak billowed as he spun from the ghastly reflection of his own sweat-soaked face only to catch the same image in the mirror beside that one. His gut wrenched and he tried to turn away, back to the front of the stage, back to the audience. But he froze as movement caught his eye and when he turned his head, she was there—the "Mirror Lady." His illusion. His own delusion.

Onstage.

As real to him as his own reflection.

No! Not here!

Her thigh-length ginger hair was loose, rather than pulled back in the usual braid. The shining tresses poured over her shoulders like a rushing waterfall and cascaded down a beautiful gown of burgundy velvet that hugged her slim form. The tears in her golden eyes told a tale of sadness that wrenched at his heart, and he felt himself take an involuntary step forward. More familiar to him than Martha or Lance or Sir Kori, the sight of the “Mirror Lady” twisted his gut, a tornado rampaging through him, a tangled enrapture of perplexity and fear, love and pain—as if he had known her for more years than his life was long. And that familiarity drove him somewhere beyond her presence in some glass.

His dilemma with the redhead in the front row disappeared. The girls he’d met in the past or would meet in the future no longer mattered. It was this stranger, this illusion. She alone meant everything—and she scared the hell out of him. But deeper than fear lie an unbearable urge to leap into the mirror and gather her into his arms.

Protective impulses tugged at him relentlessly and he was suddenly frightened not of her but for her. Terror seized his heart, and refused to let go, pounding through him harder than the music that continued to fill the stadium, confusing him profoundly. Passionate emotions thrashed at his brain and his head ached with the need to bring them to the surface. But he couldn’t. A mental barrier walled off the needs screaming for release. Why couldn’t he just go to her; feel for her the love he’d been missing his entire life?

Behind him, the glass’ surface reflected a flurry of activity; lambent light bounced from one mirror to the next, heightening the pain in his head. The small section of audience visible moved and swayed, their images like dancing ghosts in the dark mist of the stadium. Stephan’s long strawberry hair swayed as he bobbed his head up and down while he plucked away at his bass. He hadn’t seen her. At the time Dane didn’t think anyone else saw her, but her form was as solid in the mirror as was his own, as she had been in every mirror throughout his life.

Concentration became impossible. He faltered, his voice cracked and he missed the chorus altogether. Familiar with the

music, the mistake must have been quite obvious to the crowd. But he couldn't turn from that damn mirror.

Dane tried to force his mind back to the song when a searing bolt of pain sliced through his head. The clank of the sword and the microphone sounded loud to his ears, even above the music, as they dropped from his hands and crashed to the stage. Feedback screeched from the monitors and the music stopped. The burden of emotion and conflict pressed him downward and, like Alice, he found himself falling. Down. Down. The spotlights swirled like shooting stars and agony screamed through his shoulder as he hit the hard stage floor.

The fog consumed him.

The stadium went dead silent. Bruce and Stephan rushed towards him. Adrian leapt from behind his drums. Road crew members and strangers circled above. The audience pressed closer to the stage, security guards frantically tried to hold them back. Their lips moved, their hands pounded the stage. He saw them all, yet he heard nothing. And then he was forced into a vacuum of darkness.

The Celebration

“**M**eirah! Why are ye lyin’ in bed wearing your dress, lass?” Somewhere through the deep reverie, Meirah could hear the Western Village brogue of her mother, smell the scent of a dying fire, yet still it took a moment before she came to the full realization that Jirenah had entered the bedchamber. The room had grown cold.

Slowly, she sat and rubbed a hand over her eyes. “Mother. Must I do this?”

The bed sank beneath the older woman’s slender form. A comforting hand caressed Meirah’s hair, combing the tangles through experienced fingers. When her mother spoke at last her voice was a mere whisper. “I understand you’re sorrow, lass. And I know your heart for the mortal, but ye must try to forget—”

“Forget!” Meirah interrupted. “How does one forget twelve years o’ love? I feel naught for Kaeplan.” *I despise him*, she thought, but kept the words to herself.

“I know.” Jirenah’s constant strokes on Meirah’s hair was soothing, but nothing could pacify the pain inside. “But many years ago ye made the vow final...”

“He tricked me!”

“It matters not, Meirah. Ye must earn back the trust ye lost. You’re twenty and six years now. Most your age have been united and bore Youngest Ones many years past!” Her mother’s hand moved to touch her chin, and when Meirah gazed up into the familiar face, she saw a gleam of hope spark in the maternal green eyes. “The union wi’ Kaeplan in four days hence may just alter the course of things.”

Meirah straightened her shoulders. “What d’ye mean?”

Jirenah gave her daughter a sly sideways glance. “I have plans to visit Sakkana after the union.” Meirah perked as her mother rose and paced to the window and back. “I will try and convince him—

and the council—to free ye of your obligation to witness Ritual.”

Meirah sighed. “But, my punishment—”

“Shh, Meirah!” She sighed softly and proceeded to brush a mote of imaginary dirt from the skirt of her beige garment, its color deliberately quelled in order to saliently display Meirah’s celebration attire.

“Once you’re united wi’ Kaeplan, the Ancient One may see differently,” Jirenah stated softly. She placed her hands on Meirah’s shoulders, looked deep into her eyes. “Wi’ your father on the council and the years ye’ve had to endure...” She paused and shook her head, raised herself straight, eyes closing. The pain of watching her daughter’s punishment all these years weighed on her face as much as it did on Meirah’s heart. A wisp of gray hair fell from within the neat bun. Jirenah quickly whisked it back into place. “I can no longer bear witness to your pain. Ye’ve suffered long enough.”

Her mother’s words clenched her heart and squeezed a tear from her eye. For twelve years her mother stood by her side, had always been the one—the only one—to understand Meirah’s plight and pain. For this, Meirah was eternally grateful. She sniffled and wiped at the tear, smeared it on the velvet dress. “But...Dane. He will still die whether I am there to see or no. And o’ that I shall always have knowledge.”

Jirenah moved to the fireplace, grabbed up an iron and proceeded to poke at the embers. She spoke without turning to face her daughter. “You saw him today at the Looking Glass again, did ye not?”

Meirah stood quickly. “I had to!”

“If ye wish to begin the process of gaining Sakkana’s trust, you must cease these visits,” said Jirenah, busying herself now with a bellow to fan the flames back to life.

Meirah lowered her lashes and, despite her intention, a tear watered the velvet in her lap. “I know.” Had she not pledged that to herself? A promise just as easily broken as it had been made.

“And ye must not visit him when he arrives,” said Jirenah, her words like a blow to the gut. Meirah gritted her teeth until her jaw ached. *Not visit him*. But her love drew her in like the inevitable migration of sparoose birds from the northern barriers to the southern, ingrained into her very being. Surely her heart would

leap from her chest and stop beating. She dropped to her knees and wept. “No, Mother. How can I? I need to see—”

Jirenah spun towards her. “Your presence only causes him greater suffering. Ye *must* tend to the business at hand.” She struck fist to palm with each word. Meirah glanced up through watering eyes. Behind her mother’s stern expression was one of serious conviction. “Be united with Kaeplan, as much as it pains ye now, and the punishment cast upon ye shall lift in its own time.

There is naught ye can do for the mortal—”

“*His name is Dane!*” Meirah snapped, standing with a move so swift a human would never have caught it. Immediately she withdrew. “Mother, I am sorry.”

Jirenah’s shoulders dropped in a sigh. “Whatever his name matters not. His death is fated. But you my daughter—Ye’ve paid long enough for your mistake.”

The pain sliced deep, as if to take her entire body. Her head pounded, her stomach twisted, and she hoped her heart would stop beating right there, ceasing this suffering once and for all. Invisible hands weighted her down to the bed. “B-but I can no’ see him while he still lives?” she wept.

“No, Meirah. Do ye wish him more suffering than what he will already endure? Do ye wish him to remember? Your visits only bring on his memories sooner, and ye know what will happen once he remembers it all!”

The lump in her throat threatened to choke her. She swallowed hard. Meirah gazed down at her hands, which she twisted around in her lap. Her mother was correct, of course. She knew this in her heart, but it did not cease the emotional pain that had been her constant companion these past twelve years. She had visited him each year; the visits, however slight, being her only salvation from the accursed existence she led. How could she just cease seeing him once he arrived? Without his presence her life would be like the field without its flowers—void and empty.

She dared not grant release to the tears that burned in her eyes. For her mother's sake...for Dane’s sake, she needed to be strong. She had to start exhibiting maturity and responsibility if the villagers were ever to respect her again.

Finally, Jirenah spoke. "Brush out your hair and clean yourself up. The guests await your arrival as we speak."

Meirah was once again alone as her mother exited the room. Not a mote of desire existed to leave the so lace of her bedchamber and join the council members and their families who had recently arrived for the celebration of her upcoming union. But she could no longer disappoint her mother. Despite the inner emotions dwelling within her, she would be off to the Great Hall to face the others with her head held high. She turned to the reflection in the looking glass on the opposite side of the room, sighed, then slowly walked toward it. Studying her attire, she noticed a few brown smudges of dust on the skirt, but little wear to indicate the dress's age.

Twelve years ago, Jirenah had obtained the gown for the celebration of the news regarding Meirah and Kaeplan's future union. That ceremony had never taken place. After witnessing her beloved mortal's death for the first time, Meirah's depression had consumed her. With a great show of maternal depth, Jirenah had canceled the celebration. Meirah was grateful for the love and guidance, but her true wish lay in the impossibility of joining with Dane, rather than cursed anew as Kaeplan's mate.

How wonderful it would be to see Dane's smile in the sunlight, rather than the dark pain trapped within the azure depths that intensified with each passing year. It was his love that sustained her through it all, a love he had given voice to nigh on seven years now, during the mortal year of 1797, before his death. Theirs was a love that defied time, defied magic, and defied all who opposed it. A love that, despite everything that happened, had grown and blossomed from the day they met—even if he had not at first known it—on that fateful day when a certain knight named Sir Kori Blackmore came into her life...

Christine Church

Mikaire

Twelve Years Last



Mortal Fear 1642

Meirah's Discovery

The surface of the large wooden door was cold and rough against Meirah's ear as she pressed against it. The whispers on the other side were of vital importance and she needed to know the secrets spoken within. There was no need to spy into the tiny crooked keyhole. She had seen her father and Coatier disappear into the room only moments before and the purpose for the reticent meeting was obvious.

"Who has crossed through to fetch a mortal?" asked Coatier, his voice slight, as if disappointed he was not the Committee member chosen for the task.

Meirah released a quiet snort of derision—*Committee Head for the Ritual*. Only males were allowed to be a part of the Committee and it made no sense to her. One day, she thought. One day she would outshine the lads of Mikaire. She would prove that females could also be Head of Committee. Females could also cross to the Mortal Realm and fetch a mortal for Ritual. And why not? She thought. *Are we not as strong and capable of capturing a hideous lowly beast?*

Voices from within drew her attention back to the door. "Member Uropis crossed through just this morn," Meirah's father answered. "Twas the decision of Sakkana this year."

Sakkana. Another male role. Ruler of a Dimension.

Meirah shifted her stance, the stones of the hallway floor cold beneath her bare feet. She pressed her palms against the door. She could hear Coatier pacing within.

"Sakkana! The Ancient One has ne'er before chosen a Member for this. 'Tis a job tasked only to the Head of the Committee. Why did Juren no' choose?" Coatier asked.

There came a slight pause, before her father replied, "Sakkana suspects Juren of possible treason and until such time as he is

proven innocent, Sakkana shall make the decision. Juren, in the meantime, has been given leave o' his duties."

"What form o' treason? What if he is proven guilty?"

There was silence then. A long stretch of it. Meirah felt impatience tugging at her and she wished only to go outside. The castle was cold and damp. Outside in the sunshine she could hunt, feed and play games. But, she needed to know...

A sigh. Then, Coatier spoke. "This task is important and no' deserving o' just anyone." His words were quick. "If Juren is executed for treason..." he paused again. "Then Sakkana shall choose *you* as Committee Head?"

"Aye," answered her father with pride.

Meirah, however, felt wrought with disappointment. She pulled back from the door. The news of her father's possible induction as Head of the Committee pleased her, but told her naught of that which she longed to know. He was not the one chosen to cross the Main Looking Glass this year and the hopes she'd carried of finally seeing a human for the first time waned with the news.

She would one day see a mortal. One day she, Meirah, would be chosen to cross into the Mortal Realm and retrieve a strong human. *She* would be responsible for the life of their world. There was nothing more important, no task more deserving, and the one who brought back the mortal that Sakkana required was celebrated throughout the year. But, never a female. This would one day have to change.

A new plan, however, would need to be utilized. All had failed in the past, but if only she knew the exact day Uropis would bring in the mortal, she could take a ride into the Red Dust Mountains, a "picnic" of which no one would be aware. Then, perhaps she could be conveniently within sight of the human as it was brought into Mikaire.

Grateful her father had been too distracted to sense her presence, Meirah turned and padded down the long hall to the west wing. She passed quickly by the torches, their flames snuffed for the daylight hours, and ran a hand along the tapestries that lined the hallway walls. Once well away from earshot or probability of detection, she picked up her step, merry footfalls echoing through the drab castle as she skipped down the winding stair. On the first

floor she paused to slip a pair of dexter-hide boots onto her feet before attempting escape through the side door.

Jirenah was somewhere nearby—more than likely on the grounds, carefully tending her flowers or giving the servants their duties—and Meirah wished not to be noticed. She peered cautiously out the door, looking left, then right, releasing mental feelers around the immediate area until she was sure neither her mother nor the servants were in position to sense her whereabouts. Then she stole silently out.

The warmth of winter penetrated the fibers of her tight blue tunic and breeches, warming her skin, while the sunlight caressed her face. The air held the sweet perfume of blooming flowers, their identity unfamiliar to her, and Meirah closed her eyes for a moment, breathing its scent as she walked to the edge of the Northern Forest Barrier. Turning full-circle, she scanned the endless expanse of lawn that surrounded her family's castle. The flowers that clothed the property created an interminable sea of colors all around her, broken only by the azure of the sky that touched them at the horizon.

Oceans appeared blue to the sight, she'd once heard. How wonderful would it be to gaze upon that ocean in the Mortal Dimension—an ocean, Meirah imagined, that must reflect the beautiful color of the sky until one could not discern where the water ended and the horizon began. But she could not be sure, for the ocean was a marvel only mortals had the great fortune to behold. Unfortunately, no barrier existed within Mikaire that would lead one to a body of water as gigantic as that of the ocean, she had heard. Mikairian barriers skipped from one land to another and the only water of any depth or size was the Lake Barrier. She would visit this ocean in the mortal realm, she convinced herself, one day when she was chosen!

Meirah smiled at the thought before turning and crossing the barrier, materializing on its other side into a forest as vast and green as the sea of colorful flowers had been plentiful. As she strolled along the dirt path, hunger, like the great dragons of human legend, breathed fire through her insides.

She halted, gazing first at the winding path to the Northern Village Barrier before her, then to the forest, which stood dense on either side. A sigh escaped her lips as her stomach screamed for

satisfaction. The village would have to wait a few more moments. Without repast she would soon feel too weak to seek the information she desired.

She followed the leaf trail into a dense location where she could hide within a thicket. Silent. Undetectable. Listening to the forest around her, she waited, acute senses locked to the air for any scent of an animal. The wind sang softly through the trees, a pici bug buzzed by her ear, a leaf floated to the ground beside her and rested with a muffled tick on a stone.

Finally, she perked. She could smell the redolent blood coursing through its veins. A strange scent that tickled her senses and heightened the hunger. But she could not define the animal. The rustle of shrubs around her indicated that it neared and Meirah tensed, readying herself to spring. But, just as she was about to leap forward, the massive antlers of a dexter rose up from beyond the brush. Meirah gasped, paused. She had not expected the large animal to be the first in sight.

One should never take an animal larger than oneself, her mother had warned. But Meirah's hunger overrode the warning. No other creature would be in the vicinity, as the dexter's presence often scattered smaller critters. Boldly she leapt.

The dexter bolted, sensing her presence even before she cleared the thicket. The animal moved swiftly as it parted brush with its monstrous size and bounded easily over bushes and fallen trees. But Meirah's youthful strength gave her advantage and she closed the gap between them within seconds.

For a moment, she kept pace with the animal. What gaiety to sprint beside such a monstrous beast. But, when her stomach reminded her once more of her reason for chasing this impossible animal, Meirah bound toward a massive tree, using it as a spring board and onto the animal's back.

The dexter jeered to the right, desperate to lose this sudden intruder. Its quick parry caused her to slip to one side. She encircled its colossal neck with her arms and swung her legs over its back.

Determination and hunger coalesced, forcing her to tighten her grip, as the animal thrashed and bucked to remove the threat from its back. Meirah squeezed her legs tightly around the beast's sides then reached her head forward to its throat. But the animal threw

another kick and she was nearly thrown once again.

With a bold act of reserve strength, Meirah righted herself and laughed. The thrill was like none she had felt before. The tickle of the wind through her long braided hair and the feathery brush of leaves against her arms.

When the scenery around her changed abruptly, Meirah started and almost slipped from the animal's back. In her glee, she had not realized how close they were to the Moor Barrier. The dexter's strides slowed as its large hooves sunk into the softened ground, giving Meirah time to remember the hunger that pounded within her. With one quick motion, which was almost thwarted when the beast stumbled, she sank her small fangs into the animal's throat. The dexter went down. Not from her small bite, but from the slick marsh grasses. The world spun as Meirah hurdled from the animal's back into the marsh. The instant her body came to rest, she leapt to her feet and trudged through the heath to the animal as it struggled to right itself. Her teeth were once again buried into its throat before it could get its leg.

In a spiral of intoxicating ecstasy, which circled her mind and carried her beyond the moor, Meirah drank from the wounds until her hunger was sated. The blood tasted sweet like none she had drunk before and, inwardly, she laughed at her mother's warning. The vibration of the animal's life force coursed through her, its rapid heartbeat drumming into her awareness. But, when the drum's rhythm began to slow, Meirah knew she must stop. The gratifying experience had to end before it was too late. Only Sakkana was allowed to release a being from its life. Meirah robbed the animal of a few more drops before lifting herself from its limp slumbering form, now half buried in yielding mud. She walked slowly away, knowing the beast would soon awaken and be most displeased with its current situation. Her head swam with joy, not only from the feeding, but the knowledge that she had taken such a beast in the first place. In all her fourteen years she had never attempted such a hunt, always heeding the words of her mother to take only smaller animals like emmers and tobits. This new conquest caused her great pleasure and made her feel more like an Older One than the Young One as others saw her.

Meirah gasped. Oh my! She had forgotten! The hearty feeding so enraptured her mind that thoughts of anything else had faded

into the mists. An attempt to wipe the soil and grime from her breeches and tunic only smudged them further, so she gave in. No matter, she thought. The villagers were accustomed to seeing her with soiled attire, as the moor was a popular location for games like Xulis 20, of which she was, at one time, one of the best players. No more, she realized happily. Xulis 20 was a game for Young Ones and she no longer belonged to that category. Wait until Kaeplan heard of this!

She picked up a jog but then halted and looked about. The moor stretched from horizon to horizon and, in her ecstasy, she had lost track of how far she was from the barrier to the forest. If she stumbled within Sakkana's Kingdom, even accidentally, during preparation for Ritual, his army may think she wished the Ancient One ill will and imprison her. Taking in a deep breath, the rancid odor of the moor playing in her nostrils, Meirah moved carefully in the direction the dexter had come. Following broken flowers and hoof prints visible in the mud, she made her way slowly back from whence they had come.

Soon the Northern Forest Barrier once again sprung up around her and Meirah released her breath in a relieved sigh. She skipped around trees, hopped over bushes, softly singing as she headed back to the path she had recently traveled.

The moment she crossed the Northern Village Barrier, a bustle of activity surrounded her. Remaining within hearing range of anyone speaking of the mortal was vital for her success, so Meirah passed the throngs of villagers slowly as they rambled along, going about their daily business.

Her sensitive ears picked up the sound of many voices, but the serried tones made it difficult to distinguish one word from another. A merchant loudly announced the new season's attire, attempting to draw barterers to his shop. A woman cradled her screaming Youngest One. Lovers whispered of their illicit affair from behind one of the clothier shops. Most of the voices came to her in the form of mumbling whispers, but the few pieces of conversation she picked up told her nothing she did not already know. It could be a day or so before Uropis returned with the mortal and no one, not even Sakkana, knew who that chosen mortal was as of yet.

“Meirah!” She spun at the sound of her name to find Kaeplan,

the night Cell-Watcher's son, rushing in her direction. The sunlight bounced from his red hair, creating the effect of fire streaming around him and about his shoulders. She moaned and rolled her eyes as he bounded up to her and gently took her by the arm. With an exasperated sigh, she shrugged him away.

His gaze scanned the stains on her clothing. "Ya've been to the Moor to play Xulis 20?" Kaeplan asked with his usual boyish enthusiasm.

Meirah squared her shoulders. "Nay, I have no need for such games any longer." Kaeplan merely stared at her blankly. Meirah raised her brows and placed both hands on her hips. "I have recently taken a dexter as my own," she stated with a smug grin.

Kaeplan tilted his head and raised a red brow. "A dexter? Nay! Can no' be possible. How did ya catch it? What was it like? Did the taste satisfy?"

His barrage of questions annoyed her, as did his Northern accent—generally, she never noticed it. She merely shrugged. "Twas like trodding the skies above," Meirah recalled. "But..." she threw a cautious gaze his way, "...you must promise no' to inform my parents o' this." He'd always kept his promises in the past, hope prayed he would continue the tradition.

Kaeplan gave a noncommittal shrug. "Of course. Have ya heard that Uropis crossed the Lookin' Glass?" asked Kaeplan, as if he had not heard her reply about the dexter. *Jealous!*

She snorted. "O' course! Who do ye think I am after all?"

She straightened then and looked into his eyes. If the truth was there, she would know. "Kaeplan, you shall have this knowledge before I. Has Uropis returned yet with the mortal.. when is he to return?"

"I know not. But I hear Sakkana chose Uropis and Juren will be brought ta council on charges of possible treason."

Meirah dropped her shoulders. "This I already know. Excuse me, Kaeplan. I have business to attend." She walked away and left him standing bereft on the path.

No longer did she have time for games and young boys like Kaeplan. Now that she had come into her fourteenth year perhaps the Older Ones would allow her to witness Ritual, which precedes the annual Sacrifice. Oh, but she dared not hope, for her parents kept her tightly bound by their rules during Ritual, always claiming

she was too young to view the hideous mortals. Hmmph. One day...! But not even Kaeplan had seen a human—and his father tended the Prison where the mortal was brought and kept during Ritual and until the day of Sacrifice.

But Meirah was determined. She had heard so much about them, the human creatures who ruled the Mortal Dimension. However, she wished to see for herself if they truly were as revolting as rumored. And to taste one's blood must surely be spectacular, though even the mere thought of that was forbidden. Only Sakkana was allowed the pleasure of drinking mortal blood.

Meirah spent a good part of the day in the village, hoping to gain knowledge that no one seemed to possess. It was obvious all Mikairians would have to await Uropis' return. Disappointment coursed through her as she started on the road towards the barrier out of the village. She would go home, steal herself quietly back into the castle. Pity she could not share with them her exuberance over the dexter, but that would only spawn their anger. And of their wrath she did not wish to consider. They made firm their rule that she was not to go there seeking news of the sacrificial event. They knew well her curious nature, "more befitting a lad than a maiden," said they, and tried to discourage it. But their rules had not stopped her in the past, and would not now. A human she would witness, and this was the year!

As she stepped forward, ready to cross the Northern Forest Barrier, a great roar of commotion hailed her back. Down the road, Younger, Young, Old and even Oldest Ones rushed about, frantic. She halted an Old One, grasping his arm in an act of sheer audacity, and spoke quickly. "Tell me, Old One, what is the commotion?"

He jerked his arm free and looked with disdain into her eyes. "Thou art a foolish Young One to seize me in such a manner," he snapped. "But if the knowledge shall enlighten thee ..." He smiled, baring impressive fangs. "'Tis rumored a mortal, silvery and malformed—" he waved his arms about as he spoke, "—and riding atop a strange beast, has spied the Main Looking Glass from the Mortal Realm Dimension and may come through—*on its own.*" With that he rambled off, climbing into a crowded village wagon led by two juspettes that would take him down the dusty road beyond the Red Dust Mountain Barrier.

What luck had befallen her! If she had taken that step through the Barrier... Ah, but she had not, and now—This was all too good. She would see a human, see Ritual perhaps. Sacrifice was performed within Sakkana's private chamber and no one but his guards witnessed that. But the human's body, she had heard, was set out in celebration on Sakkana's Grounds.

With a whoop of glee, Meirah hopped into the back of the last wagon and settled between two Older Ones who gave nary a glance in her direction. Imagine, she thought, a mortal human had come upon the Main Looking Glass and might actually step through into her world. She had been too excited by the news to even ask about the "strange beast" or, for that matter, what the Old One meant by "silvery and malformed" when describing the human. But it mattered not. Her dreams were about to be answered.