

CHAPTER ONE

“Arielle,” purred the rasping, sensual voice. “Come to me...”

Like one possessed, Arielle Blaylock tossed and turned in her massive four poster bed carved with lion’s feet. In Arielle’s vision, she wasn’t trapped; she was fleet footed, her twisted leg strong and nimble. She had perfect night vision, the stygian darkness like day to her luminous gaze. Here, perhaps brambles slithered after her, snakelike, to trap her, but nothing frightened her. She was invincible...

...and truly happy only in this strange netherworld, caught between two mystical beings, both ever out of reach. Both tempted her to a strength of limb and will beyond her in the real world people always told her to face. Why should she? She detested cold reality as much as she despised her weak earthly form.

Only in dreams could she be free.

Only in dreams, could she find *him*, the one the gods decreed would be her consort. But which of them was destined to be her lover? The one of the night? Or the one of the light?

There, at the end of a tunnel, bathed in a luminescent glow, she saw the one of brightness. He was always turned away, his broad back naked, his loins covered in an Egyptian style sarong. He wore a headdress carved like a flowing lion’s mane, his burnished skin almost the same muted glow of the mask, as if inside and outside he were richly endowed with the royal metal of the Egyptian pharaohs and the warrior gods they worshiped.

“Look at me,” she pleaded in her vision. “Let me see your face.”

As he began to turn, she sensed the power in him, yet the gentleness, too. She reached out her arms, longing for that first glimpse of his face, but now the light was so bright she couldn’t distinguish his features against the glare. She felt his utter stillness, however, and his repressed wild need. As if it were not her he distrusted, but himself. Arielle ran faster to bridge the gap, but now her feet seemed to move in molasses, stuck in place.

Why could she never reach him? Or distinguish his face?

Standing over the bed, watching Arielle’s bad leg moving as easily as the good one, were two people. The man had a bearing that came naturally only to the titled and the wealthy, yet he wore every father’s grimace of despair for his only child. He tried to soothe Arielle’s brow with a damp cloth, encouraging her to return to him with a hummed lullaby, as if hoping some atavistic part of her tormented mind would follow the childhood beacon back to him.

Instead, she tore the cloth away, arms outstretched, but not to either her father Rupert Blaylock, the Earl of Darby, or the woman he’d brought to cure her. Arielle’s deep blue eyes were open now, yet glowing amber in the half light, unseeing and unaware of anything but her inner journey.

Beside the earl stood world famous investigator of psychic phenomena, Shelly Holmes, detective nonpareil. In contrast to the earl’s overwrought emotional state, she displayed only dispassionate appraisal. She made no conclusions, and formed no judgment, moral or otherwise.

Shelly Holmes merely observed, seeing things other people missed.

Her keen gray eyes moved from the girl, to the windows barred from the outside, and covered with wooden panels nailed in place on the inside. Even the gas fireplace had been blocked with a giant metal screen it would take Atlas himself to move. This luxurious room was more secure than any of the fortress keeps Shelly had seen, but by all accounts the precautions

were futile. Even as she watched, tiny scratch marks began to appear on Arielle's shapely arms one by one, as if drawn by a talon both playful and cruel.

A talon of neither form nor substance yet it left a very tangible mark.

Could it be the same talon that had slashed throats and ripped open the chests of three women in various parts of London? The motive, so far, was mysterious even to Scotland Yard's renowned detectives. There seemed to be no link whatever between the victims: a baker's daughter, a countess, and a preacher's wife.

And now a frail, virginal girl bore the same marks, though this assault seemed to be just beginning.

The earl grasped his daughter's shoulders, shaking her slightly in an effort to bring her back to him, but he withdrew his hands with a gasp of horror. Deeper scratches had appeared under his hands while he held her, dotted now with spots of blood.

He stared at his own reddened palms and then whirled on Shelly. "What sorcery is this? Do something, woman! I'm paying you a fortune to bring her whole back to me."

Shelly gave him a cool glance. "I'd remind you, my dear sir, that I agreed to review your case. I have not yet agreed to the stipend."

She looked back at the girl, knowing, despite her leveler, that she'd already decided to take the case. Arielle's strange behavior was the most persuasive evidence Shelly had ever beheld of astral projection, the ancient art of wizards and gods that allowed their spirit to travel where it willed even while their body remained imprisoned. A skill Merlin himself was rumored to excel at, though by all recounts, its origin began long before Merlin--on the desert plains of ancient Egypt.

Even as Shelly watched more scratches appear on Arielle's delicate shoulder, she felt a twinge of envy amid her concern. She had supernatural powers aplenty of her own but astral projection...what a skill to have. Even if it manifested itself as a curse. Shelly knew something of the blessings curses could sometimes offer, and she suspected, even without yet exchanging a word with Arielle, that the girl's experience was similar.

Despite her wounds, Arielle seemed more enraptured than tortured.

Shelly tested Arielle's temperature with the back of her hand. She'd expected the skin to be burning hot. Instead, Arielle was cool, as if the torment that marked her body and wracked her mind did not overstress her fragile constitution. It almost seemed as though this horrific seizure that suspended her spirit between real and twilight worlds were somehow normal.

As if it were her destiny and her birth right.

Balderdash, Shelly groused to herself.

Shelly had never believed in the concept of destiny, for if one were merely a puppet on a string dancing at the behest of some larger force, then the mores guiding Shelly's life were pointless. From the time she reached her precocious teens, Shelly had learned that only betterment of self accomplished the laudable goal of betterment of society. These worthy ends were attained not by the maudlin sentimentality of do-gooders, or even by the guilt of the repentant. No, the unerring pursuit of truth, and justice, and the fair society they promised could be accomplished only by that great leveling power that bridged the gap between kings and peasants: logic. Its application had shaped not only Shelly Holmes, but those she touched and saved by her use of it.

Never, so it seemed, had she needed that impartiality more than now. She, too, was moved by the increasing mutilation she seemed powerless to stop. Seizing for inspiration, Shelly

looked around. There must be something in the surroundings that fed the girl's ailment.

One thing was immediately apparent: Arielle seemed obsessed with cats.

Figurines of every type of feline imaginable lined the shelves on the wall. A cat drawing done by a juvenile hand was framed and displayed opposite the bed. And even the pillow on the plush Turkish divan next to the fireplace was the needlepoint of a lioness with her head trustingly resting on the neck of an enormous male lion with a flowing black mane. The bed also bore a family crest in the headboard: a lioness rampant, a dove perched on her outstretched claw.

"The crest...is that your own?" Shelly queried of the earl.

"What? Oh, the bed. No, it's one her mother's grandfather had made up. It's not in the Domesday book, I can tell you that. Miss Holmes..."

When the earl's shoulders began to shake as the dotted scratches deepened, and his voice broke, Shelly took pity on him. "I accept. Now answer my questions quickly. First, who named the child?"

He gave her a strange look. "What possible bearing...oh very well, don't scowl at me. Her mother. It was a family name she was fond of."

"Do you have her picture?"

He went to the mantel above the fireplace and brought back the daguerreotype of a lovely woman who had Arielle's deep blue eyes, luminescent beauty, and black hair. She wore the same strange amulet now around the girl's neck. Shelly looked between the picture and Arielle's necklace to be sure, but the amulet looked the same, though its golden luster had faded a bit over the years. Shelly knew the central embossed image of Bast, the cat goddess, was of Egyptian origin. Obviously a precious family heirloom, also obviously passed down from mother to daughter. And since Arielle meant, 'lioness of god' and the child had a fixation on cats, it was a reasoned guess at this point, but it seemed likely that Arielle's ailment had been handed down from her own mother.

Shelly handed the picture back. "How did the countess die?"

He turned the picture face forward into the wall and said through his teeth, "Suicide."

"Was she of English birth?"

"Her mother was Egyptian. Her father was English."

"Her given name?"

"Isis." His voice had grown increasingly curt, as if he wondered how such stupid parlor room politesse could save his daughter from being marked for life. He hurried back to Arielle's bedside, watching a deeper scratch form, this time on the back of her hand, before running his hands through his thick hair as if he actually wanted to tear it out rather than stand here helpless.

Arielle was unaware of his anguish or Shelly's keen observation. In her dream, as the light was extinguished, at first Arielle froze, her heartbeat making her thin night rail flutter on her full bosom. She was half eager, half afraid, for she knew the other came, bringing darkness with him. He was not so kind, but fascinating, withal.

Sharp claws raked through her night rail into her flesh, not enough to wound, just enough to hold her and drag her back into the darkness. At first she struggled and tried to escape, but as a teasing claw trailed over her, goose bumps appeared on her skin. The pain was pleasure, the scratch a mark of honor.

For this she was born.

To be strong, and immortal, and one with the lion god, warrior king and protector of the realm. Arielle reached out to him in the utter darkness, wondering if he were the one after all,

rather than the being of bright bold beauty.

Perhaps in this world, too, as was her fate in the earthly vale, she was meant to remain in shadows. As she debated, feeling torn between the anguished growl coming from a distance and the pleased purr of the being holding her, her hands were teasingly caught by great extended claws, still half sheathed.

See, he didn't hurt her. Not even when he lifted her hands to her mouth. "Taste," rasped a deep, magnetic voice as he forced her to lick her own wounds.

She tasted, wondering how her own blood could be so sweet.

"Drink. Taste the essence that belongs to me, blood of my blood."

Arielle felt the heat of him, the indomitable strength of him. The sharp scent of his arousal twisted her face into a grimace of response. Her memory of the other, even his anguished growl growing ever more far away, faded as she lapped her own blood.

As she watched the girl, a dozen more questions formed on Shelly's tongue. When she saw Arielle's face twist into a grimace uncannily like that of the tigress she'd once seen mating, Shelly's blood chilled. Then Arielle, her eyes still glazed and unseeing, lifted her own hand and licked the blood away with a daintily curled tongue, like a cat. Her nipples hardened under the thin night rail.

And she purred.

The earl turned a ghastly puce and backed a step, but Shelly followed her instincts and did the only logical thing— she jerked the amulet off the girl's neck, strode to the door, flung it wide and tossed the amulet over the stair railing. Then she slammed the door shut again.

Immediately, Arielle went very still. Her feet stopped moving. One more barely visible scratch appeared as they watched, this one on her flawless bosom, but then it stopped. That faint sense of menace in the room receded, and the gas lamps sputtered and flared more brightly.

They both waited, breath held, but they shared a sigh of mutual relief as slowly, Arielle returned to herself, her eyes blinking back to awareness. Shelly noted that the eerie amber glow was also gone, leaving her eyes wounded pools of bottomless blue despair.

Bewildered, Arielle looked between her father and the tall, rather ugly woman with a strong jaw and unrelenting gray eyes. "Papa, what is wrong..." She gasped as she saw the marks on her arms and hands. "Oh no, not again!"

The earl took his daughter into his arms. Above her head, his eyes met Shelly's. "Thank you," he said softly. "I'll have it destroyed immediately."

But to his apparent confusion, Shelly shook her head emphatically. "I must have it to investigate, but I'll keep it under lock and key. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm weary from my journey." Nodding at father and daughter, Shelly quit the room.

"Who is that woman?" she heard Arielle ask as she closed the door.

Downstairs, she picked up the amulet and turned it from side to side. There were hieroglyphs on the back, but of the five languages she spoke fluently, none included ancient Egyptian. She'd have to have help. She was also not terribly pleased with the earl, for she suspected there was much he wasn't telling her.

Including the fact that he must have seen similar behavior before. From his own wife. Before she killed herself. There had been...recognition in his horrified gaze as he backed away from Arielle's bed as she licked her own blood.

When the butler approached to show her to her room, Shelly pocketed the amulet and carried her own baggage over his horrified protests.

The next morning, after breakfast, Shelly had a private meeting with the earl in his study to discuss Arielle's affliction. At first the earl was resistant to the idea that his daughter had some mystical ailment that made her exhibit cat-like tendencies, but when Shelly stated, "She has the strongest case of astral projection I've ever witnessed," the earl sagged back in his chair and bowed his head.

"How would you propose to combat it and bring her back to me?"

"How often does she socialize with others her age?"

"Almost never. I believe she attended a friend's coming out party some..." he calculated mentally and then added with horror, "by Jove it's near two years ago now."

"The best way to make her cling to her humanity is by exercising it. Are there any balls or teas she can attend where some of her friends might be present?"

"I fear since the accident in which she hurt her leg a few years back that she's let all her friendships lapse."

"Well," Shelly rose decisively. "She's not changing that by sitting alone in her room, prey to nightmares. I'd strongly suggest that you speak with her and wheedle her into socializing, preferably some type of outing in which she can enjoy herself and be around others her age."

The earl nodded his agreement.

So it was that a few nights later, Arielle descended from their best carriage on her father's arm. Wheedling was not a word she would have used to describe her father's tactics in getting her here, standing before one of the grandest mansions in London on one of the grandest streets, dressed in the new gown he'd insisted on purchasing for her. He'd insisted she'd want to look her best on this, her first ball since her own coming out some years back.

She swallowed as she looked up at the brightly lit facade, mullioned windows blazing and posh guests entering the colonaded exterior in a constant stream. "Father, I feel ill," she whispered, trying to turn back to the carriage, but it had already been driven to the back by the efficient lackeys in uniform who were organizing traffic.

“Nonsense. You’re just nervous. Come, Arielle. This will be fun if you let it be, or torture if you agonize over every step.”

“But how can I dance with my limp?”

“No one will notice it but you. Now quit complaining and have fun.”

She had to smile at his scowl. “You’re ordering me to have fun?”

He laughed and squeezed her arm affectionately. “Only if you don’t cooperate.”

The beautiful ballroom was packed with beautiful people, but even when a few smiled and nodded, she was too tongue tied to do more than nod uncomfortably back. The slight unevenness in her gait felt like a mortal sin to her, akin to a scarlet A painted on her chest, so different did she feel to these other simpering misses.

For the first hour, she did try, truly she did, to enjoy herself and mingle as she partook of the watery punch and tiny sandwiches, but she felt so small and insignificant beneath the grand ballroom ceiling. It was gilded and mirrored, and gas lights blazed everywhere. Most of the other young people seemed equally awe struck, and as tongue tied, so she finally gave up idle conversation.

When the orchestra struck up a country dance, she walked with as much dignity as she could, limp notwithstanding, to the sidelines where she vowed she’d take up residence until her father returned from the cigar room. Then she’d insist they’d leave.

She’d let him coerce her into leaving her comfortable solitude, but she not only was not enjoying herself, she was getting irritated that he’d subjected her to this farce ‘for her own good.’ Where was the good in feeling worse even than a wallflower? In this company, she was more a weed buried in prickly thorns! Even before her accident, she’d not had the proper constitution for a simpering miss on the marriage mart. Indeed, against her father’s wishes she’d insisted on a dress in blue when virginal white was the norm, and every word out of her mouth seemed as awkward as her gait.

She could only twist her kerchief between her gloved fingers and scowl toward the parquet floor, wondering what was taking her father so long. He was deliberately lingering, hoping she’d mingle and make new friends. Right-o.

Shiny, large evening slippers appeared in her field of vision. She followed them up long, lithe legs to a superfine cutaway coat and white vest. Higher still to a chiseled jaw and...her heart flip flopped. His features were disguised by the bright lights behind his head, his countenance illuminated by a nimbus of light that added to, rather than detracted from, the glory of his spun golden hair.

Just like her dream, a man she could see in gorgeous detail, but for his face. Except in this case he was properly clothed, though it was so easy to picture his perfect form in nothing but a sarong, fit for a god on an Egyptian relief.

The dream come true spoke.

“Why are you scowling? Should I fear for my life or offer to save yours?” His voice was equally pleasant, mellifluous with an intriguing undercurrent of an accent she could not place.

She blushed and would have risen regally to her feet if she hadn’t been certain he’d still tower above her. From a place she didn’t know she had came a pert retort. “Most gentlemen on first acquaintance introduce themselves before they take it upon themselves to be guardian of my person.”

“Pity, that. It’s such an enticing person. But if you insist.” He bowed deeply. “Luke Simball, your most abject servant.” He leaned close so only she could hear, “But only until I can work my way up to white knight. How am I doing so far?”

Based on the goggling stares of the other wallflowers around her, he was doing quite well indeed. Since some of these girls had given her cuts direct at her own coming out ball, she would not have been human if she hadn't enjoyed the brief glow of feeling so desirable. But when his gaze fell upon the dance card dangling from her wrist, she put her hand behind her so he couldn't see that she had not a single entry.

"Arielle Blaylock," he read from the top of the card before she whisked it away. "Arielle. Lioness of God. Charming name. May I have this dance, Miss Blaylock?"

She hesitated. "I do not dance. Normally." She rose and unconsciously rubbed her wounded leg.

"Then it's a good thing neither of us are normal this evening. It is far too fine a night for such restrictions, anyway." He offered a regal hand to her.

She could finally see his face and this time, when her heart flip flopped, it did so not from recollection of a dream but from tangible reality. His eyes were the exact sun-dappled green of her favorite isolated pond on her father's estate, and his skin was burnished almost golden. On second glance, he resembled even more a gilded god than on first. In short, he was gorgeous. And he was flirting with *her*.

Accepting his invitation, she put her hand in his and let him lead her to the middle of the floor. They were in position between staring couples before she realized the graceful music now beginning was a waltz. She froze, one hand on his broad shoulder, the other in his warm clasp.

The golden face smiled down at her, reckless, daring, and so handsome she knew most of the stares were directed at him. "Afraid?"

She lifted her chin. "Merely wondering how well you lead."

His gaze dropped suggestively to her well covered but rather agitated bosom. His smile deepened as he said, "Shall we find out?"

His appreciative laugh purred above her flushed cheeks, and then he swept her away into the dance. At first she was self conscious about her leg, but he was quickly attuned to her rhythm and disguised the slight halt of her limp in the way he dipped her slightly backward when their movements put weight on her damaged leg. Indeed, the next time she glanced at the couples around them, she realized they now stared at each of them equally.

She even heard a muttered, "What a handsome couple they make. Night and day. Bright and dark."

Emboldened, she forgot about her infirmity, forgot even that she detested socializing. For the first time since her accident, she knew only the joy of losing all her troubles to gaiety and the warm touch of a handsome man.

Some ten minutes later, her father found his sullen, unsocial daughter dancing so well with a golden-haired stranger that most of the other couples had slowed to watch them. He stood stunned, a cup of punch halfway to his mouth, as Arielle was not only dancing, she was dancing a *waltz* with a total stranger. He held her far too close for a father's comfort.

He was about to weave forward through the dancers, be hanged to the stares, when a vaguely familiar voice said at his elbow, "Would you like me to cut in?"

The Earl of Darby had to look up at the man, and that alone was a rare experience for him as he was rather tall himself. But this vaguely familiar young man in a somber black suit was much taller, lean and lithe. When he moved, his feet didn't make a sound on the hard parquet floor. The earl looked down, thinking the music merely covered the sound of his hard soled shoes, but no, when the young man moved to face him fully during a lull, the earl still heard no

scrape of heel.

Somewhat disconcerted, and wondering why he looked familiar, the earl answered, “Do you know my daughter, sir?”

“No. Not personally. But I have heard you speak of her.” He inclined his shining black head, his strange golden brown eyes as somber as his dress. “We attend the same club.”

“Ah, yes!” They attended in totally different circles but at least that explained why the chap was so familiar. Name started with an S...Something Biblical.

“Seth Taub at your service.” Seth bowed slightly. “I shall be more than happy to intercede and lead your daughter in a much more proper dance.”

“Would you? I wanted her to have fun. But not quite that much fun.” The earl turned to glare back at the floor where the blond man was whirling his daughter around so fast to the lively beat that her hair was coming loose of its pins.

He watched Seth wend his way through the dancers, apparently startling them also with his soundless stride, for in several cases he had to dodge aside to miss a collision. As the waltz ended with a gay crescendo, he was standing beside the couple that made, even the earl had to admit, a pleasing duo. His daughter was small and dark, and the man who held her was tall and golden. It almost seemed as if, and the earl was not fanciful, they completed one another, night and day, bright and dark, both needing the other to rule the sway of time...

The earl cleared his throat, wondering if he was dizzy from cigar smoke. He was sounding like his deceased wife, poor insane woman that she'd been. And no matter what it took, how much money it cost paying Miss Holmes or others like her—well, other investigators, for there was no one like her—he'd see his daughter safe.

The golden haired man had relinquished his intimate hold on Arielle, but he looked straight into Seth's eyes and said something obviously cutting.

Seth retorted. The set down must have been excellent based on the shocked expressions of the couples within ear shot. The golden haired man took a slight, aggressive step toward Seth, stopping only when Arielle clasped his arm and murmured something. He looked down at her, his body stiff with anger, but finally he nodded shortly and stalked through the dancers, who made way for him.

When another tune began, this one a lively country dance, Arielle started to move away but Seth blocked her, bowing deeply. She glanced around at the staring dancers. Short of giving him the cut direct, she had no other options. Reluctantly, politely, she took his hand and began to dance.

Satisfied, the earl turned away, only to face an angry, golden haired young man. “Did you set him upon me like your watch dog?”

The earl stiffened. “If I'd done that, you'd be bleeding.” What kind of arrogant young pup was this and why was he so fixated on Arielle? Given her dreams of bold, golden cat creatures, the earl knew he was being too protective, but still, it was hardly any wonder he viewed with suspicion anyone who fit that description.

“If you let Arielle around Seth Taub, it will be she who's bleeding, if only from within. He's an emotional leach.” And the golden haired young man swung around on his heel and stalked out.

Peculiarly, the earl noted that his expensive evening slippers with hard soles also made no sound, despite his high, agitated steps.

Good riddance. He turned back to watch Arielle and her partner, relieved to see that only the tips of their fingertips touched as they ducked beneath the tented arms of other dancers.

Arielle's limp was becoming pronounced. She was getting tired.

Just as he'd about decided to break up their dance, Seth Taub apparently reached the same conclusion. When they next met in another step, he gently took Arielle's hand, nodded his excuses to the dancers next to them, and led her off the floor.

The earl began to like this dark, somber browed young man. He had a care for the female kind, who always needed the protection of those stronger than themselves. It was as it should be.

Arielle, however, apparently felt differently. Her deep blue eyes were almost black, so wide were her pupils, when she finally stood next to her father. She glared up at Seth. "How prim and proper you *seem*. But if my behavior needs modifying, it will not be at your hand. As Luke said, you are not to be trusted, Mr. Taub."

"Luke, is it? And he is, a man you just met tonight who was taking liberties with your person? I only intervened at your father's request to stop wagging tongues."

The earl looked at him askance. That was putting too fine a point upon the matter, but he let the fact that Seth had offered his help slide. Arielle was already angry enough.

"They can wag until they fall off for all I care. These people don't give a fiddle faddle for me." She looked around for her reticule and grabbed it when Seth offered it.

How Seth knew which one, on a table piled high with them, was Arielle's, the earl couldn't say. But it was certain Seth had not only been watching Arielle tonight but he was also obviously interested in her. And also obviously he knew this Luke and was in competition with him.

The earl rubbed his aching brow and muttered, "I'm calling for the carriage." And he hurried out of the ballroom, thinking next time he'd watch what he wished for. His sweet, innocent, biddable Arielle certainly seemed different out among a crowd. Perhaps it was best to keep her at home, after all. Or did both of these young men bring out the worst in her?

The moment he was gone, Arielle turned a cold shoulder on the man who had ruined the only good time she'd ever had at one of these tiresome affairs.

"Forgive me," Seth Taub said softly. "I only had a care for your reputation. Luke Simball is a rakehell. He will ply you first with charm in a public venue, then with drink in a private one. Next..."

His pause was pregnant with a meaning that, innocent though she was, she understood well enough. She whirled back on him. "And what do I know of you?"

"Nothing. But I shall fix that soon enough."

"Perhaps I want to be...plied. Perhaps I'm tired of being good." Where the words came from she did not know, she only knew that this man, as tall as Luke, but dark in every way where Luke seemed bright, irritated her beyond belief. Enough to make her bold in return, where she felt shy with Luke.

"Indeed? We shall discuss this topic more at length at a later time."

The response was proper. The expression was not. His amber eyes took on dancing glints of gold, making her wonder what they looked like in sunshine. With the hint of that smile on his face turning wicked, she realized abruptly that, in a very different way, he was as handsome as Luke. Those golden eyes trailed down over her figure with a lazy promise that made her wonder what he'd look like in an Egyptian style sarong.

He offered his arm in a very proper way, his propriety spoiled by the quick appraisal of her figure that hinted of an interest much deeper than politeness. But he merely said, "Please allow me to escort you to your carriage."

Still miffed and off balance by her unwelcome attraction to this...this interloper, she

debated turning away. However, her leg was aching from the unaccustomed activity, and at least with his support she could retreat gracefully.

She accepted his arm. They walked slowly to the front steps, Seth guiding her ably through the crush of departing guests. She gave him a curt nod of goodbye as they reached her carriage, where her father awaited.

After the earl helped her up into the seat, he turned back to Seth and spoke softly, so she could not hear. "Thank you, Seth. I shall see you soon at the club."

"I shall be honored, sir." Seth gave his polite, old fashioned bow and then disappeared down the steps, blending well with the night with his silent walk and dark dress and hair.

The earl noted Arielle, despite her anger, stared after him curiously.

He tried to decide how he felt about that, but instead he collapsed back against the seat, gasping, "The next time you wish to go dancing, warn me in advance. I shall have to shore up my constitution."

Arielle did not answer, still staring into the darkness after Seth Taub.

CHAPTER TWO

Two weeks later, a preternatural calm had descended upon Hafford Place. The ancient pile of moldering stone on London's outskirts had been built, Shelly was told, by the first earl, who was given his title by a grateful Queen Elizabeth in reward for his daring captaincy of one of the frigates that helped defeat the Spanish Armada.

The structure he'd built followed the Tudor style with mullioned windows, dark cross timbers and white stucco. But the turret crowning both towers and the battlements bridging them with a walk bearing cutouts for archers betold an earl who didn't wear his new title comfortably. He was a fighting man, and so he remained to his dying day, when he was buried beneath the house in the crypt in which Shelly now stood.

She walked around his final resting place, glad for the sunlight shining through the high

windows on each side of the crypt. She sought a smaller, less significant catafalque than that of the liege lord.

During this lull in which Arielle seemed safe—depressed, but safe and free of nightmares—Shelly had spent the last two weeks trying to decipher the glyphs on the back of the amulet. She'd researched dusty tomes in the library. She'd even made a trip to the Royal Society asking for help, but the markings were not the royal Egyptian still being deciphered from the Rosetta Stone. Nor were they Coptic, and certainly not Greek. They must be a more ancient version of text.

Today, after a luncheon in which the bewildered earl watched his daughter as if he expected her to sprout whiskers and lap at her Dover sole, Shelly had decided to follow a hunch down to the crypt. Perhaps the mother's final resting place bore some trace, some clue that would be the key to the amulet's deciphering.

Sure enough, Isis Blaylock's catafalque was smaller, less ornate, than the others, obviously carved in haste. The poor woman had died in her early thirties, when Arielle was a child. Perhaps the distance of the years accounted for why the earl seemed somewhat indifferent to her memory. Shelly had seen no portraits of her, no cherished mementoes she'd left, either stitched with her own hand or painted with her own brush. Only Arielle, with that photo in her chamber, seemed to miss the mother she scarcely remembered. Even the servants refused to utter her name.

Shelly peered at the soapstone casket. Not granite, not marble. The very medium of her interment in this friable, easy to carve stone, hinted of her lack of regard by her husband. Shelly shined the lantern in her hand onto the side of the tomb, trying to read the tiny markings carved there.

Words, but strange words. Familiar, but not quite....

"The Book of the Dead. Do you know it?"

Shelly almost dropped the lantern onto the shining leather shoes that had appeared at her side. She surged to her feet, glaring at the man who made her look up to him in a way she didn't like. She was taller than most men, but this towering bean pole resembled an escapee from a very bad nursery rhyme.

He was all arms and legs, but elegantly appointed arms and legs, and the fine figure he presented almost disguised his ungainliness. His waistcoat was severe black to match his black cutaway coat. His cravat was purest white, and he bore a diamond stickpin that matched the diamond studded head of his walking stick. He had a prominent Adam's apple, and a deep dimple in his chin that somehow drew attention to the perpetually merry set of his mouth. Quite against her will, Shelly's gaze paused there. His mouth was wide, the top lip rather thin, but the lower lip bore an indentation that gave him a pout that bespoke either a truculent or a passionate nature, she wasn't sure which.

To her astonishment, she felt the stirring of a girlish need to kiss that mouth and find out for herself the measure of his manhood. The fact that he apparently sensed her unusual interest only increased her fury at herself—and him. She straightened to her full, imposing height, not happy she still had to look up to him. "Who, may I ask, are you? And who gave you permission to invade the Blaylock crypt?"

His strange, slanted green eyes had begun to sparkle with interest. "I might ask the same of you."

"You might." Their eyes met.

Challenge made, measure taken. On both sides.

Those lips quirked, becoming even more tempting, as the fullness of the lower lip curved. “Miss Holmes, I presume. Your reputation precedes you.”

“You have the advantage of me, sir.” She could have kicked herself for the trite response when she saw the rakish way he eyed her, end to end, as if he did indeed want to take advantage of her posthaste.

But he only replied mildly, “Oh, I am quite well known too, in some scientific circles, in my own modest fashion.”

Shelly made a rude noise. She’d just laid eyes on the fellow, but she already knew he had very little modesty.

“No, truly.” He clasped his hands to his bosom and raised his gaze toward the heavens. “May the dear Redeemer strike me dead on the spot if I lie.”

They both waited a second, Shelly half hoping for a salient lightning bolt whether she believed in its source or not. Meanwhile, the stranger was the picture of piety, but she knew it for a lie. She sensed in him a prodigious intelligence, a cool curiosity of the world around him, both seen and unseen, and a healthy skepticism very like her own. However, he differed from her in a marked way: He was a man who knew that a smile could open more closed minds than a scowl. That was a lesson she herself was still trying to learn, but she had no taste for him as tutor.

She turned away, ignoring his large, well shaped hands that indicated both breeding and good grooming. For the tiniest instant of self betrayal, she wondered what those hands would feel like on her flesh, but she rushed into speech to quell the image. “I make no doubt you are well known in one place.”

When he quirked an eyebrow, she finished, “The stage. But go find the Divine Sarah to practice your blandishments upon and leave me to my investigation.” She turned a cold shoulder to him and knelt back to study the markings. To her irritation, the set down that had overset richer, more powerful men than he, didn’t seem to affect him in the slightest.

The only indication of his feelings was that his merry tone had cooled. “You can either deprive yourself of a kindred spirit also wondering why Isis killed herself, or you can cooperate and hope that, if we compare notes, we can figure out the link between mother and daughter that marks Arielle’s flesh and takes her on these strange astral projections.”

Slowly, Shelly turned back to him. Astral projections. Most people had never heard the term, much less knew Arielle suffered from it.

His mouth was solemn now. “I want to know why Isis killed herself. And I want even more to help save her daughter from the same madness.”

I *need* to know why Isis killed herself. Shelly heard the words, not spoken, but inferred in several illustriously illuminated volumes in his tone of voice. “What concern is it of yours?”

“Let’s just say that I have a fondness for her daughter and leave it at that.”

Whatever ‘that’ was went much farther than he admitted, but Shelly finally took pity on him, stood, and extended her hand. If she sensed a kindred spirit in him, a fellow quester and questioner, she refused to let him see it. She pumped his hand brusquely. “Shelly Holmes.”

When she tried to pull free, he caught her hand between his much larger ones and warmed it. Nothing untoward or overly forward, yet Shelly felt a rush of heat warm her cheeks and descend, more alarmingly, to an area of her body she seldom thought about.

“Ethan Perot, Viscount of Trent. And, of more interest to one of your bent, Royal Society member interested in physics, chemistry and paranormal phenomena.”

As she listened, Shelly eased her hand away, backing a step before she could stop herself.

But that wide mouth only quirked, increasing her strange urge to stare at it. “And perhaps your greatest challenge, my very dear Miss Shelly Holmes.”

Quelling the primitive impulse to flee both the look in his eyes and her own response to it, Shelly stood her ground and thrust the lantern at him. “Very well, make yourself useful and hold this. I shall let the Earl decide what to do with you.”

“A pity. I’d much rather you made that choice.” His soft laughter warmed her cheeks as he knelt next to her. He held the lantern high while she began to copy the strange marks and words into a notebook.

After she’d sketched all she could, Shelly knelt down to study the markings again. “I need to get a thin piece of parchment and do a rubbing...” The words were scarcely out of her mouth when she saw him go to a black bag she’d not noticed earlier and—what was the matter with her? She noticed everything, normally.

While she’d scarcely laid eyes on the man she already knew he did nothing in the normal way. Steeling herself against the strange allure of his presence, Shelly stood, folded her arms over her formidable bosom and watched him remove a long roll of parchment and a thick piece of leaded pencil from his bag. He approached, a wicked gleam in his eye.

“You ask, I give. Rubbings are something I excel at, my very dear lady.” As he passed her, he used one of those excessively large and excessively capable hands to brush his fingers very lightly down her back. “And foot rubbings are my specialty.”

She arched her back at him like a spitting cat at his implication, but her high dudgeon was for naught. He was all the studious scientist again, bending to unroll the parchment over the inscription. “Now, are you going to stand there grinding your teeth down to nubs, or are you going to help me hold this paper so I can do a respectable job of duplicating this devilishly intricate script?”

Still grinding her teeth in frustration, Shelly knelt again to help, trying hard to ignore the scent of his sandalwood soap and the far more exotic aroma so heady to her heightened werewolf senses—the scent of an aroused man.

Unfortunately, the tingling in her unmentionable area was its own response and longed, despite her iron will, to be its own reward. How long had it been? She tried to remember, and suddenly realized she had not been intimate with a man since Jeremy, several years past.

Jeremy Mayhew, the little cockney sailor, Lil’s general factotum and Shelly’s general nuisance, who’d been so rough around the edges he titillated the werewolf sensibilities that had come with her ‘gift.’ All too briefly they’d been lovers, and shared something wonderful despite the difference in their ages, their stations, and their intellects. She seldom thought of him any more.

She seldom let herself think of him.

They’d parted after Lil and Ian broke the curse of the Haskell heiresses and Shelly left for her next adventure. But the strange feelings assailing her now, so similar to the ones she’d felt then, made her recall the scents and sights of that bleak Cornwall moor a bare few years ago--and the event that had changed her utterly and forever. For the better, or for the worse? She did not know herself.

Her eyes began to glow as she saw not the dim mausoleum and the man watching her curiously, but the alluring moonlight that had brushed the barren wastes with a strange golden beauty...right before the giant wolf bit her. Enough to make her bleed, though at the time she’d not been overly concerned, as she was still doubting herself the truth of something so fantastical as a being part man, part wolf, but all wild.

And then the change began...Shelly's nostrils flared as the scent of sandalwood filled her head, and suddenly she was hungry for touch and tongue. Only then did she realize that a large capable hand had closed over hers, and that this powerful rush of memories she usually squelched were all his fault.

"My dear lady, are you all right?" came a voice much more cultured than Jeremy's, yet its effect on her was very similar. She wondered if he had rough edges, too, and how it would feel to smooth them.

She stared down at that well shaped, sensitive hand, imagining it gliding over her skin. When the long fingers curled between hers, she felt a tangible lurch in her middle, her eyes glowing brighter as she longed to clutch back. To pull him into her arms, or better yet, fall into his.

And precisely because she wanted to be a woman again so badly, to forget the responsibilities and burdens of her 'gift', she forced herself to jerk away. "Nothing is the matter except I have no predilection for forward men. Keep your hands to yourself."

He arched a brow at this, as if he'd sensed her inner battle, but he merely bent back to his work. Despite her inward catechism, however, loneliness, perhaps inspired by the look and scent of a man she knew instinctively was dangerous to her, battled for primacy with longing as, inevitably, their hands brushed again in the close quarters during the rubbing. But this time he kept things impersonal, only suggesting she hold the paper a certain way.

Damnation, would she never stop feeling the inconvenient instincts of a woman? Vowing to crush every vestige of these disconcerting notions, she moved her hands to the very edge of the paper and concentrated on the hieroglyphics appearing under the lead.

Inside his carriage, sitting before Hafford Place at the curb, Luke Simball stared up at the tiny patch of light visible on the second floor between thick curtains. Morosely, he wondered when he'd ever start feeling more like a man instead of like a cat on hot bricks. Despite how hard he tried to resist, he always found himself here at the same hour, like a tomcat on the prowl, the sun sinking before the night's dominion. While he felt much more at home in the night, only Arielle could make his nocturnal world complete.

No matter how many women he bedded in an effort to end this hunger, it was *she* who haunted his waking hours and tormented his dreams. Since she'd become a recluse after her fall several years ago, until the dance, he'd only actually glimpsed her once, getting into a carriage. Now, the memory of holding her in his arms was as vibrant as she was herself. He didn't have to close his vivid green eyes to see her, so bright and strong was her allure. She was meant to be his, had always been meant to be his down through the ages.

She just didn't know it yet.

Despite the limp, her skin pale and circles under her eyes, she had a haughty aura of power, a grace of movement, that made every hunting instinct he possessed go on full alert. The fangs he'd learned to suppress except when he was ready to feed formed of their own accord, beyond his power to control. Claws grew from his fingernails and soft pads began to form on his palms. The primitive urge to conquer her, to let her know him and learn him as he lavished her with delicate strokes of his claws and little love bites on her neck and shoulders, almost overcame him.

He enjoyed their dance of desire in their dreams, but he knew that if he took her then, he might lose all chance of winning her in the tangible world. The time would come when she would choose him in both worlds.

Her dreams would be made reality...but only by her open, willful choice of him over the *other*.

When she'd paused on the step of the carriage, looking over her shoulder into the setting sunlight, as if sensing his heated stare, a primeval growl of response had come from his throat. Her eyes were so blue, exactly like her mother's. Her raven hair, even coiffed severely at her neck under a netting, shone like the blackest panther's hide. Such would be her true form when she took her rightful place at his side.

Now, staring at that patch of light, he frowned, focusing his acute senses on the room behind the curtains. A flashing vision of the empty, neatly made bed came to him and he realized she wasn't there. His glowing green eyes, his pupils now slitted like a cat's, roved the windows and stopped on the broad terrace, its wide french doors half open.

The faint sound of silverware clinking on china drifted to him on the breeze. She was at table tonight, so she must be feeling better. Good. Soon she'd be ready for the more direct portion of his wooing. No more sitting alone, using the natural magnetism of his kind from a distance, urging her to him in spirit if not in body. He knew he was partly successful, because the psychic link between them was so strong that sometimes he saw her behind those barred windows, tossing and turning in the bed as she would soon toss and turn in his arms.

Arielle—lioness of God.

She alone was blood of his blood, joined to him by her ancestor Cleopatra. She alone would be mother of his children when she finally stopped fighting him.

Tapping on the roof of his plush brougham to indicate to his driver he was ready to move on, he stared resolutely forward. His green eyes glowed amber in the gathering darkness when he whisked the carriage curtain closed. His glossy gold mane, brushing his starched shirt collar, shone even in the dimmest patch of moonlight peeking through the curtains. Impatiently he brushed it out of his face.

He leaned down and picked up the book he'd acquired a few days earlier. A knife fell from a hidden sheath at his hip. It was a wickedly long, thin blade of gold inlaid with carnelian and lapis lazuli. It pleased him as it had pleased the pharaoh Akhenaten himself who had once owned it. He stuck it back in the sheath and pulled his coat closed over it.

Then he turned his attention to the book. He read it in the dark without bothering to light the carriage lanterns. The title was: "Scotland Yard: Their Practices and Stratagems in Pursuing Persons of Ill Character." In his other hand, he ceaselessly rotated a small, oval golden scarab inscribed with hieroglyphs on one side. As he flipped the scarab from finger to finger, balancing it perfectly without moving his eyes from the page, a lion stared inimically out from the other side.

For an instant, the same cold arrogance glowed in his eyes.

Sitting at the dinner table with her father, her odd new companion, Miss Holmes, and Ethan Perot, her mother's childhood friend, Arielle Blaylock tensed, her eyes going blank. Usually this feeling came upon her only at night when she was abed, but she felt that magnetic presence so close. Surely if she reached out...

"Arielle? Do you wish me to pass you something?" her father asked, automatically reaching for the bread basket.

Arielle blushed as she realized her arms were extended. She clasped her chair arms, mumbling, "No, Father, I was merely stretching." And yet, her senses, so heightened of late, heard a carriage receding from the gate. She knew one of them had come again. As the wheels

receded, so did the feeling that all her nerve cells were stroked with the tender-rough texture of a cat's tongue.

Her father had accepted the excuse and returned to his veal, but Miss Holmes gave her that direct, unblinking stare that was increasingly unnerving to Arielle. Who was this woman her father passed off as her 'companion?' She had none of the dull submissiveness of any companion Arielle had ever met.

Instead of ignoring the acute appraisal as usual, Arielle returned an unblinking, direct stare. "When shall you return me my amulet, Miss Holmes?"

"When I am assured your...malady is cured."

Arielle stiffened. "I have no malady. Everyone has bad dreams on occasion."

This won a raised eyebrow of polite disbelief in return, but no comment.

Ethan was not so forbearing. "Arielle, if you have no malady, how do you explain the scratches on your arms and bosom you always awaken to?"

"I...am too restless in bed. There's a splinter on my bedpost and I--"

A sputtering noise interrupted her. Her father had just spit his expensive Madeira back into his glass in a gauche behavior unusual for him. "My dear, I have stood beside your bed on more than one occasion and watched the marks appear from nowhere. Why will you not admit that something is amiss here? Something of the dark. Something benighted. I cannot let you end as your mother did."

Tossing her napkin over her half eaten food, Arielle rose with all the dignity she could muster when she felt like a specimen under glass. One these all too rational beings found a bit fascinating, and a bit distasteful. "From all accounts, Father, you did nothing to get her help."

Her father blanched and half rose. "You don't even remember her, how could you possibly--"

"I see her nonetheless. She is watching over me and will guide me in the end. And she's warning me now that you're lying to me. If I find out you were complicit in her shunning by the ton, I shall never forgive you." She moved to sweep out of the room, her slight limp detracting not in the slightest from her regal posture and haughty chin.

The earl blocked her, his cheeks flushed, his eyes bright with anger. "How dare you...I did everything I could to help her, to protect her, but the madness took her away from me. And now, the same ailment affects you, and all you do is curse me and defy me."

He seemed to choke with rage and then he sank back into his chair, covering his face with trembling hands. "I see her when I look at you. When you tell me she guides you, how do you expect me to react given the way she ended?"

Arielle's own eyes grew bright as she ignored her aching leg. Unable to bear the widening rift between them, she moved to span it by kneeling next to her father to take his hands in hers. "Tell me. Don't keep secrets from me any more."

From his seat at the table, Ethan said gently, "He's only trying to protect you, child."

"How can I fight what I do not understand?" Arielle responded, still staring at her father. She sensed him weakening. "Please."

With a deep breath that seemed to steady him, the earl began, "Isis always had a strange prescience and sensitivity to the unseen world that intrigued me. I used to tease her about being a witch. At first we were very happy. But after you came along and you were both in the carriage accident, she...changed."

Unconsciously Arielle rubbed her aching leg. She remembered nothing of that night for she'd been but a babe, but she still had the remnants of that trauma in the scars and limp.

She squeezed her father's hands and he continued, "She was unconscious for over a month, and that was when the marks first began to appear. Tiny scratches, like yours, coming from nowhere. And when she awoke..." He swallowed harshly. "At first they were little changes. More cream in her tea than was her wont. A restless inability to sleep at night. She began to wander the halls and disappear for hours. When she returned, she had grass stains on the hem of her night rail. One of our neighbors saw her one night, and that's when the talk began. At first I tried to ignore it, but it only worsened. And then..." He closed his eyes, his face twisted with pain, and when he opened them he was looking at Ethan. "I can't."

Ethan glanced at Shelly's intent, listening expression. "Is now the time for this? Do you want her to know, too?"

Shelly bristled, about to retort, but the earl said softly, "Ms. Holmes has the right to know exactly what she's investigating, especially if there's some strange connection between the attacks now and then."

Ethan came around the table and pulled Arielle to her feet. "There's no way to sugar coat this. Isis grew increasingly wild and distant. I had formed a great affection for her as a long time friend of Rupert's only, and unlike your father, I had some experience with the arcane world. I believed the source of her ailment to be a psychic link Isis had not sought, but was, in some strange way, forced upon her." Ethan's hands gripped tighter than he obviously intended, but Arielle scarcely felt it, so hard was her heart beating.

The truth will set you free...the truth will set you free...She's always believed that, but she dreaded the words that came in a soft, confused rush from a man who was never confused.

"I followed her that last night and saw, and saw..." Ethan swallowed. "A cat creature. A beautiful feline I've seen only in pictures that supposedly habits only the Himalayas and mountainous areas. White and powerful."

A flashing image streaked past Arielle's consciousness, a lithe creature of thick white fur spotted with dark, inky dots. Enormous feet like snowshoes. She closed her eyes, denying the image. Lies. Why were they lying to her?

"I believe it's called a snow leopard," Shelly said calmly. "And what was the creature doing?"

Ethan gritted his teeth but admitted, "Killing a girl from the neighboring village. Strangling her with its fangs. And she was being taught how to kill by a massive lion."

"How do you know it was my mother?" Arielle demanded.

He brushed a tender fingertip under her eyes. "Her eyes were yours, Arielle. And when she finally returned near dawn, she had blood around her mouth and under her fingernails."

Arielle swallowed. "That proves nothing. Perhaps it was her own blood."

The earl hurried to finish, as if now the tale was out, he had to complete it to its grisly end. "It's true, Arielle. It cost me a fortune to hush it up. I paid the family a stipend I maintain to this day, not that there is ever any recompense for the loss of a human life. And that is when I locked Isis up, for all the good it did."

The rest Arielle knew. The increasing bouts of madness, the marks that appeared all over Isis's body, and finally, her suicide to escape the pain. Only now did she know that her mother killed herself not only because she was mad, but to spare her husband and daughter any more notoriety..and to stop herself from killing again. If she were to believe this fantastical tale.

She looked at the two men who had been most influential in her life, and did not know whether to trust them, much less give them credence. Were they trying to scare her into compliance with their petty tyrannies?

The earl brought his daughter to his bosom. “That is why we must be so vigilant. Keep your windows locked, and master these strange dreams, and we will keep you safe.”

Arielle straightened and pushed her father away. “I am not my mother. They are only dreams. I feel no urge whatever to kill anyone. And you should have told me all this many years ago rather than expect me to accept such nonsense now as an adult.” She marched to the door, her limp scarcely evident. “Now please excuse me. I am fatigued.”

When she was gone, Shelly leveled her most dispassionate look upon the two men. “Why do you not hit her over the head with a club just to get her attention? Was that the best way to tell her such a tragic tale, over dinner when she is already susceptible to nightmares? Of course she rejects believing something so awful.”

“She can’t be healed until she admits she has a problem, and every word we said was the truth” Ethan retorted.

“And she’ll never admit she has a problem with such direct coercion. Of course she doesn’t believe she’s prey to the same impulses, and frankly, I’m not sure I do either. She has quite a logical mind, and even if Isis became a cat who liked to kill, Arielle has a deal of common sense.”

“I see. So one is susceptible to the powers of the arcane only when one is weak minded? I’ll remember that for future reference,” Ethan muttered as Shelly rose to follow Arielle to the door. She turned upon him at the inference.

“Future reference, my dear sir? You’ve already practiced a unique blend of male coercion upon me to try to wrest my investigation from me. But I am not your typical simpering miss, and I am no more susceptible to the ‘arcane’ world than I am to male blandishments. Neither your height, nor your wit, nor your wealth impress me in the slightest.”

“You’ve yet to see my best attributes. But that will come. No coercion needed.”

Telling herself she simply would not grind her teeth, she simply would *not*, Shelly turned back to the distressed earl, her flinty gray gaze softening to goose down with sympathy for him. “Sir, there is one thing you must understand about the unique character of astral projection and shape shifting. Unlike so many of the psychic phenomena, wherein the victim is forced with a bite or a curse into a way of life that is anathema, these two abilities, especially when they go hand in hand, may seem like maladies to the rational world, but to the sufferer, they are a gift. The afflicted person chooses to project, or chooses to shift—and they must choose to resist. This is by far the hardest psychic ailment to cure. I can promise you nothing, but I shall give you my all in the attempt.” Shelly swept out, unaware how impassioned she’d become as she spoke, as if this were not merely a truth she voiced, but a reality she lived.

She left a very thoughtful Ethan Perot in her wake, staring after her.

His thick black hair gleaming, Seth Taub leaned back in his chair and blew tobacco smoke up at the ceiling. He tried to keep his tone mild as he disagreed with the Marquis’ appraisal of the female kind. “Women, my dear fellow, are more than brood mares or chatelaines of a gentleman’s household.”

“Yes. They are also bed warmers and decorate a man’s arm quite nicely at a ball,” retorted Samuel Hathaway, Marquis of Brackton, taking another long pull at his brandy.

This brought laughter from some quarters at the surrounding card tables, but frowns from others. Lamb’s Card Room and Smoking Club was situated in a quiet, out of the way corner of Mayfair. While no expansive view of Hyde Park could be seen from this nondescript townhouse

in a row of them, there was no picture window to display one. In Queen Victoria's London, a man's appetites could still be satisfied, but only discreetly.

And discretion was Mr. Cyrus Lamb's specialty.

He hovered at a discreet distance, close enough to listen but too far away for the gentlemen who frequented his establishment to feel his presence obtrusively. His pug nosed face had the battered but compelling look of a boxer who'd lost his share of fights but still lived to better himself--and those to whom he offered his loyalty.

Seth glanced over at him with the barest flick of his eyes. Cyrus disappeared and returned with a flamboyant black velvet cape lined in burgundy silk over one arm and an ebony gold headed cane in the other hand.

Pocketing the substantial number of coins in the middle of the table, Seth rose. The politic veneer he'd forced upon himself evaporated as he shrugged into his cloak, looking down at the Marquis. "Sir, unlike you, I find in myself the greatest sympathy for the female kind." Putting his top hat on at a rakish angle, he finished quietly, "Most especially for your wife."

The Marquis sputtered his brandy back into his snifter and leaped to his feet, hands clenched. "Why you scoundrel, you reek of anonymity despite your airs. No one knows anything about you and yet you criticize a man with ten generations of blue bloods running in his veins?" This won some hear-hears from other quarters.

Cyrus quietly approached. His hands were not clenched.

But they didn't need to be. The look on his face made the Marquis sink back into his chair. He blustered, "Show your face in my presence again and by God you'll hear from my seconds."

Seth's full mouth quirked into a smile. "Pistols at dawn? How quaint. I should think we were past that, in this so civilized company."

"Or swords. I haven't skewered any vermin lately. But then I make no doubt you don't know the gentlemanly art of fencing."

Seth's smile faded. His honey brown eyes took on a strange glow that gave them a golden tinge. Several of the men near him scooted their chairs slightly away. Taking the cane from Cyrus, Seth gave a quick turn and pull at the gold head. A wicked sword hissed with lethal menace as it came free. It was long and thin and gilded, slightly triangular in shape. It was so sharp the sides glanced with light, as if even the candles danced away in alarm..

Now the men didn't just scoot their chairs away; they scattered, all but bleating.

Even the Marquis had gone pasty. To his credit he stayed put even when Seth whipped the blade from side to side as if testing its heft and straightness, his dexterity ruffling the Marquis' hair slightly as he stirred up the still air.

Cyrus growled, "Sir, ye needs must keep yer temper or--"

As quickly as it was withdrawn, the blade was resheathed. "Forgive me, Cyrus. But Sheba gets restive when she's neglected too long. I was merely showing her off."

As the Marquis' face returned to a normal color, he barked a harsh laugh. "Leave it to a...a... foreigner to do something so bloody stupid as to name a sword."

Cyrus put his considerable bulk between the two men, but Seth's lip only curled slightly. "After, I might point out, a woman. And that, sir, defines the difference between us to my satisfaction: respect for those weaker. Luckily for you."

With that last insult and a swirl of cape, Seth was gone, the gold handled cane firmly in his grip.

"Did you see it roar?" asked one of the men at Seth's table after he was safely out of

earshot.

The Marquis blinked in confusion, shoving the dregs of his brandy aside. “What in tarnation are you nattering on about?”

“The head of the cane. It was carved of pure gold into a snarling lion’s head. I suspect you had a lucky escape, Hathaway.”

“I say, have you all heard the rumors about those three girls they found in the Thames a few weeks apart?” inserted a pimply-faced young fellow at a different table.

Cyrus frowned, but he could hardly forbid the gossip that was as much the coin of the realm in his club as the pound notes littering the table.

The Marquis grew thoughtful as he stared after Seth. “Yes, I did. And the bodies were...” He had delicacy enough not to finish.

The brash young man didn’t even blush as he nodded eagerly. “Incised, they were. With strange markings some compare to Egyptian hieroglyphs. So deep and clear they had to be made with something confoundedly sharp. And tooth marks. Like...fangs. Pierced the carotid in each case and ah, sucked at the blood. Or so it’s rumored. Probably nonsense.”

The Marquis nodded absently, still staring at the door where Seth exited. “A lion headed cane, you say? Interesting.”

Feeling stronger than she had in ages, if still depressed over the horrid fate of the mother she didn’t remember, Arielle combed her hair before her dressing table. Sitting as she was, her lawn night rail falling half off her shoulders, she could pretend she was what she longed to be: beautiful, passionately involved with a man she adored, a child on the way, and, most importantly—whole.

She rubbed her aching leg, trying not to think again of that awful night Ethan had depicted so vividly, to see her mother transformed into a cat. Automatically, she reached for the amulet at her neck before she remembered it wasn’t there. With a petulant frown that made her look like the miniature of her mother on the fireplace mantel, she rose, intending to find her dressing robe so she could march to Miss Holmes’ room and demand it back.

This time she wouldn’t take no for an answer. The heavy weight of the amulet made her feel grounded, her mother’s daughter, linked to her by more than face and name. And she needed that sense of belonging, needed it with increasing desperation because with every night that passed filled with dreams of lion gods who seduced her, she felt more alienated from the father she used to adore and was increasingly resenting.

No matter the face he put upon it, that ludicrous tale made it sound as if her mother had been a venal, blood thirsty creature, and she simply did not believe it. The woman she saw in her heart and dreams was nothing like that.

She was about to shrug into her robe when there was a scratching at her window. She looked over at it, starting back in alarm. An enormous shadow of a rampant lion, reared upward on its hind legs, its full mane tossing as it flung its head back in a roar, loomed huge against the wall. But as she blinked in disbelief, when she looked again, the shadow had shrunk to the size of a house cat, rubbing itself against the bars.

A meowing filtered to her on the night breeze coming through the window and wooden portals the housemaid had left open just a crack. Telling herself she was a silly goose, she really must quit being so imaginative lest her nightly dreams start haunting her by day, she went to the window and raised it enough for the supple feline to wend through the bars. It sat on the sill, looking up at her expectantly.

Tentatively, she reached out her hand for the cat to sniff, wondering if it was wild. It was a golden tabby color with green eyes, eyeing her with that ineffable cat wisdom that had made the creatures beloved companions of mortals since time immemorial. Why, her own mother was rumored to have a treasured tabby that never left her side, and several cats were inscribed on her tomb in the family crypt.

Bast had been the protector of the household, and her image, snug around her neck on her mother's amulet, had always given Arielle comfort. Perhaps the odd bond she had with cats had drawn this pretty little creature?

The moment she touched the soft fur, the cat began to purr, rubbing against her hand. "You little darling," she cooed, picking up the cat to cradle it against her bosom.

It rubbed its head into the vee exposed between her breasts by the loose night rail. It licked her there, the roughness of its tongue sending a thrill of pleasure through her. If only...

Wondering at the strange eroticism of her own thoughts, and the flashing image she had of this creature as a golden haired man in a lion mask nuzzling her in the same spot, she set the cat down at her feet. She was still enough of her father's daughter to realize this growing obsession she had for cats had its unhealthy side. Sometimes she felt literally torn in twain between the pedantic half of her English father and the mystical half of her Egyptian mother.

Immediately the tabby began to rub against her legs, side to side, as if it were famished for human contact. It looked up at her with those slanted eyes. Was it her imagination, or did they glow even in the bright candlelight? It gave a husky meow, as if it were hungry, but when she poured her nightly warm milk into a saucer, the cat only sniffed at the milk. It looked back up at her, and this time there was no mistaking that gaze. Like her, it was hungry. But not for food.

The unblinking green eyes were mesmerizing. "Hold me, touch me, and I will succor you forever. Come with me into the night in your true form."

Arielle heard the words clearly in her head.

In a male voice.

In a male voice she recognized, that of the golden one of her dreams. The one whose face she could never see beyond the gleam of green eyes.

The pedantic half resisted. The dreams she understood for they took her away from the unpleasant reality of her inadequacies to a place of magic where all things were possible. There she could be whole, and loved, and part of something born of her mother's blood.

But this was no dream. And this was no normal cat. Feeling both fascinated and repelled, Arielle stood teetering in place, longing to touch that winsome, seductive creature and feel its warmth and softness again, yet instinctively knowing if she did so she served its purposes. And what were those?

Fear overwhelmed fascination. Backing another step, Arielle picked up the poker beside the fireplace, retreating as the feline approached. "Go away!" The sound of her own voice, stronger than she felt, gave Arielle courage even when the feline's shadow grew again against the wall.

A lion's ruff began to form, the chest became massive, and the paws grew as big as plates. But when she looked, the cat was sitting calmly on its haunches, watching her with that hypnotic gaze that pulled at something deep within Arielle, something that was the source of her strength—and her nightmares.

"What do you want from me?" Arielle cried. The poker had sagged point down to the floor in her loose grip, for she knew she could not hit the tabby, no matter how afraid she was of

its alter ego.

The shadow grew larger on the wall, the lion now fully formed. The dark, forbidding shape began to stalk her as the cat moved toward her again. It was odd the way corporeal and incorporeal moved in syncopation. A small tabby striped foot moved forward. So did the plate sized paw seen only in shadow.

Arielle bumped up against the wall, unable to retreat further. Still she couldn't raise the poker to defend herself, even when the tabby crouched, still staring up at her, tail swishing.

"Come with me, transform to your true self. Let me show you the night as we were both meant to see it." The lion crouched, too, and glanced outside.

Arielle heard the words in her head in that husky, seductive male voice. The poker sagged further as she stared at the half open window, curious to see what he saw. The night was beautiful. Even through the barely open window, she could see past the shadows to the horizon...

Though she did not know it, her eyes had begun to glow, too.

The bedroom door opened.

"Arielle, before I retire, I just wanted to see if you needed any..." Halfway inside the room, Shelly froze. With an all encompassing glance at the cracked open window, Arielle's defenselessness, the poker sagging in her hand, her eyes glowing, and the crouched cat and its counterpart massive shadow against the wall, Shelly took in the cogent facts.

The tabby's hair stood on end as she entered. It spat at her, fangs bared. So did the shadow lion, revealing massive jaws that could crush a skull without effort.

"Stand aside, child," Shelly said coolly. She picked up a large vase of flowers, tossed the blooms aside and poured the entire container full of water over the tabby cat. Instantly the menacing lion shadow disappeared.

Still rapt, her eyes glowing, Arielle got drenched, too. She flinched as water splattered her in the face. The glow in her eyes died. She gripped the poker more firmly.

With a yowl, shaking vigorously from side to side, the tabby spat one last time, and then in a streak of striped gold, it leaped halfway across the room and landed nimbly on the sill, where it turned.

The look it leveled on Shelly could only be termed inimical. Shelly stared back coolly, pulling something that gleamed gold from her pocket. "You're not quite as strong as you would be if this were weighing her down, are you?"

Arielle and the cat both fixated on the amulet with equal intensity.

Shelly strode to the roaring fire and flung the amulet on the flames.