



*Of Agony
& Ecstasy*

Vicki McElfresh

Of Agony and Ecstasy
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ISBN: 0-9742549-3-2
nightwares Books eBook ID: NWP-2004-0615

Published by nightwares LLC
<http://books.nightwares.com/>

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Chapter 1

Time is both my best friend and my worst enemy. My days are empty and my nights lonely. I spend each day in agony and every night in ecstasy. I pass the daytime hours with a pen in my hand, laboring over manuscripts, wondering if this one will be a masterpiece and if it will be my last. Mistress has granted me once chance at greatness, and once my masterpiece is complete, I will die in the fires of agony and ecstasy. I have no desire to die.

I smile as I read through my latest work, noting its perfect rhyme and flawless imagery, a true masterwork. With a heavy sigh, I walk to the fireplace and let the paper fall inside. The poem, my creation, shrivels and blackens at the edges until it disintegrates. I walk back to my desk and begin writing again, this time a poorly rhymed love poem. I lay my pen aside and wait for Mistress to come.

The door to my room opens and Mistress walks inside. The silver of her outfit contrasts with her coffee colored skin. Even her hair matches the shimmer of her clothing. Gemstones sparkle at the corners of her eyes, on her hands, at her neck, and around her ankles. "Have you finished it today?" Her voice is soft and musical. I could write a poem about her voice alone, but I haven't, or if I have, it has long ago been consigned to the fireplace.

I hand her my love poetry with trembling hands. It's drivel, but my greatest fear is that she will find something masterful in it. I watch her eyes as she reads. Her brow wrinkles, and she shakes her head. "Better, but not what I want." She walks to a table in the corner and puts the paper inside a basket. "What do I have to do to inspire you,

Poet? I have given you everything, and still you give me nothing in return.”

I bow my head to hide my smile. “My lady is beyond words. I cannot construct a poem about your beauty because there are no words —”

“Spare me your feeble excuses.” She slides a fresh sheet of paper onto my desk. “You will write again tomorrow.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Yes, Mistress.” My cheeks grow hot, and I keep my eyes fixed on the floor a few paces in front of me. I dread what comes next almost as much as I dread waking each morning to stare at the blank sheets of paper on the desk. Her touch startles me. It always does. She is cold, not just in spirit, and her touch sends chills through me.

“Do you lack for inspiration, My Poet?” Her hands massage my shoulders and knead away my tension.

“No, Mistress,” I whisper, no longer trusting my voice.

“Then why can you not write the masterpiece I have asked for? I know the power is within you. I sense it.”

I imagine her tongue running over her lips at those words, like a cat waiting for a dish of cream. She sounds hungry. “I have no words. They are gone.” My gaze wanders towards the fireplace. How many poems had those fires claimed?

Her frigid lips nip my ear and nuzzle my neck. My body responds to her touches against my will. “You aren’t looking for them.” Her nails dig into my skin hard enough to bring tiny dots of blood to the surface. “You need to look harder.”

I bite my lip when her nails pierce my skin again. She already owns my soul; I have no intention of giving her my pride as well. “I’ll try, Mistress.” Her hands move lower.

“Yes, you will.” Her fingers undo buttons, and I bite my lip till I taste blood. “I

have decided to raise the stakes, Poet.” Her icy hands slide over the bare skin of my chest, and I fight to contain gasps of pleasure and pain.

“Raise the stakes?” I finally look at her and wish I hadn’t. She lets her knee-length silver hair fall loose and begins undoing the buttons on her blouse. My breath catches.

“Yes, Poet.” Her blouse falls to the floor, and I stare at it. I don’t want to see the inhuman perfection of her body, and I don’t want to feel my body respond to that perfection. “You have until Midsummer to complete the masterpiece.”

“And if I don’t?” My groin tightens when I look up again. She is lying on the bed, nude, already gesturing for me to come to her. I don’t want to desire her, but I can’t help myself.

“Then I shall give you to the hunt so that you may run for all eternity from your failure.”

I shudder. Death, not true death, but death all the same. I fear death more than any of Mistress’s rewards or tortures. “I will do my pitiful best, Mistress.” I bow.

She smiles and pats the bed. “Come, My Poet, come lie with me.”

I want to refuse, or at least my mind wants to. My body desires her. My body desires her coldness the way it once desired the warm embrace of Claire. Claire’s embrace is far from my mind as I leave my clothes in a pile next to the desk and slide into Mistress’s embrace.

“I shall give you inspiration,” she says in my ear as her hands drift over my chest and move lower. Her nails tease the sensitive flesh of my shaft. Her mouth wanders over my chest. She suckles at my nipples, and I can only lay panting as my body betrays me.

“Please,” I gasp when her mouth closes over my erection. I close my eyes, unable to watch her. I distance myself, trying to stop myself from touching her, but I can’t. I guide her upwards and capture her lips. I grasp her hips and lower her tight heat onto

my aching arousal. She moans and finds her rhythm. I nuzzle her neck, caress her breasts, and hate myself as my own passion builds to a fever pitch. My vision grows dark, and I cry out as all conscious thought disappears in a wave of pleasure. Mistress laughs and rolls away from me. She peppers my cheek with a few more kisses and slips from my side, leaving only her scent behind on the bed with me.

“Give me a masterpiece, Poet.”

I manage to nod and wrap the blanket around my body before sliding into contented sleep.

Chapter 2

I wake as I always do, cold and tired. I slip out of bed and stare at the blank sheet of paper on the desk. One sheet, not the usual stack. Mistress is most displeased. I shudder, gather up fresh clothing and walk into the bathing room to wash the stink of sweat and sex away. I wish I could wash away the memory of Mistress's touch as well. I shiver as I step into the cold water. I'll never be able to wash that memory away.

The clock strikes nine when I settle myself at the desk. The chamberlain will be along soon with breakfast. I know this, just as I know I will compose yet another work of art today. I wonder what to write. If I displease Mistress before my time is up, she'll give me to the hunt anyway. But if I please her...

I can't think about that. I don't want to die, not even the glorious sort of death Mistress promises me if I give her that one masterpiece. I pick up my pen and dip it in my jar of ink. A single drop falls on my paper and spreads into a tear-shaped stain. One sheet of paper. I won't be able to destroy whatever I concoct today. I glance at the basket on the table. I know the paper is there, but I also know the penalty for disturbing the basket. I paid the price once, and I have no desire to do so again. I look down at the page again. I'll have to write something marginal, something good enough to keep from being drivel, yet not so good that I consign myself to the fires. I swallow hard and wish the chamberlain would come with my breakfast. I can't write on an empty stomach. I trace the outline of the stain and close my eyes. Last night's ecstasy had all too quickly become this morning's agony. I hear the door open, but I don't move. My hand never strays from the page of paper in front of me.

“A slow morning, Master Poet?” The chamberlain’s voice is heavy with condescension. I’ve never liked the man, and he has never liked me. That’s the biggest reason Mistress chose him.

“I can’t write on an empty stomach.” I stare at the tray in his hands and almost sigh. The lush breakfast I expected has been replaced with bread, butter, and milk.

The chamberlain sets the tray on the edge of my desk. “Mistress has decided a change of diet is in order for you.” A grin tugs at the corner of his lips, and he struggles to hide it. “And if you aren’t careful, a change of sleeping places as well.”

I meet the man’s piggy eyes. “Go away,” I say in a voice that offers no room for argument. Bad enough that I have to write something both drab, yet promising, but enduring the prig’s taunts is more than I can handle.

“As you wish, Master Poet.” The chamberlain bows, somehow making the action an insult and my title into a sneer. I ignore him and turn my attention back to the blank sheet of paper before me. I have to write something decent, yet not something so good that Mistress would consider my commission filled.

I lick my lips and take a sip of milk. I wince at the faint twang that tells me it has been sitting out far too long. I put it aside and reach for a piece of bread. The bread too, tastes old and stale, but I choke it down and take one more swallow of the milk. I sit the tray in the floor, brush the crumbs from my lap, and close my eyes. I need a subject. My stomach growls. Misery, I decide. Misery will be my subject. I begin to write.

I finish the last line just as night falls. My hand aches from writing. My back aches from sitting too long. My stomach is still empty. My lunch still sits untouched on the edge of my desk. The fire burns low. I shiver. I’m already cold, and Mistress has not even arrived yet. I stoke the fire and add more wood, but the temperature of my room doesn’t rise. I

don't bother to read what I've written because I'm not certain I can even follow the many twists and turns of my handwriting. I already know the words from memory. I know the words to this poem just as I'd known the words to every poem I'd written, except those I'd given to the fire. Those, I forgot the moment the paper burned away to ash.

The door opens, and Mistress steps inside. I don't bother to get out of my chair. Tonight she wears red. Red clothes, red hair, red jewels, red boots, a she-devil in heat.

"Have you written my masterpiece?" Her voice is sharp and cold, much sharper than normal.

I hand her the sheet of paper with trembling hands and wonder if she'll be able to follow my many arrows and scratch-outs and strike-throughs. I couldn't. "I've done my paltry best." I bow my head as she reads.

Without a word she walks towards the basket and places the sheet of paper inside. She returns with two sheets of paper. "You will write again tomorrow, and this time, copy the draft over so I can read it."

"Yes, Mistress," I say, relieved. Tomorrow, I will go back to my old ways, and Mistress will be none the wiser.

"I am impressed, Poet. This was your most inspired work yet." Her dark eyes narrow, and a dangerous gleam fills the depths of those black orbs. "I think you need better inspiration than what I have offered you."

Her words send an arrow of fear coursing through me. "What do you mean?"

She smiles, a cold, empty smile. A cruel smile. "If depriving you of a few luxuries will give you inspiration, then deprivation you shall have." She moves toward me, and I take a step backwards. I know what comes next, and I don't relish it.

"Deprivation, Mistress?" My voice cracks.

She doesn't acknowledge my question. Her icy hands grip my shoulders and wander over my body. I try to keep still and quiet as her hands undo the fastenings of my clothes and tease me with empty promises, but I can't stifle my gasp when her cold hand slides into my pants and grasps my shaft. She chuckles. "Deprivation," she repeats and kisses my lips as she strokes my shaft until it's hard. "You shall write my masterpiece, Poet. You have given me a glimpse of your talent and passion." She pulls me into an embrace and kisses me again. I shiver when my tongue meets hers. She pulls away. "And you will show me the sort of greatness I know you are capable of achieving." Without another word, she walks out the door leaving me hungry and unfulfilled.

"Deprivation," I whisper as I lie down on the bed. I shiver and try to think of anything but the ache between my legs. I don't know how much deprivation I can survive.

Chapter 3

Morning again, and I wake still unsatisfied. I lie in bed and wonder how far Mistress will take her deprivation. First my lush meals, then the pleasure of her touch; would my comfortable room be next? I climb out of bed and make my way to the desk. I don't bother with a bath this morning. I need to write. I need to write to soothe my soul.

I don't hesitate to pick up my pen and begin scribbling. My world narrows to the pen in my hand and the rough paper in front of me. I never notice the chamberlain come in with my breakfast tray. I keep scribbling. I hear him comment, but I pay no attention. My words are more important.

I scribble through lunch and on into the evening. The words flow from me like blood from an open wound. I can't stop them. Only when the light in my room begins to fail and my fire burns low do I realize I've already filled both sheets of paper. I need a third.

I know it is late. I can sense it. I have no time to burn the pages before the mistress comes, and even if I did, I doubt I could turn away from the unfinished poem inside me. I won't be able to write another until this one is finished. I read the first few lines and know this is the masterpiece Mistress commissioned. I shiver. Now that I've started writing it, I won't be able to stop. The door opens, and the mistress steps inside.

"Have you completed my masterpiece?" She wears black tonight. Black clothes, black hair, black jewels. The Goddess of Death. I ache for her touch, but as I look down at the page all thoughts of her fly from my mind. I ache for the words more.

"No, Mistress," I whisper. I hold out the sheets of paper. "I've only just begun. I

cannot finish without more pages.”

I see surprise on her face. For the first time, I think I’ve shocked her. She moves past me and straight to the basket. She hands me a stack of paper. “Then finish.” Without another word, she walks out my door. I stare at the closed door for several moments before I lay my finished pages down and look at a blank one. She knows. She knows, and now I can’t escape my fate. The words have already decided. I curse them. I curse myself. I curse her. I take up my pen. I need to write. I need to write to soothe my tortured soul.

Chapter 4

I wake at the sound of my door opening. I start, thinking it is Mistress come to claim her masterpiece. I glance at the stack of papers under my hands and shudder. The poem ends in the middle of a line, and already the words to finish it rush to my mind.

“So,” says the chamberlain as he sets down my breakfast tray. “You’ve finally found your inspiration.”

I blink at him, uncertain why he seems so sympathetic today. “Yes,” I mutter and curl my aching fingers around my pen. The words beg me to write.

The chamberlain points to my breakfast. “You should eat.”

I don’t acknowledge him. I turn my attention back to my stack of paper. I don’t want to eat. “Later,” I say as I read the last few lines I’ve written. “Later.” He sighs, and I glance up. He still hovers a few steps from me. “Is there something wrong?”

“I’ve seen so many like you.” He shakes his head. “You fight your fate, and when it claims you —” He shrugs. “Good luck to you, Master Poet.” He turns and strides from the room, and I look down at the page in front of me. I don’t bother to think about his words. I pick up my pen and write.

I write about love and hate, futility and resistance. I write about entrapment. I pause at the word ‘trap’ and remember. I had been trapped once; that’s how I came to Mistress’s home. My hand shakes, and I almost dig through my recollections to find the memory. I continue writing. Memories can wait until the words are gone. I write about fire and death, sunshine and spring flowers. I write about life. I write about living. With each word, my soul feels lighter. With each word, I seal my fate. I won’t be able to burn

this manuscript. I've invested too much of myself in it. I'll have to face the fires of agony and ecstasy. I bite my lip and taste blood. My pen stops moving. I wish I could just gather up the pages and toss them into the fire, but the very thought pains me. I sigh and continue writing.

"Poet." Mistress's voice startles me from my work. My room is still light, and yet she has come so soon? Has my time run out already? I've just begun working, and my paper supply is dwindling. I look up.

"Mistress?" I barely recognize her. She looks human today. Her clothes are blue and white. Her jewels are gone, and her hair is a silky blonde.

"Yes, Poet. You are wasting away. You will never finish my masterpiece at this rate."

I don't feel wasted. If anything, I feel invigorated. "I will finish, Mistress." I close my eyes and promise myself that I will indeed finish.

She points to the tray on my desk. "You've eaten nothing for almost two days. You will grow weak. If you are weak —"

"I will finish." My hand aches, but my heart aches more. I must write. I take up my pen again.

"Poet, you must remember that you are only human." She closes the gap between us and enfolds me in her arms. Her caress is warm this time. I shudder. She kisses my cheek, and the tip of her long hair tickles my bare arm. "Come with me, Poet." She takes my hand.

I shake my head and wrench my hand from her grasp. As much as my body hungers for her touch, be it warm or cold, I need to write more. I can't rest until my masterpiece is complete, and even then, I'm not sure I'll be able to. "I must write."

She runs her fingers through my hair. "Very well, Poet, I will leave you to your

words.” She walks away. “Will you finish soon?”

I look up at her and with as much honesty as I can muster I say, “I don’t know, Mistress. It all depends on the words.”

She nods and leaves me alone with my stale rolls and the ever present litany of words running through my head. I set my pen against the paper and begin to write. For now at least, writing is the most important thing in the world.

Chapter 5

I lay my pen aside when my fingers grow stiff and sore. The words are silent. They don't beg me to continue, yet my poem, my masterpiece doesn't feel finished. I stare at the pages of paper filled with my cramped, tiny handwriting and wonder what I've missed. Something isn't quite right. There is more to this poem. It isn't finished.

My stomach growls, and I glance at my latest tray of food — cold soup, rolls, and wine. My belly yearns for food, but I reach for the wine bottle instead. If I can't finish my masterpiece, the very least I can do is get drunk. Perhaps in an alcohol dream I can find the ending I've missed. I uncork the bottle and clamber to the bed, heedless of the fact that I haven't showered for two days or that my sheets still smell like Mistress.

Mistress. I pause with the bottle halfway to my lips. Mistress has not come yet. If she sees me not writing ... I shudder. I don't want to displease her; I've done that already. I set the bottle on the nightstand and lay down. My eyes close, and I feel sleep coming for me. I try to fight, but I can't.

I wake to a warm touch. "Have you finished, Poet?" Her voice is smooth and silky. I shiver at its sound.

"No, Mistress," I whisper. "I've no more inspiration." Even as I say the words I realize they are true. I have no more words. I refuse to look at her. I hear her sigh and shudder when she touches my shoulder.

"You have nothing left?"

I want to weep. I want to shrug off the touch of her hand, but I force myself to stay still. "Nothing." My voice cracks, and I blink away tears. So close, and yet the words

have left me. I think of all the poems I've burned and regret my actions. Perhaps I've burned away the last of my inspiration.

She peppers my cheek with kisses until my tears are gone. "Then we shall have to find a new source of inspiration." Her hands tease me, but I don't respond. "Are you ill, Poet?"

"Just weary," I hear myself say. "Very weary." My eyes threaten to close again, but I force them to stay open.

"You need to rest, then." Mistress covers my shoulders with a soft blanket. "Rest, Poet. Rest, and then perhaps you shall find your inspiration."

I try to fight the suggestion. I don't want to rest. I want to write. I want to find my words, but the power of Mistress's voice is too much. I drift into the deep darkness of sleep, and I dream.

Claire's arms close around me and pull me close. "Write something for me," she whispers in my ear.

I shiver and turn just enough that I can kiss her lips. "What do you want me to write?"

She laughs, a delicate, girlish laugh. "Something pretty. Something about love. Something about eternity."

I chuckle. "You don't want much." I roll onto my back and stare into her bottomless green eyes. "Why do you want me to do that for you?" I don't know why I want to know the answer to that question, but it seems important.

"Well." Her voice is teasing, and she fixes me with the coy look I've come to love. "Then we would have something that is ours alone. Something for all eternity."

I kiss her ruby lips and laugh. "I'll write you a poem then. But first —" I gather her

into my arms. “There’s something else I have to do.” She gasps when my touch wanders over her breasts. I savor the moment, capturing its essence for later when the pleasures of the flesh are gone, and I have only a page of paper for comfort.

Claire falls asleep soon after our energy is spent. I slip from her side and disappear to my desk. I pick up my pen and a fresh sheet of paper, then sit down to write. The words don’t come. I think of the pleasure we’d just shared, the fall of her hair, the touch of her lips, the scent of our lovemaking. Images tumble through my mind, but the words won’t come. In frustration, I tear the page of paper to bits and reach for another, fresher page. Still, the words won’t come.

“Please,” I whisper to the empty air. “Please. Just let the words come.” I stare at the paper, but the voice inside me remains silent. I blink away tears. “Please.” The word is more of a prayer this time. “I want to write. Give me words.” I lay my head on my hands and weep.

“Poet.” The smooth voices startles me from my misery. A woman shimmers just a few steps away. She holds out her hand. “Come with me, Poet. Come, write me a masterpiece.” I stare at her, uncertain if she is real or if I’m dreaming. I can still hear Claire’s soft snores, but I hear music, soft, indescribable music. I have to strain to make out the melodies.

“Who are you?”

“Come, Poet. You prayed for words. I have come to give you inspiration. Will you not come with me?”

Blue and green jewels sparkle on the white hand stretching towards me. Her clothing matches the jewels and hugs her form so that I can see every curve of her body. Even her hair is the same blue-green. I wonder if her eyes are the same color. “Go with you where?”

She laughs. “To my realm, of course. Will you come? Will you write for me?”

I don’t want to reach for her, and yet I crave her touch and her promise of inspiration more than anything else. I stand and take a step towards her. “Where is your realm?”

“Beyond the stars, Poet. Beyond the darkness in the sky.” She smiles, a sly, secret smile. “Mine is the realm of dreams and imagination. It has been kept alive by poets like you. Will you come and write for me?”

I reach for her hand. “Who are you?”

“I am the mistress of my realm, a muse for poets who follow me there.” She wags her fingers. “Come, take my hand. I will show you the way.”

I lay my hand in hers. “What do I call you?”

Her laughter is cold, as cold as her touch. “Mistress.”

I open my eyes and wonder if I’ve been dreaming or if I’ve simply been lost in my memories. I haven’t thought of the night Mistress came for me in many days, or months or perhaps even years. Here in her realm, time doesn’t matter. Bright sunshine fills my room. I know I’ve slept through the night because I’d fallen asleep in near darkness. I push the covers from shoulders and sit up. The dream stays with me.

I glance at the pile of papers on the desk. Even from a distance, I can see the lines of tiny cramped handwriting. I scowl. The poem isn’t finished, and yet, I have no words to finish it. I stalk from the bed to the desk. I read the last few lines. Rubbish. Absolute rubbish. My eyes drift to the fireplace. Its fire has burned low, but I stoke it back to life. One by one, I feed the pages of my manuscript, my masterpiece, to the flames. I watch each page shrivel into ash and stifle my tears. I refuse to cry over the nonsense in my hands. Page by page, the words leave my memory and return to wherever they are born.

I feed the last page to the flames and watch it crumble into ash. I don't regret my actions. I refuse to offer Mistress a faulty work. The words will return soon, and then I'll write the poem I'd first intended. A true masterpiece. I stare at the flames, waiting for the flood of words to rush back to my mind. Today though, nothing comes, not even a single line for a sappy love poem. In disgust, I stand and gather clean clothes. Perhaps after I clean myself up and eat, the words will come. I hope so.

Bathed and fed, I sit at the desk and stare at a clean page of paper. I close my eyes and wait for the words, for inspiration, to come. It doesn't. I fling the paper to the floor and crawl back in my bed. At least I still have my dreams, even if they're far from comforting.

Chapter 6

“Poet.”

Mistress’s voice draws me from dreamless slumber. I stare into her deep green eyes. I try to speak, but no sound comes out.

“Have you finished, Poet?”

My eyes drift towards the desk where my masterpiece once lay. “No, Mistress.” My voice cracks, and I tear my gaze away from hers. “I have no words.”

She runs her fingers through my hair. “None at all?”

I shake my head. “I’ve burned them all.” I realize the words haven’t returned, even after my long rest. My mind is empty. The words are gone.

“You burned them?” Her voice rises in distress. She rushes to the desk and ruffles the stack of papers on the desk. “Why did you burn them?”

Anger colors her voice now. “Because it wasn’t the piece you requested. It was nothing.” My eyes close again. I want to sleep. “Please, just let me rest.”

“You must write them down again!” The cold creeps back into her voice, and I shiver.

“I have no words,” I whisper. “My words are gone. Burned, just like the pages.” I drift back to sleep.

“You will wake up, and you will write.” The heels of her shoes rap on the hardwood floor. She shakes my shoulder, and I feel the cold of her hand burning through the thin fabric of my shirt.

“Please, just let me sleep. I cannot please you. Let me go.”

Her nails dig into my flesh, and I'm certain I feel drops of blood running down my chest. "No." She buries the sharp points of her nails into the flesh of my shoulder, and I gasp. "You *will* write, or I will give you to the hunt."

I open my eyes and force myself to meet Mistress's ebon eyes. "But Mistress, I have no words. I have no inspiration."

"No, you have only excuses. Get up." Her voice is cold and sharp, but I ignore its implied threat. "Get up!" She emphasizes the words by tightening her grip on my shoulder. I wince.

"Why?" I ask, but I sit up anyway, if only to avoid another painful squeeze. She is dressed in green again tonight, but there is no warmth about her. Her tenderness melts into scorn, and I shudder.

"You will write."

"I can't." I refuse to rise to her taunts or her threats. I have no words to offer. I can't force them to come.

"You can and you will." She grabs my pen from its holder and slams it on the stack of paper. "Sit and write."

A protest hovers on my lips and dies when I recognize the look in Mistress's eyes. She is angry beyond words. I lick my lips and take cautious steps towards the desk. She pulls out my chair, and I sit down.

"Pick up your pen."

I do as she asks, without thinking. I roll the pen around in my fingers and savor its gentle curves. "And now?"

"You will write. I will not leave until I see you've written something." She backs away a few steps, and I lick a bead of sweat from my upper lip. No words come.

"I have no —"

“Write!”

I flinch. “Yes, Mistress.” I set my pen against the page. I draw a line and watch the ink seep into the heavy paper. I have to put something on the paper so I write, “My mistress’s eyes are like the moon.” Drivel, I think, as soon as I see the words on the page. I write the next line, “Cold and distant.” Mistress strides towards the door and leaves me alone with the empty pages.

Chapter 7

The shadows grow long over the hardwood of my floor. The pages are still empty. I stare into the fire as I wait for Mistress. Her threat to give me to the hunt no longer frightens me; better that than sitting in agony day after day straining for more words. I close my eyes. Words have deserted me. I'm not even certain I can speak.

The door opens, and Mistress steps inside. She says nothing, and I don't bother to acknowledge her presence. Her heels echo on the wooden floor. She trails a hand over the back of my neck as she leans over my shoulder. "Have you finished, Poet?"

I lick my dry lips. "I told you. I have no words." I can feel her scowl burning into my back.

"Have you even tried to write?"

Midnight colored jewels glitter next to her eyes. Her outfit matches the jewels, but her hair is still golden. It's still warm, even if the rest of her is as cold as death "I see no point. When I pick up my pen no words come." I shrug. "If nothing comes what's the point of holding the pen?"

Her lip twitches, but I can't tell if she's angry or if she finds the comment amusing. "You have nothing at all?"

I shake my head. "Nothing." Her green eyes bore into me, and I find myself frozen by that gaze. I wonder if Mistress is like the Medusa, but instead of turning her victims to stone, she freezes them.

Her hands knead my shoulders, and she kisses the top of my head. "Come, Poet." She moves towards the door and holds out her hand. "Come with me."

I stare at her. I haven't been outside my room since she brought me to her realm. "Where?" Her smile is warm, and a delighted shiver creeps down my back. "Where are we going?" I ask as I take her hand.

"To find inspiration."

She leads me through darkness into the bright horror of sunshine. Wind caresses my cheeks and dances through my hair. I take a deep breath. The fresh air smells as sweet as heaven, and if I close my eyes, I can almost imagine I have died and moved on, at least until Mistress's cold hand touches my arm.

"Let us walk, Poet. Find your inspiration among the flowers and wind and sun." She leads me through a fanciful gate wrought in the shape of a pair of weeping willows. I hesitate at the gate, too stunned by its workmanship to move forward. I wonder what artist created it, but I'm afraid to ask. The scents of wisteria and honeysuckle tickle my nose, and I almost gag, the smell is so strong.

"I have brought many to my realm, Poet, did you know that? I have brought artists and musicians and poets and craftsmen." She pauses near a rosebush taller than I am. "I have even brought simple gardeners." She cups her hand around a bloom and sniffs it. "I have brought them, and they have created masterworks for me. I have symphonies named for me, and I have been painted so many times, my face is famous the world over. I have brought many. I have helped them find inspiration." Our eyes meet, and I see deep sadness in her eyes. "Yet you seem to find nothing here. Is there so little beauty around you that you cannot create to enrich my realm?"

I don't know how to answer her question. I think of all the poems I've burned just to escape the fires of agony and ecstasy. I think of the masterpiece I'd begun and never finished. I bow my head. "I am ashamed, Mistress, but I cannot find the words to describe the beauty here."

“You are a poet. The words are within you, if you will only seek them out.” She plucks a bloom from the rosebush and holds it out to me. “Can you not find the words to describe this flower, so perfect in its form and so sweet to smell?”

I stare at the blood-red rose and try to conjure the words, but they remain silent. “I’m sorry, Mistress. No words come to my mind. As I have told you the words are gone.”

Her eyes narrow and she tosses the rose to the ground. “What shall I do with you, Poet? I have given you everything. I have given you beauty and everything you need, yet still you cannot write for me?” She shakes her head. “I choose my subjects well, Poet; I know you have the ability within you. You just have to find it.”

I want to refute her claim, but I can’t. She’s right. I should be able to write something, even meaningless prattle. But I have nothing, not even a quick little rhyme. “I am sorry.” I bow to her as a gentleman would to a lady. “I have nothing, Mistress.”

Somewhere close by a hound lets out a long, low wail. Mistress turns cold eyes to me. “Then I shall give you to the hunt for all eternity.”

Chapter 8

Mistress escorts me back to my room, silent and grim, and perhaps a trifle disappointed. She leaves me alone in the room and disappears without another word. I sit down on the bed and wonder how long I'll run before the hunt devours me. I sigh and close my eyes, thinking of Claire and her request for a poem, a memory that no longer seems real.

The door opens, but I don't move. Someone tugs on my arm, and I force my eyes open. A figure clad all in white stands at my elbow and points to the door. A mask obscures the figure's face so I can't tell if a man or woman stands beside me. I allow myself to be led to the door and follow the figure through the endless darkness and past the garden with its wondrous wrought iron gate. I pass over an arched bridge, across a cobblestone path leading through yet another garden, and to another gate.

Unlike the wrought iron gate in the garden, this gate is plain, a simple archway made of a myriad of different woods. Yet somehow its simplicity makes it all the more beautiful. The figure points through the gate and I step outside it. I take a few steps towards an ocean of green grass and turn for one last look at Mistress's home, but it is already fading. Soon, it is gone, and I'm left staring at a pair of weeping willows. A hound bays in the distance, and a little shiver runs down my spine. I should run, but I don't see the point. The hunt will catch me. I sit down in the shade of the trees. If I am to die, then I will die like a man, proud to face my death with dignity.

The hounds draw closer. I can hear more of them now, and I resist the sudden desire to run. Tiny tremors of fear crawl through my body. I stay put. The heavy beat of

horse hooves provides an odd counterpoint to the baying of hounds. I clamber to my feet and mop beads of sweat from my forehead before stuffing my hands in my pockets so the hunters won't see them trembling. The first rider comes into view. I shiver. My groin twists as a sudden urge to relieve myself overcomes me. I bite my lip and take a deep breath. Death has come for me, not in the form of fire, but on horseback, clad in red and white with a flock of hounds at its heel.

Hot urine slides down my thigh and soaks the front of my pants. My legs shake, and my heart pounds. Sweat beads my forehead, dampens my shirt, and slides down my back. The first of the hounds rushes towards me. I close my eyes and clench my fists, determined to remain where I am. I refuse to run. I wait for the first touch of pain, but it doesn't come. The hounds stop howling. The heavy beat of the horse's hooves slows to a walk.

"Ho, there, good man. What are you doing out here all alone? Did you come from the palace?"

I crack an eye open and stare at the man on the back of the horse. His face is smudged with dirt. His black riding cap sits at a crooked angle on his head. A few brass buttons are missing on his red coat. A hole gapes open in the knee of his pants. A multitude of scuffs and nicks decorate his black boots. "P-palace?" My voice doesn't seem to work quite right. I become aware of the hound sniffing at my leg and yelp when something hot and wet lands on my shoe. I look down at the dog, but it just scuffs the ground and lopes off.

The rider chuckles. "The mistress's palace." He points over my shoulder. "You must have come an awful long way. It's at least five miles that way." His gaze lands on my soaking pant leg, but he says nothing about it. "So what are you? Musician? Artist? Or did the mistress choose you for your prowess in bed?"

I stare at the rider and wonder how he could know so much about Mistress. “A Poet.” I look down at my feet. “Or I was anyway, but I’ve lost my words.”

“Lost your words, huh?” He slides from the back of the horse. “Well then, I suppose you won’t be going back anytime soon.”

He starts towards me, and I take a step backwards. “What are you going to do to me?” My courage melts away. My legs tremble so hard that I can barely stand.

The rider shrugs. “You? Nothing. I just wanted to get down and walk a bit. My legs are killing me.” His nose wrinkles. “You stink, you know. I was going to give you a ride back to my house, but not until you’ve had a bath.”

I can’t find the words to reply; evidently my inability to write has spilled over to include my speech. He takes another step towards me. I stumble backwards, catching my foot in a hole. My head slams against something hard. Stars dance in front of my eyes, and I fall away into darkness.