

Sleep Sweet

Thomas was playing a barn dance in Farin. He'd turned eighteen the day before, and he'd never felt more confident of himself or his music. He fiddled through two lively reels, his eyes passing over the crowd in easy observation. He noticed Megan for obvious reasons: Long black curls against creamy skin, and the promise of rich curves beneath expensive silk. He guessed her age at fifteen or sixteen.

When she'd turned to wave at the circle of children on the dance floor, he'd seen a wide streak of gray in her hair. It was exotic on the girl, even attractive, her face more than living up to the expectations of her other obvious charms.

"No disappointment there," Thomas thought, "and a dangerous package for some unsuspecting lad."

She'd arrived with two men about his own age, but neither hesitated before abandoning her to wade into a gaggle of pretty young women. "So she came with her brothers," Thomas noted. He watched the children race to her side like dogs to a mistress, as she dropped down with a smile and a hug for each.

The next time Thomas paused to sip his beer, he noticed the children had returned to the dance floor, but the pretty lass stood alone watching the dancers. None of the other single girls joined her, nor did she move to them. Not one of the eager boys or questing men even looked in her direction. She didn't seem to notice.

"If she's damaged in some way, damned if I can see it," Thomas mused, as the next tune began at a roaring pace.

Thomas dropped into the music, forgetting the solitary girl. Over the next hour, dances flowed at breakneck speed until everyone was damp with sweat or

homemade ale. The cry went up for one of Thomas's own songs, and he was happy to oblige.

He began to play, pulling long soft notes from his bones. His melody unfurled in the silence that had fallen, and he leaned into a longing he could never name. Everything narrowed down to he and the music. Together they stretched and bent, until the voice of his fiddle carried him beyond the reach of thought.

When the song was over, Thomas found himself staring into the black eyes of the solitary girl. Her gaze had the weight a physical touch, and intensity impossible for a girl her age. He felt her ask a silent question, and then slip gently inside him. She moved like a ghost through his private truths. When the applause broke out, she startled and looked down, deliberately breaking their lock on each other.

Thomas took a breath he hadn't known he needed, relief pouring through him. He bowed to acknowledge the applause and cries of appreciation. The bass player led into a brisk tune, and only when he was firmly steeped in the tempo, did Thomas dare to glance in the black-eyed girl's direction. She was looking at him with an expression he could not begin to interpret.

She turned, stepped through the opening and disappeared into the star-studded night.