



Midnight Showcase

Erotic-ahh Digest Vol. 06-15 ISSN: 1555-5496



J A D E D B E A S T S

The Rat of Fury by Anna Fallon

Forbidden Ways by K. Melton

Chasing The Ox Moon by Waterfall Nagamoon

Ox-Heart by Mae Powers

Jaded Beast – Rat & Ox

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE

Erotic-ahh Digest Vol. 06-15

Jaded Beasts

Rat - Ox

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE
www.midnightshowcase.com

Jaded Beast – Rat & Ox

Published by
Midnight Showcase
PO Box 134
Orr's Island, ME 04066
www.midnightshowcase.com

The Rat of Fury, Copyright © 2006 by Anna Fallon
Forbidden Ways, Copyright © 2006 by K. Melton
Chasing the Ox-Moon, Copyright © 2006 by Waterfall Nagamoon
Ox-Heart, Copyright © 2006 by Mae Powers

Names, characters, and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author or the publisher. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 06-15

Credits

Cover Artist: Jinger Heaston
Editor: Mae Powers
Copy Editor: Jewel Adams

Printed in the United States of America

Jaded Beasts – Rat & Ox Erotic-aah Digest

The Jaded Beasts Collection

Ancient and mystical symbols, like that of the Chinese astrology, have been around for centuries. According to various sources, twelve animals presented themselves before the ancient deities and heavens, and these are: the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig, coming in that particular order. The jade gemstone became useful for different things in oriental cultures; like money, symbols of power, jewelry, and so on. Many of the astrology symbols were made from jade pieces. Each sign and animal represented has its own unique abilities, individuality and characteristics.

In six digests, Midnight Showcase proudly presents two symbols and four novellas per digest with four authors giving their unique spin on these tales. However, as mystical as most of the stories are in some aspect, “jaded” and “beasts” have many meanings. Read them all to find out.

Jaded Beasts – Rat & Ox

Erotic-aah Digest

Jaded Beasts I, Rat & OX - July 2006

ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 06-15

Rat – This clever and assertive sign is often apprehensive and sometimes hot tempered. However, the Rat is also bighearted and loves intensely. They can be methodical in their habitual traits, but they are also inventive and resourceful.

Ox – Strong and obstinate, willful but influential in their behavior, these laid-back creatures are stimulating to be around. The Oxen are highly accomplished in whatever endeavor they undertake, and have a very compassionate heart.

The Rat of Fury – Anna Fallon

Highly trained Kung Fu artist Sunshine Li, wants to seek vengeance, but the man she'd once seduced would fight her, for love and more.

Forbidden Ways – K. Melton

Turmoil hit Samantha until she met Stefan Keese. Can her love withstand knowing he is part of a mythical race known as the Rat People?

Chasing The Ox Moon – Waterfall Nagamoon

Shannice must work with the stubborn and sexy Jardor Vannox to save the Agradorian people. Will they manage to do so without killing each other?

Ox-Heart – Mae Powers

Lavera Tallys wants Zareth Okshart, but he's part of a spoilt alien princess' endowment. Now if only she can barter for his heart and body.

The Rat of Fury
By
Anna Fallon

Highly trained Kung Fu artist Sunshine Li, wants to seek vengeance, but the man she'd once seduced would fight her, for love and more.

<http://www.annaf.net/>

The Rat Of Fury

By

Anna Fallon

CHAPTER ONE

“Miss Brightman?” Sunshine turned toward the unfamiliar voice questioning her.

In the corridor of her office building, Sunshine faced a medium built man. Dressed in full police uniform, the officer looked directly into her eyes. She’d never seen him before, never really seen any officer up close and personal. Sadness lingered in his copper brown eyes. Sunshine's sharp sense of intuition told her he didn't want directions to the nearest donut shop. *Something bad must have happened, very bad.*

“You are Miss Sunshine Brightman, correct?”

“Yes?” she answered and noted he looked a little lost as to what to say next. With her heart striking up a faster pace, Sunshine pressed him for more detail. “What can I do for you, Officer?”

“Just a moment, Miss.” He turned toward a suited man following about ten paces behind. This man quickly closed the distance between them, quite frosty in his expression. His tailored eyebrows touched together with a frown. Large build, trim, tailored suit – looking like he had a purpose, not just to get to her, for his whole existence.

“This is Miss Brightman, Sir,” the officer stated simply.

“Very good, Harris. I'll take it from here,” the suited man replied.

“Miss Brightman, is there a place we can talk...privately?” his mouth smiled, his eyes didn't reflect humor. Sunshine felt under examination, the way she thought a lab rat would feel. Despite his

cool looking demeanor, she knew he instantly assessed everything about her on the spot.

“Yes, of course. Just go into my office.” Sunshine extended her arm to indicating the wide oak door across the hall. The pace of her heart slipped into a higher gear, her moist palms clinging to her fingers, now curled into a tight bunch. Closing the door behind her, and walking past him to flick a switch, which blocked all calls. Sunshine made eye contact with him once more. His steely blue eyes never blinked. His square jaw set firmly, he spoke very deliberately.

“My name is Larson...Detective Sergeant Larson, Hollowbrook City Police Department. Miss Brightman, I’m afraid there has been an accident. A very tragic accident.”

“Just tell me,” Sunshine replied, bluntly. The look in his eyes softened a little. If Sunshine wasn't mistaken, she recognized a hint of admiration in them.

“Would you like to sit down?” he offered, running his hand through his floppy dark fringe.

“Just *tell* me...please.” Sitting down not an option in these situations, Sunshine remained upright. Lord knew she stood too short now, the last thing she needed was a surly, suited up cop standing over her. *No, on second thought, he is anything but surly.* Still, she wanted to feel in control. Pulling herself up to her full five foot four height, Sunshine squared her petite shoulders. Her Chinese genes did nothing to help her look formidable, but her attitude projection could stop a bus. Having learned how to harness her inner-self, from years of Kung-Fu and Tai Chi Chuan study, would hold her in good stead now.

“Miss Brightman...your family...has been murdered,” he exhaled slowly and audibly. Sunshine knew his eyes watched carefully, gleaning every scrap of reaction he could from her face. She tried to hold her expression poker-face straight.

The trembling started deep inside, but she fought back the tears stinging her eyes. This shocking news stunned Sunshine, maybe a heart attack or traffic accident, but *murder*? Who would do such a thing, and why? Aunt Viv and Uncle Tom, arguably, the gentlest people she'd ever known. They wouldn't even kill a spider; they just scooped it up with some newspaper and popped it outside. The garden reeked of Tansy, Basil, and Chamomile, to name a few of the herbs grown to repel flies and other pesky insects. So why would anyone kill her family?

Now she sat down abruptly, but not stooped or slouched over the desk racked with sobs. Sunshine kept her shoulders squared and sat upright, fighting her urge to lose control.

“How?” Not knowing if she could even handle this information, but the question begged asking anyway. Noting the way his eye contact dropped and the definite fidget he displayed, *not good*, she thought, *not good at all*. Her intuition never failed her.

“*How?*” her voice showed the signs of the smouldering anger bubbling deep inside.

“Extremely bad, I’m afraid. Your Aunt and Uncle had been held and beaten, but it seems a sword made the fatal blow. According to the neighbours, the daughter-in-law and two grandchildren visited at the time. They recognised the car but heard nothing,” he added, studying her as he stated that piece of information.

This exact moment, something inside Sunshine snapped. A force of anger, greater than any she had ever felt, seethed in her veins. Although she knew this feeling went against all the teachings of her Sifu and Grandmaster, the fury steadily built inside her. Sunshine remained determined not to lose her cool outwardly.

Her training taught her the ways of honor. It also gave her a level of strength and independence seldom seen in women. Family business stayed within the family. It was a matter of honor. Inside she quaked, outside she sat as still as stillness itself.

“Go on” she requested quietly.

“All dead, I’m sorry to say. Those poor kiddies. It’s enough to break a man. At least the assassin murdered them and their mother swiftly. It seems they died first. Your Aunt and Uncle fought for their lives. Whoever did this would not have come out of it unscathed. The bloodied swords found at the scene only had your Aunt and Uncle’s prints on them.” Detective Sergeant Larson stared at the floor as he relayed the morbid information.

“Swords? Aunt and Uncle used swords? Do you know who could have done this, or why?” None of this made sense to Sunshine, no sense at all.

“No idea, at this stage, Miss. All we can ascertain is that whoever did this was looking for something. The contents of the house have been turned upside down, even cushions and mattresses have been slashed and the insides torn out. Do you have *any* idea what they could have wanted, Miss Brightman?” The detective asked it as if the

answer had a great importance to him. “Can you think of anything at all?”

Her thoughts whirled over to no avail. She’d been raised by her Chinese born Aunt and Uncle, in America, upholding many Chinese traditions. Peace, love and self-worth, Sunshine learned it all from them. She had no other family, not in America anyway. Sunshine attended Chinese lessons, to learn of traditions and the language, but for the most part she was raised American.

China would be the only place to find relatives now and she didn't know them from a bar of soap. That her family should meet with such a violent end felt abhorrent to her. Sunshine vowed to avenge them, there and then, and promised herself she would find the responsible people and kill them.

A voice in her head reminded her of the ten laws she vowed to uphold in her martial art training. Before her family had been murdered, everything seemed straightforward

“No, nothing. And their son...Frank?” Sunshine and Frank agreed to disagree and avoided each other when younger. After he married, they’d shared a closer relationship. He would be devastated at his family’s demise.

“He’s missing. I was hoping you may know where he is. Seems he never made work this morning, which by all accounts is extremely unusual,” he said.

“Yes, it is unheard of. Frank would go to work even if he were on his deathbed,” Sunshine observed, thinking aloud. Her mind searched for a possible connection to the murderers search.

“So you don’t know where he might be?” he asked.

“No Detective. I have no idea, I can only hope he is safe.”

“We thought about the idea of him being kidnapped for information, or murdered elsewhere. These people aren’t playing around, Miss Brightman. We feel you may need protection until we apprehend the perpetrators.”

The thought of police in her everyday life did not appeal to her at all. Sunshine valued privacy. Her past a veritable mystery, she certainly did not want to sacrifice her quiet life for close police surveillance. Not unless it became absolutely necessary. How to find these disgusting murderers she did not know. Yet, something deep inside the anger told her help would be at hand when needed.

“No, Detective Larson, that will not be necessary. I will be fine,” Sunshine adamantly said.

“Your life could be in danger, Miss,” he added.

“Nothing in my life will ever be the same, Detective, and I’m damned sure I will not live in fear of these monsters. If they are to come for me, then let them. I will die honourably, not hiding in fear like a coward. Thank you for coming. I think I need some time alone now.” Sunshine’s tone dismissed him.

She could defend herself from attack, having attained the highest order in Kung Fu. Self defence was not her primary motivation for practising martial arts. Inner peace became the major factor. Lately, her interest lies in Tai Chi Chuan. The health and spiritual aspects proved of greatest benefit. It was said immortality could be achieved, a warrior status to guide and teach. The road to spiritual attainment may be a little rockier now. Sunshine battled her thoughts of revenge versus forgiveness. “Yes, of course. We may need to ask you further questions, so let us know where you are staying.”

“I will be at home, Detective.”

“I very much doubt that, Miss Brightman. That place is out of bounds for now and not the prettiest sight. I would strongly advise you to stay away from there altogether. There are firms who do that sort of clean-up. Anyhow, forensics will want it for the next week or so, maybe more,” he closed his notepad and slid it into his top pocket inside the suit coat.

“I will take care of my own accommodation, Detective. Where can I reach you?” Sunshine decided it may be better for her to lay low at a motel for a while. Nothing would get solved if she made herself a sitting duck.

Detective Larson pulled a card from his wallet, “this is my private line, otherwise you’ll be all over the precinct before you reach me. Call me anytime, day or night. Take care,” he handed her the card. His sky blue eyes in a fixed gaze, trying to penetrate her resolve. Sunshine made sure her brick wall expression remained untouched, but in his eyes she saw something beyond the police training. She experienced a sensation that he knew she would not stand still on this matter.

“Thank you, Detective Larson. You can be assured I will be careful.”

* * * *

The funeral would be simple, her family uncomplicated and loving folk. Sunshine decided uncomplicated and loving to be the perfect combination for the service. The police released the bodies

after forensics went over them with a fine tooth comb. A week passed and Frank still made no contact. He couldn't even attend his parent's funeral. The fact did not comfort Sunshine in the least.

The police parked outside, supposedly undercover, she guessed in the hope the killer may turn up from some sort of morbid satisfaction. Walking slowly along a grey and black marbled path, snow white daisy lining each side, Sunshine spotted the bogus van immediately. Choosing to ignore their presence completely, using quiet steps she entered the cosy, intimate chapel.

Along with a handful of friends, and the family's Chinese Priest, Sunshine farewelled the gentle elderly folk, the children cut down in cold blood and their young Mother, a source of joy and strength as a friend. Sunshine allowed a few tears to fall, her head drooped, and her eyes squeezed shut. She steeled her emotions against losing control. The hatred burned within like a fiery ball. Someone must pay. She felt the tightening of her stomach, the only thing wholly possessing her mind was revenge. Sunshine never thought herself capable of...murder, but someone needed to avenge the unnecessary deaths.

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Someone stood behind her now. What felt like a burning hand barely caressed her elbow. Her heart hammered. Could this be the killer? A low male voice with a distinct Chinese accent whispered into her ear.

"It is you, Li Yáng Guang ...it is you..."

The breath of the man warmed her lobe and neck. Sunshine did not move a muscle. A reverberation of energy roiled through her. Inside, she felt the unfamiliar stirring of sexual arousal. A most unusual, yet strangely familiar feeling. She opened her eyes and turned quickly ...nothing. No one stood near her. Sunshine rubbed her tingling elbow. She thought she had felt something. *All this strain must be making my mind addled*, and yet the prickling sensation remained. Someone touched her...but who? *Why is he using my Chinese name?*

Her tweak of arousal surprised her; no man interested her of late. Plenty of men showed attraction to her tinted porcelain complexion with a hint of dusty pink rose color around her cheeks. Her jet black hair reflected light like a mirror. Sunshine occasionally stared at her face in the mirror wondering about her unique looks. The wide almond shape of her, almost ink black colored eyes held a fascination for her. Apparently for everyone else as well. Often Sunshine fended

off questions about her heritage. No other person, in her experience had eyes quite shaped like hers.

Maybe the stress caused her imagination to run riot. Perhaps, her mind conjured up a dream man, not that Sunshine could fathom why. But those words, played on her mind. *What did you mean? What am I?* She silently pleaded for more answers. The ache in her lower abdomen took a long time to leave. Making no moves to leave the Chapel, Sunshine sat and closed her eyes once more.

Sunshine was no virgin and certainly no stranger to the pleasures of a man. The emotional hollow left afterwards became less desirable than the brief highs of sexual intercourse.

Her last explosive sex happened with a stranger. Well, a blind date set up by Frank. Frank needed to attend an important business dinner, his colleague Lee needed someone to accompany him. His stay in town being brief, so Sunshine agreed. Sunshine found herself instantly attracted to Lee Chang. Of Asian origin, Lee Chang's tight, hard body demanded attention. Through his emerald green body shirt, Sunshine could see his lithe outline. His complexion's warm glow matched the golden highlights streaked into ebony black hair. A cascading pony tail held it away from his delicately chiseled facial features. She knew the body of a practiced martial arts master. When he told her of Tai Chi Chuan, Sunshine found herself inexplicably drawn to him.

For reasons unknown to her, she wantonly seduced him. The ensuing sex became wildly abandoned and out of control. Waking early the next morning, Sunshine panicked at the intensity, and left Lee's hotel room while he slept. Frank mentioned Lee only once and Sunshine cut the conversation short saying she had no interest in seeing Lee again. She didn't need any relationship and her sudden attraction to him scared her. It felt like her mind lost control leaving her body in charge. Often in the lonely, early morning hours Sunshine wondered if Lee might have the capacity to be her one true love.

Since then, she turned to Tai Chi Chuan training and never looked back. Inner peace filled the growing void inside her. As Sunshine practised and trained, the lingering feeling of having an important role to play in this lifetime badgered her. Revenge and anger went against the grain of all her training. For some reason Sunshine just couldn't shake the negative feelings she harboured for the killer.

Sunshine suddenly realised she still sat in the service Chapel. Deep in thought, she hadn't noticed anyone leave. But, obviously, everyone took her deep silence as mourning and politely left her to it. *If only I could mourn.*

Getting up and walking outside, the bright daylight hurt her eyes, she squinted momentarily. Sunshine walked over to the white van. The obvious business decoy sticker amused her. Her knuckles rapped sharply on the side. A door slid open and Detective Larson smiled out at her. Placing his audio gear on a hook, he nodded to his associates while stepping from the van.

"How'd you know it was us?" he asked with a wide smile. The man looked a whole lot more agreeable when he smiled. Sunshine thought he may be about thirty-seven, three years her senior.

"I am no idiot, Detective Larson," Sunshine spoke defensively.

"I never meant to imply you were, and please, call me Pete," he offered. Sunshine considered for a moment he seemed trustworthy enough, perhaps a first name basis would help her enquiries.

"Very well...Pete. Please call me Sunshine," she allowed him a little smile.

"Sunshine is such a unique name and suits you. Is that the name your Mom and Dad gave you?"

He fished for information, she knew that.

"Not exactly, but in a way I guess so, it is the English equivalent of my Chinese name Li Yáng Guang. My Aunt and Uncle insisted I take on an English form of name. I haven't used my Chinese one since I was five."

"Is that when you came to America?" Walking beside her, they strolled the neatly landscaped grassed area, Sunshine felt comfortable, sensing an aura of protection from Pete, her intuition again. "Yes, my parents were killed and I was sent out here." Sunshine noticed the flicker of concern in his eyes. "Your parents were killed as well?" he looked surprised and a more than a little sympathetic. Sunshine feared the concern may be more than professional.

She changed the subject rapidly, the last thing she needed was a mooning detective, not even one with the rugged good looks of Pete Larson. "Did you see anyone unusual enter the service?" she asked.

"No, not really." Pete's eyes narrowed with a suspicious look.

"There wasn't a Chinese man?"

Pete looked curious now, “No, you can check the footage of all the folk who entered the chapel if you like...What's going on, Sunshine?”

“Nothing...it was just a strange feeling. Must be my mind playing tricks.”

“If you feel like you are in *any* danger you let me know immediately.” Caring showed in his eyes.

“Do you know who did this yet?”

“No, but it would not be out of place to assume they may come after you.” Pete stated.

The distinct Chinese voice still played at her mind. But the genuine look in Pete’s eyes gave her a warm, protected feeling. Her attention moved to his shoulders, broad and muscled, the outline showing through his shirt. Again the urge of arousal formed in her centre. *What is wrong with me?*

“I’m fine, Pete, your men could tell you that.” Trying to deflect his attention to the fact she recognized the surveillance outside her hotel. “Not my men...me. I am concerned, Sunshine. I wish you would reconsider protection.”

“No thanks...I’m being careful. I am taking leave from my company. My Senior Editor can play chief for a while. My magazine, Jaded Beasts, will survive without me.” Sunshine informed him. The knowledge of him watching her movements thrilled her. She broke eye contact, but perhaps her gaze lingered a little too long for him not to assume she felt some personal interest in him. *Damn!*

“Very well, I won’t be far away and the view is pretty good from where I sit,” Pete smiled again and Sunshine warmed to his sincerity, despite herself. Her gut told her this man could be trusted in this whole mess. Welcoming the slight flirting tone he used worried her. Coupled with the strange feeling inside, it could be an emotionally dangerous combination. *I’m sure it’s just the situation.*

“Please let me know of any developments, Pete. I must go now.” Sunshine waited for his nod of affirmation and walked off. *Better be careful there*, she thought, *I don’t really want to encourage a personal relationship.*

She briefly wondered if she may be scared of her feelings. But it just didn’t seem reasonable to be attracted to, not only Pete, but a phantom voice. The low ache resurfaced as the voice came back to her, along with the tingling skin. Something defied all logic.

Sunshine headed for the nearest library needing to expend some nervous energy. Maybe a genealogy search would reveal something in the family history. With each step her memories of her first time in a new country occupied her mind.

Without her Aunt and Uncle...Sunshine grimaced at the idea of being raised in an orphanage in China. She owed them her life, loving them as she did her parents. A small memory egged at the edge of her thoughts.

A key, a small silver key, her mother gave to her the very last day she saw her. At that time a key was the least of her worries; a five year old with more important things to do with her favorite teddy, thought a key much less exciting. Sunshine returned from school one day to find her parents gone. That memory permanently burned into her subconscious. Her life turned upside down and a child had no choice but to be bundled around by total strangers.

Now, where had she put that key? Her mother's sweet voice carried on the breeze. "Keep it safe, my child." Terrified at five years old, being pushed onto a boat by an obscure family member, Sunshine clung to her one friend and confidante. Wang, her tiny pink teddy bear. Daddy won him for her at the fair. Wang had a little hole in his side and Sunshine poked the key far inside him and up into his head cavity. She remembered it clearly now. How strange she had forgotten. *Now, where is Wang?*

Sunshine racked her brain, trying to remember the last time she saw Wang...*could the key have something to do with all this?* So long since she looked at her box of treasures from her life in China. *Treasures! That's it.* Changing direction, Sunshine knew she must return to the house. Her home, the library would have to wait.

Gathering her strength, she quickened her step. The family home, a place of love, now violated by heinous crimes. Sunshine disappeared into the sea of faces on the street. Her intuition and peripheral vision told her two men trailed her and neither of them were Pete Larson. Silently, she prayed for police and not assassins. *Police will be so much easier to lose.*

The weekend crowd increased to attend the weekly market, *perfect*, she thought. Taking off the tomato red scarf, she shoved it into her jacket pocket, *too easy to pick out in a crowd*, her resourcefulness surprised her. Letting down her hair, its coolness spread around her shoulders and face. Sunshine slipped her dark

glasses on to complete the camouflage. Now she would blend in with the crowd.

Detective Larson must not know she returned to the house. If they rushed a report back to him he'd guess where she went. Sunshine's mind still nagged her not to trust him completely. Old habits die hard when your whole support base is ripped away from you. Besides, something more solid would give a lead. This key must hold the secret, one apparently worth killing for.

Sunshine weaved and surged with the crowd, careful to work her way toward the end alley. She travelled this city for a lot of years, knew the hidden shortcuts like the back of her hand. Hoping they'd lost sight of her momentarily, Sunshine slipped into the alley way and squeezed her tiny frame through the gap in the hard bricks. Her followers wouldn't see her, but she could see them.

After waiting ten minutes, the two suited men strutted past, craning their necks to spot her. One had a phone to his ear, the other looked terribly distressed. She smiled, extracted herself and continued walking the long alley. It seemed a dead end blocked off with a high wire fence. Sunshine knew better, scaling the wire she dropped with a thud landing on her feet.

Knowing that Detective Larson...Pete, may guess where she headed, Sunshine chose to go directly to her house. Time was of the essence. She knew the shortcut through the alleys would bring her to the back brick wall of her home. It stood too high to scale, but a large hole, hidden by the shrubs underneath she should still accommodate her squeezing through.

* * * *

The roof of the old home now in sight, her heart pounded in anticipation. Perspiration beaded. This would take the strength of a warrior to face. Stopping, she inhaled deeply, held her breath and exhaled slowly. Momentarily Sunshine fought the urge to just turn and run. She gathered her inner strength, looked around to make sure she was alone and disappeared into the thicket of shrubs.

Dragging herself through the dirt, she came up under the bushes in the corner of the yard. *Hah! Still fit!* Scrambling out, she brushed the dried dust off her jeans. Placing one foot deliberately in front of the other, she crept alongside the house, edging ever closer to the door.

Her sweaty hands and beating blood flow did not deter her. Peeking out around the corner of the house, she looked around; she

could see nothing, sense no-one. Quickly, she stole inside and came to a dead stop in the rear of the passageway. The oriental style carpet runner looked just normal. The gravity of the murders hit her; just over a week ago she laughed and sang in this house with her family. Now an eerie silence possessed the once happy home.

The wind chimes tinkled, just as always, and then stopped. She could even see the large aquarium glistening, the tank sat in the kitchen directly opposite the doorway from the hall she walked along. The brightly colored fish swam lazily around. The normalcy stopped, broken shards of ornaments, vases and plates littered the kitchen floor. Ripped materials and stuffing lay around, making the place an absolute mess. Whoever searched the place, did it very thoroughly. Sunshine focused her energy back to the job at hand and stared at the aquarium hoping the swimming fish might transfer some calmness to her.

She had forgotten the fish. *Who has cared for them in the last week?* Sunshine guessed Pete. He would do that type of thing, judging by his level of concern for her. A noise sounded just before she stepped around the corner into the kitchen. Stopped her in her tracks, back pressed to the wall, Sunshine fought for self-control. Stinging began as her nails dug into the palms of her hands. Taking a couple of deep breaths and calling on her Tai Chi Chuan skills to bring a sense of calm throughout her body. Sunshine pushed herself silently forward. *You can do this.*

Another noise, stepping forward, she took a quick glance around the door frame. It felt like a ball of fire roiled inside her as she prepared to meet a possible attacker. It took all her concentration to bring peace over her body. Sunshine prepared for the possibility of meeting the assassins, and the possibility of becoming a murderer.

Her fury seemed to know no bounds. A pair of non-human eyes stared back and relief swept over her. She felt the sweat prickle on her forehead and roll over her temple. Swiping the droplets with the back of her hand, she grinned.

Cosmos, her family's black cat, with shining, golden yellow eyes, sat perched up at the tank looking longingly at the swimming inhabitants. A sigh of emotion overcame Sunshine, Cosmos now the only link to her previous life. She softly stepped forward and pulled the cat into her arms. "Oh Cosmos, you scared me half to death!" she whispered and hugged him to her. If he felt pleased to see her, he

never let it show, aloof as always. Cosmos just jumped from her arms and headed for his food bowl, mewling all the while.

“Same old Cosmos!” Sunshine grabbed the container of kibble from the shelf and filled his bowl. Even the packages in the cupboards scattered in disarray. Her mood really plummeted when she first entered the house, but Cosmos made her feel a little better.

Everything strewn out of place, it smelt of intrusion. Apart from Cosmos crunching, silence reigned supreme. It had never been a quiet home, peaceful yes, but not quiet. The indoor fountain didn't babble in the background, the Chinese music didn't quietly calm the atmosphere and no chattering voices could be heard. The total destruction of everything her family held dear fueled her anger.

Stepping further into the main area of the open plan kitchen and sitting room, Sunshine felt her throat constrict as three chalked outlines came into view. The black slate tiles on the floor could have been laid just for chalk drawings. Two smaller outlines and one larger, Sunshine collapsed, she rested on her knees rocking back and forth. Silently, the pain surfaced. Tears streamed down her face as she allowed herself the luxury of mourning the deaths of her dear little niece and nephew, and the sister-in-law she loved.

Recalling the last time the rosy, chubby faced, two-year-old, twins ran up to her, both vied for position to reach her first. Their arms wide, faces grinning and little fat legs going as fast as they could. “Aunty Sunny, Aunty Sunny!” They screamed and giggled as she fell to her knees to greet them in a big hug. Such loving children, innocent, loving children. *What sort of monster can do this sort of thing?* Shaking uncontrollably, Sunshine knew she needed to compose herself. Time was not on her side.

Forcing her mind to steel against the hurt once more, willing her tears to dry, Sunshine promised to avenge them. Careful not to touch anything, she moved outside, into the white cobbled courtyard. Here Aunt and Uncle died. All the garden urns and statues had been smashed and remained in pieces on the ground. The same chalk marks mapped the outlines of two bodies, most of the blood looked cleaned up, but the dark stains remained.

Sunshine gulped for air, she tried to stay calm and remember why she was here...Wang. Her secret spot in the garden where she hid him from Frank one day remained undiscovered. He'd been in a mood and tried to destroy her bear. She loved Wang so much, the only reminder she had of her parents, and she hid him. Wang should still be hidden

and the key must have some meaning. She forced her eyes to look away from the murder scene and headed carefully for the objective.

On her knees in front of the bushy patch of Tansy, Sunshine reached into its thickness and lifted a rock up. Feeling around inside the small hole previously hidden by the rock, she felt the plastic bag she had wrapped around Wang ten years ago. Her own buried treasure she called Wang as she'd placed him there.

"Come on, Wang, it's time you came out." Sunshine spoke quietly. She automatically looked around as she unwrapped him and smiled at the pink glowing fur he still possessed. She hugged the small bear to her and could still smell her mother's Jasmine scent on him. Her eyes prickled with tears. If ever Sunshine needed a friend, it was now.

Stuffing him into her pocket, Sunshine prayed for the dead and went to leave the same way she had entered *No need to take any silly chances now*, she thought, *I must find what this key belongs to*. Scrambling under the unruly shrubs toward her exit gap, when another noise sounded, *Oh no, what about poor Cosmos. I can't leave him here*. Sunshine shifted around to try and see the cat, maybe she could grab him, but the sound of footsteps made her withdraw in under the protection of the low lying branches...She waited in the dirt, *it might be Pete*.

She did not budge an inch for fear of making a noise. Knowing if she remained silent, whoever walked around wouldn't see her tucked away down here. Just a glance, might give her a clue as to where to start looking, that was all she required. A reasonable range of sight available, despite the density of the low branches, Sunshine waited. Lying down did not offer her a position she could easily protect herself from. She scrunched up on her haunches, branches scraping the back of her head painfully.

The footsteps came a little closer, and Cosmos mewled. The obvious thud of a kick sounded and the cat meowed loudly. *Cruel asshole*, Sunshine felt her heated anger rise.

Shhhhhhhhhh... The calming rustle of leaves in the breeze sounded in her mind. It occurred to Sunshine this spot should be sheltered. One thing seemed sure, this wasn't Pete Larson, he would never kick a cat.

A pair of trousered legs moved back and forth the feet moved ever closer to her hiding place. She still couldn't quite see an upper body. She heard a familiar voice in a loud whisper, "No, there's no

one here. I'm sure, yes. I know I have to find her. Well, I can't make her fucking appear out of nowhere, can I? If you hadn't stuffed up we would have Sunshine now."

Frank? It was Frank alright. *What the hell is he saying and who is he talking to?* Sunshine's mind worked overtime as a sick realization hit her. Frank knew about everything and he looked for her.

Sunshine felt the need to leap from under the shrubs and tighten her hands around his throat until he stopped breathing. She tried to move her body, it did not budge. A burning presence on her arms held her fast, that hot breath in her ear once, "Stay Yáng Guang, sssstay..."

The hot whisper prickled the hairs on the back of her neck. "Danger...listen."

The pounding pulse of her body now centred lower. This time it felt more like a dire warning bell than arousal. Mentally picturing a power-ball of white hot energy inside her. Sunshine listened again to the one sided conversation going on above her.

"Hey, I know what I am doing, if they find me here I can just plead the broken-hearted husband? I *have* just lost my wife and kids. Not to mention my parents," Frank's cold-hearted chuckle and sarcastic tone made her blood run cold. Nausea played in Sunshine's stomach. Frank left no doubt what his words meant, or the way he spoke them.

"What the fuck would you know? It wouldn't have looked authentic if they'd lived, no one will suspect me now. My next ritual will give me the exact whereabouts of the key in a dream. I want that key. Then I'll find the talisman. Once I have both, I just need her on the night.." Frank's feet moved away from her and Sunshine shook from anger, sorrow, fear and almost every other emotion that a human could experience. Still confused about what he meant exactly, Sunshine knew he would soon track the key and her.

The fury built behind the dam wall inside her brain, she mentally gathered it into the white hot power-ball. Her heart pounded so hard she would not be surprised if it gave her away. *It was Frank! He even let his own little children be slaughtered.* Sunshine couldn't help but vomit quietly on the ground. A flame burned inside her and now she knew exactly where to direct that flame. Frank must die.

CHAPTER TWO

“Fuck! Where is she?” Pete Larson roared at the shuffling officers in front of him.

“Dunno Boss, she just seemed to disappear, into nowhere. There is nothing of her.”

“Don't tell me...” his voice laced in sarcasm, “the markets...right?”

They nodded sheepishly.

“The fucking oldest trick in the book, when are they going to get some decent training around here. How long did you look for her?”

“Bout an hour, Boss...”

“Well, she could be anywhere now. Christ! You two couldn't keep track of an elephant in a pack of penguins!”

He waved the pair away. Judging by the looks on their faces they took their leave with relief.

“If she is hurt, so help me...” Pete shouted after them.

The bloody house, I bet that is exactly where she is, he mused and headed for his office door, he might find some peace inside. Noting the time that passed since he spoke to her after the funeral. He knew her stony-faced determination meant trouble. In fact, Sunshine Brightman epitomized trouble wrapped up in a little package. One very attractive little package.

This woman stirred feelings in him no decent man should harbor. He didn't just want to have sex with her. He wanted to fuck her brains out. He wanted to make her wild with desire for him. This new feeling surprised Pete, an intensity he'd only read about but now understood. He wanted her body, but more than that, he wanted her love. She was volatile.

Pete knew his job, protect civilians and find the killers, not to get personally involved. Something about her begged for protection; somehow Pete thought he might need protecting, especially his heart. Why would she be interested in him? He had no exotic look, nor any

element of danger. All he could offer her was security and stability...and an oversized penis.

His generous cock never held the benefits the books said it would. The advantages his mate joked might be awarded if only they had nine inches. Little did they know Pete packed more than a pistol. It had been the ruination of his marriage. Modern women seemed to want excitement. Not boring Cops with big dicks. Walking through his office doorway, he slammed his coffee cup down on his desk and the dark droplets splashed over the rim. *I'm fucking losing it!* His secretary rushed up and closed the door quietly. Pete thanked God she knew when he needed solitude.

Okay, calm down, think rationally, he reminded himself. As he jerked the blinds closed, his mind searched for clarity. Sitting back at his desk he spoke out loud, it made him feel better to hear his voice rationalizing.

"She's not stupid, if she thought straight enough to lose my two best field officers, she isn't likely to go rushing into any danger." He tapped his pen on the hardwood desk, "I just have to trust that if she needs me she will call."

Feeling a warm breeze wash over him, Pete looked toward the closed window and then to the door, it remained shut. A shudder travelled his body. What an unusual phenomenon. Somehow it reassured him to her safety. "The best thing I can do to help is research."

Following up on some leads his only recourse at the moment, when she came to him he wanted to have something for her. He knew she'd come, and he would help her, even if it cost him his job. Tapping his mouse, Pete watched the screen light up. He glanced at his private phone line willing it to ring.

* * * *

Pete started on the internet as soon as he got home. The office closed in on him. He needed peace and quiet, but most of all privacy. None of his colleagues could' know this case held a personal interest for him. Pete wondered on that a moment.

He knew the exotic look excited him. So did her no nonsense attitude. Registering no reaction to his flirting, except that one time, Pete felt a little foolish. Of course, she wouldn't be interested in a city detective like him, she needed someone to stimulate her senses. Anyhow, he crossed the line to get personally involved but something pulled him to this investigation. Perhaps the sense of danger

emanating from her pores did it. A champion at Kung Fu, and now studying Tai Chi Chuan, Sunshine proved no slouch in the self-defence department. She could protect herself, and probably him too if it came to that. Indeed Sunshine Brightman may be no ordinary woman, but this killer did not ring of ordinary either.

The far away look in her eyes when she thought no one watched played on his mind. No one should look so lonely and sad. Pete wanted to hold her, touch her skin against his. His cock stiffened. *Jesus! I have work to do!* He forced his mind to solutions, not things only bringing more confusion. He maintained a semi-hard erection, as much as Pete tried to ignore it, his cock refused to give up hope. *Damned thing has a mind of its own.*

Pete decided to follow up on the Tai Chi Chuan side of her life as this seemed like the only passion Sunshine Brightman had, other than her small, now non-existent, family. He spoke to a few people last week and the results piqued his interest to say the least. Apparently, Sunshine was much further advanced than the exercise form. Tai Chi Chuan a powerful and ancient martial art used also for attaining immortality; Pete intended to study this, as there could be a link to the murders. He remembered being corrected on his pronunciation, apparently it was Tajijuan, “Tarsh...ee...waan” he said out loud. Still, he wondered about the whole immortal bit.

The swordsmanship used on the victims no slash and hack. One piercing thrust into the back of the neck administered the fatalities. He picked up the swords at the scene with gloved hands and the weight of them surprised him. He’d swear only someone the size of a gladiator could pick them up. And yet the Chinese, a small statured race, handled them with apparent ease. Knowing their skill Pete knew they could be every bit as strong and dangerous as any large person. Apparently the inner stamina and attaining a higher level of consciousness became the prime motivation. It wasn’t about the fighting at all.

Sure it could be like the movies, but the majority of the martial art elite are peace loving individuals. Making the world a better place by just being here. Pete decided he could well take a leaf or two out of their book. Lately he’d been fretting over all the things he never achieved in his life. Maybe it was time to look at exactly what he had and appreciate it. His cock jumped to attention once more. *I didn't mean you...*

It would be the Chinese New year in a week's time. He wondered if that could be a link to the murders. *At this point I'm willing to consider anything.* Perhaps he should look at both, he'd always wondered about all the Chinese horoscope stuff anyway. All of this did nothing to quell the nervousness in the pit of his stomach. *Will she ring* He brought up Google and punched in Tai Chi martial arts. That would be as good a place to start as any. He jumped as the phone shrilled it ring, breaking the silence. The private line light flashed. He sat and looked at it for a moment, it had to be her.

* * * *

When Sunshine felt sure Frank left, she went back out and grabbed Cosmos. No way in the world would she would leave her cat to become her cousin's next victim. After scratching her way back under the wall, Sunshine wasted no time losing herself in the pending darkness. Sticking to the shadows so as not to be seen. Her head thumped from the swirl of thoughts taking over. What to do next had her little perplexed. Sunshine felt truly alone, time she trusted someone.

I can't take Cosmos back to the hotel. Reaching into her pocket with her spare hand she pulled free Pete's card. Sunshine knew no one else to call. The truth being she did not want to call anyone else anyway. A warm feeling washed over her and she knew he would help. Maybe he'd give Cosmos a home as well, for the time being. She quickly walked the block through the alley, then back onto the shadowed sidewalk. Slinking into a phone booth, which thankfully housed a working phone.

The ring sounded, *pick up, pick up*, Sunshine decided to let it ring, maybe in the toilet or something and didn't have his voice mail on. Sunshine nervously jiggled as it rang again, *come on, come on*. Then Pete's breathy voice sounded.

"Detective Larson, Pete...this is..." she began, struggling to keep hold of the cat and the phone.

"Sunshine? Oh thank God! Are you okay?" The sound of relief unmistakable in his voice.

"Yes, well physically anyhow. Pete, you said you would help, can you come get me? I'm at the phone booth across the road from the coffee shop about a block away from my house. You know where I mean?" Sunshine felt pleased by his concern, despite herself.

“I knew you would be at that house! Damn! Sunshine... anyhow, I'll get to that later. I know where you mean. Hang tight, I'll be fifteen minutes. And Sunshine, stay out of sight.”

“Thanks.” Breathing out in a rush Sunshine knew she made the right call, literally. She left the phone box and hung back in the shadows waiting for his car. Knowing Frank looked for her, which meant men may be watching her favorite hang outs. The coffee shop one of them. Thank God she checked into an obscure hotel under a pretend name.

Now, more than ever she needed a friend, perhaps Pete Larson would be her first in a long time. She ruffled the soft fur at the top of Cosmos' head and hugged him to her. For a change the cat let it happen.

* * * *

From across the street, Sunshine saw Pete get out of his pick-up and look around. She headed across the road, clutching Cosmos. He made eye contact as Sunshine neared the middle of the road; about the exact same time his expression told her he heard the same screech of tyres and roar of engine she did.

“Sunshine! Look out!” Pete screamed at her

Turning sideways, Sunshine stood directly in the path of a speeding black car. Sunshine's heart felt as if it dropped into her stomach, she braced herself for the full force impact. Seconds seemed like minutes and her body reacted without thought. Instinctively, she deftly threw Cosmos in the direction of Pete and prayed he would catch him instead of killing himself to try and save her. No point them both getting skittled.

As she turned to face her oncoming attacker she breathed in air through her nostrils and held her breath, harnessing her energy. The whole scene turned into slow motion. Her body tingled and her white hot power-ball centered inside her. “Li Yáng Guang...Jump, yes...jump” the voice ordered her.

The words, not whispered, sounded loudly in her mind. That voice commanded her and Sunshine crouched down with perfect balance, thrusting her hands upwards into the air as she pushed up. Picturing the power-ball exploding, using every ounce of strength her legs could muster, further upwards. Exhaling powerfully, she rose easily into the air. Every last ounce of the power-ball radiated to her extremities.

With a body as light as a feather, time almost stood still. Sunshine felt her body above the ground. The rush of air thrust her upwards as the car passed underneath, giving enough momentum to somersault forward, inhaling as she twirled. A blast of cold air assaulted her nostrils. Tucking her body into a ball, she let it spin at least five times. Her senses told her the car passed completely underneath.

Stretching her legs out her arms reached out to the each side. Landing on her feet with a small bump, her knees bent automatically to lessen the impact. She exhaled and hit the ground running. The car tires screeched and Sunshine knew the vehicle came again. Sunshine ran hard for Pete's vehicle and screamed at him, "Come on!" He snapped out of his apparent daze and ran toward the driver's seat door with Cosmos firmly in his grip.

Tossing the surprised looking feline into the vehicle, he slammed his door behind him. Pete hit the key just as the first shot's rang out. Sunshine heard bullets pinging off the pick-up.

"Get down and hang on!" Pete told her as he roared off.

Sunshine did just that, sheltering Cosmos. Determined not to get killed now, not until she'd settled some scores, Sunshine prayed Pete would not get injured. Her blood pulsed in exhilaration as she tried to get her head around what just happened. The shivers set in, fighting against her body's natural reaction. Sunshine calmed herself, harnessing all her emotion into her next white hot power-ball.

After a few more twists and turns of his vehicle, a couple more shots rang out, the attacking car sped off.

"Are you okay? I think you can get up now. They've given up. I suspect they want you alive." Pete checked his mirrors.

"Yes, we are fine. Thank you for being here Pete." Sunshine answered, truly grateful. Her shivering just barely noticeable now.

"Don't thank me, you saved yourself. You must have jumped twenty foot in the air and you spun so fast. Where'd you learn to jump like that?" he glanced at her.

"I didn't, it just happened. Something strange is going on here Pete, something that can't be explained in normal terms. At least I know who's responsible for my family's murders." Sunshine hung her head and fought back tears, now more than ever she needed someone to hold her.

"You do?" Pete asked, seeming quite surprised.

“Yes, it was my cousin, Frank, I don't know why yet. He came to the house. I hid as he spoke on his cell phone. He said he was after a key.”

Pete sounded shocked, “but wasn't that his wife and children? Do you know anything about this key?” Sunshine nodded and tears threatened to fall, she blinked hard to hold them back. Sunshine told Pete nothing more for now. At this point she did not know if she would share her key find with him. Her duty to her family would be to see Frank payed for his actions.

“Listen, don't worry about it now, lets get back to my place, get you into a hot bath. Some hot food in your belly. We can talk there. I have some interesting research which may help.”

“Do you mind a house guest?” Sunshine nodded toward Cosmos.

“Only if you agree to stay as well...I have a guest bedroom,” he added

Sunshine nodded again, her independence and stubbornness gone for now. She needed answers and a safe place. It seemed her new friend could give her that. Her hand went to her jacket pocket and she felt Wang.

* * * *

Considering Pete lived on his own, his house and décor fell nothing short of stunning. Rich rustic orange and dark ocean green adorned the walls and furniture. Leather, sumptuous browns the color of toasted muffins, and velvet brought an air of olde worlde charm to the rooms. Yet contemporary stainless steel finishes rang of modern day decorating.

The guest room boasted an ensuite to rival home's main bathroom. She planned on enjoying the lovely inner area. Just before she started the shower, a light knock came to the bedroom door. Wrapping the fluffy robe around her and tying the belt tight, a quick look in the mirror confirmed her suspicions, she looked like a polar bear cub with her large dark eyes peeking out from the very thick collar. *Lord! This robe is huge.*

The door opened to reveal a very sheepish looking detective, but Sunshine did not miss the flash of humor that passed through his eyes. “Ah sorry, my robe is a little big for you.”

Studying his upper body as it tapered down to trim hips, Sunshine could see why he needed an extra large robe. Realizing her look lingered a little too long once again, she smiled up at him. The ache

deepened in her core, wondering how much more of him would be well built.

“Yes, well at least I'll fit in if I need to hide in Iceland.”

Pete chuckled in a delightful manner, and to her surprise for the first time in weeks, she giggled as well. It warmed her insides to share a moment with a man she could trust. Pete's eyes glowed with admiration and he spoke quietly.

“I was hoping to catch you before you showered, I have readied the spa in my room, I mean, I don't want to presume, and I will stay in the lounge room. I just thought you may need that relaxation before we hash out what information we have...” he babbled, obviously embarrassed that she might think he had ulterior motives. In some strange way she wished he did.

More than anything, to be held in safe, secure arms appealed to her. Her mind went to Lee. No, they'd had explosive sex but no intimacy. Sunshine always imagined her perfect man to be dark and mystical, but at the moment her life provided more than enough danger. Stability and loyalty sounded good at the moment. Sunshine put him out of his misery. “That would be lovely Pete, and so thoughtful.”

Dropping her guard momentarily, she touched the side of his face lightly. His eyes closed partially and Sunshine felt the sharp pang of desire. She also knew she must fight it. Certain it only stemmed from the high-tension situation. Breaking her minimal contact, he immediately stepped away, as if he knew her thoughts.

“This way.” Pete led her through the hallway, across the lounge and through gleaming white French doors which opened into a room filled with twinkling down-lights and a massive four poster bed. The silken canopy hung sensuously about the chunky, dark wooden frame, a chintz powder blue cover draped the bed. Sunshine drew in a gasp of pleasure.

“Oh Pete! This is beautiful, was it your wife's?” Sunshine could not imagine a man inspired to decorate a bedroom this way, not a straight man anyhow. It took her breath away.

“Actually, no, I was married once. A very long time ago, and for a very short time as it turned out. This...” he waved his arm indicating the whole room, “you can thank my sister, Camille, for. She is an interior decorator, and coupled with her badgering matchmaking tendencies, she made this room into a romantic delight, or so she tells me. For when I meet *The One*, apparently.”

“It is truly stunning, she is very talented. Do you like it though? I mean it isn't traditionally masculine, but I can see aspects of you in here.” Sunshine felt her face flush as she revealed how in depth she studied him. She sensed him scrutinizing her and she dared not raise her head for fear of pressing her lips to his. *Control yourself, it is only the situation, it has to be.*

“I love it. I love the softness, the allure. I love the feeling of romance,” he spoke softly and Sunshine wondered if he referred to the bedroom or her. She stood with her face lowered until she felt his fingers brush lightly under her chin. His fingertips burned a trail there.

“That is a water sign for you, I guess. Pisces has to be the greatest contradiction to being a man at times.” He chuckled and his finger stroked her throat lightly. Sunshine couldn't help but wonder if he would treat her swollen clitoris with the same gentleness. She attempted to change the subject. Moist arousal made it's presence known just above her inner thighs.

“I'm a rat,” Sunshine needed to break the spell forming between them. No time for this personal banter, she must find out about the significance of this key. She kept telling herself being vulnerable made her body react this way. She simply refused to admit she wanted Pete more than anything right now.

Pete took his hand from her chin, but not before he slid his thumb lightly over her skin once more. Her body tingled from his touch. He stepped toward the inner doors deeper in the room, brushing against her as he passed. These doors, she guessed correctly, led to the ensuite.

“A rat? Oh I see, the Chinese horoscope signs, I've been studying up on those a little. You'll be interested to hear about the possible connection.”

“At this point, Detective, I think I would believe anything.” Sunshine tried to bring the conversation back to business by not using his name. Inside, her desire burned hotter than a Hell fire and the wetness, now formed at her pussy lips, threatened to spread further.

More French doors, “Oh my goodness, Pete!” Sunshine gushed despite her efforts to remain unaffected. Inside his bathroom, a multitude of candles flickered, while steam drifted off the milky white colored water. A strong scent of Lavender and Jasmine mixed with other sweet scents permeated the air. The candles glowed bright ruby red, the traditional colour for the coming of the Chinese New Year.

“Pete?” The question stuck in her throat, tears threatened to fall. *Why would a virtual stranger to me go to all this trouble? Why does Pete Larson care so much?*

“Don't fret about it now, just enjoy your bath. The herbal mix of Lavender, Sandalwood and Chamomile with a hint of Jasmine will help reduce your stress levels. Red is a traditional color for you, to help you relax and process your thought patterns,” he grinned. “See, told you I had done some research.”

“But how did you know I'd come here?” Sunshine stepped up to him and into the breathtaking bathroom.

“Dunno, I just knew. Seems I just know a lot of things these days, maybe my thirty eight years of experience are finally paying off.”

“Well, I hope my thirty-five years does the same.” Sunshine hadn't been far off guessing his age.

“Get outta here, thirty-five? More like twenty-five.” Pete smiled.

“Thank you for the compliment, but thirty-five it is.”

“Go on, enjoy your soak in the tub, I'll go out and prepare what information I have for you. Whenever you are ready and not a moment before.”

Sunshine smiled as Pete closed the doors. Sinking into the hot water and pressing the jets on, she reclined, inhaling deeply, clearing her mind of any worry, for now. In her semi-relaxed state Sunshine thought about the voice she heard. It seemed to penetrate through her body, but why? *Why am I imagining this voice?* The heat of the water eased around her sex, embracing her arousal. She parted her legs, inviting the heat of the water to meet her own. Would nothing quell this throbbing need?

Her hands balled into fists once more, Sunshine took three long, deep breaths. Inhaling through her nose to the count of ten, holding for the count of ten and exhaling just as slowly. After three times, Sunshine let her mind relax and open...”Li Yáng Guang...listen...lisssten to me,” the voice sounded softly.

Fighting her immediate reaction to lurch forward, Sunshine kept her body calm, kept her heartbeat slow, controlled her breathing, relaxing into the warm water with every outward breath. This voice saved her life, surely it could be no coincidence, and how else would she be able to propel herself twenty foot high from a standing position?

She must know more. *This voice may have the answers I seek.* Then her mind questioned, *who are you?* A warm breeze rushed over

her. Her body pulsed with an unknown energy. Still as horny as hell. Her nipples hardened against the light breeze which seemed to flow from nowhere.

Sunshine felt a very peculiar feeling, she opened her eyes and saw her body reclining in the bath. Floating near the ceiling spooked her. She panicked and felt the rush back into her body. Opening her eyes again just to make sure. Astral travel or whatever, she'd heard of it. *Let's try this again.* Closing her eyes she carried out her breathing ritual once again. The peculiarity returned. After confirming she visited the astral plane her eyes closed again. Her spirit followed the voice, a part of her seem attached to the voice like a lifeline. All movement ceased. Carefully Sunshine opened her eyes. She found herself standing in long, soft grass, barefoot. Wearing white silk Chinese robes white and covered in large bright prints of Hibiscus flowers. Totally naked underneath, the material touched her erotically. Her vision became impaired as a thick mist seemed to hang all around. Squinting her eyes, she could see a form coming closer. Her Kung Fu training kicked in and Sunshine took up a defensive stance. The breeze wafted up and around her aroused folds. The excitement of the unknown almost overwhelmed her.

Through the fog emerged a warrior, he wasn't mountainous but very well built, unmistakably Chinese. A pointed black beard flowed from his chin to his stomach. His hair, a tightly braided ponytail, hung over one shoulder. Chinese silk garb flowed majestically around him and a large sword glinted upon his left hip. Sunshine swallowed nervously and wondered why her imagination played such tricks.

"You are not imagining this, I am real..." he spoke with a resonating timbre, "you can relax. I am here to help you." As he came closer, a feeling of calm passed over Sunshine. Peace emanated from him. Breathing deeply, relaxation came easily to her.

"How..?"

"You are seeking answers, guidance, I am here. You've found me," he replied gently.

"You are here to teach me? Teach me what?" Sunshine felt calm despite the unusual circumstance she found herself in.

The Warrior chuckled. "No. I am here to guide you in teaching yourself. Every answer you want is inside you. You will not find the peace you yearn for outside yourself. Revenge will not quell the storm raging inside your body. If you try to resolve this situation using the fury simmering inside, you will bring forth no good end."

I need to make them pay for what they did. My own cousin...how could he?

Sunshine felt a twinge of guilt over her hatred and revenge toward Frank and the killers of her family.

“No guilt, it is only an extension of anger and fear. You need not fear, you need not worry about death, for life and death are one and the same, just different vibrations of energy. It is time.”

Sunshine tried to make sense of his philosophical words. *How does he know how I feel?*

The warrior continued, “To know others you must first know yourself. It is time to be content to just be and let go of any expectations. Once you have no expectations you can enjoy just being here in this moment.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is not important. You must find a way to stop Frank or an ancient evil will possess the world. I am here to bring you some information. Your key will unlock a jade talisman, your family's jade talisman. This talisman is most powerful. Only one person can stop this. The one who has the blood of an Ancient warrior in their veins. One born in the year of the rat. You, Li Yáng Guang. But remember, Frank has the same blood but not the same heart. He needs you, on the night of the New Year. At precisely Midnight he needs to spill your blood over the talisman. When the moon aligns with the constellation of the rat, only then will he gain immortality. You must not come from a place of anger or you are no better than him. It will only bring you more heartache.”

The warrior began to fade away and his voice remained, “You must find a way to forgive...”

“Forgive...forgive?” Sunshine screamed at his fading form, “My cousin had my family murdered, his children! In Heaven's name, how will I ever forgive that? He's a monster and I'm all alone.” Sunshine realized she shrieked out loud and returned to her body. Shaking uncontrollably, the strain of reality finally hit her. She pushed herself up in the bath. Sobs racked her body as her emotional release hit. The out-pouring of sadness left a hollow inside, a hollow to be filled, and at this point anger just might win over.

Suddenly her hairs stood on end, tears blurred her vision but she saw Pete standing beside the tub. Her screaming must have been loud. Sunshine felt nothing, no embarrassment at her nakedness, yet she couldn't control her sobs and trembling body.

“Sunshine...? I'm sorry to barge in. I heard you screaming at someone. What is it?”

She couldn't answer him, no words would come. The shaking of her body just would not leave.

“Oh Sunshine...” Pete muttered. Feeling his strong arms around her shoulders, and under her legs, she clung to his neck like a needy child.

* * * *

Her weight almost non-existent, Pete lifted her tiny frame out of the water. Her body, covered in suds, smelt strongly of the oils. Tight arms around his neck, built his desire even more. *The woman is an emotional wreck...back off!* he ordered his now very erect cock. This moment called for the sensitive new age type, but his testosterone won over.

Sunshine nuzzled into his neck, her hot breath flowing over his skin. His pulse pounded out his need in his ears. He wanted her but not just for this moment. The need to protect her for the rest of their lives smouldered wildly within. He wanted to share her dreams and her sorrows, but most of all he wanted to take away her pain. The pain of all she had endured, and lost. The pain of uncertainty. Pete placed her carefully atop his bed, the thick softness of the quilt taking her slightness and enveloping it.

Then her whispered plea took him over the edge of reason, transcended him to a place of no return. Deposited him deeply, and permanently, into the realm of love.

“Pete...please? Hold me, I need you.” Pete knew her need probably stemmed from the emotion of the situation. She may well regret those words later. So he vowed not to take advantage of her. Not wanting to just leave her alone either, Pete found himself between a rock and a hard place. The hard place being found between his legs at the moment. Selfishness aside he decided to make her feel like the most special person in the world. Whatever it took. Because to him she was.

“Sunshine, it may not be wise...” as the words left his mouth he felt the wanton surge of raw sexuality as her soft lips pressed to his. He groaned into her open mouth when her tongue came exploring his lips. He opened to her. It felt like the most natural thing in the world, her tongue inside his mouth. In one sweet movement she owned him.

“Sunshine...” he whispered as she broke the connection.

“Shhhhhh...Pete, I need this. I need you right now. I do know what I'm doing.” He believed her, honesty shone in her charcoal grey eyes.

With that, her tears flowed again and he scooped her closer into his lap, cradling her. Cross legged he wrapped his body to hers. Even though fully clothed, he felt her naked heat. Her unique scent of arousal wafted up, welcoming him. Daring him to taste her. A light-handed touch came to rest on his sturdy erection. His arousal felt like formed lightening bolts charging through his body. Daring to explore further, Pete found her turgid nipple.. The sharp intake of her breath spurred him to fondle more thoroughly. Playing his fingers over the very tip of her nipple, he rejoiced at Sunshine's shudder. So long since he pleased a woman. Right now he wondered if he'd ever truly pleased any woman. Needing to take his time. Pete wanted to worship her body with his mouth. Pete wanted to propel her to heights of ecstasy with his fingers, to play her perfectly, show her the depth of his feeling. Show her his love would never wane.

Shuddering as her hands unbuttoned his shirt, the feeling of skin upon skin drove him crazy. His nipples ached, needing her touch and his supple abdomen longed for the nibble of her soft lips. Slipping off his unbuttoned shirt, Sunshine gripped his shoulders. He felt her fingernails as the lusciousness of her mouth explored the nape of his neck. His cock wanted freedom and threatened to burst free from the zipper. Magically he felt her fingers flick his trouser button undone.

The release, as the zipper lowered, felt delightful. He felt a distinct nip at the tender flesh on his neck. It thrilled him and he growled deep into his being. Sunshine let his hardened cock spring free from his underwear. Pete just hoped he could keep himself in check. The only chance of that would be total distraction. “Sunshine, I want you. Whatever happens I will respect your wishes.”

He wrapped his hand around her ample breast and squeezed. Sunshine groaned, so Pete tweaked her large chocolate brown nipple and pulled on it. Sunshine thrust her chest forward. Still cradled in his crossed legs, her wet body melded with his own. As Pete increased the firmness of his touch, Sunshine increased the horny sounds which encouraged him onward.

“So beautiful” he whispered.

Pete felt something click over in his brain and he just needed to taste her. Supporting her back with one hand, he drew his mouth downward and he closed his lips over a nipple. Playing his tongue

around, he flicked quickly and firmly. Sunshine reclined back even further, pushing her breasts up to him. Pete took her breast in an infantile fashion and sucked.

Managing to take his lips from her breast for a moment he had to say how he felt. “Sunshine...fuck...you are gorgeous. Just beautiful,” Her hand gripped around his aching cock in answer and an animalistic groan rumbled from deep inside him. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Pete, I'm not sure about very much anymore, but at this moment in time, I want this, I want you.” She crushed her lips to his and ravished his mouth once more.

He had to accept it then. She did want him, maybe not forever, but he had a chance to bring a little color back into her world and he intended to do just that. Sunshine would be too smart a woman to start a relationship just because of a good bout of sex. Pete willing to accept her decision when the time came, whatever it may be.

Determined to worry about the rest later, his attention went once again to her supple body. Loving the smoothness of her, he feasted his eyes upon her yellow-gold perfection. Finely sculptured and extremely flexible, her head almost touched to the bed as she arched for him. Pete kissed between her breasts and over her soft belly before easing her back up. The expanse of his hands almost spanned her midriff. Lifting her easily as he kissed down her silken skin, he manoeuvred her onto all fours. Her tightly rounded butt cheeks parted slightly to reveal her female distinctiveness.

Pete felt like a kid at Christmas, His every desire waited before him and he intended to open his present slowly. Roaming hands rubbed down each globe simultaneously, Sunshine parted her legs further. Juices glistened on her swollen labia, his thumbs gently spread her lips. Completely exposed to him, his mouth watered his intent... Pete leaned down and played the tip of his tongue into her opening, tasting her sweetness, revelling in her womanhood.

Sunshine growled and Pete pushed his rigid tongue further, his nose nuzzled slightly at the tight anal rosebud. Taking his tongue upwards, he gave it a little flick. All of her tasted fantastic. Moving back to her tightened pussy walls, he began diving his tongue into her cunt. Spreading her juices up over her delicate ass opening and swirling around it. Sunshine emitted some guttural noises.

Wanting more, Pete worked his mouth toward her clit. Resting on his hands and knees, he extended his tongue making a direct hit, and

flicked her swollen nub. Sunshine let out a small squeal of delight as tremors passed through her body. Pete laved her from clit to ass, licking her hard, lingering on her nub. Sunshine straightened her legs and stood with her palms still flat on the bed, giving Pete all the space needed to sit up straight and lick her from underneath. His cock jutted out toward her and he buried his mouth into her soft folds and sweet juices.

Such was this woman's amazing flexibility and strength, she actually held his thighs and took the end of his cock in her mouth. Pete almost exploded immediately, as she softly sucked on head of his cock, he felt his precum flow freely. He really wanted to pump his cum into her warm, tight pussy, but if she kept this up he may not get that opportunity. Pete had worked wonders with his mouth. Sunshine felt her primal urges rising to the fore. Sighting his huge, stiffened prick she just had to suck it into her wet mouth. So aroused, she would have agreed to anything. The unusual position they had found themselves in, strangely comfortable and a super turn on. His lips nibbled her clit as minor pre-orgasm tremors flooded her body. Release neared. The release she needed more than anything. She used her breathing to try and prolong the pending explosion. As if sensing her immanent journey toward climax, Pete stopped licking her out and lifted her off his cock. His penetrating, sky blue eyes gazed deeply, the depth of emotion unmistakeable. He kissed her again, passionately and thoroughly. Sunshine gave of herself gladly.

“Sunshine, you taste so sweet, so tight on my tongue. May I make love to you? Even now, if you want to stop, it's okay. I'll stop.”

His consideration astounded her, any other man would have just taken her. Suddenly, Sunshine felt inundated with joy. She also felt safe, loved and cared for. “Pete, I want you to fuck me.” Then she attached her mouth to his nipple and sucked for all she was worth. Pete's groan sounded like a wild animal's as he flipped her over again. She knew she pushed him past the point of no return. It pleased her greatly. *I need this, I need him.*

She loved the way he handled her body with such masculinity and yet with reverence. Sunshine had never felt worshipped before, but as he turned her onto all fours, that is exactly how she felt. Climbing off the bed he edged her nearer the side. Holding her hips from behind, she felt his fatted penis pressed to her opening. Sunshine needed impalement immediately, her urges controlled her. She thrust

back and drove her cunt onto his considerable length. A scream broke free from her mouth. She tightened around him.

“Sunshine! Fuck...I'm going to give it to you now.” Sunshine shivered in anticipation. Completely filled, she urged him on.

“Fuck me Pete. Please. Make me come.”

With one swift stroke he impaled her again. Sunshine cried out in joy, he stretched her to burning point. Wise enough to cease all movement and hold his cock inside until her vagina learned to accommodate his thrusts. She felt him lean into her and then his fingers diddled her clit, deftly rubbing her nub, causing her cunt walls to throb. Her inner contraction must have squeezed him hard because he growled and gave a quick thrust. Pain shot into her core and spread outwards as pure, unadulterated pleasure, all the way to her fingertips.

The exacting movement of him slowly pulling out, not completely, then sliding back into her fully, had her crying out with each one. Sunshine relished his continued gentle, metered strokes, fingertips dancing on her clit. She arched her ass up towards him and threw back her head, she couldn't help but scream her words as she was so close to orgasm it wasn't funny. “I'm gonna come, I gonna come, Pete, oh God!”

Pete immediately ceased his finger work and gripped her hips, he thrust hard. Sunshine pushed back to take as much as she could. His massive knob massaged her vaginal walls and a kaleidoscope of colors began to form before her eyes.

“Harder, Pete, harder,” she ordered him and he held her fast against him as he pounded his cock into her wet cunt. Hearing their combined juices sounded like heaven and she cried out as the first of the spasms gripped her body, he roared his approval.

He was coming, coming as never before. Blackness clouded his sight, every part of his being focused on this Goddess he rammed his cock into, who took all of him, who wanted all of him. At last a woman who could handle his size and his desire. He felt her orgasm break around his cock, something he had never felt before, exquisite!

Sunshine fairly vibrated and he almost felt as if she would push him out of her as her climax peaked. Her scream of delight the best thing he had ever heard and he wanted to hear it forever.

The roar that came from his own lips surprised and delighted him even more. He'd never relaxed enough with a woman to emit more than a shallow grunt. But Sunshine, different in every way, provided everything he needed to finally feel like a real man. His spurting

finally subsided and Sunshine lie groaning on the bed, small tremors still erupting. Sliding his cock, still semi-rigid, out of her superb cunt, he just couldn't believe sex could be that special. He gathered her up with one arm. Pulling back the covers, he placed Sunshine beneath them. Sliding in beside her and wrap his arms about her. He wanted her to feel safe for always, forever. She reciprocated the hug.

“Thank you, Sunshine,” kissing her forehead with affection.

“Why are you thanking me? I should be thanking you.”

“What just happened between us has never happened to me before.” Sunshine searched his eyes, questioning his statement with her eyes.

“But Pete, you said you were married. You can't have been a virgin.”

“No, no, not a virgin. “ Pete prepared to reveal something about himself no other person, let alone the woman he loved, knew. But it felt right, he wanted total honesty with Sunshine. “No, I'm not a virgin. I married young, my wife was young and inexperienced and well...she thought I was too large for her.” He felt his face flush a little, it seemed so juvenile now.

“Too large? Your penis?” Understanding crossed her face.

“Yes, she was scared to have proper sex with me, her parents had been very strict and she knew little about sex, as did I.”

“I see.”

“Well, I learned to satisfy her with my fingers and mouth. We had very little intercourse. But that couldn't have been enough, she left me, for a guy with a smaller dick. Ironical eh?” His embarrassment must have showed.

Sunshine pressed her lips to his forehead with affection. “I'm sorry you had to go through that.”

“After that, I felt self-conscious of my size. For a while I went single, then I met this woman who seemed really sexually liberated. She seemed to be attracted to me, so we ended up in bed. She loved my cock. We had sex all the time, I doubt she could even tell you my name now, but she could tell you how long and thick my dick is.”

“What a selfish bitch, she used you for sex.”

“Yeah, but I let it happen. I'd never felt a woman orgasm around me like you didl just then. I must say the feeling is magic.” He kissed her on the nose and continued. “Every time we went anywhere, she would drop hints that I was big, you know, it embarrassed the hell outta me. Then when her and two of her girlfriends wanted me to

service them all night. They really were girlfriends, apparently. I had no idea she was bi either. I snapped and told her I never wanted to see her again. It may be a lot of men's fantasy, but being a sex object is over-rated.”

“Pete, I am just glad I could be the one.”

“Me too. Now, young lady, turn over and let me cuddle you a little. You need sleep, your body is exhausted mentally and physically. You are safe here, I will never let any harm come to you.”

After five minutes the tell-tale signs of deep sleep had invaded her breathing. Pete held his love for a little longer, knowing this may be the only chance he hold her this way. He would still respect a decision to not be with him, but he would never stop loving her.

CHAPTER THREE

Wrapping the robe tightly around her, smiling at yesterday's comments, Sunshine padded out to the lounge-room. The soft woollen pile on the carpets caressed her tiny feet. Pete read computer printouts, he looked up when he heard her.

"Hey, how was the sleep?" he grinned.

"Oh Pete, it was the best. Thank you so much," she sidled up to him. Looking over his shoulder at what he read.

"S'okay. You thirsty?" he asked.

"No, not really, how is the research going?" Sunshine couldn't keep the emotion out of her voice. The residue of what they shared last night still lingered, and the memories permanently etched into her brain. She wanted to just hold him and walk away from all of this. But running away never solved anything.

"Well, pretty good I think. But a lot of hard work is ahead if any of these leads have a link to what is actually going on here."

"What do you mean?" Sunshine settled on the sofa beside him, she could feel the warmth radiated from his leg to hers. She switched her mind off from that thought. *You have Frank to concentrate on*, she reminded herself firmly, *don't get in deep with Pete*.

"Sunshine, I don't know how you feel about the supernatural world, but most of this is pointing toward some most unusual possibilities. Now, I'm a cop. It's my job to be suspicious. Normally I would say this is a bunch of mumbo jumbo, but seeing you in action, I can't explain that. It is humanly impossible to go twenty foot into the air from a standing start, let alone spin like that." Pete's eyes searched hers momentarily. "Have you ever studied anything on the ancient Tai Chi Chuan warriors? Tai Chi was a lot more than a relaxation method back then."

"Tajijuan, yes. I am seeking high spiritual attainment in my practices. I don't know if I have taken Kung Fu as far as I can but this just seems so natural to me. Sifu said I had a gift, that's why I've been

trained in the art a lot more than most. For me, I like the inner peace it gives. I certainly never thought about warriors before, but I now know they exist on a higher plain than us.”

Sunshine accepted the ethereal and knew the time to sort out the problem to be in short supply. She wanted to tell Pete everything.

“Actually, that's who I yelled at last night when you heard me. It was almost like a dream but more real than that. He said the key was to an ancient family talisman and only I could stop an ancient evil coming back to the world. Frank needs me and the talisman when the moon aligns with the rat constellation on New Year's night. I presume that is why I am still alive. Frank wants me to find the talisman for him. If I don't stop him, even if he doesn't succeed the next person may. We have to find a way to stop this once and for all.

“What key? Is that what Frank wanted? Why does he need you at that time?” Pete looked carefully at her.

Sunshine nodded in answer at the same time as she said, “To sacrifice me.”

“What? Jesus, he is a madman!”

Sunshine went to her jacket, hanging over the back of the armchair, and pulled Wang out. “This is what I went to the house to get yesterday.”

“A pink teddy bear?” Pete looked puzzled.

“Wang, I brought him from China with me, the last time I saw my mother, she gave me this.” Sunshine poked her finger inside Wang as she spoke. She popped the key out and handed to Pete. “I'd forgotten about it until yesterday. According to Frank he will dream about where the key is so I'm not sure how much time we have before he finds us.”

Pete looked it over. She could see lines of concentration on his brow. A thrill coursed through Sunshine as she remembered the exquisite way he used his mouth on her. She took the information pages Pete handed to her and read about her ancient art. With much to learn and no time for day-dreaming, she put her torrid thoughts out of her mind. Anything personal would have to wait, right now the only thing Sunshine really cared about was making Frank pay.

“So, we have a key,” Sunshine mused. “But what does it open and where will I ever find whatever it opens?”

Pete turned the key over in his hand, “I haven't seen this type before. It's a lot smaller than regular. It shouldn't be hard to track

down. I have a friend in the force that lived in China for about five years. He is right into all this mystic stuff. Be worth a try.”

“The warrior said I need to keep the talisman safe. I need to find it before Frank does.”

“Well. I'm not sure I will ever grasp any of this but if you are seeing ancient warriors and people are killing for the talisman then it must be important. First, we have to find it.”

“Then...we find Frank.” Fury bubbled inside her once more. She just could not let go of the anger.

“I'm not sure how safe that will be but it may be our only hope. If we can find a way to flush him out.”

“I *can* find a way...me.” Sunshine determinedly replied.

“That is far too dangerous.”

“Pete, I'm grateful for all this protection and stuff, but I'm not going to sit on the sidelines here. This is my family problem and I will deal with it.” Sunshine snapped at him, as frustration built within.

No matter what it takes, I will destroy him. The warm breeze ran over her again and she recalled the words, forgiveness and love. *I'll never forgive that monster!*

Pete wondered whether last night truly meant anything to Sunshine. He really felt love for her, but he did not expect love in return. Sunshine clearly loved her independence. Now, he had a warrior to compete with...*great!*

Also well aware he should never mix business with pleasure, it would be sure to end in heartache. Maybe get him kicked out of the force. He knew full well he'd lost all objectivity. Her soft porcelain skin and large dark eyes became the very reason for his existence. Her feathered touch on his skin had thrilled him to the core.

Pete had lost his cool and all sense of what was proper the second his lips touched Sunshine's. He would see her out of this mess, or die trying. Regardless of whether she saw him as worthy husband material, he would ask her to marry him when this was all over. That thought alone became enough to drive him to a successful completion.

As she looked away from him, he almost doubted what they shared. Nevertheless, he needed to put that out of his mind for now. He had to work on getting this case solved and keeping Sunshine out of danger. *Those kisses, those kisses...*

“Pete?” she started with a tone he cared little for, almost apologetic and maybe even regretful.

“Last night, it's well...I mean, I'm sorry if I led you on. I just needed so much for someone to hold and pour my emotions into. I just don't know...” Sunshine stumbled awkwardly over the words.

“Enough said, we have a job to do and if anything other than friendship happens between us, I'd rather know after we get through this mess.” Pete did not want an emotional decision to tie her to him. If she felt grateful or just didn't want to hurt his feelings, he couldn't bear it. Even though her words and tone hurt him to the core, he would never let her know, she had enough to worry about.

“Thanks.” She replied quietly and walked over toward the kitchen.

“Now, I'm going off to see a few workmates about this key. As soon as I hear anything, I'll be straight back. Keep the door locked, do not open it to anyone except me, but I have a secret combination number, so you shouldn't need to let me in. I'll set up the alarm system right now.”

“I hope I don't need it.”

“Same, but they know you are with me and although my address isn't common knowledge, I'm certain they are resourceful enough to find it eventually.”

“Okay, I'll be careful. I have found a whole site on ancient Chinese Warrior legends. I'm going to devote some time there, see if I can get some clue. After a good strong iced tea.”

“Good idea, we need to know exactly what our real threat is. We cannot fight an unknown foe.”

Sunshine had been sifting through the site information for an hour. She kept reading and clicking links which took her further into the Chinese legends. Nothing presented itself to her, she did know only three days remained till the Chinese New Year.

* * * *

“That slut is with her cop boyfriend!” Frank spat out as the sharpened sword swished into the air brutally cutting an imaginary foe. “I am going to have to kill her as well. I bet she pleads for her life, not like those pair of old fools.” Every time Frank recalled the look of calm in his parents eyes he seethed. How could they seem so calm in the face of death? Even when he pressed the tip of the blade to the base of their skulls. Holding hands and speaking the words still haunting his dreams.

“Shu Bao Nu will come for you. I die with honour.” said his mother.

“Shu Bao Nu? What is that, an angry mouse? Why should I worry over an angry mouse?”

“Shu bao Nu, The Rat of Fury. I forgive you, Frank. I die with honour,” said his father.

Frank's rage became uncontrollable and he forced the sharp blade swiftly into his Mother's brain. As she slumped to the ground, he said, “Show that to your Rat of Fury!” Turning next to his father he said, “So, Old Man, are you ready to beg for your life and tell me where the talisman is hidden?”

“I will not beg, you are a bad man Frank. No longer our son, we disown you. I die with honour, you will not.”

“Fuck'n right I won't die with honour, because I will not die. When I get that talisman, I will be immortal. I will hold the power. I will rule supreme.”

“Shu Bao Nu, will come for you, Frank.”

“Everyone knows the rat is a creature of peace, cunning maybe, but never a cold-blooded killer. You, Old Man, are about to join your wife.”

“I die with honour. I forgive you, Frank”

Frank administered the fatal blow, and although he knew he should have felt disgusted by his actions, the need to possess the power was far greater. He left the pair slumped to the ground then. He never knew his parents Swordsmanship. It surprised him when they fought back with the swords over the fireplace.

Even a couple of his best men had died, but the Cops wouldn't find them, the bodies had been taken away and burned immediately. He'd always thought those damn swords had only been for decoration. Gingerly touching the elongated scar in his side. Frank only took about ten hours to heal from the deep slash. Potions and incantations prepared him for immortality and his body already begun to heal any wounds without other assistance. *But that is nothing to the power I will possess, nothing and no-one will be able to harm me.*

Every night since, the nightmares about killer mice plagued his sleep. Waking frequently in the cold sweats, Frank pushed the words Shu Bao Nu aside. He would get to Sunshine. She was the only one left with the ancient blood, aside from him, but Sunshine had been born in the year of the rat. The dusty book said blood of the special ones must be spilled on the night of the Chinese New Year, beginning the year of the Rat, at midnight.. And once that blooded talisman slotted into his ring, the power would be his. Frank Just needed to

stay alive and complete that ceremony. For now he waited for the dream to reveal the key. Last night's sleep did not prove fruitful. He would succeed, no matter who must die.

"Have you found her yet?" Frank roared at the two Chinese men who scurried before him.

"No."

"I should kill you both, but I need you, for now."

Sunshine proved better at hiding than he thought. From the way she'd gotten out of that 'car accident', her power already increased. The best hope he had was for Sunshine to not understand he needed her on the night. Even if she had the key and found the talisman she could not know he needed to sacrifice her at the precise moment the moon aligned with constellation of the rat.

Frank felt a presence behind him and spun around. "Oh! It's you. Fuck, you scared ten years off my life sneaking around like that."

Lee Chang held powers also. Frank worried about what Lee might be capable of. Surely he would covet such power for himself? Lee seemed to much prefer the lower echelons of evil, the actual practices of torture. Seeing him in action both frightened Frank and impressed him. This made Lee the perfect choice to carry out Frank's dirty work.

After the double date, Lee fell in love with Sunshine. Her refusal hurt his pride, her death would save him face. All Frank need do was stop him from killing Sunshine before she could reveal the key. Without the key nothing could go ahead. Without that damned key the whole plan would fail. Lee's voice roused Frank from his thought pattern.

Lee's evil, ebony eyes crinkled at the edge in amusement. Frank worried Lee could read his mind as he asked, "is it time?"

"It is, you've had her before, can you find her?" Frank queried.

"I already know where she is."

"Take care, she must be alive."

"She will be. I will bring her to the house on the night of the Chinese New Year. I'll keep her busy until then."

"Good, I can't take the chance she might escape."

"She won't."

* * * *

I've got to get out and clear my head a little. The ring of the phone shattered the silence. Sunshine jumped despite herself. *Okay, calm down.* The private line light flashed. *It must be Pete.*

“Hello?”

“Sunshine, how is everything?” Pete’s asked.

“Just fine, I’m hitting dead-ends though. I need some time out of four walls. I’m getting stir crazy.”

“Understood. Nothing on my side yet either. If you go out, be careful. There’s a couple of cafe’s and bars in the neighbourhood.”

“Thought you’d be telling me to stay in,” Sunshine tested.

“Wouldn’t do me any good, and besides I know you can take care of yourself.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. I will be careful.” Sunshine placed the receiver back in its cradle. Maybe a long, cold beer would help. Being three in the afternoon she figured it late enough in the day to have a drink. Not wanting to draw attention to herself. Women out early, drinking alone, usually stuck in the memory banks of people.

The mild air welcome as Sunshine stepped out along the footpath. Apprehension surfaced but Sunshine managed to push it to the back of her mind. The outside of *The Piano Bar* looked inviting. Looking through the window, a wood fire burned invitingly. Sunshine decided a fire would bring in the crisp evening air nicely. A secluded table sat near the side of the fireplace, the room just dark enough to blend her into the background. Trailing her fingernail down the beer bottle, she studied the icy droplets clinging to the sides. Drinking now, the fresh flavor caressed her dry mouth and throat. *Ah...yes*. She studied the young man playing the piano. The music had the sounds of light jazz. *Perfect*. Another mouthful of beer and her muscles relaxed. Her mind ticked over with the thoughts of the key and a jade talisman, she wondered what the discovery would bring.

A familiar voice sounded beside her and Sunshine turned.

“Sunshine? What a surprise. May I sit?”

Her body immediately reacted, but she couldn’t decide if it was a warning or memories of a night filled with lust.

Lee Chang, the man she’d shared the explosive one night stand with, stared calmly at her. His eyes seemed to probe right into her soul.

“Oh...yes. Yes of course. Lee, sit. This is a surprise.”

“I had hoped we would meet again someday.” He smiled and Sunshine relaxed a little. *What harm could it do?*

“I guess I should apologise for cutting you off like I did.”

“Not at all, I understand completely. It was after all, a one night encounter, not an arranged marriage.”

“Thank you for letting me off the hook so easily.”

His hand came to rest on hers, his touch still affected her, and yet, Pete played in the back of her mind.

“You were never on the hook.”

Her heart pounded, and the effect of his intense stare burrowed into her core. *Surely, I can't be attracted to him after last night.* She withdrew her hand to lift her beer, taking another sip.

“Do you come here often?” Sunshine couldn't suppress a giggle at the sound of the cheesy pick-up line. She felt heady.

“I have spent some time here, but I've never seen you here before. What brings you to this side of town?”

Determined not to reveal anything, Sunshine replied, “just needed a change of scenery.”

“You still in the magazine game?”

“I sure am, getting busier everyday.”

“Will you join me for dinner?”

“I'm not sure I should...”

“Oh, you have a lucky man waiting?”

“No, it's just...a little awkward, given my behaviour last time.”

“Nonsense, this is just dinner, I expect no more than that. Just a couple of old friends sharing a meal.”

“Okay, if you put it like that.”

“Fine, that's settled then. Another drink?”

Sunshine realised she'd finished her drink, *take it easy girl.*

“Yes, that would be great.” She answered, his fingers brushing hers as he took the empty beer bottle. The memories of the searing passion they'd shared hit her like a ton of bricks and she felt her face color. *Can my life get any more complicated?*

Will Pete try to call my cell phone if he returns to an empty house? Sunshine conceded he probably would, so perhaps it would be better to call him and let him know she would be out for dinner. Awash of guilt rushed over her. Pete represented the stable influence she so desperately needed. Lee represented the purity of carnal need. Lee, not relationship material, became the safe option for remaining independent of commitment. At the moment, too much else went on to worry about relationships. But every time Lee neared, she wanted him.

“There you go. Any preference for dinner? They serve a great steak here.”

“That sounds fantastic.”

“Well they serve all day, so we can order whenever you are ready.”

“Even better, I'm quite hungry now actually, I missed lunch.”

“Fine, I'll go order, how do you like your steak cooked and do you want salad or vegetables with it.”

“Medium thanks and a salad would be nice.”

“Beautiful, another thing we have in common,” he arose again and headed to the bar to place the order. Sunshine's senses heightened, Lee seemed more attractive than ever. *I must be going crazy* Confusion about her feelings did not help. For some reason it seemed difficult to concentrate on the problems at hand with Lee around. Somehow much of it didn't seem all that important anymore.

Hitting the speed dial on her cell, she waited for Pete to answer.

“Sunshine? Is everything okay?” he sounded concerned. The question almost annoyed Sunshine. She did not know why. “Yes, just fine. I'm having dinner with an old friend...so I just wanted to let you know, I'm fine.”

“An old friend? Who?” Pete asked quickly.

“Does it matter? I'm fine really.” Sunshine felt hostility within, she couldn't control it.

“Sunshine, that's fine. Just be careful. You don't sound like yourself and with all the strange happenings lately...” Pete warned her.

“I can look after myself.”

“I know. Will you at least tell me where you are...just in case. I promise I won't follow you.”

Commonsense prevailed briefly and Sunshine said, “I'm at The Piano Bar. Don't come here.”

In that split second, Sunshine knew if Pete came here, it would mean certain death for him. A feeling in the pit of her stomach warned her. The warm breeze washed over her.

“I won't, but you need to call me in a couple of hours so I know you are still okay.”

Sunshine fell silent, anger built inside her once more and she realized Lee had returned with more drinks for them.

“I'll be fine, really. I might see you tomorrow.” She cut off the call.

“Everything alright?” Lee enquired, sitting her drink down.

“Just a concerned friend.” Sunshine smiled at Lee, feeling relaxed in his company. *Just what had Pete been worried about?* Her

mind couldn't recall why all the fuss came about. Lee's hand on hers sent a charge of sexual want through her body.

“Don't worry, I'll see you are looked after,” Then lowering his voice a little and leaning in closer he continued, “Remember my rigid cock inside you, Sunshine? Remember the way it made you feel. How you begged me to fuck you? I want to fuck you again. I have been waiting for you.” His lips gently touched her cheek and Sunshine wanted him badly. The verbal reminder only served to inflame her need.

“After we eat, I want to take you and have you all night, Sunshine. Tell me I can...please,” Lee continued.

Sunshine wanted to say yes immediately, without thought, without worry. She felt ready to give her body back to this man. Before she could agree, a whisper sounded in the back of her mind...a shouted whisper...*NO!* Confusion set in, a battle between her head and her body began. The daylight ended and darkness fell silently.

At this moment, Sunshine noticed a glint pass quickly through Lee's eyes. A look of hatred, subtle, but undeniably present.

“Excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom. Must be all the drinks.” Sunshine stood and headed for the ladies toilet door. The bathroom seemed a mile away. The further she walked from Lee, the more dread encased her. Fighting to keep her composure, Sunshine knew Lee held power over her. That must explain why she felt compelled to seduce him in the first place. A moment of clarity told her his link with Frank involved more than business. He didn't just happened to turn up in the small bar alongside her. He came to get her.

As she neared the bathroom door, a surge of violence screamed into her mind. It came from Lee and Sunshine shook inside with fear at his power. Automatically she created a mental shield to block her from further psychic attack. The only problem being Lee now knew she had worked him out, and he would not leave her alone gracefully. Frank sent him, and that would surely mean Lee wanted to capture, or kill, her.

She thumped both hands against the door, pushing it open quickly. Inside, she leant on the back of the door her heart feeling like it pounded in her throat. Her mind raced with possible solutions. Checking her cell phone, she had no signal. *Just as well, this is no place for Pete.* Sunshine knew she could not go back out into the bar.

Lee would not worry about killing others to get to her. Enough innocent lives taken already, she knew she might have to fight.

The smallish window, still ample to let her through, led out to a large space behind the bar, extra parking for patrons. Sunshine, kitten heeled shoes in hand padded down onto both feet. *Silence might be an important ally.* Well apparently this would require a little more than silence. No sooner upright when she heard his venomous voice.

“Going somewhere, Bitch?”

Sunshine drew a long breath and braced herself, facing Lee without fear.

“Get out of my way!” she ordered.

His cackle, low and evil, chilled her to the bone, “You aren't going anywhere.”

He advanced then and Sunshine felt the air rush from his quick sidekick past her face. Her body swayed back just enough to allow his foot past without contact. Seeing him momentarily off guard, she drew back her fist and drove at him squarely in the middle of his chest. The blow thumped into him and Lee took a step backwards, surprise flashing through his eyes.

Sunshine recalled all her Kung-Fu and Tai Chi Chuan training and as Lee lunged at her, she used his momentum against him and her movements flowed throughout her body. Warding off his initial attempt at striking her throat with his palm, Sunshine stepped back and used her palm to deflect the blow. Immediately she followed through with another thrust punch to Lee's chest. He grunted and knowing she had a slight advantage, Sunshine wasted no time hitting him again. She feigned a palm strike to his throat and whilst he concentrated on deflecting that blow, Sunshine moved in to punch him using a vertical fist to the ribs. A distinct crunch sounded on his bone. *That's sure to piss him off,* she readied herself for the repercussion.

Lee roared and stepped back from her. “If he didn't want you alive, I would have killed you by now!”

Sunshine laughed back at him, goading his anger to her own advantage. “You are nothing more than a puppet to a murderer, you have no honor.”

Lee raced toward her then, kicking low trying to sweep her off her feet. Sunshine practiced this deflection many times. Avoiding kicks, commonly thought to be the most effective fight method, was extremely easy when you knew how. *Kicks are actually the easiest to*

counter, she remembered the voice of her master, remember start earlier, arrive later. Use your opponent's own force against him.

As his kick came towards her Sunshine lowered her stance, stretching out her right leg and bending the other. Allowing her to counter Lee's kick with a single low whip action using her hand. Grasping his heel, she pushed it away and immediately landed another thrust punch with her opposite hand. This time it landed on his upper thigh. He growled and stumbled, his anger inflamed.

Sunshine to not fight in anger might keep her alive long enough to deflect his attacks. She knew if Lee decided to kill her, she would have a hard time avoiding that. This man, an obvious killing machine, left her no choice but to get away as soon as possible. Until she found a way to and unravel this whole mystery, she needed to keep far away from Lee.

Righting himself quickly, Sunshine watched as a powerful high kick came towards her head. If it connected, it would probably snap her neck. He'd gone beyond the point of reasonable thinking.

This may well be her last chance to flee. As the swift kick advanced, Sunshine took up the lowered stance again. As she averted his foot, at the very end of his movement, she forced a cruel blow into his groin, just stopping short of connecting with his scrotum. This time Lee went down, clutching at his genital area.

"Fucking Bitch..." he groaned.

Sunshine didn't wait around to exchange words, she saw her chance and took it. Running, as fast as her legs would carry her, the couple of blocks back to Pete's house. Knowing she had to get Pete out of there before Lee came looking for them both. Pete's police training would be no match for the skills at work here.

If Lee knew she would be at the bar, obviously he knew where she hid and Pete's house could no longer be a haven to them. She'd also decided the next time she met Lee she would let him win. The only way she would get to Frank.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Yeah, I’ve seen keys like this one before,” Gary Moore said as Pete handed the key over to him. Pete hoped his friend could help him. Gary’s home looked like a little piece of China. His Chinese wife had cleaned and decorated for the traditional New Year celebrations. “You have...where?”

“You may not believe this but when I was in Special Forces...long time ago now,” he grinned, “the time I spent five years in China, you remember? They’d slaughtered in Tiananmen Square and sent us out in secret to try and hold some peace. Protecting those innocent citizens was dangerous. We all lived undercover.”

“Yeah okay...and the key?” Pete brought him back to the subject at hand.

“Well, I lived with my wife’s family, not that she was my wife then. She showed me keys like this.”

“What are they for? I thought a safety deposit box,” Pete pressed Gary to go on speaking.

“I suppose they are in a way. I never really thought about it like that. Su Lin worked for some powerful people, cleaned for them and stuff. She took me one day, when they were out, to show me how some of the high military types lived while the peasants starved.” Gary handed the key back.

“You’ll find a golden box, of some description, somewhere in the home of where this key belongs. They keep their special things in there. You know, kinda like the family jewels, but more sentimental than valuable. Seemed to me anyway. Was only ever jade animals and stuff she said.”

“In the home of the family the key belonged to...” Pete mused, did this mean they had to go to China and find Sunshine’s former home?

“Yep, it would travel with them. They would not leave it behind, to superstitious. I’m thinking what you’ve been looking for is right

under your nose. This to do with those murders of that Chinese family?”

“It is, but we've searched that place even more thoroughly than the killers did.” Pete explained.

“I bet there is a place you haven't looked, it'll be so simple you'll kick yourself. The Chinese worked on the fact that folk often don't look in the places most obvious to them.”

“I guess it warrants another poke around.” Making his way over to the police headquarters, Pete wondered how Sunshine went with her research. He'd better give her a quick call. He needed to hear her voice, it made him uneasy to be away from her.

Pete rang before he left for Sunshine's family home, he had no intention of telling her his plan to go searching there. He knew she would want to go as well. The conversation went quickly. She wanted a walk to clear her head. Quietly taking the keys to the home, he set off. This would be an unofficial visit, so no need to let any of his colleagues know. The truth being he did not want them to know anything about his involvement with Sunshine.

No one would believe the super natural element of this case. He wouldn't have believed it himself if he never experienced it first hand. Pete stopped his car a couple of blocks from the house and walked some of the way. He started searching inside the kitchen, his eyes scanning every inch of the room. He saw most of the foodstuffs had been cleaned away. The department had written the crime off to drugs. One of those cases written off too easily, in Pete's opinion. Most involving Asian cultures were. Still it would serve to help him this time.

He saw nothing that housed a golden box, of any description. Big or small. *Where is the most obvious place that we haven't looked in yet?* He took the fish food flakes and sprinkled a few on top of the water, the podgy orange and yellow fish gulping hungrily at their food. As he watched them, his line of sight trailed down to the inside of tank. There in the very corner with bubbles coming out of it sat small gold colored treasure chest.

Surely not! Reaching into the cool water, he took the chest between finger and thumb, flicking off the air hose. The weight surprised him, being a small object, a definite sign of solid gold. The keyhole on the front looked far too small to take the silver key Sunshine found. *So what can that mean?* Pete turned the chest over

and saw that the bottom up under the little legs shone metallic silver.
Bingo!

Certain the bottom would be false and lead into the part the talisman may be hidden, Pete considered his next move. As much as he wanted to open it here, he conceded it would be a pretty dumb thing to do. Frank may come snooping around. Besides Pete decided Sunshine should be the one to open the golden chest. After all she had endured, it only seemed right.

So he tucked it in his pocket, grabbed a heap of stuff in plastic bags to look like he'd gathered evidence and left for his car. That would hopefully put off anyone watching the house for Sunshine. Now to get back home. The colder evening air settled and the sun quickly went down. It would be dark when he got home. Pete hoped she would be there. The thought of returning to a dark, empty house suddenly did not appeal to him.

* * * *

The second he walked through the door, he knew Sunshine hadn't returned. Despite the fact that he told her he wouldn't worried, he did. *If anything has happened to her...so help me.* The phone began to ring and Pete rushed to grab it, it had to be her. He spoke first.

"Sunshine? Is everything okay?" he was concerned.

"Yes, just fine. I'm having dinner with an old friend, so I just wanted to let you know I'm fine"

"An old friend? Who?" Pete was puzzled by the level of annoyance in her voice.

"Does it matter? I'm fine really." She snapped back, Pete could hardly believe it was the same woman he had made love with last night..

"Sunshine, that's fine...just be careful. You don't sound yourself and with all the strange happenings lately..." Pete spoke reminded her. Something didn't feel quite right.

"I can look after myself."

"I know. Will you at least tell me where you are...just in case? I promise I won't follow you," he awaited her pause with baited breath, hoping to get through to her.

Finally, she said, "I'm at The Piano Bar. Don't come here."

Now her voice sounded the warning. The hostile tone replaced with something deeper than concern. Pete felt the fear in her voice, but just as quickly it returned to the anger.

“I won't, but you need to call me in a couple of hours so I know you are still okay,” Pete continued to coax her.

Sunshine fell silent for a moment, then cut him off abruptly, “I'll be fine, really. I might see you tomorrow.”

The line went dead and Pete's hands became clammy. *Just be okay Sunshine, I trust you to take care of yourself. What other choice do I have?* He could have went after her, but it seemed more intelligent to him to wait for Sunshine. It went against the grain of his training, but she proved herself to be resilient and brainy. He would wait. Fondling the small chest in his pocket, Pete just hoped his idea proved correct.

A gut feeling told him things could heat up and they may need to make a quick get away. He found his gun roll in the cupboard and took out the small pistol. He strapped on his leg holster and place the gun inside. He then took out a slim bladed knife, took off his shoe and placed it in the bottom. He already had a body holster on. He wondered if he would get the chance to use a gun, maybe not, but he did feel safer with the weapons. The gold chest he buttoned into the inside pocket of his jacket with the key. He didn't want to risk losing that.

Sunshine...that very name haunted his every waking moment. After the way she came to him last night, Pete knew there would never be another lover for him. If he couldn't have her, he would have no one. He loved her, would die for her. The memory of her soft lips feathering across his body came back to him suddenly. His cock became instantaneously hard. Completely at her mercy, should she want him or not, his feelings remained bound to her. Touching himself then became natural, her essence filled his house.

Walking into his bedroom the scent of her oiled bath and candles still hung enticingly. He sat on the unmade bed and lifted the quilt to his nose inhaling her scent. Filling his body with desire, taking his cock into his hand through his pants, he rubbed it. *What am I doing? I haven't done this since Uni?*

In an effort to stop the way his mind worked, Pete undressed for the shower, he wanted to cleanse the day from his body. Noticing the bottle of Jasmine scent on the sideboard as he passed to get to the shower, he picked up the bottle and inhaled strongly. The lid had been left off. Everything about Sunshine came back to him then and his cock throbbed and begged for release. His balls tightened. Pete had no choice. Pouring oil in his hand he ran it the length of his shaft.

His cock seemed longer than usual just thinking about the petite flexibility of Sunshine's body. His stroking became faster with a nice rhythm going now. His pulse quickened somewhat. *Sunshine, I want you Sunshine. I need you...please take my cock inside you again...* Pete's mind took over as his hand worked over his hard dick that would have release. Any rational thought long gone and the building of his orgasm peaked. Determined to see this to the end he tugged wildly now and the pressure in his tightened sac felt ready to explode. As his grip tightened on the side of the shower cubicle, his legs began to tremble.

As his cum rocketed for release, Sunshine's name ejected from his mouth and his spasms came easily. His orgasm quick, quicker than ever before, left him panting. Such an effect she moved him to emotion with a single thought. He just prayed they would come out of this alive. Pete turned on the heated shower water and washed the residue of his orgasm away. The water felt good against his skin, he wanted to stay under it forever, but he shut it off and stepped out.

His behaviour juvenile seemed quite embarrassingly male. Perhaps a little selfish as well. Sunshine may be in danger and he wanked off. Pete felt bad, but knew he could not have stopped himself.

As he dressed, he placed his weapons back in their positions, praying he wouldn't need them. The lounge room seemed empty without Sunshine. One thing he did know, they had to get this talisman out of the way of Frank. The sooner he could get together with Sunshine the better. *Perhaps I should go find her?*

No sooner had he thought that, the kitchen door slammed back to the wall and Sunshine burst in. Covered in dust, breathing like a wild animal...Pete grabbed her and held her tight.

"Sunshine! What the fuck is it? Are you hurt?" he yelled.

"No...I'm not...but we will be if we don't get out of here. I just made a very kick-ass fighter very angry," She puffed.

"Where the hell will we go? Any ideas?" Pete snatched up the rest of his gun roll and ammo and stuffed it down his shirt.

"We just need to hide...as quickly as possible, as far away as possible," Sunshine panted grabbing Pete's hand she pulled him toward the patio door.

"Okay, I have a place but it's a big run...they shouldn't find us there, for a while anyway," Pete knew an old hut he used to play in as

a kid. “It’s pretty run down, but offered shelter, and it’s only about ten miles out of town.”

“Which way?” the desperation in her voice egged him on.

“Listen carefully. We go up to the end of the street, turn left, go straight ahead, about a hundred yards, and then you’ll see an opening into the trees. Get on that track and follow your nose, don’t stop until you catch me up. Don’t worry you can’t get lost. The track will dwindle out a little, just keep going. I’m talking ten miles in.”

“Right...” Sunshine replied.

Pete rushed out the gate and ran. After about thirty strides, Sunshine passed sprinting ahead of him. By the time he hit his straps and rounded the corner she was out of sight.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Pete had to smile and shake his head...*why the hell did I assume she would be behind me?*

* * * *

“You what?” Frank roared.

Lee stood toe to toe with him, not seeming intimidated by the outburst at all.

“She got away. I chased a while but she ran to fast. They will go hide, but I will find her. I will find him in my mind. They will be together.”

“Why didn’t you just knock her unconscious her, you idiot?”

“Frank, she has the power. The only thing stopping her from pulverizing me is the fact that she doesn’t know she has the power yet.” Lee’s tight hold on his shirt told Frank he may have pushed a little too far.

“I will beat her. I will be stronger.” Frank spat out.

“If she realises the power she harbors, you will not stop her. Should she embrace her anger and hate, she will be The Rat of Fury. And you, Frank, will die.” Lee spoke as if he knew what the Rat Of Fury was.

“What the fuck do you mean, what is The Rat of Fury? They told me The Rat of Fury would come for me...” Frank felt nervous. Why hadn’t he known about this before?

“She has ancient blood, is born in the year of the Rat and may have the jade rat talisman. The three things needed on the full moon at Midnight, tomorrow night. If she gets pissed off enough, she will have more power than you.” Lee stepped away casually and continued, “You may have the opportunity to be all powerful, but it seems your family line comes from a long line of immortal warriors. I

never believed the legends, but I have seen her in action. She moves faster than the blink of an eye. Even my psychic powers did not hold her for long.

“How can I stop her?”

“If she tries to kill you from anger, she will weaken herself. It is the way of the ancients to bring peace. Hate blinds people, makes them less careful. The only chance you have is her wanting revenge and the fact that she may not have fully embraced her power. Of course the last is a variable. By the time we get her, she may well have discovered it.”

Frank tapped his fingers on the table, “Well, she hates me. I just have to make sure she hates me enough to lose her cool.”

“It is your best chance. Bring her to her house this time. It will serve to bring her emotions to the fore.” Lee suggested.

“I want to have the power of the immortal warriors and have it, I will” Frank ranted.

“I will bring her. I have a score to settle myself,” Lee added as he left the room.

Tomorrow night it would happen. When the full moon shone on the Year of the Rat and the jade talisman placed into his ring, he would have the power to rule all. Pity help anyone who stood in the way. Taking up his twin curved swords, he swung them and slashed through the air. His enhanced skills had him working at lightening fast speeds. As far as he knew, Sunshine still tried to find out exactly what all this was about. Perhaps Frank’s major advantage.

No rat would defeat him, the idea preposterous, not to mention her being a small woman. She’d just been lucky up until now, but her luck would run out, permanently.

Tonight he would prepare himself for the dream. It would take a deep meditation state. Something he had grown accustomed to practicing. He had mistakenly assumed the answer would manifest naturally. Tonight he would make sure he located the key.

* * * *

“You made it then” Sunshine grinned at Pete as he made his way up the overgrown path into the hut.

“Apparently...just!” she noticed he tried to look serious but laughter played around his eyes and mouth.

“Good.” Sunshine giggled a little. Why did the worst situation things seem to tickle her funny bone?

“I was just making sure we weren't followed is all.” Pete added.

“Yep...sure,” sarcasm laced her words.

“Okay, so you run faster, fight better, can jump higher and are more attractive than me...but other than that, I'm doing okay.”

“Don't worry. I'll take care of you.” She teased.

His laughter came easily and Sunshine loved the sound. If only things could be different for them. Then again, they may never have met if not for the murders. Bizarre.

“Well, are you any good in the wild? Can we have a fire or something?” she asked.

“A small one, I can't see how anyone could find this place. You can see how overgrown it is.” Pete replied.

“When they want me, they will find me. But tomorrow night is the night. I think we'll be safe for now. Frank will not want me until then, but Lee well he is another story. I think he wanted to have some fun before he handed me over to Frank. So I needed to get away from the house, besides he would not have hesitated in killing you.” Sunshine observed.

“Lee? Who is he? Let me get a fire started and you can tell me. Do you have one of those pocket torches?” Pete asked.

“No.”

“Good. I do, see I am handy for some things,” he laughed as he handed her the torch.

“My hero! Won't you need it to find wood? I'm not worried by the dark.” Pete loved her playful tone.

“No, I think the wood will still be where we used to leave it, under a makeshift cover. I thought you might need it for these...” he handed her the gold treasure chest and the silver key.

“Pete?” her eyes widened, picking up the torch light and glittering back her excitement. “What is this?”

“I'm thinking the bottom is false, leading to a lock the key will fit and the talisman will be inside,” he told her then left the hut.

Sunshine hesitated, feeling a little trepidation. *What will happen when the talisman is out? How will my life change?* Sunshine had enough of change to last her a lifetime. She wondered what normal used to be like. Recalling how home everyday meant the pungent aromas of ginger, garlic and chilli wafting in the air, made her remember her previously peaceful life. Her security had always been in her home, surrounded by the only family she knew. Frank had a lot to answer for...she would never forgive him.

The bottom of the chest seemed to fit tightly. Sunshine couldn't budge it with her fingernails. Looking around the floor of the hut by shining the light around, she found a small nail. *Looks a bit rusty but should do the job.*

Prying away to no avail, Sunshine felt more than a little frustrated. *This silver key will never fit this tiny keyhole*, she looked over the chest. The design on it looked intricately beautiful. The only thing small enough to fit in the keyhole was the end of the nail. Pushing it in and jiggling firmly, Sunshine gasped. The silver base snapped open revealing the true golden base and a keyhole which looked the perfect size to house the key. Sunshine turned the key slowly in the hole, not sure if she would be more afraid to find the talisman or find it empty. Black rubber sat inside the opening. Guessing it was a water barrier she stuck her fingernail underneath and lifted it.

Under the rubber sat an intricately carved jade rat. Every hair detailed in the carving, about the size of her thumbnail in total. A lot smaller than Sunshine had imagined, small enough almost to...fit in her ring.

There, it fit perfectly. Her family ring had an equally detailed indentation of a rat carving. Frank had one as well. Sunshine never really paid much attention other than she thought the ring to be a little bulky on her hand. Aunt and Uncle always insisted it stay on her finger or she would bring shame on the family.

One thing about the Chinese, honor is important to them. To bring shame on one's family was almost akin to killing one of them. *Well, I don't feel any different.* Hearing twigs and branches crackle Sunshine jumped up and opened the door for Pete. He wasn't there. Having a look around, she saw that he was down in a clearing about one hundred yards away. But she could even hear him breath clearly. Then it occurred to her that being pitch black dark she shouldn't even be able to see him. *What the...?*

Sunshine knew it had to be the talisman. What other powers would she now have? Rushing back inside, she felt the anger start to build within her...*Frank must pay, must kill Frank...* Sunshine shook her head and breathed deeply, trying to collect her feelings. But the fury burned within her. Her heart hammered and Sunshine quickly flicked the jade rat from the ring. Her mind calmed and her pulse became regular.

The door opened and Pete came in with the wood. "Are you okay? You look like you have seen a ghost."

"I'm fine, really...look I got it open."

"It's a small rat," Pete observed.

"Yes, beautiful isn't it."

"I'll just get the fire burning and we'll talk about what we have so far."

"Sure." Sunshine remembered how close she came to going with Lee earlier and shuddered. *What would he have done to me...I guess I will be finding out tomorrow.*

A gentle touch to her face brought her to reality. "Are you okay, really? You look a little scared."

A tear fell onto her cheek. "I am scared, Pete, so much has happened. I don't really know what powers this talisman possesses, but I know it does have power. I am supposed to forgive Frank for what he did to my family. But how can I?" she defiantly wiped the tear away with the back of her hand. "All I do know is that I will see Frank pay for what he did, or die trying."

"Don't say that, your death would solve nothing. There will be a way to stop Frank. I won't leave you alone, Sunshine. I'll never leave you alone."

"This may well be our last night together, Pete. What we shared is really special to me. I needed you so much. Thank you."

"It's me who should thank you. I have never had a time when I felt so comfortable about my...size, about myself as a man."

"Why do you care for me so, Pete?"

"Because in your eyes I see the loneliness I feel. No one deserves that feeling."

The light of the fire glowed on his face and the sincerity there frightened her. *How can I promise him anything? I don't know how I feel.* "Pete, I don't know what to say..."

"Don't say anything. I have no expectations of you. I wish only that you find happiness."

"Now, you sound like the Grandmaster Wu."

"Come lie with me and sleep. You need the rest. We can talk in the morning."

He cuddled her then and once again Sunshine felt an overwhelming sense of safety. His strong arms surrounded her and his body felt warm against her own. Had she not been so damn tired she might have found solace in his body again.

Her dreams came easily. Sunshine even consciously knew she dreamt. Her family spread around her, all eating and laughing. The children's cherub faces and puckered lips slurping up noodles and giggling. Aunt and Uncle dancing together, her sister-in-law looking happy.

Then Frank entered. Sunshine knew he came to kill them, but try as she might she couldn't get them to listen to her. Everyone thought Frank a good man, but Sunshine knew the evil lurking inside his body. He turned and sneered at her as he took their lives one by one.

Sunshine screamed and rage flooded through her, but she couldn't get to him. She couldn't touch him. Then the scene faded away and left Sunshine shaking in fury. The mysterious dream warrior appeared before her.

"You see, your dreams are trying to tell you. If you come in fury, you will not achieve what it is you seek. You will not find peace in revenge. You will find only more death and loneliness."

"How can I forgive him? Why should he get away with it? Why should he go unpunished?" She did not comprehend the reasoning behind his advice.

"You do not have the right to punish him. He will reap what he sows, as will you."

"What about the talisman, I will defeat him with that. What of the power it gives me?"

"Yes, you may defeat him, indeed you may. I cannot tell you the future. I can only try to guide you in your learning journey. It is not about defeating Frank. It is about your journey to your spirit. Frank needs to learn his own lessons for himself. He cannot learn them because you desire it. People must learn for themselves because they are ready for the change. Everything else is merely a catalyst for change to take place."

"What will happen if I forgive him...will he kill me as well?"

"Perhaps..."

"If you can't help me why are you here?"

"The jade rat, you know how to wear it. I am here to tell you it has the powers of the ancients within it. It is only evil if worn with hate. If worn with love, it will only produce good. If it is destroyed no one can ever go through this again. Your anger and hatred will turn you the same as Frank if you are not careful. Bring real love into your heart if you are to have any success. Even to use the ring with love is coveting a power to be greater than others. Wisdom comes from

knowing every living being is equal. If you want true peace, give up the jade rat, destroy it and accept whatever result that comes with that.”

“Easier said than done when all the people who love me are dead.” Sunshine looked him in the eye. The surge of pleasure that rushed about her was surprising. She felt herself blush.

“You feel a want for me, Sunshine?”

Her silence spoke louder than words.

“I am immortal and the ways of the flesh are far behind me now. You are beautiful, but we could only share our spirits if you were immortal. It is your choice ultimately. And what of the Detective? Has he not pledged himself to you?”

“I’m confused about my feelings, everything is so mixed up.”

“Trust me on this. What you feel for me is not love, or even desire. You are feeling the pull of immortality. It is your destiny.”

“And if I choose not to be an immortal warrior?”

The warrior laughed. “You have no choice, it will just be.”

“I don’t like not having choices.”

“Neither did I, but here I am,” he replied.

“Well, I’m not there yet, and at the moment it is the least of my worries.”

“Indeed...try to find love of humanity, understanding of the weakened mind, and forgiveness of the tortured soul. You must let go of your selfish reasons for revenge and try to give compassion.”

“Okay. With the talisman I can definitely stop Frank forever. If I destroy it now, he will not achieve his wish and will still live. Perhaps even kill me?” Sunshine knew she still wanted to kill Frank despite the advice.

“Yes, it will mean he cannot achieve that which he desires. I will not come again. It is now your journey to make. Choose each step wisely, Li Yáng Guang.”

“I won’t see you again...ever?”

“Perhaps one day, when you fulfil your destiny, we will meet again.”

Sunshine’s eyes opened to a new day. The day that would see her kill Frank, one way or the other.

Pete’s head was resting back against the wall at an awkward angle, but he still held her. Sunshine smiled at his little snores. *Poor thing probably had next to no sleep.* As she tried to extract herself from his arms, he woke up with a start.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I'm fine, Pete. Nature calls...literally. I might take a look around as well. Get some fresh air, clear my mind a little.” Sunshine smiled. She needed to decide what to do about the talisman. If she destroyed it, she stopped Frank. If she kept it she defeated and killed him. Then she could rule with peace and love with the jade rat in her ring. Pete interrupted her thoughts.

“Okay, sorry, trust me not to realize,” he laughed. Smiling she handed him the talisman. “Here I'd hate to lose it in the forest. I'll tell you more as soon as I get back.” Sunshine jiggled as her bladder contents demanded release. She ran out of the hut. Sunshine had no idea Pete still housed the key in his pocket.

Pete watched her go out the door and felt that all familiar twinge of arousal. He ignored it though, so much at stake today and he still really did not know what was going on. He hoped Sunshine helped his understanding a little more.

Making sure the fire was out, he ventured outside. A Chinese man stood near the doorway. Something about him struck fear into Pete. Pete pulled his gun from his holster and aimed it at the stranger's head.

“Who are you?”

“What? She didn't tell you? I am the man who fucked Sunshine before you came along. She loved it too.” his top lip curled and his eyes seemed to become darker. A frigid chill took over Pete's body. But he felt livid at the way this man spoke of Sunshine. “Shut up. Don't speak about her like that.” Pete squeezed his finger on the trigger. He wanted to blow this man's brains out.

“My name is Lee. I am here for the key. If you let me have it, I will let you live and your slut live.”

Pete considered for only a split second, apparently just long enough for Lee to knock the gun away and pick him up by the throat. *Damn he is fast.* Pete struggled for breath, wondering if Sunshine was safe. If this stranger looked for the key he would find the talisman

“Don't worry, she is down by the creek. She has no idea I am here. I placed a psychic block on her.”

Pete felt his consciousness slipping. *Thank God she is okay.* Lee roared and threw him back against a tree trunk. The impact winded him and as darkness claimed him, he felt Lee's hand in his pocket...*the talisman!*

The sound of the trickling creek calmed Sunshine. After reliving herself she washed her hands in the icy cold water. It seemed the perfect spot to practice her Tai Chi dance ritual. Some grounding may help her decide what to do with the tiny jade rat.

Performing the slow movements and breathing, Sunshine let out the negative and inhaled the positive. Yes, she knew what to do. It must be destroyed. She still wanted to kill Frank, he had to pay. If it meant her death trying then so be it. The important thing would be to destroy that jade rat to stop anyone ever trying this again and keep Pete alive. The warm breeze rushed over her, *Pete!* Something was wrong. Sunshine crashed back through the trees and shrubs toward the hut.

Pete lay slumped against a tree. He looked out cold.

“Pete!” she screamed and ran to him, careful not to move him in case of injury. A laugh entered her mind. *Lee.* Damn! She should have known he would come.

Touching Pete’s cheek gently she coaxed him to open his eyes. Her emotions overflowed. “Pete? Wake up. Please Pete, I need you. Wake up?”

To her great joy his eyelids flickered and opened. His eyes a little glazed.

“I’m okay...” Pete whispered.

“Don’t move yet. Oh Pete I am so sorry, I should have guessed.”

“He took the talisman. I’m sorry.”

Sunshine weighed up the possibilities. Well, she couldn’t destroy it now, not until she found it again. She would have to lure Frank somehow.

Helping Pete back to the hut, she told him about Lee and about destroying the jade rat. Pete recovered enough to start the walk back.

“How are you going to destroy the talisman now?” Pete asked.

“I’m going to find Frank.”

“How the hell do you plan to do that?”

“Well, they are looking for me. They still need me for the ritual. So let them find me.”

“It’s dangerous, too dangerous.” Pete argued.

“It is the only way, and if we plan it right, you can be there to help me. Above all we must make sure the talisman is completely destroyed. Promise me, Pete, no matter what.”

Pete stopped and turned to her. Sunshine drank in the love pouring out of him. His loyalty shone in his eyes as brightly as all the

full moon on a clear night. He took her hands in his, looking deeply into her eyes. He said only one word but his actions spoke volumes.

“Okay.”

* * * *

Sunshine rummaged through the furniture, cupboards and draws. Her act had to seem authentic for this plan to work. Knowing Lee would turn up had her stomach twisted in knots. Pete hid outside, to try and hear where Frank’s lair was located. Sunshine made sure he would not reveal himself unless absolutely necessary.

The inevitable moment came when she knew Lee stood behind her. Turning, she shuddered at the dark hatred burning in his stare. The familiar pull toward him still remained, but Sunshine fought to block him mentally. She gathered her white hot power-ball inside her mind.

“Hello Sunshine. Let’s make this easy, I know you are here purposely. Frank wants to try and sort this out.” Lee lied so salubriously. Sunshine knew better than to believe him.

“Why?” she spoke with hostility.

“He is worried about you, he wants to protect you.”

“Really? The same way he protected his children and wife. The same way he protected his parents?” Her body roiled with hatred. *Stay calm, stay calm.*

“Very well, I see I must take you to him then.” His top lip curled back in a snarl fit for a wild animal.

“You can try.” Harnessing her fear into energy, Sunshine readied herself.

Sunshine ducked and weaved evading the flurry of punches, her feet still firmly planted on the floor. Bringing her forearm across his shoulder blades, she attacked and knocked him to the floor. Her attack was measured though. He had to think he overpowered her. He quickly spun around and Sunshine let his punch land to her stomach. Holding her muscles tight, she hardly felt the blow but feigned injury anyway. She fell to the ground. She just hoped he fell for it. Otherwise Pete would be in trying to stop him.

“You cannot beat me. I will regain my honor. You made a fool of me. I wanted you, you refused me. Now you will die by my hand...” Lee roughly pulled her head up by the hair, she winced, no acting required.

As if to make sure she understood him he landed a kick to her ribs. She felt the searing pain of a cracked rib. A cry broke her lips. As soon as she had that talisman she would see Lee hurt no one else.

“Think yourself lucky, if it was up to me I'd cut your throat and leave you to bleed to death. But your cousin wants you alive, for now.”

Sunshine did not doubt that for a minute. He dragged her by the hair. She prayed it would be over soon and ignored the pain chewing into her side.

“Where is Frank?” Sunshine gasped out, hoping Pete would get some clue as to where to go.

“Ha! He's coming here.”

“Why didn't he just come in the first place instead of getting you to be his lap dog?”

His hand stung her face. “Shut up, Slut...Frank had things to finish off,” he did not hesitate in hitting her again, “and I wanted to have my fun”

Sunshine's pained cry also not rehearsed. She felt the trickle of blood over her lip. *Stay put, Pete, just stay put.*

Sunshine concentrated on her breathing. Not an easy task considering her cracked rib. But she must concentrate, block out the pain. She needed to strengthen herself mentally for when Frank arrived. Her anger simmered. She did try to control the feeling, but it seemed to have a mind of its own.

Feigning her injuries to be more serious, Sunshine slumped on the ground. Her eyes closed, she meditated to recoup her energies and gather her strength. After about ten minutes, Sunshine heard the voice she now detested more than any other in the world.

“Hello, dear Cousin. Nice of you to join us for tonight's ceremony.” He gave a mocking chuckle.”

Sunshine did not move a muscle. He would get no reaction from her. Not yet.

“Come now, cat got your tongue?” Sunshine felt a harsh grip under her chin. She moved with it, opening her eyes. Frank looked different somehow. His eyes seemed more intense and his body had taken on an almost athletic appearance. Frank never worked out or anything, which made the fact of his changes more noticeable.

“Don't play games with me, Sunshine. I won't hesitate to kill you.”

“I'm no good to you dead, am I, Frank?” Sunshine challenged.

“I have the talisman,” he waved it in front of her eyes. “Why do I need you?” Frank said with confidence.

Sunshine decided the time to show her full hand had come.

“Because dear Cousin,” she laced her voice with hateful sarcasm, stood up with a wide stance, and leaned toward him. “*You* need to sacrifice me, at the exact moment the full moon lines up with the constellation of the rat. If you kill me now, even with the talisman, you will never taste immortality.” Sunshine saw the almost invisible flinch Frank gave. Lee sniggered behind her.

“Seems like your one remaining card has been played, Frank.” Lee observed.

If looks could kill Lee would be dead from the glare Frank administered. Lee smirked and walked out the door. Frank redirected the glower to Sunshine.

“Maybe you can watch me kill your cop boyfriend then. I *will* have you at my mercy as I did the rest of your family.” He proceeded to drag her outside by the arm. The strength in the movement shocked Sunshine. This was not the strength of a mere mortal. Sunshine did not want to imagine what he had done to prepare for immortality. Pete lay slumped on the ground. *Lee must have psychically detected him.* Sunshine prayed Pete faked it. However the dark stained, matted patch of hair at the back of his head did not look good. She crouched on her haunches, head down, staring at the ground.

Fury raged inside her mind and body. Sunshine drew it into her power-ball

“They were your family too, Frank.”

“I have no need for family, when the talisman is in this ring I will become everything to all people.” Too cocky for his own good, Frank held the jade rat up once more. Sunshine raised her head to look at him. A glint of moonlight through parted cloud reflected on the jade. *Green for go.*

“You are mad,” she spat her words at Frank. “But stupid...”

By the time she finished the sentence, Sunshine’s body thrust upwards. Taking the jade rat from Frank’s fingers and continuing her surge, Sunshine pulled her body into spinning somersaults. She landed flat on her feet behind Frank, but facing him. Frank turned quickly and swore. Lee stood beyond him. Strangely he never looked surprised in the least.

She smiled at them and clicked the talisman into her ring. Pete lifted his head; she could clearly hear his breathing. Frank’s heart beat

like a drum, Lee's sounded calm in comparison. She heard Lee's footstep's walking away into the night. *Let him go. It's Frank I want.* All these sounds assaulted her ears and the power-ball sought an outlet.

Lifting her arms toward the heavens, forked lightening cracked through the clouds.

"No! I must win. I must." Frank stepped toward Pete, producing a dagger." Petel!" She screamed. Sunshine did nothing to hold back her contempt. The power-ball grew larger. Sunshine took lightening fast steps and knocked Frank off his feet.

Raising her hands in the air once more and threw back her head. Screamed loudly, the hate gathered, ready to strike. Frank gathered himself up and lunged at her, faster than she expected, but Sunshine stepped out of the way. Frank roared now and turned on her, his first punch landing in her side. The cracked side of her rib should have hurt but Sunshine felt no pain. Only revenge burned and seared inside her.

Placing a kick directly to his abdomen Frank landed clear across the yard.

"Sunshine, no!" Pete's scratchy voice called. He had almost crawled to her. "Don't, it's not you. This Rat Of Fury, it doesn't have to be this way. You are a good, kind person Sunshine. I love you."

"How sweet. True love," Frank goaded. "He doesn't really love you. Nobody loves you anymore. I killed them all." Obviously the ability to know when to keep your mouth shut was not a talent of Frank's.

"Now, we will see how you handle your death." The power-ball exploded inside her. She felt power as she had never known. She grew larger, stronger and faster. In less than a heart beat she reached Frank and drove both hands into his ribs. Frank crumpled. Sunshine grabbed his forearm as he tried to defend himself. As if in a dream, but feeling so satisfied, she gripped as hard as she could. Hearing the bone crack under the pressure, she felt the tingling thrill of power.

"Sunshine! No!" Somewhere in the distance she heard a familiar voice but she couldn't quite place it. Beyond that, a blood-curdling scream sounded. Frank's scream

Sunshine followed through with a flat palmed, upward blow to Frank's nose. She could no longer hear his heart.

“Noooooooo!” Pete came from the side. Although badly beaten, he must have found the strength to get up. Throwing himself toward her. They crashed to the ground.

Pete took the tack hammer from his pocket as he felt Sunshine’s hand close over his throat. She looked so different now, hoping she still knew him. He prayed the tiny, loving Sunshine still resided somewhere in this...well the only way he could describe it, this giant rodent-like human.

“I love you, Sunshine, I will not let you become a monster. I promised, no matter what, to destroy that talisman. I will keep that promise. Sunshine forgive me. I love you.”

As if hearing a distant call, the grip on his throat lessened and those beady eyes shone with Sunshine’s soul. Only a split second but long enough for Pete to pry the talisman out of the ring on her free hand. Her fingers and nails had elongated but the ring remained on.

The grip tightened again. The eyes reflected hatred for the one who tried to take the jade rat. Pete made a last effort and the talisman flicked out onto the ground. Sunshine screamed as Pete smashed the flat side of the hammer onto the jade rat. It shattered into a million smithereens. Pete’s world turned dark as her grip stopped all oxygen supply. Sunshine on top of him now, showing no signs of reverting. Pete looked into her eyes, hoping his love would convey silently. *I love you. Sunshine.*

* * * *

“Pete...Pete...talk to me, you'll be okay. Stay with me Pete.” Sunshine cradled his head. He gave everything up for her. She knew she loved him. *What have I done?* “Pete...I’m so sorry. My life is nothing now. I need you, Pete, stay with me.” He did not show a glimmer of life. A purple-black, wide bruise formed around his throat. She could remember doing it. Killing him. The rush of power controlled her. Sunshine could not stop it, but Pete had. Her darling, darling Pete. He gave his life for hers.

As hot tears poured down her face, the rays of the sun broke down through the clouds. *Good Lord, we have been here all night!* Sunshine looked up and prayed...

“Save him...please, I have been foolish. I'm sorry...take my life, not Pete's. I love him.” Her sobs racked her body. She rested her head to Pete’s chest and cried.

“Sunshine...” the voice of her Uncle sounded.

Looking up, she saw Aunt and Uncle. “You are back?”

“Sunshine, we are sorry for not telling you about our family history. we never imagined Frank could turn evil.”

“You have fought bravely, but it is not over.” Uncle said.

“Not over, what do you mean? “

“You have much to learn, Dear Girl. You are sorry for the death of someone you loved, but you must learn to be sorry for the death of those you hate.”

“But...Frank killed you and Aunt.”

“He did not know what he was really doing. He weakened from greed and the addiction to power. We should have tried to help him more,” Aunt said softly.

“I cannot change this,” Sunshine stated. Sunshine watched as Frank’s body turned to ash and disappeared like smoke on the breeze.

“You have many battles to come in your journey to immortality. Pete died for love. He sacrificed himself for you and earned the right to stand at the right hand of the Immortal Warriors.”

Uncle came over and touched Pete's hand. He stood up, and yet his body still lie there. Sunshine stood before him. Pete took her face in his hands and kissed her deeply.

“Goodbye Sunshine...until we meet again.”

“Goodbye, what do you mean? Uncle?” Sunshine felt her blood pressure rise a little.

“Pete is no longer a mortal, his body has died. He will be here with us, until you get here.” Uncle answered.

“What? But how can I get there?”

“You must find the way, if you truly love Pete, you will find him once again. Remember, act in love and you will always be on the right path.”

“Goodbye, Sweet Child,” Aunt's voice sounded and Sunshine turned to see them walking toward a great light. . “No...you cannot take him from me. Take my life instead. None of this had anything to do with Pete. His only crime was loving me. Why should he be taken from his life of helping people when he has done nothing?” Sunshine did not lose her temper, she spoke firmly and reasonably. “There is no glory in Frank’s death. The hatred consumed me. I am truly sorry for the death of my cousin at my own hand. Take my life for Pete’s and Frank’s if you must.” Her Uncle stopped and turned.

“You will give your life for them?”

“Yes, Uncle, I will.”

“Sunshine...no, I do not want a life live without you.” Pete answered.

“Nor I without you.” She embraced him and imagined pouring all the love she had inside her into him.

Then the body she hugged faded away, Uncle and Aunt gone as well. Sunshine cried.

“Please...I love him...take me.”

“Did I hear you say you love me?”

Spinning around, Sunshine saw Pete's crumpled body move, and his head turned to her, wincing as he moved.

“Pete!” she yelled, showering his face with kisses.

“Ease up, Sweetheart...I'm injured.” Sunshine followed his gaze down over his healed body. “Well, I was.”

“Do you think this is really over?” Sunshine shook her head and relief swept over her.

“I don't know, but I know something that is just beginning.”

Sunshine held him just as tightly as she could, and kissed him madly.

END

Forbidden Ways

By

K. Melton

Turmoil hit Samantha until she met Stefan Keese. Can her love withstand knowing he is part of a mythical race known as the Rat People?

Forbidden Ways

By

K. Melton

CHAPTER ONE

“Bloody hell, you can’t be serious!” Samantha growled as she stood staring in disbelief at the man in front of her.

She wanted to reach over the counter, grab the man by his collar and shake the dickens out of him, but all she could seem to do was turn away and go find an empty seat in the terminal. Sitting, she placed her elbows on her knees, face in her hands, and exhaled fighting the turmoil that wanted to grip her. How the hell could he leave her here, in another country like this? In Romania nonetheless! Her thoughts turned to ways to torture the bastard. She smiled when a vision of him being staked to the ground and pouring honey over him over a fire ant hill. To hear the sounds of his screams as the ants feast brought a tiny smile to her face.

The day started off badly; she awoke to find a dear Samantha letter stating that her fiancé was leaving her and taking the first flight back to America. Not only did he leave her, but he had also taken her money and passport.

“Fu...” She screamed out. Samantha jumped slightly, placing her hand over her chest, when she felt a hand tap her shoulder and saw a royal blue handkerchief appear before her. She looked up. “Thanks, but no thanks.” She tried to smile at the tall, lean man standing before her. His eyes catching hers, her pulse quickened.

Samantha watched as he stepped back with a confused puzzled look upon his striking features. The look he gave her and the jerky movement he used as he stepped back caused her to laugh. She couldn’t think of anything funnier than seeing this man step back from her. “I don’t bite.” She sniffled out as she reached for the handkerchief, that he still held in his hand. “I’m just having one of

those days.” She finished and dabbed at the tears that started to flow freely down her cheeks.

“You see, my fiancé deserted me and is on the flight that just left.” She started to laugh again, almost hysterically “And all I got was a Dear John note,” hiccupping as she laughed. “And to top that off, he took my damn passport, money and today was our last day at the hotel we were staying in.”

Gathering herself, Samantha looked over as the man took a seat next to her. Taking a deep breath she sighed and straightened her back. She’d get through this. She always got through the little speed bumps that life seemed to throw her way. This was just another bump to ride over. Or in her case, such as now, stomp over. Her father always told her to hold her chin up and fight back. *Don’t let anything get you down girl. If you see something worth fighting for, then reach out and fight for it.* The thing is she didn’t think her now ex- fiancé worth fighting for.

“Thanks for the hanky and your concern.” she eyed him, holding the soiled linen out to him. Geesh, he hadn’t said one damn word since he sat next to her. She wondered if he was a mute.

“It’s my pleasure madam.” He replied in a heavy accent.

“My god,” she whispered, then blinked. Did she just say that out loud? That voice seemed to glide caressingly across her flesh. She looked down at her arms and sure enough, goose bumps had formed. Something in her blossomed in awareness. Need coursed throughout her being. Licking her lips she looked at him through widened eyes.

“I’m sorry, did I just say something wrong?” he asked.

“Umm, no,” she murmured distractedly and stood. “I’m Samantha. Well it was nice meeting you. Samantha stopped held out her hand, though she felt the need to get away. This was just too soon.

“Stephan,” he murmured and stood also, taking her hand within his and letting his thumb rub soothingly across her palm.

“Stephan,” Samantha repeated his name quickly removing her hand. Feeling a tingling sensation race up her arm she looked up at him in slight confusion. Nodding to him, she turned to walk away.

* * * *

Stephan came to Romania to meet his fiancée for the first time. His father looked forward to this union, perhaps more than he did.

However, his thoughts weren’t on meeting his future wife; the angelic Violeta as her father would call her. His thoughts, instead, were centered on Samantha. He watched as she weaved her way

through the terminal. Her steps spoke of agitation, but he could see how she walked with her back straight and head held high. She had a lot of pride and Stephan could tell that she was a fighter.

He started after Samantha when he lost view of her parting back and flipped out his cell. "Get an adjoining suite to mine." He ordered and flipped the phone shut.

Stephan wasn't known for his generosity; in fact he was shrewd in his business dealings. He wouldn't be where he is today if he made impulsive decisions. But his instincts told him that there was something special about Samantha and he trusted his intuition

Stephan turned his head, looking for Samantha. Searching through the crowd, he couldn't see her. His pulse started to race, he *needed* to find her. Inhaling the air around him, he sorted through the scents until he found hers and went in search for her.

* * * *

Samantha sat back in the cab seat next to Stephen, but kept looking at him out of the corner of her eye. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. I just don't know what else to do." She sighed letting her eyes wander up his lean thigh, his chest, over his long fingers and back down to his outstretched legs in front of him. She felt safe in his presence, and something pulled her to him. She did admit though, that she was extremely attracted to the man.

"I will reimburse you as soon as I can get my father to wire me some money. I also need to stop at customs or I won't be able to go back to America." She let her eyes drift upwards again, whispering huskily and looked directly into black eyes with what looked like red specks in them. Quickly she turned her head and glanced out the window. She could feel her face flush in slight embarrassment. "I really do appreciate this."

Stephan didn't say anything until he got out of the cab and stood next to Samantha. When he did speak, he placed his hand at the small of her back and guided her into the Hilton. He nodded to the manager who came up holding out two sets of keys.

Samantha studied him momentarily, with a brow raised, and then she turned to look around in awe at the luxurious hotel. She'd never stepped foot into anyplace like this. As she followed Stephan and the manager to the elevator, she felt a tingling sensation at the base of her neck. She stopped and looked around. The hairs on her arms stood on end. *Something was not right.* She couldn't put her finger on it, but she always sensed when danger came about.

Then she saw it above, and gun shots echoed also. She jumped and dove for Stephan, tackling him and knocking the manager off balance as she saw the falling debris. A spray of plaster fell, bombarding Samantha's and Stephen's heads. The sound of screams surrounded them.

Samantha opened her eyes and looked directly into Stephan's narrowed gaze. "Are you alright?" she whispered.

Stephan blinked. This creature just saved his life by tackling him and she just asked him if he is all right. He felt like every bone in his body had been crushed from the tackle. Yet, the soft, feminine, lush feel of this amazing female's body against his, had his cock aching hard.

Samantha felt his body stiffen with desire and wanted to melt against him. But as reality set in, she reluctantly pushed away and sat up. No matter how the man affected her, she couldn't take advantage of him in the middle of this luxurious hotel foyer. The strange accident was a mood breaker for sure. She felt herself laugh inwardly. She couldn't believe that thought just occurred to her. Samantha couldn't take advantage of someone. Oh, this was so going into her diary for a much later laugh.

Stephan growled inwardly when the warm contact of Samantha's body left his. As much as he enjoyed Samantha's company, this was a mistake, he endangered her. Even though his people were on the verge of being extinct, the renegades seemingly wanted to control what remained. The union he was about to form would help his alliance, and his offspring would be pure.

Stephan looked over at Samantha who was in discussion with the guard. Her lively hand gestures had his groin instantly tightening. The inner beast in him began to growl with need.

* * * *

Samantha sat into the depths of her luxurious hotel room bed, towel drying her hair, when she heard a light tap on the door. Standing, she went to open the door.

"I've decided to order in tonight." Stephan murmured huskily as he looked down, his nostrils flaring as he inhaled her fresh scent and pushed a food cart before him into the room.

"So tell me, why would someone want to shoot at you?" Samantha asked. "Are you a drug lord or something?" She went to the cart and lifted the tops from the silver dishes.

Stephan began to chuckle, speaking in Romanian. “No, foc unul, I am not a drug lord, just a simple business man.”

Samantha snorted. “Simple my ass, I’ve never known a ‘simple’ businessman to dress as you, or who could afford a 5-star hotel.”

Stephan shrugged his shoulders and reached out to run the back of his hand down Samantha’s cheek. “You are beautiful.”

Samantha huffed, but leaned into the caress, she reached up and placed her hand over his and closed her eyes. His touch seemed to sooth her; turning her head Samantha placed a lingering kiss in his palm. Her eyes shot open when she heard a growl.

Stephan leaned down, leaning forward he replace brushed his lips teasingly over Samantha’s before reaching up and cupping the back of her head to deepen the kiss, causing her toes to curl. Dropping her towel, she leaned into Stephan, melting against him. A warm hand came down and cupped her rounded bottom and pulled her against him.

Samantha’s head fell back, her eyes closed and she moaned as Stephan’s lips moved along her jaw and down her neck. His fingers kneaded her buttocks. When his hand released her head, he slid his hand into her robe, cupped her breast, and with feather like caresses he ran his thumb over her nipple.

“Ohh god...” Samantha whimpered out in pure desire as her body turned to putty from this man’s slightest touches. A brief sense of awareness came over her that she had just met this man.

Stephan breathed into Samantha’s ear, before he moved his head down to capture one dusky nipple into his mouth “I voinbă a voi a face tu al meu foc unul, cel pupin pentru this zi.”

Samantha’s mind went blank. So enthralled by him, she barely remembered being laid upon the bed. She opened her eyes and watched as his luscious mouth went from one breast to the other, paying equal attention to both. A warm hand laid at the juncture of her curls, pressing lightly.

Samantha’s hands went up. She ran them over his bare back. Somehow, he’d shed his clothing. A pulsing member beat against her leg. She gasped when fingers slid into her curls and within her wet folds. He caressed her nub before delving two fingers into her wetness. Samantha’s opened her thighs wider and moved into the touch. She moaned when she felt his head move down her stomach; her hips arched up when his warm breath fanned over her jewel, followed by a flicking tongue.

Samantha's mind was fully focused on how he made her feel, hot with desire, while his fingers slid in and out of her. The combination of his lips and fingers seemed to work in union with one another. Her moans and purrs echoed within the room. Stephan began applying suction to her sensitive bud.

"Ohh god." she whimpered out, thrashing her head back and forth, her hips rocking into his magical touch.

Her taste was heady, and her open responses to him drove Stephan on. He placed his shoulders on her thighs, pinning them down and added a third finger, curved them up and pressed as he flicked, suckled and nibbled her.

Samantha's body bowed up as an intense release streaked through her. She screamed out as her body shook.

Stephan drank in her juices before he slid up and quickly placed her legs over his shoulders. In a flex of his hips he entered her. Samantha's still pulsing inner muscles gripped his cock as he filled her with deep sure thrusts, grinding a bit as he dipped deeply.

Samantha laughed in pleasure, moaned out in awe. He filled her, made her body hum. Stephan sent pulsing pleasure through her body with each thrust. Her next release rose to a high peak, when she came down she couldn't focus, but she knew when she opened her eyes that Stephan was still in her, his hungry eyes running across her face, his thick, ready again.

Samantha pushed him backwards and both growled when his thickness left her. She quickly mounted him and turned backwards. Grasped his cock, she slid down him in reverse cowboy fashion.

Strong hands grasped her hips to help guide Samantha as she rode and ground on his cock. She was being pulled back, with her back against his chest, one hand on her breast, the other between her thighs, caressing her as she felt lips against the back of her neck. Rumbling murmurs came from Stephan. Hips thrust up and ground into her, fingers teased her jewel, and nibbling kisses ran across her neck. Lights passed through her closed lids, and Samantha's release rocketed throughout her body.

CHAPTER TWO

“I’ve gotten a very disturbing call from the hotel manager, that you booked a room for an American. Who is this female you have with you, Stephan? Do I have to remind you that you have a duty to our people? Do I have to remind you of your duty?”

“I know my duty, sir. It is for me to marry and reproduce,” Stephan murmured into his cell phone.

“She is forbidden. Do you hear me Stephan? Keep your hands off of the American.”

“Forbidden?” Stephan paused. He had always listened to the wiser and older man. He turned and looked at the adjoining door. In his soul, he felt right about her being his. Yes, Samantha might shun him and his kind if she knew about them. He didn’t want to lose her, yet he didn’t want to hide from her either. “I want her! Forbidden or not she will be mine. She will carry my seed and produce my offspring.”

“Are you denying my choice for you? This American is not one of us, she will not fit in. I forbid you to remain with this woman.”

“You forbid me? There will be no forbidding father. It’s done! She is mine.” With that, Stephan hung up the phone.

* * * *

Samantha awoke with a prickling sensation running up her neck. Something was wrong. She felt cold and off. The shower in her suite was in use. Slipping out of bed naked, she winced at the slight pain, and then smiled when she remembered the night before.

She opened the bathroom door and walked silently up to the shower stall. The prickling sensation returned. She ignored it. She couldn’t sense any harm in here, just something off. Opening the shower stall she froze.

“What the hell?” Samantha blinked, reached up and rubbed her eyes. She ran her eyes up and down the man before her. She couldn’t resist lowering her eyes to his stiffened member. The body before her

stood lean and strong. One that pleased her and brought her to heights she never knew was possible to reach. But when she raised her eyes she saw someone else.

The face before her had Stephan's features. His eyes were steady and watching her reaction. Throwing up her hands, Samantha growled out, "Stephan? Talk to me dammit!"

"You are not frightened?"

"Why, would I be frightened?!" Samantha paused and blinked as she looked up into his face; his features were reminiscent of a rodent yet human too. "Should I be frightened?"

"No, foc unul, I would never hurt you." Stephan sighed and reached past Samantha for a towel. Turning off the shower he stepped out, wrapped a towel around his waist, and reached for a robe to wrap around Samantha. "There is much I need to tell you though."

Stephan led Samantha to his suite and sat her in front of the fire. "We came from one of the ancient races known by most people as the Chinese Zodiac Clans. We are not myths or symbols but all signs were actual shape shifter beings born eons ago on earth. We once served deities of long ago and all the races moved to different areas of the Earth when the gods went to war and one day just vanished. My family is the leader of the Rat Clan and has been here for centuries in Romania." Stephan paused and looked off. "I came here to meet my fiancée. Together we will help to help build the line stronger, with pure bloods. Our breed is dying out."

"Oh," Samantha murmured dejectedly, "well don't expect me to hold you back Stephan. I didn't think we'd last anyways." Samantha replied heatedly and stood. "I was just a lay... what am I saying? Why am I mad? Why the hell am I not madder? I think I have gone completely insane." Samantha nodded to herself. "That must be it, I'm must be insane." She headed toward her room and rummaged for her bags.

"No you weren't just a lay, Samantha." Stephan came up behind her and removed her hand from the luggage. "You are what I crave, you are in my soul." He forced her around to look at him. He leaned over and brushed away her hair, exposing the mark on her neck.

Samantha brushed his hands away and snorted. "Don't give me that line of bullshit! I won't tolerate it, do you hear me?" she demanded the last by poking him in the chest with her forefinger. "You have a fiancée and I was just dumped by my fiancée." She turned around and leaned down to reach for the luggage again.

Stephan growled low, his cock raised, his towel slid off at the sight of her rounded buttocks pressed against her robe. “It’s no line, foc unul, you are in my soul.” He hissed out and reached for her, pushing her towards the bed, pushing her forward. He leaned over her, letting his weight pin her to the bed as her buttocks pressed against his erection.

“Get the hell off of me Stephan, you aren’t even human. God dammit, get off... of... me!” She hissed out, wiggling furiously.

“Mmm... you fight me, Samantha? I can smell your desire building.” Stephan whispered huskily, and ran his hand up her thigh, pulling her robe up as he did so He slid his fingers between her moist folds and caressed her.

His hold slackened and he started kissing her softly, on her bare shoulder where her robe had fallen to one side. She clasped her thighs tight but his hand remained imprisoned between her upper legs.

Just the thought of his elegant fingers laying within her turned her on, but she stood her ground. “I mean it.” She hissed out, but not as meaningfully as she would have liked it to come across. She felt the moistness grow between her thighs, even more. She bit her bottom lip, but still he didn’t move.

“Do you really want me to move away, foc unul? Though my fingers are imprisoned within you, I can feel your wetness growing.:

She opened her legs to release his hand. He pulled his hand out and tasted her juices from his fingers, then reached for his cock and ran it between her folds.

She groaned and shifted her leg, putting one knee upon the bed. “You do strange things to me, Stephan, but I won’t take your domination.”

“I did not mean to hurt you, sweet Samantha. Let me love your body as it should be, luv.”

She nodded and braced forward on the bed, groaning. “Damn I’ve never been turned on so much by a man before. Slide into me, now.”

Leaning himself into her, he guided his cock into her tight silky wetness, using slow, long, deep rotating thrusts.

“Tell me I wasn’t wrong. Mmm... so tight you ar, luv.” He leaned forward. One hand still holding her down, he moved in her slowly. “Touch yourself, foc unul. Caress that sweet jewel for me.”

“Stephan!” Samantha felt herself respond to his slow filling movements. Her hips started to push back on their own accord. His body seemed to demand her to respond to him.

“Damn you Stephan, yes, I do want you.” Samantha growled out as she heard his husky chuckle. Somehow she pushed back and placed her other knee up on the edge of the bed, so she was on all fours, positioned for his deep thrusts. With his less aggression, she found herself opening up more to him. He seemed to realize this for he caressed her body sweetly though he moved firmly in and out of her.

“I’m already dammed, my future, is yours.” Stephan said heatedly as he started to thrust faster into her. “You are mine, but yet I will always be yours, Samantha, and will always remain yours!”

“Ohh god...yes...I’m coming hard.” She screamed out as an orgasm overtook her.

Laughter of happiness erupted from Stephan when her juices coated him. He gave her several more thrusts and sank deeply in her, grinding as he released his seed into her, spilling himself against her womb.

* * * *

“I want to understand more Stephan.”

Stephan lifted his head as she lay panting under him. He could tell that her emotions were mixed and jumbled. A lot had happened between them within a twenty-four hour time span. Her fiancée left her in Romania without money, she accepted a stranger’s offer for a room, and she kept him from being killed. He eyed her then sighed. He’d already explained what he was to her, and was actually surprised she didn’t run off screaming or faint when she opened the shower stall and saw him in his rat form. Stephan knew she was different the moment he saw her upset yesterday at the airport; he had walked off the plane and spotted her immediately in the lobby.

“I am Rat, I live like everyone else. I work, I have parents and siblings. The only thing is we have different values, and keen senses of smell. Our union is forbidden and will be shunned, at first. But you *will* be accepted, in time.”

After a long pause of trying to piece together what he had said, “What do you mean union?” then froze when she felt a sudden uneasiness washing over her. Danger was near.

“What’s wrong, Samantha?”

She held up her hand. “Shhh...trust me.” She whispered. “Something’s off.” She cocked her head. “When I yell now, pull us

to the right.” When the feeling got stronger, Samantha yelled out. “Now!”

Stephan didn’t doubt her. As soon as she yelled out, he did as she said and pulled them to the right, and just in time. A blade came slicing down into the bed where they had been lying. Samantha quickly moved from Stephan and kicked out with her bare foot and connected with the assassin’s stomach. It sent him crashing backward against the wall. Stephan jumped the attacker and hit him.

Samantha winced at the sound of bone cracking. She went over and stood above the attacker and kicked him again. “You son of a bitch,” she yelled out. “How dare you ruin my moment?”

Stephan looked up with laughter in his eyes. Then he noticed she was standing there cursing at the attacker, naked. His nostrils flared as he caught their combined scents. “Samantha, go put a robe on and call security...Now,” he all but roared out the last. Her heaving breasts and flushed angered face made his cock hard again. And he was pinning this attacker down while nude.

Huffing, she looked down at herself and blushed. Rushing off, Samantha did as Stephan asked. Coming back into the room she held out a robe to Stephan as she looked down with narrowed eyes at the attacker. “Don’t move. I happen to know several ways to filet and torture a man, alive.”

Samantha leaned down and looked into the attacker’s terror-stricken eyes. “Are you the one who tried to harm Stephan? Who are you working for?” Samantha fired off several questions then turned to look at Stephan. “Do you have a sharp shaving blade? You know, so I can filet him.”

Stephan sat on the chair across from Samantha and the attacker. “No luv, but I do have an electric razor though. Although, I can’t see how that could hurt anyone, much.”

Samantha raised her brow and smiled at Stephan, she caught the small light of laughter in his eye. She turned and started grilling the attacker until the policemen arrived. To no avail, the attacker would not talk; he sat perfectly still and would not say one word.

CHAPTER THREE

Samantha finished packing her luggage while Stephan and the police tried to grill the assailant further. She wasn't about to get into a relationship with someone who had a fiancée waiting for him and to top it off, he wasn't even human. But somehow she knew that wasn't the issue. It was rather a combination of the way he made her feel, his fiancée, her life in America, and the fact that he was too damn dominating.

Sitting next to the phone, Samantha stared at it. Sighing she picked it up and called her father.

"Hello, Sweet Pea!"

"Father, how'd you know it was me calling you?"

"Your father knows these things. I also wired you some money, but I suggest you should follow your heart." With that he hung up, he had been born with a gift that he could foresee events before it happened.

Samantha sat and looked at the phone for a moment. Annoyed at her father, she huffed and stood up. She needed time to herself, to think. Reaching for her luggage she headed out the door.

As she was heading out the door, she felt a tug at her heart. Her shoulder had a slight burning sensation to it. Reaching up she rubbed the area where Stephan bit her then froze. "What the fuck?" She hissed under her breath. "No freaking way... pffft." *What if his bite was like that of a vampire? What if his bite was like a symbol of their union?* She asked herself.

Spinning on her heels she stormed back into the room and went to look at her shoulder in the mirror. She gasped. Sure enough there was a mark on the base of her neck. "Stephan!!" She yelled out. Stalking out of the room, she went in search of him.

She ignored the policemen and pointed to her neck. "What's this?"

Stephan disregarded Samantha and thanked the officers as he led them out of the room.

“I asked you a question.” She fumed standing there and tapping her foot impatiently.

Stephan looked at her. *God, she is so damn fiery*, she was his focus, his fiery one. He still wanted her even though she wasn’t super model thin or had the “proper” demeanor and breeding; as he was sure his intended would have been. But Samantha’s fiery nature was beauty unto itself.

“Stop looking at me like that dammit, as if you want to eat me. I asked a question and I want an answer now! What the hell is on my neck? Did you bite me? Pffft... Of course you did, there are teeth marks on my damn neck. So?” She asked as she reached up, capturing a piece of hair and started to twirl it around her finger nervously. “Will I turn into one of those female vampires that obey their master or something?”

Stephan threw back his head and laughed. “I can’t see you obeying anyone.” He continued to laugh and then when he settled down a bit, “It’s the ‘or something’ luv.”

Samantha stared at the man, his laughter stunned her. It was deep and seemed to have threaded its way through her and to... her heart. “Sure laugh, I’m glad you find this so amusing.” She huffed out and went to sit on the sofa by the fireplace.

Stephan raised his brow at Samantha and followed her. “Were you planning on going somewhere?” he asked, nodding towards her luggage.

“Dammit, Stephan, my life has changed so much within the last twenty-four hours. And you are a big part of the damn change.” She looked down at her hands where Vincent’s, engagement ring circled her finger and removed it. “The sad thing is,” she held up the ring, “this doesn’t even bother me. It’s like a faded memory.” She raised her eyes and looked at him. “Talk to me please.”

Stephan went to stand in front of Samantha and pulled her up. He sat down and placed her in his lap, he reached for the ring, placed it on the table and then started to run his hand soothingly over her back.

“Our race will perish if we do not breed. My father thought it best if I wed a pure bred of our kind, mated and produced more. I agreed to meet her while I was here. I am from a small village on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains, called Lasi. It borders Moldova.”

Samantha felt so relaxed by his touch and soothing voice. She sank deeper into Stephan’s embrace and listened to his husky baritone.

“Our people are looking forward to the new blood I bring with this union. We are about to become relics of extinct and forgotten civilizations. But I can’t do it. I have tasted you, I desire you above all others.” He paused. “You are in my blood and I am in your blood. You are mine. I am yours. It’s as simple as that.”

Samantha sat up and slipped off of Stephan’s lap. “This is a big step. It could be a huge mistake for you and your people... I didn’t plan this,” She said and turned around to look down upon him. “What if I don’t want this? What happens to me now?”

“You do want this, open yourself up and *feel*.” He shrugged. “As for what will happen to you, luv... that is completely up to you. Follow your heart.” He paused and pulled her down to him. “I don’t believe this is a huge mistake. I believe this is destiny. Is there something you should tell me about yourself?”

Sighing, Samantha settled down. She knew he’d ask her this sooner or later and she had no idea where her heart was leading her, but she knew where her body would. She looked at him. “My father has a special gift. He senses things about me and close ones around him. He dreams events that have come true. I sense danger. I can never predict what kind. But my instincts have always steered me correctly. The sensations tend to get stronger the closer danger gets.” she added. “When the sensations reach a certain height, I can pinpoint when to react.”

“It is strange. Maybe I should be like most females who run, screaming or like one of those simpletons who tend to faint at the sight of a male chest. But with you I sense no trouble, though I sense danger around you.” Samantha whispered, and then giggled when her stomach let out a low rumbling.

“I think it’s time we eat, don’t you agree?” Stephan smiled and stood with her in his arms. “We will work this out, don’t worry.”

* * * *

“I don’t care, go and remove her from his presence. Their union is forbidden. I forbid it! Our race must not die out.” Andre hung up and sat back in his chair sighing. Stephan had never disobeyed him, this was unlike him. Stephan was his youngest son and Andre looked forward to this union.

All his children disobeyed his orders about marriage. He even had a daughter-in-law who was Rabbit of the ancient races. Andre fully intended to forbid Stephan marrying a human, an American

human. “Blahh, no son of mine will marry an American.” He muttered to himself.

“Enter!” Andre barked out when he heard a quick tap at the door. He watched as his secretary all but slithered into the room.

“Sir, we have some bad news... the bride is missing. She has been missing for several days. Her father’s men are searching for her.”

Andre leaned forward. “Missing?” He watched as his secretary shifted from one foot to the other, stalling. “Get with it man!” Andre barked out in Romanian.

“There was no foul play, sir. A note was left for her father. Here’s a missive her father sent to you, sir.”

Andre reached for it and began to read. “It seems my son’s intended has run off with her lover.” Andre sat back and dropped the piece of paper on the desk before him.

Andre looked up when he heard his secretary clear his throat. “Yes?”

“It also appears your son has been attacked twice since he arrived in Bucharest.” The man shifted nervously, his eyes not meeting Andre’s.

Andre stood. “And when did this happen?”

The secretary cleared his throat. “When Stephan arrived at the hotel and then again this morning.”

Why wasn’t I informed about this sooner?” Andre asked calmly. Andre was anything but calm.

“The American he is with seems to have protected him, sir, both times.”

Andre stopped and raised a brow in surprise.

CHAPTER FOUR

Samantha was sitting out on the terrace sipping a latte when she heard a knock on the door. Her stomach turned, but she could feel no danger. She heard Stephan's deep voice, then a soft feminine one answer.

Samantha got up and walked to the doorway and watched as a small petite woman stood in front of Stephan. She was a beauty, with a small pert nose, silvery blonde hair and huge breasts for one so small. Samantha reached up and cupped her own breasts. And felt a bolt of jealousy streak through her. She knew without a doubt this woman had to be Stephan's fiancée.

She stepped back out onto the terrace and headed for the door that led to her suite. Samantha felt her heart sink when she looked back and saw Stephan's eyes glued to the small bitch's cleavage. Samantha snorted to herself and muttered in disgust. "It ended before it even started, figured!"

* * * *

"Hello Stephan, I am Violeta, your intended. I am honored to finally meet you." Violeta whispered as she looked up at him. Stephan thought her gaze seemed so innocent and searching. "I hope you do not mind that I have come to meet you here instead?" she said with a small pout.

Stephan was unmoved by the tiny woman in front of him. His thoughts were on the fiery one out on the terrace and how she would react. One thing he knew about Samantha, that she could be impulsive. But he didn't want to hurt this woman either. He had to find a way to ease the news to her about Samantha.

He focused on the woman before him and felt a protective instinct over take him. She looked so fragile, so tiny compared to Samantha's bold and brash behavior. She was not Samantha.

Violeta smiled a tiny shy smile at Stephan and touched his arm lightly. "You are more than I ever thought. I was so nervous about our

union and I simply had to meet you without my father in my way.” She shifted nervously. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Stephan did mind, he sighed. He had to be honest. “I’m sorry Violeta, but I do believe our union is a mistake.” He was watching her facial features and saw her lips tremble slightly.

“But... But. I thought,” and then a tear slid down her cheek, “Are you not pleased? Do I not please you? I will learn.”

“It’s not that, it’s...”

“It’s me.” Samantha said from the doorway.

Stephan watched as Violeta let out a gasp and small cry as she turned to see a Samantha standing there watching her steadily. Placing a hand to her forehead she fainted.

* * * *

“Oh, good lord!” Samantha said as she rushed over to the woman and felt for her pulse, and then tapped Violeta on the side of her face. “I really wish that if you are going to faint, then please faint properly or make it look more believable.”

“Samantha that was uncalled for. She just had a shock and you slapped her?” Stephan hissed and reached down to lift Violeta and place her on the sofa.

Samantha raised her brow when Violeta placed a hand over her cheek and whimpered, then turned her head towards Samantha and smiled. She didn’t even bother to correct Stephan. She tapped the girl not slapped her.

Samantha winked at her and turned to sit on the chair across from the sofa. Sometimes men weren’t very bright. She thought.

Violeta was up to something and Samantha knew it, hell she sensed it. And the ‘rat’ bitch would be called out.

When Samantha went to her suite, as her bout of jealousy struck her, she thought about packing and leaving. She didn’t want to have to deal with another fiancée, especially one who liked Violeta. Then a thought hit her. Even if she and Stephan were different, the ass had grown on her and she wanted him. She would stand by him and help him. When she went to the door, she caught sight of the look in Violeta’s eyes and felt a tiny prickling. Violeta was trouble; she was not here for Stephan, and Samantha’s curious nature told her to look into it.

She smiled at Violeta as Stephan rushed to get her a drink of water. “How are you feeling, dear?”

Violeta looked at Samantha with caution. “Much better thank you.” She said with a heavy accent.

Samantha nodded. “Good to know.” She leaned forward and whispered to the other woman. “I think you should know that I will be watching you.”

Violeta let out a small laugh. “Don’t be jealous lady. Stephan is my fiancé, and we will be one.” Violeta snorted and looked Samantha up and down. “You are not even our kind. You’re nothing but an American human.”

“Ah, but you see dear you forgot one thing. I’m a Gemini, and my Chinese Zodiac is none other than the ‘RAT’. So yes, I do believe 1972 is the year of the rat.” Samantha chuckled. “I’m an American Rat!” Samantha sat back and let her smile widen. “Shocked? I might not be able to change forms, but I do have my own special talents.”

“By whoring with my fiancé? Is that how?” Violeta asked and moaned as Stephan came back in and handed her the glass of water.

Samantha chuckled, then stood and stretched. “I think I will go out for a walk. I’ve had the most delightful exercise last night and I need to walk it off. So I will leave you two alone, it seems you have some catching up to do.” She turned and waved at Violeta with her fingers. “Enjoy yourselves.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Walking the grounds of the hotel, Samantha shivered. Hugging her arms around herself, she felt an odd sense of peace fill her when she was standing in her room earlier. She realized – forbidden ways or not – she wanted Stephan, and by god she was going to stand up for what she wanted and Stephan was what she desired.

Samantha had only been walking the grounds of the hotel for about twenty minutes, and while contemplating the events that had passed within the last two days, her shivering stopped and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

She slowed her steps and focused her mind around her. She couldn't sense where it was located or towards whom. She set off towards the hotel. All she could think of was, that fake bitch hurting Stephan.

Samantha's thoughts were on how stupid men could be. She shivered at the thought of the thin women with big breasts and simpered like an idiot. "Like I'd simper for male attention and make an ass out of myself."

She snorted, rolling her eyes as she hurried towards the back entrance of the hotel. Like before, her senses were humming, but the danger didn't seem like it was clued into anyone specific. Hearing footsteps behind her she stopped. Before she could turn she felt a blow to the back of her head. "Son of a..." she yelped out. Afterward, she crumpled and then all went black.

* * * *

"Well you didn't have to hit her so hard," Andre murmured as he stood over the curvy auburn-haired American. He forgot his order to have this female removed from his son's side after he had been informed she saved Stephen's life.

Andre called Marius, his oldest son, and both flew to Crisana from Lasi.

"Go fetch the doctor at once, you moron." Andre waited until he was alone and looked up and over at his oldest son Marius. "Why

can't any of you do as I wish? See what happens when neither of you obey me? Innocent women get hurt."

Marius pushed back from the wall he had been leaning against and came over to look down at the human. "Stephan is not going to be happy father." He turned Samantha's head and looked at where the blow had connected. "I believe he will be livid."

Andre grumbled and went to sit down heavily on the chair across the room. He loved all six of his children and Stephan was the last male child out of four to have found his mate. Andre saw the mark on Samantha's shoulder and knew Stephan claimed her. He still had two daughters, but one was still in her teens. His heart sank. All four of his sons went through some kind of drama in their lives when they met their wives. He turned to look at the sleeping American, his youngest son's future bride.

* * * *

Samantha slowly came awake, she cracked open her lids, saw a silhouette of a man, and the event of the evening hit her. She remembered heading back towards the hotel, the feeling of danger was near her; she had thought of Stephan being in danger and not her.

She moved her head slightly and tried to look around the room. It was funny in a way, but she didn't feel in danger here. She saw a man in a white jacket standing next to an older man.

"Hello there..." Samantha heard a heavily accented masculine voice.

She opened her eyes wider and turned her head towards the silhouette she noticed earlier, and raised her brow. The man before her resembled Stephan. She turned again when she felt the presence of the others. She didn't say anything as they watched her reactions to them.

"How are you feeling?"

Samantha glanced at the man in the white coat. "Like, I was hit by a damn 2 by 4 in the back of the head." She smiled when she saw the man next to him wince. Some people didn't care for brash, uncouth American ways. Samantha knew how to behave but she preferred not to.

"Father, I think we should call Stephan. He is probably looking for her and worried to death." Marius said and sat next to Samantha on the bed. "By the by, I am Marius, Stephan's oldest brother and that ill-mannered man is our father Andre."

“Oh son of a...” Samantha started cursing as she tried to get out of bed.

“Stephan is with this tiny little big breasted bitch. Some lady he was to marry.” She went on to complain about men being idiots and not seeing through a female who has big boobs.

“What do you mean his fiancée?” Andre barked out to stop Samantha’s ramblings.

“Yano, the fiancée he was to meet, the one he was to marry,” Samantha barked grouchy back, her head throbbing. “She is as real as silicone breasts are fake and was playing him when I left. Plus some idiot is trying to kill him.” She finished on a huff when she was pushed back down.

“Girl, you will not be going anywhere. You have a mild concussion.” The man in the white coat said firmly. “There is more bruising than anything else.”

“Like hell! Get your damn hand off of me. I’ve got to get back to the hotel.” She stopped. “Why am I here anyways? How did I get here? Did you catch the person who did this to me?” She asked curiously.

Marius turned his head towards his father and raised his brow. “Yes father, do tell!”

“Never mind that, all that matters is that you’re safe. And how can Violeta be with Stephan? She ran off a few days ago with her lover.”

Samantha snorted. “She did, did she? Well she was there simpering and a cooing at Stephan when I went for a walk.” She saw Andre stiffen and could tell that he thought a lot of his son.

CHAPTER SIX

Stephan started to pace the room. Samantha had been gone for more than three hours and Violeta clung to him at every chance. He stopped counting the times he'd removed Violeta's hand from his body.

"I'm sorry, Violeta," he said firmly when he removed her hand one last time. "I have told you several times now that I have chosen Samantha. Our union has started."

Violeta sat back and glared at Stephan. "So you play games with me?"

"No games are being played. Look, let me call your chauffeur or father. I think you should leave." He was worried about Samantha and his stomach twisted in knots.

Violeta started to laugh. "I don't think so. You see I have plans for you. At first killing you was the answer to get out of the marriage, but then we had decided to use you for your money."

Stephan froze, but kept his facial expression still. He went to the scotch decanter and poured himself a two-fingered shot, and looked down at the golden brown liquid as he twirled it in his glass. "And how were you going to do this?" he asked, looking over at Violeta.

The petite woman laughed cruelly. "We are getting married dear, and you will meet an unfortunate accident."

"Ahh, I see," Stephan nodded and went to stand by the fireplace. Stephan was anything but calm. His mind raced and he worried about Samantha, he didn't know if she would be hurt or okay.

Stephan watched as Violeta shifted uneasily. Oh yes, she was nervous. "So, when is this marriage to take place?" Stephan asked. He didn't want to do anything rash in case whoever Violeta was working with had Samantha.

Violeta flipped out her cell, and dial a number. "Things have changed. Get up here now."

* * * *

Stephan turned his head when he caught a familiar scent and Violeta gasped when three figures walked into the room. He leaned

over towards Violeta. “Hmm... looks like your plans have back fired, my dear.” He stood when Violeta started to sputter. He walked towards Samantha, his father and oldest brother.

Marius’ hand was around Samantha’s waist as he led her into the room. “Ok, ok, you can let go of me now. Good lord, Stephan,” she said when she caught sight of him. “I’ve been knocked out and manhandled by some quack your father insisted on checking me out and now they act as if I’m a toddler with a boo boo.”

“She has a mild concussion, which seems to have given her an attitude.” Marius chuckled.

“What happened?” Stephan asked as he rushed over to Samantha’s side. Stephan looked up at his father. “Why are you and Marius here?”

Andre shut the door behind them. “You were attacked not once but twice so we decided to see if you needed us.” He shifted uncomfortably and nodded towards Samantha. “We found your young lady and sought some medical attention.”

Everyone seemed to ignore Violeta’s presence. They all gathered in front of the sofa and two armchairs. Violeta backed towards the door and stopped when Andre turned his head and waved her over.

“I’m sorry for being so rude, dear. You must be Violeta, my son’s fiancée or ex- fiancée.” He pointed towards a seat across from where Samantha and Stephan sat. “Have a seat.”

“Samantha told us you decided to grace them with your lovely self.” He looked her up and down then turned his head towards Stephan and Samantha. “Such a dilemma we have here.”

“Oh yes, father, you should have heard her plans for me. Her lover is on his way up here now.” He bent his head and brushed his lips over Samantha’s forehead. “It’s quite entertaining I must say.” And a relief too he thought.

“Oh yes. Her lover,” Andre murmured and pulled out a piece of paper. “You’re father is quite worried about you. He sent me this missive earlier, stating that you ran off with your lover.”

“Hold on...”Samantha broke into the conversation, leaned back and looked at Stephan “What were the plans they had for you?”

He looked down into the wide violet eyes. “That Violeta and I were to marry and they were basically as you Americans say, going to ‘off me’ for the money.”

“Oh really,” She raised her brow, sitting back. “Well it looks like their plans are foiled.” She giggled nervously, and then asked. “So where is this *lover* at?”

She looked over at Marius who was watching the byplay in amusement. She liked these men. Rats or not they had one hell of a sense of humor. Samantha had read up on the Chinese Zodiac for rats since she was considered one due to her birth year, 1972, and thought of them as serious and devious. But these men were cunning with an odd sense of humor. They seemed to have a natural power of charm about them. She liked it. But not once did she get out of Stephan what he did for a living. His father was dressed in a suit pretty much like the one his son Stephan had on when she had met him in the airport, while Marius wore jeans and polo. She needed to bring this up.

“Samantha. Samantha?” She looked up when she heard Stephan saying her name. “Are you alright, foc unul?”

“She needs to lie down.” Andre said matter of fact. “The doctor gave her some medicine before he left.”

Samantha blinked. Did she just miss something here? One minute she asked a question and now they asked if she was all right? “Yes I’m fine, well except for this slight headache...but I want to know about those plans Violeta and her lover had for you.”

Stephan glanced at his father and brother in concern; he had already told the story once and Samantha stared off blankly, lost in thought. He stood and pulled Samantha up with him and turned to look at his father and brother. “Samantha’s suite is through those doors. You can use it, unless you already have rooms,” he said, nodding towards the left before looking down at Samantha. “I think I’ll tell you in private. We both have had a tiring day.”

“But, but what about the big breasted girl?” Samantha asked when they walked into the sleeping room where Stephan’s bed was.

Stephan heard a choked laughter from the other room and a feminine gasp. “Marius and father will deal with the girl.” He murmured and helped Samantha undress.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Mmm...” Samantha moaned when she felt Stephan’s hands glide over her body, removing her clothing. She leaned against him and purred. “Have I ever told you that you have beautiful hands? And they’re magical too...”

“I see the medicine is taking effect.” Stephan murmured huskily, Samantha snuggled into the bed. She grew heated as Stephan quickly shed his clothing and slipped into bed. She reached for him, letting her body melt against his and then ran her tongue over his nipple. “Umm mmm...you are so tasty.” She purred, and slid her hand down his flat stomach.

“Samantha, I don’t think you are up for this.” Stephan growled low in his throat. His cock was already harder than hell. Stripping her had been pure heaven and hell combined.

“Oh I think I am and so are you.” She whispered across his chest, letting her lips and tongue glide about, her hand reached for his cock and began stroking him. Samantha raised her head up and brushed her lips teasingly over his.

She giggled when she heard him growl and felt his hand cup her bottom. He removed her hand from his aching staff and pulled her onto him.

Samantha straddled him laughing softly. She leaned forward letting her hair curtain both their faces and slid her wetness along the length of him the tips of her breasts grazing his chest.

“God, I could just eat you.” She hissed out and took his lips playfully. Leaning forward she reached down, grasping his hardness.

She placed it at the entrance and she sank down an inch, lifting her hips then lowering herself fully upon him. He filled her, he was so thick. She shifted her position and ground down bringing him as deep into her as possible.

He moaned into her lips and reached down to grasp her hips, pulling her back and forth while he pushed up grinding. Her silky tightness gripped and pulled at his shaft.

She raised her head and looked down at Stephan, seeing desire and need race across his face. The feel of him reaching and grinding

against her inner walls, touching her in places she'd never been touched before, had her body shaking in desire.

"Oh my gods," Samantha moaned out when she felt Stephan slip the tip of his finger into her tight anal entry. Leaning back she placed a hand on his thigh, caressed her nub with her other hand and rode him hard.

Her expressions caught Stephan's attention. His member seemed to swell as it never did before. He reached up and gently pinched one of her nipples, tweaking it between his fingers as he pumped up into her. "Let go foc unul, fly for me, luv." He demanded as he watched ecstasy flash across Samantha's face.

"Stephan..." She cried out as an intense orgasm crashed over her.

Stephan couldn't hold back, Samantha's juices coated his cock and balls as her inner muscles seemed to grip his member in pleasurable pain. "You are mine foc unul." He growled out as he pressed into her one last time, finding his own release.

* * * *

Stephan climbed out of bed and got dressed after Samantha went to sleep. He knew they shouldn't have made love due to her head and he knew she would not be feeling well in the morning. But he had to talk to his father about the situation with Violeta and her lover.

He slipped out of the room and walked into the adjoining suite and saw his father and brother relaxed in their natural forms. He began pacing the room letting his nervous energy out.

"Where is Violeta?" he asked.

"Her father came and took her home, her lover did not show." Marius replied.

Stephan turned to look at Marius with a frown, then nodded. "I want to bring Samantha to Lasi until we catch this fellow."

"I don't think he will try anything now, Stephan. Violeta's father is quite livid at his daughter. She broke down and told him their plans. So I see no need to worry about this any further." His father remarked as he watched Stephan's movements.

Stephan walked to the terrace, shoving back the doors. He inhaled the moist cool air. "I want her accepted by our people."

Andre stood and went to stand next to Stephan. "It might take some time, but are you sure she will accept our ways? What about your children? Will she be able to handle having children with our features?"

Stephan turned to look at his father. "I think she can, she is a

strong woman.” He turned and looked out into the night. “She saw me while I was taking a shower. She wasn’t repulsed, stunned yes, but not repulsed.”

“I think you should bring her, let her see how we live, to adjust.” Marius broke into Stephan’s musings. “You are the last male in our family and Samantha might not have an easy time with a few of the females. Claudia is still having issues with some of the women in our clan.”

Stephan knew his father didn’t approve of Claudia’s background. However, his sister-in-law belonged to the family now. Stephan nodded and headed towards the adjoining room. His had doubts and a feeling something unpleasant was about to happen.

* * * *

Arriving at the private terminal, Samantha boarded the Keese Jet. She walked around the compartment. Turning to the left she saw eight leather captain chairs, set four in a row, and, each set had a dining table between them. To the right was two long beige leather sofas along the walls, each big enough to stretch out on and relax. Stepping in, Samantha was guided through the jet, noticing that it had been designed for comfort and bore a homey feel to it.

Samantha sat next to Stephan in the private jet, looking around. Marius and Andre were seated across from them. Marius had a laptop open on his lap while Andre was reading the business section in the paper.

“So what is it you do for a living?” she asked, glancing at Stephan, and then nodded her head towards his father and brother.

“The family runs several banks and dabbles in Organic Chemicals such as acids, like anhydrides and acid halides, Amines, including salts, amides and other organic nitrogen compounds.” Andre said, not looking up from his paper.

“Electronics here and my wife Claudia teaches literature at the local public schools.” Marius murmured.

Samantha turned wide eyes and looked at Stephan, who shrugged. “Other then helping father with the banks I also run a small veterinary clinic on the estate compounds.” He finished.

“Ohh...” She turned her head to look out the window. Samantha felt slightly intimidated. It appeared the family was involved in many things. She herself once owned a restaurant, but it busted, so she took mediocre jobs here and there despite her father’s offering to get her a job at his firm.

“Are you alright? Is your head bothering you?” Stephan took her hand in his and ran his thumb over her palm.

Samantha turned her head and eyed at the man who stole her heart within a matter of moments, but still doubt set in. She’d suffered so many disappointments where men were concerned. She and Stephan were from two very different worlds. “I will be fine...in time.” She added the last under her breath as she turned her head and looked out the window, biting her lip.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Welcome home, master Stephan,” A servant said in Romanian, bowing to him while watching Samantha.

“Thank you, this is Samantha,” Stephan said as he introduced her to his household staff. He knew the staff could sense she wasn’t one of them.

Samantha smiled and greeted the servants warmly. She stopped and talked to the maids, asking questions, joking and laughing with them. It seemed Samantha already won the hearts of his staff. Stephan just hoped that it would be this easy with the rest of his people.

“Is something wrong, sir?”

“It seems the staff is accepting Samantha warmly,” he replied.

“After we got off the phone, I gathered the staff and let them know the change. Sir, your lady is fine and graceful even for an American. She has a good heart and neither you nor your brothers would bring home someone other than who you have chosen. To be honest, we thought you would marry your father’s choice and the union would spoil. It is always better to choose for oneself.”

Stephan nodded. He hand picked his own staff, and they were all loyal to him. They were older, but wise with the changing times. They accepted what was and not what should be. “Thank you, Yousef. I do hope the rest of the clan sees her as we do.”

“I’m sure they will, sir. I had the staff fix you a light repast until dinner.”

Stephan nodded and patted Yousef on the back, before going in search of Samantha. He found her in the bathroom looking at the tub. He slipped behind her, wrapped his arms around her, then bent his head and inhaled her sweet scent. “Find anything interesting?”

“Well of course I have,” she murmured and leaned back into his embrace.

Stephan felt her withdrawal on the flight and on the drive throughout the estate compound. Even though she was leaning against him accepting him, he could feel her hesitation. “Care to share?” he asked.

She bit her lip and looked up over her shoulder at him. “I was wandering if we could stay in tonight before tackling your people... I mean we could dine on the terrace and bath by candlelight?”

Stephan bent his head down and brushed his lips over hers. “I find that highly arousing, but you do remember my features change when I am wet?”

She nodded and pulled away from him. Turning she glanced up at him. Her emotions were in chaos with each other, a state of complete disorder and confusion. She wanted this man with every fiber of her soul. Yet, she felt nervous of what was to come. Her senses told her that danger still surrounded Stephan and now her. But she didn’t want to worry him. She also didn’t want to leave, though in time she would have to go back to America to settle her finances and visit her father.

“Things will work out,” he murmured. Raising his hand, he brushed a strand of hair from her face.

“Yes, yes they will and no I have no problem with you or your appearance.” She whispered. Stretching up, she wrapped her arms around his neck and brushed her lips teasingly over his then pushed away. She leaned over, then started the water in the tub. “Bubbles...”

As the tub filled, watching him with lowered eyelids. She raised her blouse over her head and tossed it to the side. Reaching in front of her, she unhooked her bra. His nostrils flared as he caught site of her breasts spilling out for his view. Samantha never stripped like this before. She was kind of nervous, but by the look in Stephan’s eyes she felt like she had a sense of power.

Slipping off her sandals, Samantha unhooked her skirt and let it slide in a pool around her feet. She stood in front of him with nothing but her panties and thigh-highs on.

A low growl came from Stephan. He bent down, his face level with her panties. Reaching out he ran his hands up her thighs. Leaning forward, Stephan brushes his lips lightly above the waistband of her panties.

“You’re so beautiful!” he whispered huskily against her quivering flesh. Stephan grasped her panties and slid them down her thighs. Tilting his head down, he kissed first one thigh then the other while his hands slid upwards, parting her wet folds. He slipped a finger in, and flicked his tongue across her sweet jewel.

“Oh my...” Samantha hissed out, her hands automatically going to his head, holding onto him for balance. She spread her legs a bit more, closed her eyes, threw her head back, and enjoyed the sensations he caused to run havoc across her body. Samantha hadn’t intended this, but planned on stripping for him. However, this felt so much better. She purred out in pleasure “Ohh Stephan...”

Stephan raised his head up, reached over and turned off the tub with one hand. Getting up, he lifted her in his arms, and then placed her on the bathroom counter. Her hips hovering over the edge, he knelt before her. Inserting two fingers, he resumed where he left off. Leaning forward, he flicked his tongue and applied a suction combination to her nub, teasing her.

Hips rising, hands grasping his hair Samantha whimpered, moaned and purred. “Oh my god, oh my god,” she repeated and her breathing grew heavy as an intense orgasm started to peak. Whimpering, “Ahh.” She cried out as she crashed and went tumbling down the other side of the mountain.

Stephan stood and slid the thigh-highs off of her legs. He kissed her as he removed his clothing. He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it aside. As he reached for Samantha, he hesitated. “Are you sure you are up for this?”

“Of course,” she murmured.

His features change as soon as he stepped and sat down in the tub. She was a bit stunned and hid it well. Samantha reached up and ran her fingers over his rat like features. His body was human in every way. It was basically his nose and mouth, though his teeth weren’t as bucked as she thought they would be up close. The first time she saw him, she didn’t get a good look. She’d had a shock, but she wasn’t disgusted with this man. In fact, she became intrigued.

Stephan sat still and savored the feel of her fingers; he saw interest in her eyes and exhaled. “You are so special, so unique...” he whispered, then lifted his hand and ran his fingers over her lips.

Samantha looked up into his eyes with a smile and nibbled his finger. “Yes I know...” she laughed out playfully. “But you can tell me as often as you wish.” She teased, leaned forward and brushed her lips over his.

Stephan chuckled, as she straddled him in the tub. “Such a playful minx you are.”

“Mmm... that I am...” she giggled when he pushed her back and ran his lips along her neck. “I see how you are...” she said squirming. His staff pressed against her, jutting up, and she wiggled until he was at her entrance, before sliding down on his shaft. She hissed out, being filled with him never ceased to amaze her.

“Samantha...” Stephan growled as it took him slightly by surprise how forward she could be, considering a majority of the women in his past were slightly submissive. But he liked Samantha’s

dominant and wild side. Her openness, the way she expressed herself. Stephan took a pert nipple into his mouth, teasing her between his teeth.

“Ohh god Stephan... “Samantha breathed out as she started moving... Thoughts of doubt seem to fade away, differences didn’t seem to matter. All that mattered was them, the two of them together as one.

CHAPTER NINE

“That fickle bitch,” Tomic roared out and tossed the table over in front of him, sending the contents flying across the room. He hoped by playing Violeta, that he could succeed in taking the Keese’s of their fortune and robbing them of their son, like the Keese’s had robbed him of his father.

“I told you she wasn’t going to be much help. What were you planning to do with her if you had succeeded? Keep her?”

Tomic growled and looked at his friend and partner who seemed to be the only one unfazed by his anger. Emil was leaning back in his chair, twirling and watching the amber liquid. “You know what I planned...”

“Oh yes, you were going to drop her as soon as you got what you wanted.” Emil replied, looking up.

“Emil, is there something you wish to say to me?”

He shrugged his shoulders and changed the subject. Emil had fallen for the small beauty, even though she wanted attention from everyone around her. She had an innocence about her that called to Emil to protect her. Emil didn’t think he would have let Tomic hurt her in any way. But Violeta didn’t look at Emil the way she did Tomic. The silly twit would have done anything for him. “What are your plans now? You do realize she will have mentioned your name, your cell number was on hers when she called to summon you there”

“We travel to Lasi tomorrow and finish this.” Tomic eyed Emil.

Emil had a feeling that this wasn’t going to go well. Tomic had a crazed look about him the last few years. He’d been obsessed with the Keese’s ever since his father lost his job as vice-president of two of the many banks the Keese’s owned. Tomic’s father was thrown into a private prison. Emil heard that Tomic’s father embezzled monies from the bank, invested when he shouldn’t have and lost millions of dollars. He was lucky the Keese’s were as lenient as they had been. They asked the Lasi court systems to hire some of the clan members

as security guards. So their people wouldn't be found out and now Tomic seemed to have blamed the Keeses for his downfall as well, his failures and bad decisions. Emil knew he'd have to keep an eye on Tomic or it could be his downfall as well.

"What are you thinking Emil?" Tomic asked, watching his friend.

"That you are not thinking this through."

Tomic kicked a bottle that was lying by his foot and stood. "I have thought this through... I will take care of Stephan Keese and his family through his American."

Emil lifted his head and stood. "I will have no part in hurting an innocent, Tomic."

"You will do as I say. I am the leader of this ban of rebels," Tomic hissed out from under his breath.

Emil stood his ground. Tomic wasn't leader material and would bring them down by his crazed idiocy. Emil sidled up to Tomic. "Step up or step down. You are not fit to lead anyone, anywhere. If we follow you then we will all perish. I refuse to allow our people to get caught in your insanity."

"Insanity... Insanity..." Tomic sputtered, throwing his arms out wide, "To down the Keese's empire will help us prosper."

"No it won't! If you hurt this American or continue on this quest it will destroy us all. I will not stand here and be a part of this insanity any longer." Emil growled out. "I can not put the remaining of our people at risk. I won't allow it." Emil turned to look around the room and a handful of men. "Can't you see how crazed he is? If you want to stay, then do so. I will not force anyone to come with me. But I will accept anyone who wants to come with me to start a fresh life."

"Emil, you have crossed the line." Tomic growled out.

Emil snorted and walked out the door, several men following him as he left.

"Andre Keese and his family shall suffer and the jaded symbol of our people shall be mine."

* * * *

Samantha sat next to Stephan as they drove through the streets of Lasi. Stephan was well-liked by his people, she could tell. They smiled and waved as they drove past the people in the small town.

"This is such a lovely community." She murmured as she gazed out the window.

"I'm glad you think so." He drove them through the city. They had been in Lasi for three days and things seemed to be going good.

Stephan was proud of how his people took to Samantha, accepting her. She laughed, touched and chatted lively with them. She glowed.

“Where are we going Stephan?”

“It’s a surprise, luv.”

Samantha raised her brow when she looked over at him. “Surprise huh?” She looked out the window and saw that they were pulling out of the city and heading out towards the countryside.

He shrugged, “I thought a picnic in the meadow would be wonderful.”

Samantha looked at Stephan and blinked. “A picnic, No one has ever taken me on a picnic... Well, besides my parents. But no man has taken me.” Samantha leaned over and brushed her lips over his cheek.

“Well then, you are in for a surprise. Romania just isn’t about vampires and changelings. We have beautiful country land also.”

The countryside looked beautiful, Samantha had to admit. She glanced around as Stephan pulled along side the road. She slipped out of the car before he could come around and open the door. Turning around, she saw fields of tall grass and flowers. The air smelled so fresh and clean.

“It’s so beautiful, ” she whispered in awe to Stephan when he came and stood next to her with a basket in one hand and a throw cover over his shoulder.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said, and took her arm to lead her off. They stepped off onto a well worn path.

After walking for several minutes, they came out into an open clearing. She gasped when she saw a small lake with a waterfall dancing into it. Feeling arms slip around her from behind, she leaned back into the strong body behind her.

Tilting her head to one side, she moaned when Stephan’s lips grazed her neck. Shivering she wiggled her bottom against his hardness and laughed out. Turning she slid her arms around his neck, stretched up and brushed her lips over his.

“This is so beautiful Stephan, thank you.”

“Ceva pentru tu,” he replied in Romanian.

Samantha tilted her head, smiling up into his face. She didn’t know Romanian very well but something’s seemed to come to her. “Anything for me, you say?” She pressed against him and sighed. She was afraid she’d open up and he’s shatter her heart. “Stephan, I don’t

want to ask for much from you, but one thing,” she paused. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Stephan cupped Samantha’s chin and raised her face so she was looking him in the eyes, his searching hers. “I could never hurt you, I promise you that.”

Samantha laughed and pushed away from Stephan and nodded towards the waterfall. “Can we swim?” she asked and started unbuttoning her clothing.

“Of course we can, but it is a bit chilly.” Stephan smiled and started removing his own clothing. She was a complex woman. However, she had a habit of changing the subjects when she started feeling uncomfortable. She was his not only in union, but it in soul as well.

Samantha wiggled her brows at Stephan, smiling once both were nude. With a challenge she set off for the lake. “Catch me if you can.” She laughed out.

Chuckling, Stephan shook his head and went in after Samantha. A cry of surprise erupted from Samantha as soon as she jumped into the chilly water. “Oh god!” she laughed out, and shrieked again when Stephan dove into the water and tackled her, taking both under. She came up sputtering and laughing, wiping the hair out from her face. “You, sir, are *so* in for it now!!”

Stephan was ready. He caught her as she dove for him and pulled her against him. Despite the chilly water his cock was aching for this little hellion. “No meu dragoste, I believe you are in for it... now.”

“Mmm...I am, am I?” Samantha giggled and wrapped her legs around Stephan’s waist, the cool water lapping against them. “I think I would like to see what I am in for.” She whispered against his ear, her fingers splaying in his hair while one hand slipped between their bodies and grasped him.

Stephan’s hand lifted her and let her guide him to her entrance, then he eased her down onto his shaft, her warm silky heated core like a welcoming haven, gripping him tightly.

Samantha tilted her head back and watched his expression. She had gotten used to him and it didn’t bother her that he changed slightly when he got wet. He became so damn dear to her. She knew now, that he would never hurt her and she could trust him. She ground down on him and moaned. Both arms wrapped around his neck. “I believe you wouldn’t hurt me intentionally Stephan. But be warned

luv, I am temperamental, and well... we shall not always see eye to eye on certain things.”

He leaned over and brushed his lips over hers. “I’m looking forward to your temperamental ways Samantha. I would expect nothing else from one as fiery as you.” He started moving in her. “Indeed, I am looking quite anxiously to the years to come.”

* * * *

Tomic watched the two as they frolicked about like adolescents instead of adults in the lake. He had followed them from town at a good distance. Seething, he watched as the thick American wrapped her arms lovingly around her lover’s neck and gazed at him adoringly as she made love to him.

Smiling, he knew she was going to help him in his quest to bring the Keeses down.

* * * *

“What is it?” Stephan growled and started pumping into her faster.

“Somebody is watching us; she cooed in his ear and reached between them to start caressing her jewel.

“It’s jealousy.” Stephan murmured against the base of her neck, he nibbled, suckled and ran kisses along it. “They want what I have...”

“Possibly... it could be, what I have,” she purred and closed her eyes; she opened her senses to what this man was doing to her. Her peak was so near, building quickly. She could feel Stephan’s body pulse within her, swell and knew he was on the verge of release. Throwing back her head she laughed out as she tumbled down. “Oh god, Stephan.”

Thrusting furiously Stephan pushed up one last time and growled as he released his seed into Samantha. His lips and tongue moving from her neck to her ear, he whispered. “I love you fiery one.”

Samantha felt tears in her eyes. She knew that what he was saying is the truth, but yet couldn’t say the words back. They were in her own heart but if she pokes them out loud but afraid something would come along and take him away from her. Cupping his cheeks, looking into his face, she let him read the emotions, clearly visible, she felt, showing in her eyes.

CHAPTER TEN

“Stephan, I am disappointed with you in your choice of wives. But, reluctantly I have to admit that Samantha is a good woman. She is strong, beautiful and accepting.” Andre said as he and his sons sat together before dinner, while the women sat in the gardens. André slid a box towards Stephan.

Stephan reached for it and opened it. It held a necklace. “It’s the jaded symbol of our people son. Give this to Samantha with our blessings. She is one of us now.”

Stephan pulled the necklace out. It was a miniature of the original jaded jewel that their father had locked away in the shrine. It was guarded at all times by a state-of-the-art security system, like they used for their banks. Their people worshipped the jaded rat-beast.

“Thank you, Father. She will, I am sure, be very happy to know she is accepted by you and our people.”

“Father had one made after each of us was born, to let us give to our mate.” Alexander replied. “I gave Maria one as well. She never removes it.”

“Same with Sophie,” Adrian replied. “She thought she lost it once and went frantic searching for it.”

“You can add Ana to the list as well,” Marius said sitting up as his youngest child toddled over, holding out her hands to be held. Lifting her, Marius kissed her forehead and tucked her against him.

Stephan watched his brother Marius with his daughter, and then he turned to look at Alexander who had just mated with Maria several months ago. She was round with child. All his brothers were content. Adrian had only been with Sophie for two years, but they didn’t produced any offspring as of yet. Everyone was curious as to what the children of Adrian and Sophia would resemble considering both were from different races. Smiling he closed his hand around the necklace. He would give it to Samantha later that night.

* * * *

The afternoon air felt cool, the breeze refreshing. Samantha smiled at the youngest Keese sister. She was so full of spunk and energy, but loved having all the women around. Personally, Samantha didn't think she'd be able to get along with seven other women as well as she did so far. They were all unique and special in their own way. She'd been here just over three weeks and fell in love with the whole community. Still, she missed her father, and needed to return to America to say her goodbyes.

"So when do you plan on telling us that you are pregnant?" Ana asked, laughing as she finished braiding Corina's long black hair.

Samantha gasped and looked up. "How did you know? I mean, I am not even sure, I mean, umm... I am late, but I have only been with Stephan a little over three weeks. So... well," she sighed.

Ana shrugged, "I was the same with Marius. You have a glow about you that I had, and I saw your face turn green when the tray of olives was passed in front of you this afternoon during lunch."

"I have never liked olives, but I have never had that reaction before to them. I was going to see about testing in another two weeks if...well you know."

Maria heaved herself out of her chair, stretched and placed her hand on her back. "I think I will go see what Alex is up to. Anyone coming?" she said, looking down at the other women.

Samantha continued to sit, waving the other women off. "I'll be along in a moment."

She had been leaning back in her chair with her eyes closed when she heard footsteps, she smiled feeling it might be Stephan. He would come looking for her when the other women returned without her.

"Hello luv." She purred, opened her eyes and screamed when she saw a silvery flash and felt a sharp pain sink into the side of her stomach.

Screaming she kicked out and felt the blade slice into her again. She could hear cruel laughter erupting around her.

"Die bitch!" she heard as another her assailant started to attack her again. This time though, she blocked it and the blade grazed her arm. Dazed and hurt, she heard her assailant curse out again. Thundering footsteps, men's voices seemed too coursed through her consciousness. She balled up moaning. Hands grasped her and voices spoke to her but she couldn't comprehend any thing as she faded into nothingness...

* * * *

Stephan paced the room. “I don’t understand this. She can sense danger. Yet, she stayed and didn’t heed her intuition. Her mind must have been somewhere else.”

“Ability, intuition, would you care to explain?” His father asked.

“She can sense danger when it’s near, how you think she saved me those two times?” he paused and looked up and watched his brothers walk into the room. “Did you catch the bastard?”

“No, he vanished into thin air.” Adrian growled out.

“How is she?” Marius asked, going over to sit next to Ana.

“We have no idea. The doctor is still with her.” Stephan replied distractedly.

“Ahh...” Sophie broke in and turned to look at Ana, Maria, Corina and Julia. “Her senses might be distracted by...” she hesitated, “her pregnancy,” she finished quickly.

Stephan spun around and looked at each of the women then back at Sophia. “Pregnancy?” he asked quietly.

“The rabbit clan have certain abilities and some women who have certain ‘gifts’ such as Samantha’s, will temporarily lose the gift, until she delivers.” Sophie explained.

“She wasn’t for sure and it was brought up not long before she was attacked. I noticed her glow and how she turned green when she saw the olives. Her reactions were like mine when I was pregnant with Delia. I asked her and she said she didn’t know.” Ana finished.

Stephan sat down heavily. He helped remove Samantha’s clothing and aided in stopping the blood flow out of several wounds. One had been to her stomach. “Pregnant...” What if she lost the baby? What if this leaves internal scarring and she can’t have any more. He knew she would live. He could feel her strong life force beating within himself.

The compound’s doctor came out of the room, wiping his forehead and looked at Stephan. “Your little American is fine. She is a strong woman...” he stalled. “I don’t know if you knew this or not, but she is pregnant.”

“She still is?” Stephan stood and went over to the doctor.

“The will to live is strong within her, and I’m sure this helped protect the babe growing inside of her.” The doctor paused again. “She is asleep, but you can go see her. Though I suggest she be on bed rest for about six weeks. I called the pharmacist and he will send over the prescriptions I ordered for her. She will be in slight pain and

the wounds will need to be changed and cleaned. Other than that it, is a matter of time, but she will recover.”

Andre stood, paid the physician and showed him out the door, while Stephan went to go check on Samantha. His stomach tightened in suppressed rage, she looked so fragile and pale lying amongst the white sheets, with her auburn curls spread out, framing her beautiful face like a halo. Stephan sat on the edge of the bed, reached for her hand and watched her as she slept.

He had never been so frightened in his life. “I love you, Samantha.” He whispered and bent his head down to brush his lips lightly over her forehead.

“Dragoste tu la spre Pas,” barely audible words from Samantha slipped through still lips.

Stephan raised his head in surprise. He had never heard Romanian. He knew she understood it, but she preferred English. She was asleep and yet... she replied in his language, perfectly. He stuck his hand in his pocket, pulling out the necklace. Leaning down, he clasped the precious trinket around her neck, and then smiled when he heard her sigh.

* * * *

Crazed laughter filled the room as Tomic looked at his bloodied knife. He had done it. He killed the American bitch, he hurt the Keeses, and killed Stephan’s unborn child. Tomic had been listening to the women for some time and when the American sat back he could not pass up the opportunity to slay the woman.

Emil will be next after I finish the downfall of the Keese Empire. He had taken the band of rebels with him and left Tomic on his own. “I’ll show you Emil, you’ll see. When I become leader and own the prized jaded rat. I will prosper and free my father.” He ranted aloud, leaving his rooms laughing madly and muttering about what he’d just done.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Less than a week later, Stephan paced the room in front of his father and brother, his temper soaring high. They went and left, though they did get a good description of the assailant. What made this more complicated, though, was that the man most likely used a fake name. But he was determined to catch the bastard who would dare to hurt someone so dear to him. His brothers and father put out extra security and everyone joined him in his concern.

“We’ll catch the bastard. Stephan, never let your fears consume you.” Andre growled out. His family was in danger and one had already been hurt. “Samantha’s father is on his way. I just thought being a father myself, he’d want to be there as well. I asked one of the maids to see if they could get her father’s contact information.”

“She will like that.”

“I think she wants to get out of bed and hunt the man down herself.” Adrian chuckled. “When she awoke she was quite livid. I’d never seen a woman so mad.”

Stephan smiled, when he replayed the events of Samantha’s actions, he smiled. “*OMG someone actually tried to kill me! Did you catch the son of a bitch? Oh, let me at him.*” She’d growled out and tried to get out of bed. She had been fuming and ranting. It took Stephan and his sister-in-law to calm her down.

Stephan smiled at his brother. “She is one of a kind isn’t she?”

“She’s a hellion,” Andre replied in Romanian.

“I see how it is... You all talk about me while I am laid up. And I am not a hellion, Andre.” Samantha said good-naturedly, as Sophie wheeled her into the sitting room with the men.

“What are you doing out of bed, meu dragoste?” Stephan asked and rushed over to her.

Samantha looked at Stephan, smiling sweetly and then batted her lashes. “I missed you and couldn’t help myself...” She turned and

looked up at Sophia and winked as she whispered, “Do you think the batting of the lashes worked?”

Laughter and snorts came from the men. Stephan bent down in front of Samantha and kissed her forehead. “You should be resting.”

“Besides feeling queasy, I feel quite fine, in fact I feel like a whole new person. I think I like being pregnant.” She murmured and let him help her out of the wheelchair and onto a sofa.

She looked around the room and raised her brow. “So?”

The Keese women came into the room. The men looked at one another and shrugged. They all had chosen strong women and always consulted in them.

“He slipped out from under our fingers. We have a good description.”

Samantha closed her eyes and leaned her head against Stephan’s shoulder. She felt weak and sore, but she couldn’t sit any longer in bed. To be honest, Samantha was scared, and being left alone made her uneasy her, especially after she’d been attacked. She didn’t like feeling helpless and without her gift she felt unsure. “We’ll catch him...” she broke in. “He’ll slip. It sounds as if he is already slipping,” she yawned out.

Stephan stood and helped Samantha off the sofa, and into the wheelchair. “I think we need to take a nap.” He nodded to his family and pushed Samantha to their rooms. He bent down and whispered. “I wish you wouldn’t push yourself like this, Samantha. I don’t want anything happening to you.”

“I am fine Stephan, just sleepy,” she sighed as she was lying up in bed. “I am just a bit nervous.” she yawned again and snuggled next to him. “But I’m afraid until this lunatic is caught, I’ll be edgy.”

He felt the same; someone was out there with a vendetta against his family. He wanted Samantha safe.

* * * *

Stephan looked up from his computer as a knock sounded on the door. Samantha was lying on the bed reading a book. “Come in...” she said and continued to read her book.

“So that’s how it is then... I see how you are daughter of mine.” A deep cheerful voice came from the doorway.

“Daddy!” Samantha yelled out and opened her arms in welcome. “How did you get here?” she laughed and hugged him tightly to her when he came and sat next to her.

He laughed and lifted his head, looking at Stephan and smiled. “Andre called me when you were hurt and sent his jet so I could fly over here.” He held out his hand to Stephan and shook his hand. “It is great to meet you. I am Richard, Samantha’s father.”

“Daddy, this is just wonderful.” She said cheerfully and hugged him again.

“How are you feeling, sugar?” he asked and looked back at her, he smiled and cupped her face. “I am very proud of you. You have made the right choice.” He reached down and grasped the jaded rat symbol and looked at it. Then he turned to look at Stephan and smiled. “Did you know her grandmother on her mother’s side was of your clan?”

Samantha gasped. “Nana was of the rat clan? Why didn’t anyone tell me this?”

“She married a human and left the pack to move to America, for which I am glad. Then I met your mother who would be considered half-Romanian Zodiac rat and you my dear I would assume to be quarter. I didn’t think you was ready to hear the truth or believe me if I brought up the Chinese zodiac and your heritage.”

“Is this why you sent me to Romania, to find my roots?”

He smiled and patted her hand. “Of course and you found your heart as well my dear. The moron who came over with you was just a ruse to help you get here. Think about it.”

“Is this how I got my ‘gift’? But you have a ‘talent too... I am most confused.” Samantha sighed and reached for Stephan’s hand after he sat his laptop down and went to sit on the other side of her.

Stephan became intrigued. He learned something new about his foc unul. He knew she was special in many ways but this... made him feel lighter still. “This is most fascinating.”

Richard looked at both and smiled. “My family came from a line of witches, if you can believe in that?” he shrugged. “If stories that have been passed down are correct, a majority of the Michaels’ side has some kind of ‘gift,’ even your cousins.”

Samantha leaned into Stephan and sighed.

“I see you are feeling better.” Her father said.

“I am tired, nauseous, and sore, and can barely stand for long periods at a time.” She replied grouchy.

Her father laughed “You’ll be fine, trust me.”

* * * *

“Come ‘ere big boy...” Samantha cooed at Stephan and patted the bed next to her.

Stephan smiled and raised his brow. “I see someone is feeling a bit playful?”

“Hmm, well maybe so. Why don’t you come here and find out?” Samantha purred and got on all fours on the bed and started to crawl towards him.

Stephan quickly stripped off his clothes and went to meet Samantha. “You are so beautiful. But are you sure you are up for this? How do you feel?”

“Stephan, it has been several weeks since the incident and you have barely touched me.” Samantha reached up and ran her hands through his hair, pulling his lips down to hers. “I miss you... the way you make me feel... the way you moan as you come to release.” She breathed huskily against his lips as one hand slipped down and grasped his cock, stroking him.

“I see.” Stephan murmured. Her hand on his cock felt so damn good. He moaned when she pulled him onto the bed and ran her lips over his nipples, her tongue flicking out and laving each in turn, her hand teasing the tip of his cock, rubbing in the pre cum.

One hand slid into Samantha’s hair while the other slid up her thigh. Seeking her slick pussy, he inserted two fingers into her and worked his thumb over her clit.

Samantha’s lips traveled down his stomach, stopping to tease his navel. She moved down and breathed over his cock. “Mmm, so damn tasty,” she flicked out her tongue and laved the base. Then closing her lips around the base, she worked her mouth up and over the head of his cock. Taking the tip of him into her mouth she applied a teasing suction to it and started stroking the long staff.

Stephan’s hips arched up, his cock seeking to go deeper “Oh god, that’s it, yes...” he hissed out when she opened her mouth and took him further.

She moaned around his erection, using her tongue and lips she worked his cock in a rotating rhythm with her hand, stroking and suckling him, her other finger slid between his buttocks teasing his tight pucker entrance.

“Samantha,” he growled out, his hips pushing against her.

She chuckled around his shaft and slipped the tip of her finger into his tight anal entrance, opened her throat and started to deep throat him.

“Baby, I am going to cum.” He growled out his hand working her wetness, while the other pushed and pulled her gently by her hair further down onto his cock.

Samantha could feel his shaft stiffen in her mouth, she continued to moan sending vibrations over his member she slipped her finger in a bit more and set him off.

He growled, bucked up and released his seed into her mouth.

She lifted her head and reached over to the end table and took a drink of water. She turned and smiled at him, his fingers still in her, his thumb caressing her nub. “Luv, that was only the beginning,” she cooed and reached for him again and started stroking his heated flesh. “I want a full night of love play.”

Stephan hissed as he stiffened again in anticipation. He pushed her over onto her back and knelt above her. “I am your willing participant and eager to please, my lady.” He whispered and bent down to take her nipple between his teeth and bit down lightly. Before closing his lips around it, his hand came to cup her other breast, rolling her nipple between his fingers.

Laughing out, Samantha’s hands came up and cupped his head. “And such a wonderful willing participant you are too, luv.” Her hips arched up into his touch, she gasped out when his lips moved down, dipping his tongue into her belly button teasingly and down to her jewel. He lifted his head and pulled away, and reached into the drawer next to the bed.

Whimpering in frustration, she complained. “Stephan?”

“Shhh foc unul and enjoy.” He murmured and looked down between her thighs. With one hand he opened her folds.

Hearing a buzz and feeling something long and thick enter her, she moaned, her hips seeking the unexpected pleasure. “Ohh...” she purred “God yesss...”

“Like that do you?” Stephan asked moving the toy in and out of her, using his other hand to caress her nub. “Well how about this?” he asked and bent his head down, replacing his thumb with a flick of his tongue. He closed his lips over her and suckled, laved and grazed his teeth while working the toy in and out of her.

Samantha’s body bounced on the bed, her hips bucking, seeking, yet wanting to pull away, pushing against his mouth, her fingers tightly pulling and pushing his head. “Oh my god,” she repeated as an orgasm streaked throughout her body.

Stephan lapped up her heady juices and continued to torture her wet dripping pussy until she had come again and right before the third orgasm he pulled the toy out and slid up her body, putting her knees together he pressed them against his chest, and entered her in one sure thrust. He leaned forward, grinding his cock deeply into her. Tight silky muscles gripped his shaft, pulling at him in a pleasurable pain as she squirted around his stiffness. He came hard and fast moments later.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Goddamn Americans!” Tomic cursed. He’d caught sight of the American as the family gathered outside for brunch. She looked healthy and happy.

Word was spreading that she was with child and her father had arrived from America. It also seemed wedding arrangements were being made. And to top it off not one Keese missus was pregnant, but two. It seemed one of the twin’s wives was rounded with child.

He seethed as laughter came from the table. Two other children were seated at the table in Andre’s arms and the other next to the oldest Keese. He muttered under his breath, “None of you deserve to be this happy.”

Heading immediately for the house, Tomic slipped through the rooms and headed for

Stephan’s room, where he remembered it lay, when he had been a guest here before. Tomic let himself into the room and looked around. He saw three medicine bottles on the night stand by the bed and went over to look at them. He then turned away and went through the drawers, tossing clothing out and about. He chuckled when he pictured the looks upon their faces when they came into the room and saw that all their security would not keep them safe. He smiled in satisfaction and went to the door and slipped out of the room.

* * * *

Samantha and Stephan entered the room and stopped in shock. Their room had been ransacked, with clothing thrown about the room. Stephan yelled out for his father and walked into the room. He looked around and noticed nothing broken or stolen.

“This is a sign to let us know that he has been here,” Samantha said.

Stephan nodded, he had to agree. “He won’t get away with this.”

He looked up when his father and brothers came into the room. “Question the staff, ask them if anyone was in the house that wasn’t a maid or house servant.” Andre and Alexander left to gather the staff.

Marius and Richard came into the room. Richard walked over to the medicine bottles. “Don’t touch anything and get someone to come in who can do finger prints.”

“I’m onto it now, let me go get my bag and I’ll be right back.” Adrian said and took off for his rooms.

Samantha laughed out. “You all are into a bit of everything aren’t you?”

Stephan looked at Samantha. “He took some classes that dealt with DNA and prints. He has a fascination with identities.”

“Well I am not complaining. It’s coming in handy, and since you have your own labs he should be able to identify the prints faster.”

Stephan went to Samantha and pulled her close to him. She’d endured too much since first meeting him. But she didn’t complain. She took it and laughed about it...eventually.

Andre came back into the room frowning. “A maid said she saw one of the security guards in the house while we were out dining.”

“Well that explains the bastard getting away when Samantha was stabbed. He posed as a security guard. Did they recognize him?”

“She said she saw him around the house , and she and a few others are, asking around town and on the compound about him.”

It took several hours to lift the prints, the household was all on edge waiting to see what the maid and Adrian came up with. The maid rushed into the rooms, excited. “Sir, Sir, I saw him out on the lawns outside of the main dining rooms. I slipped close to him and he was laughing and muttering to himself, he had a crazed look in his eyes.”

All the men stood and started for the door except Adrian, who looked up and halted them. “Tomic Kobori, its Tomic Kobori.”

Stephan looked at his father. “He is Victor’s son.”

Andre frowned and nodded. “Let’s go, but be very careful, surround the area, we’ll have Laura show us from the house where she saw him. I will go up to him and talk.”

Samantha stepped up. “I have an idea.” She continued quickly, not letting anyone interrupt her. “Why don’t you all surround the area while I lure him out? For some reason he seems to have targeted Stephan and I.”

“Absolutely not...” Stephan barked out.

“Don’t take that tone with me...” Samantha hissed and went over to poke him in the chest. “You understand?”

“I forbid you to put yourself in danger.”

“Samantha, Stephan! Enough!” Andre ordered.

“Actually I think it might be a good idea.” Richard said which caused Stephan to look at him as if he had grown two heads.

“She’ll be fine. I have faith in my daughter, plus I know these things.” He remarked.

Stephan looked at Samantha’s annoyed, yet smug expression and reluctantly relented. “Let’s get this done.” He turned to Laura and followed her out the door, not looking back at Samantha.

* * * *

Samantha went out the door humming as if she had no care in the world, a slight smile on her face. She nodded and grinned at the security guards and went to sit on a bench that was in the gardens. Alone she cracked her eyes and lifted her head, letting the last of the day’s sun gently kiss her face.

Opening her eyes wide she smiled at a guard who stepped in front of her. “Hello.” She said, continuing to watch him when he didn’t do anything but look at her.

The look of confusion on his face was priceless. He probably thought she should be in the house frightened. Instead she braved it outside by herself, knowing that someone was trying to kill her. She cringed inwardly when he leaned down and asked. “Why aren’t you dead? Aren’t you afraid to die?”

“Nope, you see it’s not my time, my father said so.” She said and smiled up at him. She saw the look in his eye and prayed this went off. Stephan was madder than hell and she could feel his eyes burning into her as she sat there, putting her self in danger, she knew she’d have to make this up to him somehow. “Why do you ask? Do you know someone who wants to harm me in any way?”

“I do believe mixing species will drag our people down.”

“Huh? Someone owns your people? I never knew that, I thought they were free.” She shrugged her shoulders. “That’s the impression I get when I meet them.”

“Free, free! No not free, my father is imprisoned because of your lover and his father.”

“Oh yes, I heard about that. Did your father embezzle millions of dollars?”

Tomic sputtered and spittle came out of his mouth as he launched for Samantha, but she was ready. She moved out, hopped off the bench and moved to the side. He stumbled and turned around towards her again. However he froze, and she grinned when footsteps came rushing towards her and her assailant. From all over they surrounded him and stopped his next attack.

“Bloody hell. Why did you have to bait him so much? He could have killed you, my love,” Stephan roared out.

“Shhh luv, I am fine. See.” She opened her arms and stepped up to him, ignoring the cursing Tomic being detained by the other men of the clan.

Stephan growled and pulled her into his arms. “Dammit woman, I love you, but I swear if you do anything like this again I will bend you over and spank your arse.”

Samantha smiled and snuggled into his embrace. She felt completely safe now, with that horrific episode finally over with. “About the spanking, is that a promise?” she asked and laughed out when he moaned, then stretched up and whispered in his ear. “And I love you too Stephan.”

END

Chasing The Ox Moon
By
Waterfall Nagamoon

Shannice must work with the stubborn and sexy Jardor Vannox to save the Agradorian people. Will they manage to do so without killing each other?

<http://www.darkertemptations.com>

Chasing The Ox Moon

By

Waterfall Nagamoon

CHAPTER ONE

Glancing around the astro-shuttle, Shannice Morgan examined her surroundings. This being the first time she left her home world, she wanted to drink in every nuance of the experience. In some ways, it looked exactly like she had expected, and in other ways it seemed totally different. At one time, this particular craft would have been considered top of the line, but now it began to show some wear and tear around the edges. Reaching her destination as quickly as possible sounded like a good idea, the sooner the better. She was determined that on the trip back she would use some of her hard earned credits to upgrade her transportation home to Earth. *Home*. Shannice missed some things about it already. Soon, her introspective thoughts, combined with the smooth quiet glide of the ship, lulled her into a dream like state. She closed her eyes and settled into the seat, letting her mind take her back to the conversation that led to this trip into the outer reaches of space.

* * * *

“You ok, Shani?” Her friend and co-worker Marina looked at her with concern.

Shannice ran a hand through her tousled reddish brown hair as she surveyed the holo-board listing all of the day's patients. After deleting the latest two who had been treated and released, she slapped her mediscan down on the desk next to Marina then dropped into the spare chair behind the medical center's command station.

“Yeah I'm fine. Just damn sick and tired of all these gang bangers trying to kill each other. In this day and age, you would think we'd be past all that and living peacefully. Instead, the younger ones

especially, are still into turf wars and all that other macho crap, even the females.” She pulled up the day’s records and reviewed them as she spoke.

“You know how it goes, no matter how much time passes, teenagers are still teenagers and boys will be boys.”

Shannice knew Mari indirectly referred to the group of older men who fancied themselves old fashioned bikers and did their best to defy the laws that had been put into place by the world government for the protection of all of its citizens. Led by the wild and unruly Rocker Javman, they lived fast and hard in a way that few did now. Rocker was also one of the sexiest things on two feet, but Marina usually avoided discussing him, so neither Shannice nor her friend ever mentioned his name directly.

“Yeah, well I wish they would all just get a life and a brain and stop trying to annihilate each other.” Shannice rubbed the back of her neck where the muscles pulled tight and hard, rocking her head slowly from side to side to release the tension.

“You need a vacation.” Marina stated the obvious. They both knew she bordered on a burnout stage and could crash and burn soon if Shanice wasn’t careful.

“Not going to happen anytime soon.” Shannice answered as she kept massaging her tired muscles. “I don’t have the creds needed to take one, besides where am I going to go?”

The pretty brunette slid a D-screen in front of her and said. “I have an idea.” She booted up the screen and they both watched as an ad-vid played for med-tech assistance needed on the planet Agrador, one of the twelve moons of Avaneese in the Vandian star system. The surface of the planet was lush and pollution free if the ad was to be believed. It looked absolutely gorgeous and the details given made the assignment seem like a dream job. All it needed was some Earther expertise in the area of disease control and prevention. There would be plenty of free time, plus room and board would be provided. Her accounts would also get quite a boost, considering the level of pay they were offering. A working vacation. It did seem like a dream come true.

* * * *

A sudden blaring noise interrupted her memories. “Landing will commence in ten minutes.” A hollow voice sounded throughout the passenger lounge of the star freighter *Be Mine*. Shannice rested her head against the back of her seat. This had been a long trip and she

would be glad to get there. Maybe taking this assignment might be a mistake, but it was too late to change her mind. They already passed into the planet's atmosphere. Besides, her trip had been paid for by the Agradorian Office of Medical Relief. She couldn't turn back now. All they had to do was land, but she would definitely not be taking this particular ship home again.

Suddenly, the shuttle rocked as if struck by something. It resettled into an almost smooth path but then it lurched again, leaving many of the passengers looking around nervously.

"Shit, damn sonofa..." Peterson, one of the ship's crew who had continually hit on Shannice since her arrival aboard ship, appeared on the screen that relayed messages to the passengers. Obviously, he hit the send button just a little too soon. His manner changed as soon as he realized his words were being broadcast. "Hit the decks! If you're hearing this transmission, everyone on board! Hit the decks. We are under attack and going to..." The screen went black, the lights went out, and the last thing Shannice heard were screams of terror as the spacecraft plummeted at a dizzying speed. The impact was almost anticlimactic...and then her world disappeared.

CHAPTER TWO

“Commander, vital signs are registering this way.” Jardor Vannox turned in the direction his second in command, Barellion Minneaax, indicated with the scanner he was holding, one of the few they had been able to get their hands on when the Shentan rebels overtook the city of Agrila.

Jardor's military forces recently took the city back, but the remaining medical technology left a lot to be desired. The Shentan soldiers decimated a good portion of the city's resources, smashing anything that might have been used to discover an antidote for the two diseases that had been introduced to the Agradorian population. Rebuilding what they lost seemed almost impossible when people were dying. This ship carried supplies and relief. Instead of receiving that relief, they were now attempting a rescue and recovery operation on those who were supposed to have been their saving grace. What a damn shame. His boots crunched over broken plasti-glass and twisted metal. Several bodies lay visible in the wreckage. No signs of life emanated from them. He moved on.

A soft sigh reached his ears. Jardor stepped down into the remains of a luxurious travel compartment. The sound seemed to be coming from underneath the sleek lines of an uprooted, overturned seating area. Reaching down, he shoved at the mess with his considerable strength until the mountain of fabric and plasti-steel moved off of the inert form at his feet. Sucking in a deep breath that expanded his already broad chest, he stared down at the bruised and battered face of an extremely lovely female. His psychic senses tingled. Why would that be happening now? Only an Agradorian woman would set off his mating senses. This woman did not come from the Ox Moon of Agrador...

Her eyelashes fluttered and opened. Beautiful green eyes stared into his. She spoke, but it was a whisper of sound that barely reached his ears. He knelt to check her injuries and she passed out yet again.

“I think this is the only one left alive, Jardor.” Barellion stepped over the debris. “Shit! She looks like she's been through a battle with a Lyaxxian war cat!”

“Shut up Barellion, and help me get her free without injuring her any further. When we're done, send the rest of the men in to salvage whatever might still be useable then get the hell out of here.” Shifting the rubble off of the lovely lady's delicate features, they worked to uncover her.

“The Shentan could arrive at anytime.”

“Hell! It looks like they already accomplished what they wanted.” Barellion rose and kicked at a piece of the debris.

“They'll be here. Valdorian didn't just shoot this thing out of the sky because he thought it carried help for us. It would have been totally destroyed in that case. No, there was something he wanted on board, and we can't let him have it. Clean the ship of anything useable then get your asses back.” He rose with the beauty in his arms and strode to the wagon they had brought with them. She wouldn't die, not if he could help it.

* * * *

Shannice awoke on a cloud, well it felt like a cloud. The white sea of fabric underneath her body caressed her with its downy softness. It looked like a cloud too. She gazed up at the miles of netting that cascaded around the bed. She groaned when the movement sent a shaft of pain throughout her whole body. A truck had hit her. Yep, that had to be it. Nothing else could make someone feel this way. It had to have been a hell of a big truck too.

“Oh. Oh, you're awake!” An excited female voice almost sang in her ear.

“I thought I was dead.” She groaned out before trying to focus on the blue woman standing next to the bed. Definitely not an easy thing to do with her vision fading in and out. Her eyes cleared, and she looked again. Well actually the voice belonged to a young woman; a young woman with deep blue skin. Maybe she was dead after all.

“No you're not dead. Jardy wouldn't let you die!” The young woman giggled and Shannice studied the female. She looked beautiful in a very unusual way. Her skin was smooth and soft looking, her eyes big and liquid. The soft silky white dress she wore, gathered by a braided gold rope, draped around her waist, and gold jewelry glittered against her soft blue skin.

“Jardy?” Shannice lifted an eyebrow. Shit, even that hurt.

“My brother, well we have the same mother so that makes him my brother, yes?” She chattered on and Shannice broke in with the next thing that popped into her head.

“You're blue.”

The young woman gave that tinkling laugh yet again. “Yes silly, of course I'm blue! My father is of the Baberinoxian clan. One of our ancestors was a great space explorer. He was blue too. It is an honor to look like him! He and his crew mate Pauleron discovered many new places. One of them being the planet you are from. Of course we could still shape shift back then...”

Her words were cut off when the biggest man Shannice had ever seen entered the room. He was absolutely huge! He had to be near seven foot tall, with muscular arms and broad shoulders a mile wide. He was also absolutely delicious looking. Gold rings glittered in both ears, drawing her attention to the tail of sable hair that slid over one shoulder as he turned to acknowledge her. His hair looked soft, silky and long enough to reach his oh-so squeezable looking butt. The flowing white shirt and leather pants he wore gave him the look of an old world pirate from her own planet. She almost sighed with pleasure at the sight of him...until he spoke.

“Jassy, I told you not to bother her. Now get out. I am glad to see you are finally awake, woman. Tell us your name.” His voice was a deep rumble that went easily with his size, but the tone grated on her nerves. Bossy men never failed to get her riled up. It often only took nanoseconds and she was ready to fight.

“Who the hell do you think you are? Maybe I wanted to talk to her! What right do you have to tell my visitors to leave?” Shannice was on her way to a full head of steam.

“I am Jardor.” The big man gave a slight bow and acted as if that should tell her everything she wanted to know. It didn't.

“Well I am Cleopatra.” *The everlasting Queen of Denial because her body wanted this big hunk of a man, but she was going to deny it 'til the cows came home.*

“It is nice to meet you, Cleopatra.”

Shannice rolled her eyes. He obviously didn't get it. “That's not my name. I'm Shannice Morgan.” She stuck out her hand. He must not have known what to do with it because he ignored it and sat down in the big chair next to the bed. How rude! Rudeness that somehow still did not detract from his sexiness. The man oozed sex appeal from every pore.

“Welcome to Agrador, Shannice. As for what right do I have, this is my room and my bed.” He indicated the huge fluffy cloud-like place she woke in.

Hell. Of course the huge bed belonged to him. It took a freaking huge bed to hold a man his size. Upon looking around, she now noticed that the room contained a lot of natural materials such as wood, glass and stone, making it both functional and beautiful at the same time. Jardor shifted in the chair, reminding her of his presence. Making herself stop admiring the simple, but elegant furnishings, Shannice attempted to scramble from the mattress.

“I’ll get out of your damned bed then, and out of your room too. Whoa...” Trying to stand wasn’t the best idea. The world swam before her eyes.

“No, Woman. You will stay here. You are not yet fully recovered from the crash.” He gently pushed her back towards the bedding. Her skin tingled where he touched her, but she could not explore the feeling further. Her stomach and head rebelled from the sudden movements, making her both dizzy and nauseous at the same time.

Swallowing, she lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes, her face pale and sweaty. “Maybe for just a little bit.” She gasped out then drifted back off into a healing sleep.

Jardor settled back in the chair and watched her rest. This was one hell of a stubborn woman who slept in his bed. Her fiery beauty and strong personality drew him like a lodestone. He reached out one strong hand to touch hers then dropped it back to his thigh before their skin touched. No, he would not allow himself to get close to her. She would recover, then she would leave. Wishing for anything more would be utterly useless.

* * * *

Shannice tossed in her sleep, the bed covers shifting around her, sinking so deeply into the dream world that she did not even realize the movements she made. Her unconscious mind moved through a place that was entirely alien to her.

A presence disturbed her, but she had no words to describe exactly what she felt. It reminded her of the old Earther phrase ‘someone just walked over my grave’. A shiver went down her spine and she turned in the inky black space her mind wandered through. She watched the wisps of vapor swirling around her, though not able to see much more than small points of light far off in the distance.

She stopped all movement at the hint of a whispery sound. What

was that? Things were still and quiet. Nothing moved. She attempted to move again, needing to find the way out of this uncomfortable place. The scrape of metal against stone caused her to gasp and stop again. She was not alone!

“Sssshannice,” A sibilant voice whispered. “You essscaped me...but next time...He will not be able to resssscue you. You *will* be mine.”

The scraping noise came closer. Shannice jerked herself out of the void using only her pure inner strength. Waking with a start, she drug herself from the dark place she had no wish to stay in and sat up gasping.

“Are you alright my lady?” a deep voice asked. As her vision cleared, she glanced at the big man who had been in her room earlier. Jador Vannox. He seemed to be in charge here. Though he may come across as arrogant and bossy, his very presence was comforting and much preferable to being alone in the aftermath of what had to be a nightmare. There was no other explanation for it.

“Just a bad dream,” she mumbled. “Nothing to worry about. What are you doing in here?” Even though it was obviously his house, since this was his bed, she questioned him.

“I need to help you arrange either the rest of your journey or a way back to your home. Since your ship was shot down in our air space, we will take care of all travel fees. Were you taking a vacation somewhere perhaps?” he prodded.

“No, unless you consider it a working vacation. This is Agrador isn't it? I was led to believe that's where we were landing.” Shannice stared up at him, puzzled by his manner. Didn't they still need medical help?

“Yes it is Agrador, but this is not a vacation spot. It used to be. However, we have had some trouble in recent years.” As he spoke, he walked to the window and gazed out across the horizon.

“Like I said, a working vacation. I get to experience a new and beautiful place, that is, if it's anything like the D-vids I saw when I applied for this position.”

“Position? You are here to work? The only position I know of that would have required the presence of an off-worlder is... Wait. You cannot possibly be the medical technician we asked for.”

“I cannot?” Shannice quirked an eyebrow at him. “And why the hell not? Do you think a female tech can't do the job? That is so Middle Ages!”

“I did not say a female couldn’t do the job. However, I hired a Braden Jashon for the task. I would know if I’d hired a woman and I did not. Also, you are injured, and I will not blame you if you wish to go home. I can find another for the job.” Shannice narrowed her eyes at him. If the situation was as dire as she had been led to believe, then there wasn’t time for someone else to be hired.

“He had a family crisis and couldn’t make it. I was your agent’s second choice. Get me the equipment I need and I will do the damned job!” She pounded her fist on the bed as she yelled at him, then groaned loudly. Fuck, that hurt. She felt like a walking bruise.

“Two weeks. You have two of your Earth weeks to recover, then we will see what you can do, woman.”

“I don’t need two fucking weeks! I can get started long before then. I thought time was of the essence here?”

“It is, but in that length of time we should be able to have the bio lab rebuilt. It is not finished yet. Besides, the incubation period of the Xanthus, which is the worst of the two diseases plaguing my people, is thirty of your days. Nothing is going to change before then. Rest and recover, then we will see what you can do.” He turned on his heel, and left the room.

Shannice stared after him in amazement. That was the longest speech she had heard from him yet. Lying back against the soft pillows, she groaned again when her sore muscles protested the move. What the hell she was supposed to do now, she had no idea, but worrying wouldn’t change anything. She yawned then let herself drift back off to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

10 days later

“Are you sure you feel well enough, Shanni?” Jassy asked her anxiously as she led Shannice to the makeshift lab rebuilt from the ruins of Agrador's main medical center. “There isn't much here anyway. Most of it was destroyed by the Shentan.” She looked sadly at the remains of what use to be an elegant structure. During the past couple of weeks, they became fast friends. Shannice was glad for Jassy's presence in her life.

“I'm fine, Jass. Let's see what we can find in here. There has to be some way to help your people before the Xanthus virus spreads any further. A cure needs to be found for the Werther virus too, but the Xanthus is a higher priority.” Shannice had seen the results of the virus and felt appalled that a race of sentient beings could do that to anyone, even if they were not of the same species. Muscles wasted away and skin turned sallow, there was no mistaking the effects of the disease. The Werther virus didn't help any either but at least it didn't kill people within a matter of 3 months. In fact, the long-term effects of that particular condition were still as yet unknown.

“If I only had some of the equipment that the ship carried, we would be able to do more.” Her own recovery from the wreck would have been quicker, if she'd the technology of her world. That wasn't what mattered most here. The lives of these strong, yet resilient people mattered. Even that of the frustrating Jardor. Every time they encountered each other they fought. *Boy did they fight*. She ended up dripping wet every damned time too. Her body betrayed her. Squaring her shoulders, Shannice resolved to put the man out of her mind for now and made her way down the hallway.

Stepping into the brightly lit lab area, she smiled at Jassy and began to make a mental catalog of everything available. There wasn't much equipment and supplies around.

“I think Bar saved a big box of things from the ship, but it looks

like a bunch of junk to me.” Jassy fingered the edge of the gleaming, marble-topped work station that occupied the center of the room.

“That might be helpful.” Shannice watched as the younger woman picked up a communicator and called the Captain of the Agradorian guard.

Jass was much too young for what went on around them. Her manner indicated that she might have a crush on Barellion. Jardor wouldn't be happy. That thought caused her to snort to herself. What the hell did she care if Jardor wasn't happy? He wasn't anything to her except a huge pain in the behind. It seemed like every time she turned around she found him right behind her. He had done nothing but boss her around from the time they met. He often even managed to seem give orders with just a look. He was a man of few words that one, but definitely still a pain in the ass.

“He's coming. Bar is on his way!” Jassy sing-songed as she danced her way over to Shannice. Yes, she definitely had a crush on Barellion. Jardor was going to have a fit when he found out. Grinning wickedly to herself, Shannice started to move things around in anticipation of getting to work. There had to be some way to help these people beat these deadly diseases.

After a few minutes, Barellion came in with a box and set it down on the counter. All three of them peered inside and Shannice's heart fell. There was a jumble of mixed up pieces, and assorted odds and ends. Some things she recognized, some she didn't. She watched the younger woman as Jassy fluttered her eyelashes at the big ox of a man. Bar was handsome, but not quite as good looking as Jardor, nor quite as big. They were both built like the oxen of her world. Animals, who at one time, were used as labor on farms, but now were pretty much extinct. However, there was no mistaking their intelligence and depth. These people needed her and she would do her best to help them!

“Well I can't tell what all this stuff is, but there you go. That's most of what we salvaged from the crash site.” Levering himself up on the counter, Barellion sat next to the box, then leaned forward as he fiddled with a couple of the pieces. It was obvious that he was trying not to look like he was staring at Jassy. Shannice grinned to herself and started trying to piece things together. If she could only send for some more supplies from home, it might help, but would it be too late?

Footsteps rang out in the hallway. There was no mistaking that

gait and the distinct sound of those boots. As he entered the room, she turned towards the door. Her pulse raced at the sight of Jardor in all of his golden glory. His burnished skin and sable hair shone under the light that flooded the big room. She turned quickly back to the pieces she tinkered with before she betrayed her interest in him.

“What is going on here? Marky's told me all of you had come here. Jassinia? I believe our *Matrona* is calling you.” He eyed Barellion, watching his sister as she let out an exasperated breath and stormed from the room. As Bar made to follow her, Jardor stopped him with a look and a grunt. The younger man obviously understood and left in an entirely different direction with a dejected look on his face.

Staring after him, Shannice realized that if she stayed here for any length of time she was going to have to see what she could do to help them. The big lug in front of her had to understand that his baby sister needed to grow up some time. She turned back to her various parts and devices. Maybe if she ignored him he would go away and let her work in peace...her luck was not that good.

“Have you found anything?” He asked and moved closer to look over her shoulder. His masculine scent wafted to her nose. Oh, he smelled so good.

“Not yet, but I will.” She turned and found herself nose to chest with the big man, and what a chest it was, broad and smooth with well defined muscles... Her mouth watered as she realized he wore only a pair of black leather trousers, a dark brown leather vest and his ever present black boots in deference to the warm temperatures of the past few days. This planet had a temperate climate with gorgeous foliage from what she saw so far, well the parts that the Shentans did not destroy that is. Exploring the landscape was on her list of things to do, she just hadn't found the time yet.

“When you are done eating me with your eyes, we can talk about what is yet to be done.” His words jerked her eyes back up to his face and she flushed red, slightly embarrassed to have been caught examining him from head to foot.

Not that this view was any better. The golden medallion he constantly wore glinted in the open neck of his shirt. Did it always radiate like that? The stone in the middle of it seemed to pulse...He moved, drawing her attention back to his handsome face, the glowing gem forgotten. His long sable hair was loose and hung down to the middle of his back. A silky looking lock slid over his shoulder when

he bent his head slightly to make closer eye contact. The softness of his hair touched her cheek and her lips parted with a sigh. At that moment Shannice realized how close his full lips were to her own. Just a breath away and their mouths would meet in a kiss. Would he kiss her? She spent a good part of the last two weeks wondering what he tasted like. That thought reminded her of his earlier comment.

“I was not *eating* you!” She huffed out on a squeak as she took a step backward, coming up short when the long marble countertop met her butt. Ah hell! There was no place left to go. She felt trapped. Caught between the proverbial ‘rock and a hard place’. Wiggling her hips just a little in the hopes of freeing herself, Shannice realized just how big said *hard place* seemed and stifled a gasp. *That would never fit!*

“No? You do not want to know what I taste like.” An eyebrow quirked at her, which only served to remind her how arrogant she thought him to be “And it will too fit. Trust me.” He grinned as if he knew something she didn’t.

“No.” Willing her body not to tremble, she stared back at him boldly.

“Well I do want to know what *you* taste like.” His mouth lowered and her senses exploded. The taste of him felt unlike any other she had ever encountered. He was utterly delicious. He also smelled fabulous. Definitely good enough to eat. Shannice moaned into his mouth, her tongue meeting the strokes of his, her body conforming to the contours of his as he pressed closer. She should *not* be doing this, but she could not help herself.

Jardor pressed his advantage as the lovely woman in front of him melted beneath his kiss. He knew getting involved with her would not be the best thing for him or for his people, but his control finally snapped. He *always* did what was best for his people, never for himself, but he *needed* to taste her. She was exactly as he had thought, delicious. His hands cupped her hips. The fact that she was curvy and built to take a man his size really enhanced his desire for her. She wouldn’t break when he touched her like he wanted to.

“You taste wonderful.” He whispered against her lips, pressing her back further until she rested on the countertop. His hand slid up the outside of her thigh, under her skirt. Her skin felt so soft and silky under his fingertips. He wanted more. He cupped her bottom and squeezed. Yes, this woman made quite a luscious armful. He groaned as his hand slid around and between her thighs. Her wet flesh excited

him. He slid two fingers inside her and groaned again. How would the tightness that squeezed his fingers so tightly feel around his shaft? The thought made him shudder. He allowed his mouth to slide down across her collarbone, and then closed his mouth over one pouting nipple. He could not wait to see what color they were but he did not have time at the moment to push the cloth out of the way. He needed to feel her in his mouth now.

“Oh, Jardor!” she moaned, the sound of his name on her lips arousing him even further.

He sucked harder on her breast and picked up the pace with his fingers. Bringing his thumb into play, he searched for the small nub of her clitoris. She tightened around him even more, encouraging him to stroke her taut flesh harder. Suddenly, biting softly down on her nipple, he was pleased when she shattered around him with a scream that echoed sweetly in his ears. Her hot honey spilled over his hand. He straightened to his full height and began working furiously to get his leathers undone while he watched her shudder and pant with her eyes closed. He could not wait to make her scream that way again. He just needed to be inside of her first.

As he leaned down to kiss her again, they were both startled by a sudden noise. When the communicator attached to Jardor's belt went off, they jumped apart. He glanced at her as he answered the page. His desire for her had not lessened at all. It only burned brighter and hotter now.

“I must go. There are things that need my attention. We will continue this later.” The rebels were sighted on the outer borders of the city and he needed to make sure that Agrila's defenses were at full strength. They *would* finish this later, however. There was no way he could do anything less. He wanted her too much. With one last long look at Shannice, Jardor turned and left the room. Kissing her before he left was not an option, because once he started again, he wouldn't be able to stop. She shot his control all to hell, but for once he could not fault her for it.

Shannice slid off the surface of the work station as he left the room, her legs trembled beneath her. She'd never experienced anything like that in her entire life. As an independent woman from a sexually liberated planet, she was no simpering virgin, but Jardor made her feel things she thought could not possibly exist. She straightened her skirt then looked down to fix the blouse, stopping at the sight that greeted her. There was a huge wet circle around one

nipple, sticking to her skin, allowing her areola to be entirely visible through the cloth. She panted at the memory of how it had gotten there, then shifted to stand up straight. She might as well get back to her work.

Every time she moved, she moaned once more as her thighs rubbed together. The slickness and throbbing between them reminded her repeatedly of what just happened. A shudder coursed through her body. She gave herself a minute to enjoy the sensation before resolving to put this behind her and get on with her purpose for being here. Getting herself back together was of the utmost importance now. *Nothing* would hold her back from her goal! A relationship between herself and Jardor would never work. She needed to remember that simple fact.

Crossing to another work station, she gathered some things together and began to take notes. Trying, and failing, to stop thinking about the heat Jardor generated inside her just a short while ago.

She heard light, fast footsteps echoing from the hallway.

“Shanni! Are you still in here?” Jassy came barreling into the lab and stopped short when she saw Shannice. “My brother was right! Our *Matrona* did want me. He only tried to get rid of me before.” She laughed.” She needs some things from the market. Let's go shopping!”

“Jassy, I don't have any creds yet, or whatever else your people use for money. My payment for this assignment is being deposited into my account on my home world and I have not been able to sync my own credit disk here yet.” She indicated the small silver disk on a cord around her left wrist.

Jassinia's eyes sparkled with glee as she held out a cord with a gleaming gold disk attached to it. “No problems! I have Jardy's credit-disc.” She grinned and bounced over to the door.

Shannice followed her. She couldn't allow Jassy to go out by herself, now could she? She wouldn't buy anything; just enjoy the experience of the market.

* * * *

The market busily teemed with individuals from all over this section of the galaxy. Being the capitol city of Agrador, Agrila was the biggest city on the planet and the Shinza was the largest retail center in all of Agrila. The sights, sounds and smells were a bit overwhelming to someone who wasn't used to such a big market place.

“Watch out!” Jassy grabbed Shannice's arm and pulled her back as a heavily ornamented litter was carried past them. One of the huge men

carrying the contraption nearly stepped on her. He gave a wicked grin, and then winked at her. Shannice noticed that he was blue like Jassinia. A gold ring also adorned his nose, hanging from it like those on the stock animals from her planet pictured in the history vids. All of the men carrying the conveyance wore rings through their noses and they were wearing nothing more than tiny loincloths and huge gold bejeweled collars, with gold arm guards around their forearms. She lifted an eyebrow.

There were no slaves on Agrador, and yet these men resembled the picture of servitude she held in her mind's eye. Shannice watched as a beautiful woman moved behind the filmy curtains of the litter. The woman stared back at her then reached a hand over the side to stroke the hair of one of the men who carried her. Her manner was very possessive, as if she declared to all who watched that he belonged to her. The man grinned at the woman. He said something to her and she laughed before they passed out of sight.

"There are those who choose to serve some of the Andreada for a time. You can tell them by the nose rings. I think Leala's men are a bit overdressed myself." She stared after them then turned to look at Shannice.

"Overdressed! They aren't wearing much as it is!" This young woman never failed to surprise her. How could she think they were overdressed? Shannice had been taught, since arriving, that the Andreada were revered as Priestesses but she realized that they were more like the judges of her world. They helped to keep order and peace in a totally different way than Jardor did as the leader of Agrador. Each city had several Andreada, depending on the size of its population. They were well respected. That one seemed a little out of the ordinary though, even to an off-worlder like Shannice.

"I meant all the metal they wear. Most don't have their guard wear collars, but the arm guards and nose rings are normal," she laughed. "Leala has a thing for gold and jewels, the more ostentatious the better. She always dresses her men like that. I don't know how my cousin Drador can stand it. However, she is very good at what she does. The people in her section of the city are well off and happy. He says he will work for her for a little while longer then he will leave."

"The man who winked at me is your cousin?" she asked as what Jassy said registered in her brain. Come to think of it, she did see some resemblance.

"Yes, Drador Varinox. He has been serving as Leala's chief guard

for some time now. As you noticed, he is blue, like me.” She laid her hand on her own chest as she finished her sentence, smiling a little. “He is considered quite a catch, not as much as Jardy is though.”

Shannice just quirked an eyebrow at her. Jassy made it no secret that she would like for them to be permanent ‘sisters’ but on that subject they would just have to disagree. She watched as her friend moved forward to examine a crate of fruit from the Denavian Plains until something in the next booth caught her eye.

“I’ll be right back, Jass.” She called as she moved forward to the booth selling stone sculptures.

They reminded her of the jade items found on her own world. Maybe there would be some things she could take home as gifts. It wouldn’t be a problem to pay Jador back when she received her wages. A sudden step behind her brought her head up. It was only one of the merchants, but she could not shake the feeling that someone watched her.

Trying to inconspicuously look around, Shannice moved casually forward as if she were not aware she was being observed. Picking up a beautifully carved dragon, she examined the exquisite detail with which it had been created, Mari collected dragons. She would love this one. Shannice took a deep breath. The feeling was still there. Yes, she was being watched.

“Hey lady, for you one hundred credits, a total steal!” The little man grinned at her and Shannice smiled back.

There was no menace coming from him. He seemed safe enough. He must have been the one watching her. Another customer caught his attention and she went back to her perusal of the statue. Shannice turned it over considering purchasing it as a gift for her friend. Maybe she should haggle with the merchant a bit. Hearing something behind her, she spun around and ended up nose to chest with a much bigger person. She couldn’t help yelping when a big hand closed around her wrist.

“I have been looking for you and Jassy. It is time you finished your shopping and returned home.” Jador stood in front of her with his feet set wide apart.

After releasing her wrist, he crossed his arms over his chest and watched her. His demanding manner grated on her nerves. The medallion on his chest glowed again. Why did it always do that every time she neared him? Not that it really mattered but she really would like to know.

“What if we're not done yet?” she tossed her head and eyed him with what she hoped looked like disgust. There was no way she could let him know how attractive she found him. He would take advantage of that in a heartbeat. After setting the stone dragon back down, she propped her hands on her hips and glared at him. He may be sexy as hell but no one bullied her and got away with it.

He stared back with that implacable manner that never failed to infuriate her. Lifting an eyebrow, he crossed his arms over his chest, watching her. “I have already spoken to Jassy. She is finishing up our *Matrona's* shopping list and is almost ready to go. Finish your own purchases and we will leave. Tandor, wrap this piece for the lady and charge my account for it.” He spoke to the merchant then turned back to her.

The grinning little man moved to do his bidding. Shannice bristled with indignation. How dare he think he could order her around like that?!

“I can handle my own business, thank you very much.” She glared at Jardor.

“Of this I have no doubt. However, you will do as I say. I will collect Jassy and we will be ready to go. Wait here.” He turned on his heel as he spoke. Shannice could not help ogling his fine ass as he walked away. He made her crazy! But she'd be damned if he wasn't sexy as hell! She felt herself grow damp with arousal and cursed her body's inability to ignore her attraction to the man.

“Lady? Your dragon is ready. May you have many blessings.” Tandor, the merchant, smiled at her as he handed her the package.

“Thank you, same to you.” She smiled back and turned to leave. She'd be damned if she'd stay exactly where Jardor had told her to! She wasn't some witless ninny, who needed a keeper. A big hand shot out and grabbed her arm. Damn, not again. She spun around to give the big ox a piece of her mind just as a cloth came down over her face. No! Catching a glimpse of the owner of the hand, Shannice realized this was not Jardor, then she passed out.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I should not have left her alone!” Jardor paced the length of the palace's meeting room. “I turn my back for just one moment and she is gone!” He threw up his hands. “I know this is the work of the Shentan. They will pay for taking my woman.”

“Your woman? Last I knew you were nothing to each other. Just when did this development happen?” Barellion looked at him with a raised brow. “She has no claiming mark on her that I could see. I could also swear that you told me you would look for your mate in the outer edges of the Meridian zone if necessary, but would never mate with an off worlder?” He leaned indolently against the huge polished wood table and crossed his arms over his chest.

“We do not choose our mates, the Goddesses do. You know this!” Jardor glared at him, conveniently ignoring the fact that he had indeed insisted that his mate could not possibly come from another world.

“I do, but I didn't think you did.” Barellion quipped. Getting Jardor's goat was always fun. Of course, he had already wondered if this was coming. All the signs had been there from the beginning.

“I know this just as well as you do.” Jardor gave his friend and captain of his guard a disgusted look.

“And does she know this, Jardor? Shannice does not know our ways. You have told her?” A softer voice interjected, and he stood up a little straighter as his mother entered the room.

“No, I have not told her but she will understand. She is my woman and that is the way of things. The fates have spoken.” Moving the cloth of his vest to the side, he allowed them to see the golden medallion resting on his chest. The polished stone in the middle of the carved pendant glowed with a soft fire that spoke volumes. He really did not understand why things had to be so complicated. The Ox Goddess had spoken. The radiance of the stone gave irrefutable evidence that Shannice belonged to him. Whenever he touched her, or spoke of her, it glowed like the Nanoxian sun. Shannice must accept their bond and allow him to complete the mating ritual. They belonged together.

“Men!” His mother threw up her hands. “Do I have two daughters?”

“No, you have one daughter and one son. What kind of question is that, *Matrona*?” Sometimes he just did not comprehend the female mind.

“If I do not have two daughters then you cannot possibly know what she will think and how she will feel. You are not female. Get your head out of your rear end and get things in gear, son! Do not tell Shannice what she will or will not do. Talk to her. Let her know how you feel. If you do not, then she will not stay with you.”

“That seems like sound advice to me, Commander. However, before you can do any of it, we must get your mate back. Do you have a plan?” Barellion brought the focus back to the matter at hand. None of these things would matter if they could not get Shannice back whole and safe.

“Yes, I have some ideas. We can discuss it, then begin. There has to be a way to find her before it is too late.” He *would* find her if it was the last thing he ever did.

* * * *

A scraping sound pierced the silent area Shannice found herself in. The noise reminiscent of the ones from her dreams. Was she dead? Didn't she have this feeling just a few weeks ago when the ship had crashed? Groaning, she tried to force her eyes to open. Things were a bit fuzzy, but she managed to examine her surroundings. Stone, lots of gray stone. What a bleak and dreary looking place. The room looked like it had been carved directly from the rock. The only furniture in this room being the cot she was lying on. A chair made of some sort of dark wood stood next to the cot. The scarred and worn seat looked as if it had seen quite a lot of use. The rest of the room held nothing but the cold gray stone. The lighting sucked too. Somebody should fire their decorator...

“So you are back with ussss.” An oily voice hissed from the robed figure that stood near the end of the cot she lay on.

“Where am I? Where are Jardor and Jassy? Who are you?” Shannice began asking rapid-fire questions. If she let herself think about it too much, he would scare the shit out of her. No way in hell was she going to let that happen. Obviously, being the one in charge here, he would know what was going on. She flinched when one cold finger slid across the skin of her exposed ankle. Scales, he felt like he had scales. She could not see beneath the hood he wore. She didn't

want to see after feeling his touch. Shuddering would let him know how much his touch bothered her, so she attempted to keep herself under control

“You do not need to know my name or this location. As for your friendsssss they are not here. My men could not capture Jasssssinia, but they took you. Yes, you will do quite nicely.” He stroked her leg again. She could not suppress the shudder this time. His touch was just too creepy.

“Get your freaking hands off me!” She shouted at him and thrashed against the bonds that held her to the cot. “Let me go. You are going to pay for this you creep! I'm not worth much in ransom you fool.” His answering laugh sent a chill down her spine.

“I do not want to ransssssom you.” He gave another evil chuckle.” You are worth a lot to me in other waysssss. You are the meanssss to my revenge. Resst for now. We will begin ssssoon. Agrador will be mine, one way or another.” He swept from the room and she collapsed back against the thin mattress that cradled her body. Pulling at the restraints again, she attempted to get loose. There had to be a way out of here. No way would she let that creep win. Unless she missed her guess he was one of the Shentan. She might be able to gather information about the diseases and get it back to Jardor. Maybe they could cure his people after all, but she needed to get out of here first!

A clanking sound caught her attention and she stilled. Was he coming back? She could just as well do without seeing him again anytime soon. A shadowed figure entered the room, much taller than the scaly creep who recently left. It wasn't him, but who was it then? The lack of decent light made it hard for her to see. There was something about him though. A sense of being in the same vicinity as a prime alpha male assailed her senses.

“Who are you? What do you want? If you touch me I'm going to scream!” She fought against the bonds again. No way would she lie there and take anything anyone tried to dish out. She would fight until her dying breath.

“Peace, little one. I mean you no harm. My name is Darius Dragoris.” He began to fold his tall, broad body into the wooden chair and she got her first real look at him. She could see his left side pretty well. He was almost in profile to her. Long black hair flowed over his shoulders when he settled himself in the seat. His left hand was in the one shaft of light that did penetrate the room and she could see his

golden skin. What a handsome man! He exuded such an aura of sensuality that she was sure he could have just about any woman he wanted. Too bad his sexy presence did nothing for her. Hell, she finally admitted to herself that it was only Jardor she wanted. No other male would do. Another metallic clanking sound brought her eyes back to her visitor. The metal against stone noise was coming from a chain attached to his ankle that lead to a huge ball of metal. It must have taken a lot of strength to drag that with him.

“Well then what the hell do you want? Why are you in here and do you work for that overgrown lizard that was just here?” She watched as he flinched just a little bit. Now that reaction might bear some further investigation in the future, but first she needed to know what he wanted with her.

“No, I do not work for him. I will admit that both of us use to believe in the same cause,” he inclined his head in a gesture of concession.

“Which is?”

“As the leader of the Shentan he is determined to take over Agrador. I was dissatisfied with things on my own home world and looking for new challenges. When I met him, our motives appeared to be similar enough that a partnership seemed like a good idea at the time. If I had known then what I know now, I never would have hooked up with him, but what's done is done.” He shrugged those broad shoulders.

“Oh? And what was it that you found out, if I may be so bold as to ask?” She turned her head, still unable to sit up on the bed due to the restraints.

“The Shentan are not a whole race of people in and of themselves. They are but a small faction from the planet Parsinthius which is several light years away. Not much is known about them in this sector because they are on the outer rim of the Santharian star system.”

She continued to listen as he further explained. “Valdorian was exiled from Parsinthius because of his radical attitudes. His people wanted no part in annihilating other beings but he was determined that they should reach out and conquer any species he considered to be beneath them. Thus, he was given a ship and asked to leave. I do not think the other Parsinthians realized just how much of a threat he could be. He managed to convince a few other disgruntled citizens to join his cause and took them with him. Unfortunately, two of them

just happened to be scientists with a vast knowledge of diseases and chemical warfare. When he came across the Vandian star system he discovered that Agrador had the climate and resources that would best support the building of his empire.”

“I see. Where do you fit into all of this? If Agrador is not your own home planet, then where are you from?”

“I am from Firezia. My people have visited other worlds before. I believe even your own world. Earth is it not?”

“Yes that's it. I have never heard of Firezia...”

“Unlike the Agradorians, my people still shape shift. Your planet has many myths and legends about us.” He leaned forward out of the shadows. The dim light of the room highlighted the right side of his face.

She gasped. The right side of his face was covered in scales, totally unlike the ones that had been evident on the hand of Valdorian. The shape of his face on that side was also a bit different. He looked like a... well he looked to be half dragon!

“What happened? I mean if you still shape shift...I don't get it. You look as if you are stuck in the middle of a transformation.”

“That is precisely what happened. I believe your planet has a very old expression 'hoist with your own petard'?”

“Well, yes but how does that pertain to you?” She could not help staring at him. Even with the facial anomalies he was still one of the sexiest men she had ever met. Not *the* sexiest because that would be Jardor, but close.

“Well...” He leaned back in the chair again bringing her attention to his muscular frame. “When I discovered just how far my so-called partner was willing to go for his cause I changed my mind about working with him, but by then it was too late.”

“Too late?”

“Yes he had already developed the Werther virus. The effects weren't that bad it seemed, so I did nothing.” He looked down at the floor. “I paid for it.”

“You did? How?” As a medical professional, she was interested in all aspects of the diseases that had been visited upon the people she was attempting to help.

“With this,” he indicated his half changed state. “I am immune to the Werther virus. This is a result of the Xanthus virus.”

“I thought it only affected the Agradorians!” Though the fact shocked Shannice, it did get her mind to working. If he was immune

to at least one of the viruses, maybe she could use his blood to develop a cure for it. Werther was the lesser of the two evils but people still suffered with it.

“That is what was thought at first. However, somewhere back in the history of this system, those from the twelve moons were all from the same place. We share a common strand of DNA. We are very different and yet, there is the one small part that is the same. In my case, it caused my body to be receptive to the virus. I am not affected to the extent the Agradorians are, and yet you can see what happened.” He indicated the right side of his face. Shannice realized that as they talked she really hadn't focused on his disfigurement, if it could even be called that. He was still sexy as hell.

“If I could just get out of here. I might be able to help you,” she pulled at the bonds again. “These things must be made of pure Platinium.” Shannice grunted as she twisted and turned, only succeeding in tightening them further.

“I can help with that,” Darius reached out and untied her. “Valdorian really has no good reason for keeping you tied down, other than he likes to be as nasty as possible. There isn't any easy way out of here. Also, the surrounding area isn't exactly a friendly environment. You wouldn't survive out there alone for very long.” He finished freeing her and helped her sit up. As she rubbed at her wrists, her mind was working overtime.

“What is he going to do with me? I don't understand what value I could possibly have to the man.”

“That's easy *dalonna*. Your main value to him lies in the ways he can use you to torture the Agradorian leader. Jardor would feel responsible for anyone under his care. He is also most likely to come for you and then Valdorian is hoping to do away with him. He would then be able to take over the planet more easily. But also...”

“Yes? And what does *dalonna* mean?”

“*Dalonna* means beautiful lady in my language. Most of all, the other reason for keeping you from your work is simple. If you are under his control then you cannot cure his enemies.” He lifted one shoulder and Shannice sat looking at him stunned.

“Well...that does make sense. However, I must find a way to help them. Darius... children are dying.” She looked at him wondering just exactly where his loyalties lay.

He nodded. “Yes that is a tragedy. Something must be done, but I don't know what to tell you. I am as much of a prisoner here as you

are. He only keeps me around because he likes someone to gloat to. He is also convinced that I may be of some use to him in the future. Maybe there is some misplaced sense of loyalty left inside him as well. I do not know. He was not at this level of insanity when I first met him. I did think we were friends... but he changed.” He rose from the chair and turned to the door. “Get some rest, *dalonna*. I will come back when he is gone and we will see what we can do. I am not promising anything, but maybe, just maybe, we can do something about getting you out of this hellhole.”

Shannice lay back against the mattress as she watched him leave. She would get out of here one way or another, whether he helped her or not. As her grandfather often reminded her, Morgans did not take adversity lying down. But first, she would do her best to find any information she could to take with her. She would stop the damned diseases from killing anyone else if it killed *her* in the process.

* * * *

“Lady? Wake up. Master Valdorian wants you in the outer chamber.” Shannice woke up quickly, and rolled over to look at the owner of the sweet sounding voice. Standing next to the cot stood a young boy with very sad eyes. He also exhibited every sign of having Werther disease. His life wasn't in danger for a long time to come, not from the disease anyway. Yet, the symptoms would not let him live a comfortable life though and that was extremely sad.

“What if I don't want to go?” She hated to make things harder for him, but dammit this was not fair. The ugly, scaly Valdorian was not her boss.

“Then he will come for you, lady. You do not want that. It is not pleasant.” His eyes spoke of suffering that she had no wish to learn about. Deciding not to prolong the agony, she rolled up off the cot to go see what slimy wanted. She ruffled the boy's hair. He just stared at her and turned towards the door.

After sweeping into the cavernous room that served as the main meeting room for the Shentan rebel faction, Shannice stopped before Valdorian and glared at him. “Yes, oh exalted one?” she blasted out sarcastically.

“Ssssshannice, Darius tells ussss you are not feeling well. He fearsss you have contracted Xanthussss. We do not know how it will manifest in humanssssss. Is thissssss true?” He tilted his head sideways to look at her. Working as long as she did in an Earth emergency room, Shannice always thought fast on her feet. This

might be going somewhere interesting. She heard a voice in her head, the rather deep, studly sounding voice of the dragon man. He said *cough*, so she did.

“I’m not sure. I don’t feel that great. As you said, no one knows how the disease presents itself in humans, or if we can even contract it.” This was not entirely true. Tests, that she ran back before she even left Earth, proved that humans could not catch the virus. Obviously Mr. Scaly did not know that and she was not about to tell him, not if it could get her where she needed to be.

“I know you were working to help Vannox find a cure. Were you making progresss? With the equipment we have here do you think you might be able to complete your work?” His eerie eyes never blinked, which almost unnerved her. Shaking the feeling off, she looked at him with a questioning expression.

“Yes, I am sure I could, but why do you want to know?” She coughed again for good measure then swayed on her feet. “You created this god-awful, disease why would you want to cure it?”

“I have found it isss best to have ssssomething your enemies need. They will work hard to get it, therefore providing excellent entertainment, not that I will let them have the cure.” His grin was just too creepy. “Besssidess I do not wish you any ill will. I only want my enemiiesss to die and give me the power of their possessssssions. I do not want you eliminated. If I had, you would already be dead. If you can cure the dissssease in yourssself then you will not have to die.”

She supposed this was true. He could have killed her already, but he hadn’t. She owed him gratitude for that, but only for allowing her to live. His certifiable insanity was obvious by any world’s standards. Understanding his motivation however, did not even make her priority list. Finding a cure for the diseases that plagued Jardor’s people, then getting the cure to those people, that needed to be the main priority.

“Then yes, I may be able to cure it. I would need a lab and some supplies. Also some assistance might be needed. He would do.” She pointed at Darius. Also I need someone who has the disease so that we can prove it works. Darius had one of the diseases. Daniel, the boy who had brought her to this room carried the other. Maybe, just maybe, she could kill two birds with one stone.

“Yess, Dariussss can help you. He mussst watch over you for me anyway to make sssssure you do not do anything untoward. We cannot have that. Your actionsss mussst be controlled.” Shannice just nodded. There was no use reasoning with a psychopath. You just agreed with

them then went about your own business. That was the way of it on her world, and it didn't seem to be any different here on this far away planet.

"Well then, get me to the lab and I will get started." While mentally rubbing her hands together, Shannice coughed just to enforce his idea that she was sick and therefore not much of a threat.

"Daniel, lead Ms. Morgan to the interior chamber, the one Dr. Fugeton used as a lab before hissss unfortunate accident. Darius will be there momentarily. I musssst ssspeak with him firsst." The way he smiled reminded Shannice that he was a threat and needed to be treated as such. She had no doubts that the good Dr's death was definitely not an accident. Daniel told her about the disappearance of the scientist who helped to create the worst of the two diseases. Once she had gotten him to talk to her in the hallway, the boy had proved to be an invaluable fountain of information.

"Yes, Master," the boy answered Valdorian and turned to lead her from the room. Daniel's manner in front of old lizard lips was much different than the way he acted when she was alone with him. She needed to do something to help the child.

* * * *

Shannice peered into a device that resembled an ancient microscope from Earth. This section of the universe used an amazing mish-mosh of high technology and simpler things that would easily fit into Earth's medieval period. Wait! Yes, right there. Focusing the lens, she found the evidence she needed. The blood she'd taken from Daniel showed the characteristics attributable to Werther disease. She told him that she needed a sample to practice on while they waited for Darius. He willingly cooperated, so she began the work. There seemed to be a long way to go yet, especially with the tools she found to be available so far.

"Starting without me?" Darius entered the room with a grin. He carried a small box that he set on the long table in the middle of the room.

"Well we certainly couldn't wait all freaking day for you to move your ass. Could we, Daniel?" she winked at the kid and he grinned. It was the first time she really saw him smile and it almost broke her heart. There must be some way to help him. She just needed to discover it.

"No, Lady Shanni. If we waited for him the Avarian lands would freeze over before any progress was made." She giggled at him

because he just named the hottest, driest desert plains on Agrador. Daniel had quite the sense of humor when he allowed himself to show it.

“Oh, definitely! And if he doesn’t help get this show on the road, then I say we kick him out of here and get busy without him.”

Darius lifted an eyebrow and picked up the box. “Then you won’t be needing these.” He pretended to leave.

“Oh no you don’t! Let us see what you’ve got there! Pleasssse Darius?” She batted her eyelashes at him and Daniel laughed at her ridiculous attempt at coercion.

“Well, there are some things here that were taken from the city when it was retaken by the Agradorian Army.” He pawed through the box. “Also, a few items salvaged from the wreckage of your ship.”

“What? Let me see!” Grabbing the box, Shannice headed to a well lighted area of the room to examine the bits and pieces he’d brought in. There was something that looked like it might have been the Agradorian version of a mediscan.... And.... Yes! There it was, slightly worse for wear but an Earth mediscan. Actually there were two. However, the one that sustained the worst damage, was the one specially calibrated to Agradorian physiology before she left home. Crap Why couldn’t it have been the one that was set for humans that had been damaged so severely and not the other way around?

“Well? What do you think?” Darius asked her as Daniel watched them both with interest.

“Possibilities, this has definite possibilities. Roll up your sleeve. Daniel has already donated for the cause now it’s your turn.” She readied a syringe, grinning as Darius paled.

“Blood thirsty little thing aren’t you?” he looked slightly disgruntled, but he complied.

“Oh, hun, you have noooo idea.” Shannice gave a wicked grin and plunged the needle into his arm.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jardor swung off of his *havilan* and approached the gateway into the Visian mountain range. Barellion had insisted that this was the place. Valdorian's lair would be found in the bowels of these craggy hills. He did not know how Bar knew of these things, but he trusted his second in command implicitly. If he said this was the place, then it was. He could also *feel* his mate. She wasn't far. Once they rescued her safely, he was going to claim her and never let her go. Bar's animal came to a stop next to his and he swung out of the saddle.

"She's deep inside Mount Arinos. My men can penetrate the outer layer of their security but we will have to proceed with caution. We do not want old Val to catch on too quickly. He might hurt her."

"He may have already." Jardor growled back.

"Well, if he had hurt her, then we would know about it. I assure you. You may not have claimed her yet, but the Goddess Oxalia would make sure you felt it." He pointed to the softly glowing medallion adorning Jardor's chest. "Besides, he may be crazy, but he is not stupid. He would use her safety as a bargaining chip. The fact that he hasn't asked for anything yet concerns me, but I assure you he will. And he will know that he needs her alive in order to have any chance of having his demands met."

"You are right, Barellion. I did not think of any of those things. I have always been known for having a cool head in battle, but I do not know what has been happening to me lately." Jardor gave a sheepish smile and shook his head.

"I do." Bar laughed. "Love. Plain and simple. Now let's go find your woman so things can get back to some semblance of normalcy around here."

"Normalcy?" Jardor lifted a brow. "What exactly is normalcy?"

"Hmm you may have a point." Bar laughed and the men remounted. They headed for the natural opening in the stone wall in front of them.

* * * *

Putting a hand to the small of her back, Shannice stretched to get the kinks out. Looking down at the various slides and samples on the table, she shook her head. They almost had the cure, but almost wasn't good enough. If she played her cards right, she just might be able to cure both Daniel and Darius, might being the operative word. She placed another droplet of Darius' blood on a slide. His immunity to the Werther virus might just be the key she needed to unlock the secrets of the disease. She had also collected samples from him in the hopes of curing the Xanthus. The main problem being that the only functional mediscan available to her wasn't set for humans or for dragon shifters but for Agradorians who were non-shifters. She had managed to get it working properly but that would not help Darius. Nothing she tried seemed to work on him.

"Any more progress, *dalonna*?" Darius' question caused her to look up at him.

"I hate to try this on Daniel without more tests first, but I may have to." She gently tapped the tray that held the samples of the Werther vaccine. "He is the only patient I have at the moment who has Werther. Just a few more adjustments and it may work though. We will see."

"And the Xanthus?" Shannice could tell he was trying to keep the hope from his voice.

"Well..." She moved some things around then decided he deserved the unvarnished truth. "I'm missing something. As soon as I figure out what it is then I may be able to cure the virus."

"Cure it? Completely?" His smile lit up the room like a sunbeam.

"Yes...in Agradorians...but Darius..."

"Yes?" A resigned look came over his face and he stiffened his shoulders as if to prepare himself for the worst.

"It may work in Agradorians *only* at this point. I do not know if it will work on you. We can try it but..."

"But what, *dalonna*?"

"I can't promise anything. However, we do have a problem. There is a small anomaly that tells me we need one more ingredient before it will be ready for trials. If I were to hazard a guess I would say that it is some biological component."

"A biological component?" He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Yes. Most likely it will be found in blood. If I had the blood of the one who created this virus that might help. I haven't seen this particular DNA before. Fugenot may have used his own blood. I know he was not Agradorian or of your planet but, I just don't know what it

is.” She went back to examining samples with the scope.

“Shannice?”

“Yes?” The tone of Darius voice was so serious that she looked up at him.

“Would it help to know whose blood was used to create the virus?”

“Yes, it would but Fugenot is dead...”

“Valdorian’s blood was used.”

“Valdorian’s? Are you sure?”

“Completely.”

“Well hell! How in the world do we get a blood sample from short and slimy?”

“It is a matter of life and death. We will manage.” The resolution on his half-transformed, yet still handsome, face touched her heart. She would help him if it was the last thing she ever did.

* * * *

Shannice stared at the big lizard dude nervously and coughed, trying to look as pale as possible. The plan she, Darius, and Daniel cooked up just had to work, but it was risky. Valdorian might catch on to them before they completed their plans, but they still had to try.

“I have been told you wanted to sssssee me?” He looked at her in that unnerving unblinking way he had that still sent chills up her spine.

“Yes.” She forced herself to have a coughing fit. She must be as convincing as possible. “I have made progress. The Werther virus is curable now.” She indicated Daniel who followed her into the room carrying a tray of supplies. The boy’s overall appearance looked much better now.

“Well it ssssseems sssso you have. That could come in handy when bargaining with my enemiiesss.” He looked at Daniel in a way that she did not like at all before speaking again. “But, that issss not what you were to do! You were to cure the Xanthussss virussss!” His eyes took on a cold look that sent goosebumps chasing over her skin, assisting with her desire to look as sick as possible. “You did not do assss you were told!” He hissed at her.

“I need another component, then I may be able to.” She coughed again. Damn her throat was getting sore from all of this crap!

“What isssss the ingredient?” he peered at her in a way that let Shannice know she really needed to step lightly at this moment.

“I think we may need some of your blood,” she stated in a low tone.

“My blood?” he laughed maniacally. “Are you ssssure?”

“Yes I am sure.” She mentally crossed her fingers. His reactions were so damned unpredictable. She had no idea what he would say.

“Then take it.” Rolling up the sleeve of his robe, he revealed disgustingly scaly green skin, totally unlike the scales that adorned Darius. She didn’t want to touch him, but needed to. While taking the sample, she caught Darius’ eye. He nodded at her and she knew that they could get through this. They had no other choice. Finishing as quickly as possible, Shannice stepped back.

“I think that will do it.” She placed the samples in a small box from Daniel’s tray to keep them safe.

“It had better,” Valdorian looked at her then dismissed them all with a wave of his hand. “Now go. I expect you to have it ready ssssoon. I have planssss.” He smiled evilly and Shannice made herself show absolutely no emotion in reaction to him. No way in hell would she let him spook her. Morgans were made of sterner stuff than that. She placed a hand on Daniel’s arm and they made an unspoken agreement to leave the room. Before they could reach the door, shouts suddenly erupted from the outer corridor. She hurried Daniel into the inner hallway and turned to see what happened.

“Soooo we meet again.” The lizard’s oily voice grated on her nerves yet again as she craned her neck to see who entered the room.

“Yes, Valdorian. We meet again. Prepare to die.” That deep voice was one she knew! Moving to the edge of the doorway, Shannice watched as Jardor drew two huge swords from the sheaths at his back.

“No, I think it isss you that will die, Vannox!” Valdorian slithered from his throne. Drawing his own weapon, a wicked looking Razellium blade, he too took on a battle stance. “Guardsss! To me!” He yelled. Only one appeared. Where are the ressst of my guardss?” He demanded of the Captain of his army.

“Sanor and Lanan are on the outer rim of the mountain looking for more intruders but the others are dead, Sire.” The one named Ransom answered. “We were taken by surprise.”

“Imbecilesssss” Valdorian hissed. “Well no matter. We sssstill outnumber you.” He spoke to Jardor. “You will not leave thissss place alive. Then I will rule Agrador.” He gave an ugly smile as he moved sinuously across the floor. His movements were oddly graceful for someone so extremely hideous. Shannice could not help but watch him avidly.

“Lady Shannice!” Daniel caught her attention. Realizing she had

been mesmerized by the lizard's hypnotic ways, she couldn't help but worry about Jardor, Barellion and Darius. What if he did the same thing to them? This was not good.

"Dariusssss. Asssisst me." Valdorian ordered as he moved closer to Jardor, attempting to get within striking distance.

"Yes Dragoris do assist him. I would love to separate your head from your shoulders." Barellion drew his own sword and stepped in front of the dragon man. They stood at what may look like a stalemate to anyone who did not know that Darius would not harm the two Agradorian men if his life depended on it. He knew what Jardor meant to Shannice. They had discussed her attraction to the big ox. Darius acted as if he wanted to tell her something, but never did. Valdorian struck at Jardor causing both men's heads to swivel. They all watched as blade clashed with blade.

"I think not." Darius inclined his head at Barellion. "He is quite on his own. Our association is long over."

Shannice heard Bar snort in disbelief. Disabusing him of that notion would be one of the first tasks she would take on when they got out of here. No way would she let them hurt Darius. Besides the fact that the dragon had been invaluable in her quest to cure the Agradorians, he was also her friend.

The noise of the fight drew her attention back to the combatants. It looked as if Jardor were winning, but it could really go either way. Daniel shifted next to her and she looked at him. Maybe she could help Jardor if she ventured out of the hallway.... but would Daniel stay here out of sight? She wanted him to be safe. Valdorian gave a sudden shout of triumph as he shoved his blade through Jardor's side and she erupted from her hiding place while yelling at Daniel to stay put. The decision had been made for her. She could not allow him to die.

"Leave him alone you overgrown iguana!" Shannice rushed forward while shouting at him.

"Thiss iss not your fight, woman!" Valdorian hissed and pulled his blade from the big Agradorian's side. Jardor lay there panting in pain as Barellion fought with the guard Ransom to see who would help their own leader first.

"It's not? I could swear you just injured my man." She smiled sweetly at him. "I am going to kick your ass."

"You?" He chuckled. "You are nothing but a weak female. What can you do?" He threw back his head and laughed loud and long.

Not one to miss an opportunity, she kicked him in the balls...hard. Valdorian went down screaming. Men! They had the same weaknesses wherever you went. She laughed to herself then rushed to Jardor's side. Darius was already there attempting to stem the flow of blood.

"Move dammit!" she yelled at him as she whipped the Agradorian mediscan out of the pocket of her voluminous robe. "Don't you die on me you big ox! I don't know why I love you so much. You're more trouble than you're worth." Setting the machine to scan his injuries, she was relieved to find that nothing vital had been hit. He was just bleeding heavily. Switching settings to heal, she performed the necessary motions to repair the worst of his wound. Damn he lost a lot of blood. He groaned, still unconscious, but looking as if he would come around soon.

"Here, Shanni," she looked back and saw Daniel offering her a warm wet cloth. He had obviously not listened and followed her out of the lower hallway. She didn't have it in her to scold him about it. After she cleaned most of the gore from the big man, it was obvious that he did much better. Wiping her own brow, she sat back on her heels and took stock of the situation. Jardor would be fine. He'd just need a little time to recuperate. Barellion stood over the body of the guard, Ransom, obviously having just won the battle he'd been engaged in. It looked as if they all won this round. Darius took the cloth from her and rinsed it out, bringing it back to be reused.

"Get away from them, Dragoris," Barellion growled as he came over. "We don't need your kind of help."

Darius stood to his full height. The half-transformed state of his body gave him a menacing look that did not reflect his true personality. He was an alpha male yes, but Shannice knew he had a good heart. Barellion moved closer and drew his bloody sword. Darius shifted as if readying himself for a fight.

Shannice got between them. "Stop it, Bar! Darius is my friend."

"He is the enemy. He is no friend of ours!"

"This man is my friend, Bar. He helped me with my research and has been nothing but good to me. If you harm him I will do something drastic to you and it will not be comfortable. Just look at *him* for the proof of that statement." While waving an arm to indicate Valdorian, she looked towards the spot where she left him doubled over in pain. Shit! Where was the sneaky snake?

"Darius, Bar! Valdorian is gone. Hell! I kicked him hard enough

that he should still be on the floor. Where did he go?” Instead of paying attention to the slimeball, they had of course focused on taking care of Jardor.

“He went out that way, Shanni.” Daniel pointed to a passage opposite the one she and he had been standing in earlier. “You were all busy. I didn’t try to stop him. I should have...” his face fell.

“No. It’s okay.” She caressed his sweet face. “When things settle down, I am sure they will go after him again. He will not be allowed to get away with his crimes. Right, boys?” Quirking an eyebrow at the men, she almost dared them to defy her words.

“No, he will not be allowed to continue.” Jardor coughed and held on to his side as he leaned weakly against the wall behind him. He was healing but even with a mediscan it wasn’t an instantaneous thing. It still took some time. “We will stop him. We must keep him from hurting anyone else.” He moved as if he would try to rise from the floor.

“Oh no you don’t. He will wait. We need to get you back home. I want to try some of the stuff I’ve discovered on your people too.” Pushing him gently back to the floor, she wiped his brow with the rag again.

“What did you find out?” Barellion looked interested and Shannice smiled at him.

“Well. I found the cure for Werther disease, thanks to Daniel and Darius.” She gave both of them a gentle smile.

“The cure? Are you sure?” He looked at her with hope. His sisters had the disease she knew. They would have to be one of her first priorities when they returned to Agrila. Shannice patted her pockets. Yes she still had both mediscans, those would be needed.

“What about the Xanthus virus? Did you make any progress with that?” The hopeful tone in his voice made her wish she had better news to share.

“No I didn’t. I came close, but we needed one last ingredient. With Valdorian gone, I don’t suppose we will now.” She sighed and glanced at Daniel who grinned back at her.

“We still have his blood samples.” Lifting the box that contained the vials of blood, he showed them to her. Yes! They still had the blood she took just before the cavalry arrived. There was still hope.

“I need to get my notes and the rest of the things I have been using from the lab here. I’ll need those to finish my research. Once we get back, I want to get started as soon as possible. Can we get out of

here soon please?” She couldn’t wait to leave this place behind.

“Let’s get him up and we’ll make our way back out to our mounts.” Barellion knelt next to Jardor.

“I don’t think he’s up to a long ride on a beast of burden.” Shannice knelt on the other side.

“We don’t need to go that far on them. We can have a flyer pick us up as soon as we clear the edge of the mountain.” Since his leader was slightly incapacitated as yet Barellion took charge. He and Darius helped Jardor to his feet. He swayed slightly, but he looked better by the minute. She was sure he would be fine soon.

“I’ll get the things from the lab for you.” Daniel’s somber look grabbed Shannice’s attention. “I will miss you, lady.”

“Miss me? You won’t miss me young man! You and Darius are coming with us!” She brushed his curls back from his sweet face.

“Really?” his eyes lit up with hope.

“That’s not necessary...” Darius began.

“Yes it is necessary. You are both coming with us. Isn’t that right, boys?” The look she gave Jardor and Barellion made it obvious she would brook no argument from them.

“You protected and assisted our lady. We can do no less in return,” Jardor answered. “I am sure if both of you assisted in the medical research thus far that you can continue to do so. There is plenty of room in the palace for both of you. The only thing I require is the swearing of your allegiance to the Agradorian people.”

Shannice sputtered, intending to protest but Darius stayed her with a hand gesture. Then he dropped to his knees. She knew this wasn’t easy for a man of his background.

“I swear allegiance, Commander Vannox,” he spoke in a deep gruff voice and she knew he meant every word.

“I too, swear allegiance,” Daniel mimicked Darius’ actions and Jardor motioned them both to rise.

“We must head back now. I could use a long hot bath. I’m sure we all could. I smell something and it isn’t those beasts waiting for us outside.” Everyone laughed and headed for the main exit.

CHAPTER SIX

Shannice approached the door of Jardor's bedroom. His mother and sister made him comfortable, but he was asking for her. Why, she had no idea. She'd run another mediscan check on him and he would be fine by tomorrow. His wound was already mending nicely. However, she recommended that he get some rest. After some protest, he agreed to spend the evening in bed. With very comfort he could ask for at his fingertips, including having the evening meal in bed, there should be no reason for Jardor to need her again tonight.

The silence around the room heightened her awareness of him as she approached the bed. His breathing was even. He seemed to be resting. Picking up his brawny wrist carefully, she checked his pulse. As she held his arm, his pulse picked up. Looking up she realized he stared at her. With a sudden turn of his wrist, his hand clasped around her wrist. Then with a quick tug from him, she found herself sprawled on the bed next to him. Damn he was even stronger than he looked.

"My Lady, Shannice," he brought her hand to his mouth and softly kissed the back of it. "Did you mean it?" His deep dark eyes were almost mesmerizing as he glanced at her.

"Did I mean what?" His touch turned her brain to mush so that she had a hard time putting two words together properly."

"Did you mean it," he asked her insistently. "When you said you loved me?"

"I...uh..." Stuttering because she didn't know what to say would make her look like the biggest idiot in front of him, but she couldn't help herself. *Good going Shannice.* Kicking herself mentally, she wondered why she said she loved him out loud. *She thought he was unconscious when she said it, that's why.* They were from two different worlds. How could she tell him the truth?

"I hope it is...because I love *you*," he purred as he kissed her hand again. Rolling her so that she lay flat on her back, he leaned over her.

After staring into her eyes for another few seconds, he kissed her.

Oh Gods, she tasted so good. Her eyes closed as he deepened the kiss, thoroughly tasting every bit of her mouth that he could. There was not one inch of her mouth left unexplored. Once satisfied, he pulled his mouth from hers and looked into her eyes again.

“Well? I need to know how you feel about me, woman. I know you do not know Agradorian ways and customs, but I want to know before I claim you.” He had every intention of keeping her with him for the rest of their lives but he needed to hear her say it. He was not going to do so if it was against her will.

“Claim me? You want to claim me?” Her eyes widened. “Well... yes I do care for you deeply. And no, I don’t know the ways of your people. But I want to learn... Jardor?”

“Yes, my heart?” He smiled and stroked her soft cheek.

“Make love to me?” She was dying for him to touch her. It had been a long time since she slept with a man, but her body gave her every sign that this time would be something special.

“With pleasure my love, with great pleasure.” He grinned before covering her mouth again.

There would be time to tell her how an Agradorian mating worked later. This first lovemaking would be the beginning of their bond. They would be irrevocably tied together, though they would still need to have the formal royal ceremony later to satisfy his *Matrona* and their people. Shannice would make a fitting first lady to lead at his side. Her soft hands pushed the vest from his shoulders and he groaned.

“So beautiful.” He whispered as he kissed his way from her mouth down to her throat. His tongue trailed over her collarbone and she shivered.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she laughed as she brushed his long sable hair back over his shoulders. The medallion lying against his golden skin caught her eye. Why did it glow like that? It seemed to have changed color since the last time she saw it too. The touch of his lips drew her attention from the pendant. His kisses along her flesh sent goose bumps rolling over her body. A rush of heat and dampness flooded her inner thighs when he brought his mouth back up to hers. He felt so sexy and he was all hers. His tongue swept through her mouth again and she shuddered under him. Damn, his kisses sent shivers of fire through her veins.

One of his big hands slid under her skirt and over the silken skin along her hipbone. His touch was sheer heaven. He unfastened her

clothing then pushed it out of the way, baring her lush body to his admiring eyes.

His mouth left hers again and trailed down to her breasts. When he took her nipple between his full lips and began to suckle, she moaned. His nimble fingers pulled and tugged on the other taut peak until she arched underneath him.

“That’s it, *meloda*. Show me how much you want me,” he whispered against her heated skin. His other hand slid between her legs. He stroked her swollen wet flesh until she parted for him. As he slipped two fingers inside her tight wet heat, he groaned. His thumb slid over her clit and she jerked in his arms. Oh that was good. He pulled his fingers pulled out, leaving her feeling bereft.

“Jardor...please...” she gasped. More, she needed more. Reaching for him, her hands met with emptiness until his hair brushed her inner thighs. She realized he moved lower. *Oh!* He ran his tongue down her slit, sending shivers coursing over her skin.

“Mmm, so delicious, so sweet,” his tongue plunged inside her tight entrance, causing Shannice to scream with pleasure. He licked at her dripping honey, as if he were determined to gather every last drop. Clutching at his hair, she moved her hips to meet his mouth, not wanting this moment to end. His big hands smoothed over every inch of her skin he could reach, heightening her pleasure considerably. This is what he’d wanted for so long.

“Are you ready for me, Shannice?” Sliding back up over her prone body, Jardor kissed her lips gently. She could taste herself on him.

“Yes. Please...More than ready, Jardor. Now!” Bucking her hips up, Shannice tried to get him to enter her. He moved back, evading her efforts, then he moved forward, placing the head of his penis at the tender opening there before him.

“Shannice!” He shouted her name as he thrust forward. He was so big. Scooping her legs up and over his shoulders, Jardor began to move. She was sure her eyes must have rolled into the back of her head. Nothing had ever felt so good in her entire life.

“Jardor. Oh!” Putting two coherent words together wasn’t easy. He was really blowing her mind. When he shifted his hips, adjusting the angle of his thrusts, Shannice knew that it *could* get even better. As his cock hit a place inside her she had not known existed, she shattered around him. When he stiffened and began pouring his seed inside her, she came yet again.

“That’s it, *meloda*. Now!” Jardor roared as he continued to give her everything he had. He collapsed upon her shuddering body, being careful to keep his considerable weight from crushing her.

“I love you, Jardor,” Shannice whispered as she ran her fingers through his hair.

“And I you, *meloda*,” he stared into her eyes. This moment would be burned into her brain forever.

* * * *

Shannice awoke in the same bed she found herself in just a few short weeks ago. The mattress still felt like a cloud to her. Swinging her legs over the side, she stood and headed for the bath. Every night this week she slept in Jardor’s room, but this was the first morning he hadn’t been here when she awoke. Fully recovered now from his injuries, he showed her every day how much he wanted her. He went back to his leadership duties though, and gave her time to take care of her research. She spent a good deal of every day in the lab, making great progress. Speaking of which, she needed to head there now.

After dressing herself comfortably, Shannice made her way to the medical building, the same one she began her work in after recovering from the crash. Upon entering the lab, she found Darius and a very happy looking Daniel waiting for her. He looked so healthy that she could not help smiling at him and ruffling his hair.

“Did you sleep well, *dalonna*?” Darius grinned at her, and she knew what he was thinking. He had made it clear that he knew where she slept every night. Teasing her about it seemed to have become one of his favorite pastimes.

“Yes I did. Very well, thank you very much. And both of you? How are you today?” She began puttering around with the vials and test tubes that held the various vaccines and medicines she’d been working on.

“Very well, thank you...at least as well as can be expected. I administered the last doses of the Xanthus vaccine to the few remaining residents of the palace who hadn’t taken it yet. Then Daniel and I delivered cases of it to the city’s main medical clinic. The reconstruction on med-center has been totally finished, so they were ready to assist with making sure the rest of the citizens got inoculated. The infected people have been treated. The Werther virus has also been taken care of. The clinic is still seeing patients from the outlying areas, but they have it all under control. There is very little left there to be done.”

Shannice knew Darius was waiting to hear if she could help him. Telling him her findings was not going to be easy. She had managed to put him off yesterday, but she could do that no longer.

“Daniel, would you please go find Jassinia and ask her to get some melsa pods from the main gardens? I need them for something I am working on.” There was no need for him to witness what was about to happen.

“Sure, Shanni!” He slid off the counter he had been sitting on and grabbed a basket before heading out the door.

“Do I really want to know, Shannice? I take it what you are about to tell me is not good,” he sighed and ran a hand through his long black hair.

“I wish I had better news, Darius.” Moving things around on the counter while she spoke to him provided something for her hands to do. “Using a mixture of your blood and the samples taken from Valdorian, we were able to cure the Xanthus virus in the Agradorians. You also, are no longer a carrier. You are not contagious at all. However, there is nothing I can do to reverse the effects of the disease. There must be a way to restore your shape shifting abilities so that you’re not stuck in this halfway state, but I have no idea how to do it. I wish I could help you.”

“I am sure you did the best you could, *dalonna*.” He squared his shoulders and stood up straighter. His six-foot-five-inch height was impressive. Too bad many women couldn’t look past the differences adorning his face and form. He was quite striking. “We all must live with what we are given. I will be fine. I have discussed things with Jador and there is much work for me here. I will be staying.”

“I’m glad. These are good people and they can use all the help they can get to recover from the devastation visited upon them by the nasty lizard boy.”

Darius laughed at her and headed towards the door. “I am heading over to the clinic again. Missine requested my help with some of the children. For some reason the children have no problem with this face.” He indicated the iridescent scales lining the right side of his body. “I will be there if you need me.”

“Okay, sounds good to me.” Shannice smiled at him as she watched him go. There had to be something else she could do to help him. She would keep trying.” The sound of the door opening drew her attention. “Did you forget something?” Smiling she turned around. The smile left her face when she saw who was standing there.

“Avara. How...interesting to see you. Is there something you needed?” Gritting her teeth, Shannice tried to hide how much the woman bothered her. She had made it clear that she was one of the few who did not accept Jardor’s relationship with an off-worlder.

“I just thought I would check on you.” The smile on the woman’s face was very insincere. Shannice did not know who the witch thought she was fooling.

“As you can see, I am fine. There is no need for anyone to check on me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I still have a lot of work to do.”

“Well, with what I had heard I was sure you might need a shoulder to cry on.” The woman shrugged and moved slowly back towards the door.

“Oh?” Shannice lifted an eyebrow.

“Yes, I heard that Jardor has not yet claimed you as his mate. Poor thing, I am sure when he does declare for someone he will not forget to make sure you are well cared for. After all, a mistress is not uncommon for a man in such a high powered position as his.”

“Because he has not done so yet, does not mean he will not...” Shannice cut off her own words. It was best not to get into a war of words with this woman.

“Well on Agrador, the custom is...”

“Yes?” Shannice lifted an eyebrow.

“A man knows his mate almost from the very beginning. As soon as they meet, the chemistry between them is such that it cannot be denied. From the first time they join bodies, if she is his true mate, he will be unable to touch another woman. It will be very uncomfortable for him to do so. I saw Jardor this morning with Alisina, one of Jassinia’s friends. He was holding her hand and they looked very friendly to me,” she shrugged again. “I just thought you should know. She had a mating mark on the back of her neck. It looked as if she had been recently bitten. The mark was very obvious.” She attempted to look innocent, but Shannice knew this woman had not a shred of innocence in her entire body. Her story must be false.

“If you will excuse me, Avara. I have something I need to do.” Shannice swept out of the lab and headed for Jardor’s office. They would clear the air once and for all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jardor tried to show his interest in what Alisina was saying, but it was hard to concentrate. He knew she was a bit disconcerted to find herself mated to Varek so quickly. As one of his people, and his sister's closest friend, she deserved his undivided attention, but it was hard to focus. His mind kept returning to the past several nights with the woman of his heart. He still had yet to explain to her the mating customs of his people. It never failed. As soon as he got her alone, they ended up in bed and all thoughts of serious discussions flew out the window.

"Commander Jardor?" Alisina caught his eye again.

"Ah, I am sorry. My attention was elsewhere, Alisina. I know you will be happy with Varek. You just need to give the relationship a chance, yes?" He tried to give a reassuring smile but she burst into tears again.

"I just don't know how to be a mate and a mother. I am not ready yet!" She wrung her hands as she sobbed.

"Now, young lady, none of that!" Jardor took one of her hands in his so she would stop chafing her delicate skin. He used the thumb of his other hand to wipe her tears away, while kissing her on the top of the head, the way he had done since she was small. He spoke again very softly. "Alisina, stop crying. Things will be fine. We will go find Varek shortly and he will make you feel better."

The sooner the better so he could go find his own woman. He had marked Shannice the first time they made love, but he knew she would not know what it meant. She might not even be aware of the mark in the small of her back.

In the heat of the moment he had bitten her there rather than on the back of the neck, but there was no hard and fast rule that stated where the mark had to be. He would gladly give her another more visible mark soon if she would let him. One that everyone would see, so they knew immediately who she belonged to.

A strangled sound in the doorway caught his attention. Shannice. What was she doing here? The look on her face gave him the

realization that she totally misinterpreted what she was seeing. He patted Alisina's hand and took off after his woman. He was intercepted by Avora. The power hungry bitch made it obvious that she hoped to be his mate. He was damned glad the Goddess hadn't been that cruel. The smirk on Avora's face was enough to send chills running down his spine. He ignored her as she reached out to him and headed for his quarters.

* * * *

Slamming her things into her black leather bag recovered from the crash site, Shannice did her best not to cry. Avora may be a bitch, but she'd been right. There was no way that Jardor could love her and look at another woman like that. And the mark! The bite mark on the back of her neck looked fresh. It couldn't have been there very long.

Jardor had played her for a fool. Well he would not get away with it any longer. After grabbing the few things that she couldn't live without, and marveling at how little that was, she slid out the back doors into the garden. It wouldn't be easy to make her way to the spaceport, but she would manage. Thanks to Mari, she knew just how many creds were in her account.

This trip had been quite lucrative. Her account contained enough creds to live on for many years. She would just go home and start over. No big deal. Dashing her tears away she hurried away from the only man she may ever love. It *was* a big deal, but there was nothing else she could do but leave.

"One ticket to Earth, please." She slid her credit disc across the ticket counter to the clerk.

"The next ship to Earth leaves in two *horas* and has a layover in the Masorian star system." The woman slid the disc into the computer.

Shit, she didn't want to wait that long. Jardor might find the notes she left for Jassinia, Darius and Daniel, then come looking for her. No... no, he wouldn't. He didn't want her and would be glad to be rid of her. Yet wait, she did for the flight.

"Shannice!" A sudden shout brought her attention to the big man striding across the floor of the terminal. Crap.

"Now boarding, spaceflight 102243 for Earth, in Terminal A7. Passengers please pass through the gate as quickly as possible." Yes! There it was, the announcement she had been waiting for. Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Shannice headed for the gate as quickly as possible. They wouldn't let anyone through the gate without a ticket.

She was almost home free. A big hand landed on her shoulder. Shit.

“What do you want, Jardor? My flight is about to leave.” Making her words as chilly as possible wasn’t hard; all she had to do was think of what she had witnessed earlier and her resolve solidified.

“*Meloda*, where do you think you are going?” The demanding tone of his voice gave her goose bumps, the good kind. No, Shannice, no allowing yourself to be aroused by him now.

“Home. I am going home.” She tried to shoulder past him, but he was just too damned big to move.

“Your home is here. With me. You will not leave me, Shannice. You belong here.”

“Oh yeah? And what about that blonde floozy you were kissing earlier? Where does she belong?” He would not sway her from her purpose, dammit.

“With her mate.”

“Then you had better get back to her!” Spinning on her heel she attempted to storm off.

“I am sure she is with Varek by now. He will take care of his mate.”

“What? Who the hell is Varek?” She had no idea what in the hell he was talking about. This was all so damned confusing.

“Varek is in charge of our military vehicles, the head mechanic so to speak. He is also a lieutenant in the Agradorian Army. Alisina is his mate. She did not expect to be mated so soon and was seeking comfort from me earlier. As a leader, it is my job to ensure the well-being of my people. Besides, she has been like a little sister to me her entire life.”

“Oh” Shannice blinked. “I still don’t understand my place in all this, Jardor. Sure, we’ve had some great sex, but relationships need to be based on more than that.”

“Surely you know how much I love you, *meloda*. He moved closer and reached for her hand. “Please stay with me, my heart. *Meloda* means my heart in case you did not know. “ He smiled at her.

“Yes but what about the mark? Avora said...”

“Shhh,” his thumb stroked over her lip and the other hand settled in the small of her back. She did remember him nipping her there. “I did mark you my love, and with your permission, I will be happy to mark you yet again. We can also say the ritual words from your planet if it will help. But make no mistake, you are mine and I will keep you. Besides, even the Goddess agrees.” He indicated the medallion on his

chest that now shone a dark deep red.

“We will keep each other. How does that sound? What Goddess? By the way does this always change colors?” She smiled at him through her tears as she fingered the golden amulet. They were tears of joy. He *did* love her after all.

“That sounds wonderful to me. And it changed to this color because you are my mate. Only the presence of a mate sanctioned by the Goddess of the Ox Moon would cause the *amulora* to change to a red this dark.” He smiled back, then swept her up in his arms and over his shoulder. “Now, woman, let’s go get you pregnant. My *matrona* is set on having grandchildren as soon as possible. I think we should indulge her. I will also explain more about Agradorian customs and traditions. We do not need any more misunderstandings.”

“You sound so sure about that pregnancy thing,” she said to his ass as she hung upside down over his shoulder, anticipating the event with glee, but having to needle him about it. After all, men couldn't be allowed a big head now could they? She did have to admit though, that the view she had at the moment was more than nice.

“That is because I am sure, completely and totally sure.” Shannice could just imagine his grin as he gave her a slap on the behind, and then rubbed away the sting with a tender touch. Damn this was going to be fun!

END

Ox-Heart
By
Mae Powers

Lavera Tallys wants Zareth Okshart, but he's part of a spoilt alien princess' endowment. Now if only she can barter for his heart and body.

<http://www.maepowers.com>

Ox-Heart

By

Mae Powers

CHAPTER ONE

When Zareth saw the astonishing woman enter the large, crowded room, his heart accelerated to an almost impossible rate. His eyes widened, his breathing halted, and his groins ached heatedly. Then his big hands shook nervously, tingling with alarm that soon spread throughout his body.

His sixth senses told him to beware. Then an elated awareness, both mentally and physically, shot through his entire system, telling him that this woman would influence his life in many ways.

He put a hand to his chest, feeling a sudden warmth in the middle of it. Beneath his tunic he felt the warming of the Okshart, his family's symbol medallion passed down to each son of the king, its center imprinted with the great Okshen Beast, the icon of royalty on his home-world. He kept it hidden as was necessary amongst strangers, but still it heightened his extra senses, making him know that it too agreed with his previous thoughts – that the uniquely beautiful alien woman would indeed play havoc with his destiny.

He had to be careful. No matter that no other but he could understand or use the guidance of his own Okshart medallion, its rare metal properties would be worth a small fortune on the dark-market, or worse, Princess Orla would covet the ornate necklace. He couldn't have his intended, Princess Orla, find out he had it in his possession. Nor that he wanted some woman other than her. The princess was a

selfish bitch who wielded some power that could crush his life and his world.

Still, the strange woman's sensual magnetism, drew him to find out what he could about her. With almost no caution, his eyes never left the alien beauty's form as she intermingled with the crowds of people amassed into the small reception room.

He kept properly one-step behind his future bride-mistress, Princess Orla, hoping she had not seen his reaction to the unusual woman across the room, who presently intermingled with other world dignitaries. He took a quick glance at the dainty, golden haired royal princess, noting she was doing her usual norm of letting other men and women ogle and compliment her. Thankfully, she looked too engrossed in her own whims to pay much attention to him. He hoped she kept up her daily fixation of needing attention.

He snuck another look at the woman, who'd nearly taken his breath away; and shot his libido aching to release long suppressed desires. From his stance, he could tell she stood tall, perhaps coming to his eyebrows if they were in close proximity. He couldn't help wishing that she stood naked next to him.

She wore a tight evening gown of sapphire, which sparkled whenever she moved those lusciously rounded hips and long legs. It split up the left side, showing her dark, lovely limbs when she moved. Her auburn hair looked lovely piled up in wavy circlets on top of her head, complimenting the toasty brown coloring of her skin. She was exotic to look at, with her powerful charisma and full-figured curves. Looking at her strong and oval face, he could make out her softly contoured nose, and a determined chin.

She bore an aura of confidence that emanated to him from amongst those surrounding her. When she tilted her head up and glanced, what seemed to be in his direction, he quickly stifled an automatically induced a sharp intake of air. *By the stars*, he thought of her as the most gorgeous woman he ever beheld, and definitely, the sexiest he ever came across. She filled out that one-strapped gown as if she were melted into the outfit. Her eyes remained mesmerizing, like a grayish mist upon the purple seas of his homeworld.

Then the princess moved. He did his expected duty and turned as Orla did, still keeping the proper step behind and beside her. Orla laughed at some anecdote someone in her throng of admirers said, and Zareth did all he could not to look back at the woman he admired. If Orla knew, she would be highly piqued.

No, she would be furiously ticked. She did not like any of her chosen intendeds to admire other women or men. He hoped when the time came, she would not make him one of her final choices of being one of her two husbands.

Had his world Urla not needed the grains from her world, Idus, he would not have allowed his father King Guitan to make him part of her endowment in exchange for the grains and other priceless products his planet considered necessary. Though he honored his sibling, Zareth knew his father didn't feel too beleaguered to bestow—no, trade him to another world for material wealth and other gains. Not the heir, but fourth in a line of six children, four males, two females, Zareth knew he was expendable. Though he sometimes missed his family, other than feeling bereft of friendship with his empathic twin Natia, he learned to deal with the loneliness and ostracism.

A soft sigh escaped his lips. His time of independence was long over with now. He'd been endowed to Orla for nearly six months. Yet, he did not want to ever touch her intimately or be touched by her in the same fashion. Though not because of formalities, he hadn't been able to bring himself to do so.

He experienced no desire to fall under her charm, or to fall in love with her, or to even enjoy sex with her in her large royal bed. He felt thankful she gave up trying to entice him into her bed, despite her expectancy of having him wait on her and cater to most of her whims. Though she practically owned him, he was not her slave, so she could not command him to have sex with her.

For a moment, he felt sadness within himself. During his more youthful days, he once believed that he might find a chance of gaining a compatible life-mate that would bring a freedom of joy to his life, and more. During the thirty-one years of his existence, he didn't even feel a minute of interest come his way. His father played upon this as most of his brothers were married by Zareth's age. That, and he knew his affliction bothered some of his relatives.

Though they cared for him and found him help and guidance, most of his family pitied him. He'd never gotten use to pity. He hated it in fact. Especially, from women like Orla, who let him know that he should be grateful she chose him to be considered for marriage by any woman, especially herself. He knew she wanted him, but he gave her only the necessary attention he had to give her. He hoped she would send him back to Urla. Still, she kept stringing him along until she

made up her mind which of her endowed partners she wanted for a husband at the end of the prerequisite two years in which the endowment contract made the men legally her fiancées.

Like other women he'd known, including Orla, they did not hesitate to show him they wanted sex from him, and only that. He knew his powerful good looks and other attributes were what drew them. Several, like Orla didn't hesitate to tell him this factor. He never let it go to his head that women found him excessively handsome and physically desirable. Yet, very few had stirred his physical, emotional, or mental needs. Most, in fact, took pity upon him when they found out his affliction of being bereft of a voice.

Comments he read on the lips of women made him glad sometimes of his inability to speak orally. Women were fickle. The lovely beings incessantly expected to be shown how much a man could love them. Not only that, but from what he gathered in life, they wanted a man to endlessly tell them so.

He was not a man of words, but emotions. Oral conversation had been denied him since birth. Too many others knew that. When people looked upon him, especially females, he could see the pity in their eyes no matter how hard they tried to hide the fact they knew. He grew to think, that his inability to speak, and his slight difficulty to hear were at times a blessing.

He may have to see and feel their sympathy, but at least he did not have to hear it also. Except in his mind. More often than not, his ability to read the open minds of average people was as much a curse as his muteness and deafness. However hard he tried psychically to tune out their mental pity, he would sometimes pick up stray thoughts. Perhaps, if life hadn't made him aware of his handicaps, he wouldn't have to endure the pity thought about him.

His mood altered as he sensed laughter vibrations coming from his nearby area. Orla turned again. This time Zareth could have thanked her for her curiosity. The alien woman he noticed earlier, now stood close by Orla's entourage, but in a different group of people gossiping with each other.

He could easily see, from his position, that the woman indeed looked even more staggeringly beautiful than when he first glimpsed her. He took note as the men, and a few women, in the stranger's group ogled her with genuine pleasure. Several of the men's faces were flush, some by laughter or embarrassment, or desire. When a gap in the array of bodies allowed him to see the newcomer, he finely

understood what talkers meant by being left speechless.

Beautiful became too mild a word for the woman, as he thought the first time he saw her. The words – dazzling, exotic, and erotic – came to his mind. Even here, in Veteas, a city full of a mixture of intergalactic species and Idussians, he'd never seen such an enchantress. Granted, he felt some physical stirrings when looking at lovely women, yet he didn't feel too inclined to give in to most of those occasions. Until now that is. Now, he wanted nothing more than to stride over to her and grasp her up in his arms and taste her cherry colored lips. They reminded him of the jewel in the eye of the Okshart medallion all the male siblings of his family wore.

What he wouldn't give to be stripped naked and lying down with her on a bed with just the two of them making love for hours on end. He knew that this feeling to want to be nestled deeply in a woman's creamy depths never hit him so hard before. He pressed his thighs tightly together, in hopes of keeping his cock from showing his burning interest in the alien woman. He also clasped his hands together and nonchalantly let them reside in front of his hips.

The medallion warmed with a warning against his chest. His empathic senses were near overload, but Zareth quickly hid his emotions as he felt Orla turn her head to glance up at him. He glanced down at her, seeing her study him for a moment. Then she smiled up at him as if she were very satisfied. He knew then and there she wanted to make sure that he had not been affected by the stranger's beauty, as it seemed, he noted, the other men in her group were stimulate by. They too tried hard to compose themselves, but some were not that great at hiding their interests in the alien female.

Orla didn't like competition. She would crush the rival if she knew any of her male partners took an interest in another female, while belonging in her entourage. The woman thought all of Idus should bow before her every whim. One day, he knew, or hoped, some one would pull that feeling of imperial self-indulgence out from under her dainty feet.

Though she seemed a bit content, he did not show any emotions towards the stranger, Orla still looked a little disturbed by something. He hoped he'd find out soon what perturbed the princess, so that she wouldn't make his life any more miserable than she did already. Though he did pick up on a few frustrating emotions from Orla, she was not always easy to read mentally. She often took guard of her thoughts if she knew someone with mind reading capabilities came

near her. Glad he could sense her feelings most of the time, Zareth felt thankful he learned to read lips and sign language long ago as a child. Orla was aware of this, but often tried to play unkind pranks on him to frustrate him, just because she liked doing those irascible things.

She motioned her hands and mouthed a few words to him. “You may leave me now and go for a walk or something.”

He hated her irritating way of dismissing him as if he were a nobody. He kept circumspect and his emotions to himself. He nodded formally to her wish and swiftly turned away from her group, thankful to be away from the bothersome creatures. Still, it left a bad taste in his mouth that she tried to embarrass him in public. He knew she didn’t want him to be near the alien woman. He did not hang onto Orla’s every word and brown nose the bitch as her other would-be lovers were wont to do. This irritated her to no end, and gave him a bit of the only pleasure he knew in her company.

He made his way to the refreshment stand along a wall not too far from her and got himself a glass of cool wine. He sipped it slowly, letting its icy sweetness sooth his fraught nerves. He glanced back to Orla’s group, making sure she wasn’t watching him, before he turned his attention on the temptress’ group.

Within his abilities, he also held the talent of filtering voices into his mind, which in a sense did allow him to hear things on occasion. He never let anyone know this ability though. It came to his aid on many occasions, since he first discovered he possessed it as a young teen. However, it took a lot of concentration. He kept his focus on the alien woman as she slowly made her way to Orla’s group. Zareth tuned in intently. He wanted to know what the confrontation of the two women’s meeting would bring. From the looks of the friction between Orla and the newcomer, it would prove to be very enlightening, if not bordering on explosive.

CHAPTER TWO

Lavera Tallys took her time moving over to Princess Orla's group. She only met the woman once, last week in a vid conference dealing with intergalactic trading. The alien princess had no mind for negotiations or anything related to trading factors, unless it dealt with satisfying her selfish needs. Oh Orla was shrewd, Lavera could very well see that; but only if it suited the princess' whims.

Everything she'd heard about the lofty alien princess hadn't been wrong so far, not from what she subtly pried from others tonight. Or, what she found out during her trading in the Atten system, which the Idussians ruled. The women were usually in charge of most business dealings, with some men as their business councilors. Lavera made sure she remained careful with whom she dealt.

Though from Earth, she'd spent years abroad in intergalactic space, building her parents' trading empire. She amassed a personal fortune, herself, and exclusive trading rights to many planets, in doing so. Now that her brothers were taking over the family business to allow her parents to retire, Lavera had more time to tighten her own personal and business dealings, and take more time out to work on other endeavors.

One of them lay in getting the Idus rights to grain holds. Her intergalactic company advisor from Urllda was the reason she came to Idus for the current trading affairs. Natia, a highborn friend, worked for Lavera for several years, knowing how Idus and some other worlds of the Atten system worked. It wasn't until recently, that Lavera learned Natia's brother became traded off for grain, and other necessities for Natia's world. Lavera, having been raised in an equal society, didn't like it when others were subjugated for any reason or means.

The thought that Natia's relative had been used as a barter like common goods, bothered her extremely. Natia became her friend long ago, and it meant a lot to be able to help the Urldan female out, no

matter the cost. Whether she made a fortune or not in the dealings she had in mind, Lavera only wanted to assist her friend.

Natia's home planet Urllda had some semblance of equality, but the High King's law still held prominent on the world. Half of Natia's paycheck went into the Urlldan treasury so that Urlldan princess could stay away from her homeworld. Though she told Lavera the king, her father, treated her well, her friend had no desire to return home any time soon. Especially, Lavera knew, after what the king did to Natia's twin brother. For her friend and business advisor, she felt determined to do something about the situation. She'd asked her younger brother Andrey, whom Natia became enamored of recently, to visit Urllda.

Natia told them of a place on Urllda that might be good for terra forming into a resort set of islands. Lavera hoped the landmasses were what her family had in mind for the venture. When she got news that they could refurbish the lands and get the rights of usage from the Urlldan King, Lavera got all her bargaining chips in place.

She knew out of all Natia's siblings, her twin brother was the one Natia cared most for. Natia said the man use to be carefree, though dutiful to his family. Although she didn't quite agree with their customs, Lavera knew she could not interfere in Natia's father's decision. A choice King Tynar made for the welfare of all Urllda. She hadn't seen a picture of Natia's brother, but felt sure she would recognize him if he even vaguely resembled the Urlldan princess. She owed this to Natia; for all that and more the clever woman did to enhance Lavera's holdings. Yet, mainly, because Natia stayed a great and loyal friend. She learned the Idussian language from Natia, and several others.

Lavera mingled tonight at her leisure, summing up the growing crowds and groups of various aliens. Some were mostly human like her, others were a mixture of beast and human crossbreeds or insectoids with disgusting odors and warped antennae. She remained pleasant to all of the aliens, though, turning on an infallible charm she knew she was well known on many worlds. Her business sense and dealings also made her sought after and gave her a reputable name for fair dealings.

She knew she'd have to use everything at her disposal tonight to get her objective done. Hopefully, the key item she held would sway the royal heir of Idus, and the ruling body. She kept animated, spoke with gaiety, and acted with an alluring liveliness, which always kept her in the forerun in many personal and business dealings.

She almost lost that edge though tonight. Upon first entering the room, she immediately made note of where the princess mingled. After seeing where the royal bitch positioned her entourage, Lavera's jaws nearly dropped open when she espied the man standing a pace behind the princess.

Slightly taller than herself, stood an extremely muscular man wearing an evening tunic of dark green, trimmed with a sparkling ribbing of a lighter green on the high collar and ends of the flowing sleeves. Explosive and shocking things came to her mind when the amber haired man turned, unintentionally allowing her to completely study him. His face was square and his stance solemn, as if he were deep in thought. Yet, her sharp vision allowed her to see that he'd noticed her studying him. He had an air of magnetism about him that her gut instincts told her drew others to him for many reasons.

When she could make out the features more intently, she realized that this dark, sandy blonde haired man with his startling aquamarine eyes could be none other than Natia's brother. When she espied the princess turning towards her view, she quickly composed herself, only allowing herself darting glances in his direction, when Princess Orla did not notice. Lavera could not allow the Idussian heir to know how much the endowed fiancé affected all her womanly senses. By the depths of all she held dear, this man somehow touched her more than any other man she'd known before this night. If she were not careful, her moistening libido would get her into a hell of a lot of trouble. She kept an extremely tight control on her composure.

After some long moments of many pleasantries, she came upon the person she most wanted to see tonight, Princess Orla. Some of the people, especially the men, took a step back to make an opening for her to be admitted to the princess' social circle. She stopped a few paces from the princess, as she knew was their protocol, and waited for the princess to admit her into the group. Lavera nodded her head in tilted honor, as also was custom, but she did not bow. Women of power in the Idussian realm did not bow to each other. They only used the customary nod of greeting, no matter the status quo.

Orla stretched her neck, straightening with stark dignity. Lavera felt it was more that she towered over that princess and even more of a gesture to show her rank and power. Seconds later, seeing that Lavera wouldn't cow-tow to her, Orla deigned to acknowledge her presence. Lavera had to hide a smirk when the princess used three dainty fingers to motion Lavera into her circle of people.

“I am honored to finally meet you in person, Princess Orla of Idus.” Lavera nodded a half bow now of greeting then, which would be about the only lowering of herself she did in front of Princess Orla.

“My queen mother said you would be here. I am glad to offer you our hospitality. You look much different in person than you do on a vid screen wearing stark clothing.”

The princess was trying to be politely offensive and Lavera just smiled wanly.

“I am honored by your hospitality.”

Orla gestured towards some of the males around her. “These are some of my attendants. Please honor me by choosing one of them or another of my favorites to make your stay here more enjoyable. I shall be glad to have a meeting with you on the morrow with my mother to do business then.”

Lavera knew it was not a request, but a command to both suggestions. However, she kept from being irritated by the princess by staying nonchalant. She’d studied the Idussian customs well before she came to Idus. This would work in her favor.

“I am grateful for the honor, but please allow me the time to savor looking upon them first, and enjoying a night stroll perhaps in your mother’s gardens. I understand she loves to show them off. I would not wish to offend her either.”

The princess nodded, knowing she could not argue with Lavera’s suggestion least she look foolish to her entourage. “I think that will suffice. Now I must do my duty and mingle with my guests. Until later then, Ms.Tallys.”

She waited until the princess and her entourage departed to another part of the room, then she slowly walked out of the banquet room, hoping that she would come across the man she hoped to rescue from the princess’ clutches, without causing an intergalactic scandal.

She walked into the palace gardens, breathing in the night air. She let out a frustrated sigh, moving farther down the dimly lit path, which led into the intricate alleyways of the royal gardens that surrounded half the palace. The walkways were smooth despite a few weather worn strips in them. She strolled deeper into the gardens, not particularly caring where she went for a while. She needed to get out of the stuffy room, and away from the princesses’ frustrating personality.

She knew that the Idussians could not ignore her, as tight as she held the reins to luxury imports they coveted. They might have control of an entire solar system to a certain extent, since they were a wealthy planet, but she had acquisitions they would bargain for. That was her main key to getting Natia's brother Zareth off this blasted planet. Oh, the planet looked lovely enough, but not to her liking, because she really didn't care for the way Idussian women treated their men or lower caste subjects. Despite the fortunes she'd made in the intergalactic commonwealths, sometimes she still felt as if she needed more to fill the wanderlust of her soul.

She ached inside for something permanent to fill the void. What she wanted scared her. An emotion frightened her since she first met Zareth. Though she ached to have that emptiness filled, it caused her inner turmoil. She'd always been in control of her life. She'd almost married once, but the man wanted control of her love and mostly her fortune. Thankfully, two caring brothers helped her to rid herself of the jerk. She'd been cautious since. Yet, she also felt the need for companionship, from time to time, as only a man could give her. That void for a more permanent bond enlarged over the years.

Lavera shivered with sudden, renewed awareness and longing. The sensations and helplessness of this feeling were a totally disturbing experience for her. Everything inside of her just now felt the shock wave of her realization. The moment she looked upon Natia's brother, her heart shook as heatedly as her body did. She hadn't always believed falling in love at first glances—but now, she's began to believe it could happen. Lavera groaned. This was indeed a predicament. Could she pull off what she hoped to do? Could she indeed be shrewder than the Idussian royal women, and barter for Zareth's freedom? Perhaps even his love?

CHAPTER THREE

In frustration, Zareth strode out of the reception room and took a walk in the crisp night air. He walked amongst the well-tended gardens for several long minutes before he calmed himself down. It infuriated him that the princess offered one of her attendants to the alien woman.

What was even more frustrating was that the woman acted as if she were considering the idea. His heart began to crumble and his shaft felt the dwindling of desire he'd instantly felt for the incredible beauty earlier that evening. Why did he believe she would be any different? His inner senses had never been wrong before about a person.

Yet, he felt something within her. A vibration that he inwardly sensed she tried hard to hide. Could he have been wrong about her attraction and more towards him? When he saw her leave via a different patio doorway, he'd cautiously taken another exit out onto the gardens, hoping fate would help him find her.

For some reason he could not define, he realized from the onset that she would be a prominent catalyst in his destiny. He *needed* to find her. He let out a deep breath of relief, when he noticed her walking further ahead of him, going down a forked path. Zareth hurried his pace, taking quicker strides.

She upped her pace too, for it was several moments, after they were well away from the palace, that she stopped near a set of flowery bushes. He slackened his walk, but made sure he stayed in the moonlight so she could see him approach. She whirled around to face him as he neared her, but she did not seem too startled. Her misty gray eyes locked with his, and her luscious mouth widened into a sensual curve.

He did a sharp intake. Her eyes were alight with genuine pleasure upon seeing him. He felt euphoric as never before in that instance. All his instincts told him that she hoped he would find her. He was certain of this.

Her hands moved to form words, as did her mouth. It pleased him she knew his language, both by hand signals and verbally. “Why did you follow me through the gardens?”

“I sensed your interest and then your despair. I needed to know more about you.” He mouthed and hand signaled back to her. Yet, he felt the instant psychic attunement between them. The medallion warmed against his chest, strong in its intensity as if the legendary Oks-beast drew him to her physically.

So had she, he realized, by her next set of words. “You are the first who has ever read my empathic nature so intimately.”

“You are not one to let others see or sense your feelings. Can you read minds as well? Do you know why I had to follow you?” He dared to take a step closer to her. “You waited for me, didn't you, hoping I would come?”

“Yes. I needed to know if you were affected as intensely as I had been.”

“I still am.” His hands moved rapidly in answer. “The depth of my need is as staggeringly powerful as yours.”

“Without a doubt.” She moved the last few steps of distance remaining between them. Within her misty gray spheres, he saw a blatant sexual hunger, so potent with a desperate passion, that it nearly sent all his senses soaring out into space like a wild comet. Yes, she wanted him as much as he did her.

“I want to experience the wild desires I see within your lovely eyes.”

She signaled words that made his body and mind start to sweat heatedly. “Let us go elsewhere.”

“Your boldness adds only to your beauty and desirability.” Still, in hopes she meant her words truthfully with all her heart, he held out his arm to her, smiling lustily in agreement with her idea. “Come with me.”

Shivers of wonder and longing raced through him when her soft hand touched his arm. He then led the incredible alien female out of the gardens and found a more quiet entrance into the palace. He learned many of royal dwellings nuances from living here for the last several months.

He noticed how unmoving her lips were as they traipsed down several corridors. The few times he escorted other women around, they were always speaking to him whether he wished it or not. She seemed intent, and he was glad to have the time to further analyze this

unusual alien woman. Her eyes, he noted, were almond shaped and long lashed. She seemed the type that would normally veil her emotions.

He wondered why the thought struck him so oddly. For, though he had read her emotional atmosphere earlier this eve, he could not do so now. What did this woman have to hide? Zareth realized his natural thought powers were automatically trying to read her mind. Though he stopped himself in time, he realized with some shock, that she mentally guarded herself to a deep extent.

What, then, did she have to hide? He quickly thrashed the thought out of his mind! Her private thoughts were her own, and he always made it a point never to invade one's inner sanction no matter that he did have the powers to do so. He'd never forced his mind into another's, because most people were like the open pages of a book, waiting to be read.

Her long legs matched his own strides, though she had to walk a bit faster to keep up with him. Close to her as he was now, he could smell a whiff of her perfume. Its scent smelled like a seductive blend of jasmine and wild herbs. He liked the arresting, sexually intoxicating aroma. It added to her mystique and womanly allure. He hoped the rest of the evening turned out to be as intriguing and as exciting as now.

Zareth led her into his allotted palatial suites. Automated and heat sensor lights were activated as he led her through the old-fashioned entranceway. He quickly tapped the heat sensed door fastener, knowing that made it lock with steadfast security.

The first room they moved through was a sitting room. He steered her off through another door, going into his private study. Shelves, bursting with books, lined most of the tall walls in the room. There stood a leisure center in the middle of the room, complete with circular couches and a miniature, automated refreshment device atop a round coffee table. A few study tables were in the room, strewn with books and papers. On one unencumbered wall stood a state-of-the-art communications/computer console.

Zareth, with the woman in tow, stepped down into the sunken recreation area. He noted a slight smile upon her lips when she surveyed the room. Somehow, he felt she was pleased with the decor of his study. He sat near her on one of the large brown and rust colored sofas, and then motioned towards the small machine imbedded in the center of the table in front of the couches.

"A sweet, red wine, thank you," her voice was baited with allurements, he thought, turning to program the refreshment order, "of the Earth ox-heart variety if you can program it in."

He paused from touching the refreshment machine, to take a quick studious glance at her. "I've only tasted it a few times, but it's sweet taste leaves a lingering pleasant feeling." He wanted to verbally say much like her thought her lips were sure to taste, but only signaled the prior words and a few more. "You pronounce it like my family surname. It is similarly sounded like your wine or fruit, then?"

"Ox-heart is a type of sweet fruit, a cherry we call it back on Earth," she said with her tempting mouth and hands. "I am thirsty for it and more."

He smiled at her dual meaning, but knew she didn't want to talk more about his surname or the wine from her planet. Up close, as they had been in the garden and away from the cacophony from the horde of voices filtering from the gaiety of the princess party, he could hear her enticing tone a lot clearer without all the deadening noises.

After retrieving a materialized flask of liquid and two glasses from the device, he poured them both a drink. Setting the decanter down on the table, he turned her way, handing her the beverage. The hand she extended out to his looked long and elegant. He was pleased to notice her fingers were not artificially enhanced. Nor, he noted, did she have artificial makeup on her dark cherry colored lips.

"It is pretty close to an actual bottle of the wine, but the luxury from your world is very much in demand here."

"I know," she stated and quickly sipped the wine down before holding her empty glass out to him to pour another. "I like sipping the first one quickly, the second round always makes for better taste and enjoyment."

He felt sure he didn't miss her underlying statement. "Then I shall pour you another."

He met her seductive eyes, and nearly slipped in giving her the glass of wine. She made no physical or verbal action of his near blunder. Instead, she remained aloof, yet she studied him dexterously. He was sure of that.

He saluted her with his glass. She clanked her own against his, her lips curving upwards softly. His gaze fell on her generous mouth, and he wondered what it would be like to kiss those luscious lips. He quickly sipped his wine, trying to hide the feelings he positively felt sure shone in his eyes also.

The alien woman drank hers down quickly, to his surprise, and then handed her glass to him. "Excellent taste, even if it is synthetic. Please pour me another?"

He wanted to tell her it was too potent to drink down quickly. However, her imperious nature put him off. Perhaps she was used to people cowing to her every whim, but he would not. He. . . he was sinking fast into those alluring eyes of hers.

He leaned back, after pouring her more liquid, and languidly studied her even further. In the brighter light of the rooms, she still looked devilishly beautiful. Her toying with the strand of dark auburn hair that she had pulled loose from her crown of curls distracted his train of thinking. He wondered what the thick mane would look like sprayed out on a pillow behind her head. Then he began to imagine her lying leisurely on his bed her arms spread outwards waiting to enclose around him...

"Your tastes are impeccable. I could find comfort, great comfort in this room." Her hand, in fact, did stretch outwards with an empty glass in grasp.

Zareth shook himself out of wayward thoughts, and absently refilled her drinking container. It was as he handed back the beverage to her that he noticed her tresses were half-untwisted. He wanted to reach over and touch her silky strands to... What was the matter with him? He'd never had such immensely rash, lustful feelings like this before. He wanted more of them.

"Uh, thank you. I have enjoyed many hours in here, but no moment more so than this one." He noted a slight glossiness to her eyes. She probably drank faster than she intended to, he thought, as if she wanted to quickly relax. He'd needed to also after being at that miserable assembly earlier.

She grinned provocatively at him, saying, "I hope to make it very memorable for you then." She gave him the empty container. "Enough for now, thank you."

He took the glass, setting both of theirs on the big round mid-table. When he turned back to look at her, he found himself starting to sweat again. Her long legs were crossed and her hands were clasped behind her head, as she leaned back into the large cushiony sofa. He could not keep his eyes off her jutting breasts no matter how hard he tried. She moved swiftly, and one of her hands came forward, cupping his chin. Zareth was almost afraid to look into her candid eyes. He let

out a gasp of air when he did. Her eyes were even glassier than before.

Once more, he saw that raw blatant hunger. And it shone even more intense than before. His cock hardened. He still wanted her with a nova magnitude of desire. He couldn't help but notice how big her nipples were hardening and stretching beneath the bodice of her glittering sapphire blue gown.

"You are a handsome devil, " she spoke softly, but boldly. "You know, it is quite refreshing to see a man blush for a change. There is no doubt you find me attractive."

Zareth could feel the heat rushing into his cheeks. Never had he known a woman to be so brazenly forward. Yet, he found it only made him desire her that much more.

He so wanted to slide himself into her, to feel her wet folds capturing his shaft and easing this painful need encompassing him. He studied her face intently, seeing the deep sexual need she possessed for him, and him only, he felt, even had there been another man in the room.

When her lips moved again to mouth her next words, he found himself unable to reply with even a simple nod. "I see you would like to make love to me. I never thought to see a stalwart man like you shy. If you want something badly in life, go for it." She changed her position, sitting on her hind legs and leaned towards him. "Don't let life pass you by. Live for the now, my handsome one."

Then she placed her hands on either side of his face, moved closer towards him, and kissed him. Her intense kiss startled him at first, but as she deepened it, coercing him to accept her tasty mouth, Zareth felt her sexual magnetism overwhelm all his senses.

With deftness, her lips scorched his full mouth. Her tongue thrust into his, teasing, exploring and teaching. She put an arm up around his shoulders and shifted herself onto his lap. The second she must have felt his acceptance at her blatant nearness, Zareth felt his body on fire and she pressed herself as close to him as possible.

Zareth's head swirled with mixed emotions and thoughts. Never before had he experienced such a whirlwind of feelings. His desires and senses were doing erratic somersaults. No woman he saw or met before affected him as this strange beauty now did. He'd never wanted a woman like her before. She was so different, so vibrantly all woman. Her luscious body felt perfect against him. He wanted her, without restraint.

“I want you now,” he uttered soundlessly against her lips. She shifted and for a split second, he thought she might pull back. His mind cried out in agony that this would not happen.

CHAPTER FOUR

Yet she didn't pull back, but leaned closer to him. And as if she felt his words against her mouth, she purred a reply, "We have all night. Let me give you the pleasure you need, and I seek."

She took his left hand in between her two elegant ones. She held his palm up in one of her hands, and then with one finger she grazed the lines of his upturned hand with whispering strokes. Prickling fires of heat shot through his hand and into the rest of his body. He could only nod in response.

Zareth bit his bottom lip, suckling on its center as he wished to do hers. Yet, he could not move, so intensely did she have him enthralled by her simple act of touching. With one fingertip, she traced the outlines of his fingers, driving those spikes of desire fiercely into his groins. She did not leave a digit untouched as she explored nearly every piece of flesh on his hand.

His hand throbbed even more as she traced his outline with two fingers, followed by the tip of her tongue. He'd never known such a simple act could make his body aflame with a heat so fierce it could consume him completely.

She didn't stop with his left hand. In turn, she took his right hand and made sweet love to it also, suckling and nibbling gently and caressing it with long suggestive strokes. Then, her long tongue darted in flicking circular patterns down the length of his right arm. First at the wrist, and then higher up to his shoulder.

He vibrated towards her. His hand shot out to tentatively caress her left thigh. He could feel a shiver run through her, but she did not back away. Her face was close to his as he looked down at her. Her beautiful gray eyes glowed with a glittering desire of molten silver. He wanted to explode just from the intense desire he saw within those hypnotic spheres. His pulses and his cock reeled with need to find completion soon.

She tilted her head back. His head lowered automatically. Their lips met firmly. He moved his lips against hers with meshing, rolling movements. Her tongue darted out, tasting his lips, setting him on fire even more. He returned the deed, but slowly, with the tip of his tongue he wetted first one corner of her luscious mouth, and then the other. It went on for long moments. Then he pressed his mouth even firmer over hers, deepening the kiss, devouring all she put into their embrace.

His tongue darted into hers, tasting the swelling heat of other promised desires to come. Succulent fires of salt and sweetness met his tongue. More than his tongue became on fire for her juicy mouth. He wanted that succulent mouth exploring every nuance of his body.

The universe about him ceased to exist as their desires blazed even more dangerously. He nearly exploded with rapture at the intimate sensations she aroused in every inch of his mind and body. He glanced at her face. Zareth let out a hoarse gasp at what he saw in her passion-filled eyes. They reflected the uncontrollable desire he felt right now. He bent closer and ran his tongue over her parted lips. She arched towards him, yielding hungrily to his demands.

His hands molded against her luscious contours and slid over her body, learning her womanly curves even with her clothing on. He agonized with need, as he sensed she did. Their bodies heated with sexually intense passion.

He needed to be out of his clothing. Between caresses, he removed his garments, helping her to do the same. They slung their clothes in several directions, not caring where they landed in the heat of their nova enflamed desires.

He groaned out his fierce needs, the only real utterance of speech he had at his disposal. Yet, it wasn't displeasing to her, for she pressed as far into his chest with hers as possible, letting him feel how aroused she had become. They half kneeled together, the rest of their bodies upright while their legs were out behind them on the big sofa. He reached behind her, grasping her high lush buttocks. Kneading them, he groaned again. His engorged shaft thrust out his need to her. She ground her hips against his.

Like he sensed she wanted, though, he intended to make their joining and lovemaking last as long as he could through the night. Once would not be enough during the night with her. He would know her many times through the course of the remainder of time they had left. He caressed her, moving his hands up and down her softly

muscled back. She returned the deed, moving her hands in kneading rhythmic motions that caused ripples of flames to dance sporadically throughout his mind and body.

He lost what little sanity he had left and became totally engrossed once more in savoring her wicked temptations. He felt the fires within her grow to match his own until they were equally ignited by passion and escalating wildly. His large hands cupped her breasts, eager for the feel of them repeatedly. She emitted further moans of pleasure, which enticed him to boldly caress every part of her body. His head lowered to her breasts, kissing and stroking them with his mouth.

“By the fates, it feels good having you near me.” Her voice was low, husky, and erratic, and he heard her tone within his mind. “I never realized it could be like this with anyone.”

“Nor I with anyone else,” he kissed the words silently against her lips, knowing she understood them, even if she hadn’t heard them orally.

“Let me pleasure you more,” she mouthed against his neck, and which he heard in his mind.

He only nodded as she pushed him softly beneath her. Then her hair splayed over his chest as she warmly caressed his sides and her tongue darted out to lick and suckle his turgid nipples, which darkened under her fiery passionate caresses of her tongue and hands.

Her hands trailed down his body, not leaving any part of him untouched. One of her hands splayed over his crotch as she slid down lower. She leaned up to watch him as she caressed and fondled his hardened shaft. Her hands worked miracles of hot love over his cock. He could die blissfully in throes of ecstasy at what her hands were doing to him.

Then she came back down towards him and he mouth widened to take his cock head in. She stroked his balls even as her mouth took him within her hot throat as deep as she could. Her head bobbed up and down over him swiftly and then slowly. He enjoyed the feeling of her mouth around him, but knew he couldn’t wait much longer for her.

Still he wanted to explore and savor her feminine charms as much as she did his male ones. After pleasuring him, she made her way back up his body, showering him with more erotic kisses and caresses. He realized she knew she drove him wild with her wanton heat. Their mouths met and he tasted his wet passion upon her lips. In turn, he pulled her beneath him and began to explore her lush body.

He traced kisses and caresses over her abdomen and lower, savoring each delectable taste of her wonderful body. Had she been ten feet away, like earlier this evening, she could still have made his body scorch with desire.

He did not wince as her nails burrowed into his shoulders. Zareth lowered his head over her most feminine parts. He tasted her with gusto, enjoying the moistness that lapped deep within her damp folds. Her gasps of ecstasy heightened his own pleasure. Zareth could not wait to possess her.

He leisurely made his way back up her body, feeling the woman of his dreams and desires sweat and agonize as she waited his coming into her. Never before, had any woman so wantonly and deeply shown her need for him.

Tonight, he truly knew what it meant to love with his heart, body and soul. All his psychic senses and natural instincts told him she also felt the same way. The sudden realization of this only heightened his urgent need for her.

Zareth wanted to be inside of her, filling every inch of her moistness with the passion he felt deeply within his heart. Her hips arched for his entrance and Zareth shuddered with gratification at the intense emotions his empathic abilities were picking up from her.

Whether she would ever admitted it or not, he knew he opened her heart as no other man would ever be able to. Later would be time for discovering those wondrous emotions. For now, he wanted to feel his heat engulfed by hers.

He teased her slightly, moving his large cockhead up and down her wet cunt. He slid it in slowly, making her writhe more beneath him. His hands went around her bottom, gripping her buttocks tightly within his big hands. He pushed his largeness into her slowly at first, until she jerked up to meet his entrance. Then he slammed fully into her moistness with a deep hot stroke of hard passion.

He drove deeply, repeatedly within her heated channel. She moved with equal fervor beneath him, adding to the heated friction welling up within him. Like wild beasts mating, their bodies writhed and thrust against each other. Her fires drove him to the edge of reason and beyond. Then her cries for completion mixed with his own and he could hold back no longer.

Zareth felt her quake with release as he thrust one final time into her. After their completion, he enveloped her in his arms and held her

tenderly against his body. He intended to hold her and love her for as long as the fates would allow.

He enveloped her sweaty naked body into his arms, entwining his long muscular legs around hers. With a slight movement of his hand, he used his telekinetic power to make one of the decorative throw covers on the back of the sofa to spread over them. Then he held her tight as possible and let the beauty and wonder of their lovemaking settle in around them as satiation and love lulled him into a soft doze of erotic, blissful dreams.

CHAPTER FIVE

She only dozed for a short while, when she felt him starting to suckle on her breasts and touching her labia. He thrust two fingers in and out of her wet folds. She bucked beneath him crying out an instant release. Lavera wanted more from him. She didn't have long to wait as he trailed kisses down her body, savoring every inch of her sweat glistened torso. She'd never known such sexual bliss as he'd carried her to the first time. She wanted him again, and by the feel of his arousal trailing down her body, he wanted her again.

He tasted and feasted upon her, running his hot long tongue and fingers repeatedly in and out of her pussy. She came again, but had more to give to him. He shifted and turned her around. Zareth pulled her hips up and she realized he wanted to enter her from behind.

She spread her knees, steadying herself as she pressed her buttocks up to answer his physical command. He reached around and caressed her clit as he inserted his cock into her soaked pussy. She cried out as he drove himself hard and deep into her. Her breast shook with each hard pounding of his cock ramming with fierce desire into her wet folds.

He made passionate love to her with every move and yet it felt as if they were heated with savage passions that drove them wild with desire. Her empathic nature knew he felt a wild hotness within her. His body complimented hers, but drove her near insane with wantonly savage thoughts of him repeatedly thrusting in her cunt. Though she knew he couldn't speak, his animal grunts were enough to tell her how close he once more was to coming inside her.

She wanted this wild coupling, needed him to be pounding his inflamed desires inside her. His hands grasped her around her hips and his thrusts became more powerful. She bucked back against him, feeling her own needs swelter up inside her. With several more deep thrusts, he brought them both to a fierce orgasm of staggering proportions.

He collapsed above her, but not putting his weight totally on her. She panted hard then felt him roll off of her. He lay back on the wide lounging couch panting also, but turned his head towards her as she lay on her side, snuggled up against his long body. She smiled at Zareth knowing her eyes must have shone her satiation just as her body glistened with the heat of his lovemaking.

The Urdan Prince's lips widened in pleasure as he glanced at her. "You make me feel complete in all ways.

"I feel the same way in your arms." She trailed a finger down his chest. Her hand absently fondled a nipple. Then her eyes alighted on the shiny medallion laying on the back of the couch behind him.

She reached out and pulled it down on his chest, twirling the long chain over his sweaty upper body and nipples. It was a beautiful piece, and the beast emblem in it reminded her of an ox she'd seen in picture books as a child, but never in person. It felt strong and sturdy like him. His sister told her that all the males of the royal family were given one at birth and the females were given a bracelet on which hung a smaller charm that reflected the emblem of the ox beast with a heart in its center.

Like their last names they derived from the Urdan Okshart beast from, Natia told her that a few in the family line inherited abilities, which the blood red-black jewel, in the center of the symbol or charm heightened. Especially for those with empathic powers, like Zareth's. She didn't believe her own extra senses were as deep as his own, but she sensed he felt every emotion in her body before, during and after they made love.

His hand clasped over hers and the medallion. "Even after twice feeling you wrapped around me, I want you again."

She nodded and she widened her mouth in a deep smile. "I want you again too. Only fuck me harder and then let me feel your arms around me as we come down."

He grinned and pulled her beneath his body. "As you desire, so do I."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pressing her body as close to his as possible, leaving even barely any breathing room between them. "I desire you very much."

His mouth covered hers hard and promising. She opened her thighs to allow him easier access into her soaked depths. He shoved hard and furiously into her, kissing her with scorching kisses and licking her neck in between with darting hot caresses. She bucked

against him, wrapping her legs around his wide hips. His hard body felt so hot and fantastic against hers.

The wild heat welled up within her, just as she felt it swell within his erection and his whole body. He pounded furiously into her as if he couldn't get enough of her. Her nails dug lightly into his back as they groaned in unison when the explosive climax hit them with staggeringly hot results for both of them. Then once more, she rolled over, but this time her back was against his front side as they lay embraced within each other's arms.

He took her hands within his and signed words to her. "Thank you, heart of my heart."

She'd learned from Natia what that phrase meant to Urdans. Zareth had fallen deeply in love with her. She bit her bottom lip, and as she shifted closer against him, she felt her thigh resting on top of the Okshart medallion, where it had fallen underneath them during their passionate lovemaking. She felt its warmth searing her skin. Did it indeed hold spiritual and surreal powers, like his sister had told her about?

Natia said the main one being that it brought the Urdan royal males to their true love-mate. How can she let him know that in freeing him from his position of endowed fiancée to Princess Orla, she'd have to make him her own personal property. She didn't want that to happen. Nor did she want him to find out. But in the end, she knew he would. And no doubt angry in some way she had not told him in the beginning. Yet she couldn't trust her heart or voice to tell him, least his euphoria and the Urdan dealings and more she held within her grasp led to the Idussians not accepting her trading winning trump.

She kept tight reign on her emotions as she snuggled against him. Making her body relax, she soon felt his deep rhythmic breathing against her body. She wished this moment of contentment could last forever, for both of them. Yet when morning came, she would act as if nothing happened between them. Though Orla had given one of her entourage as a sexual gift, she had no intention of Lavera picking her favorites. She'd learned from talking amongst the guests earlier, that Orla favored Zareth highly, though the princess didn't show the fact.

Lavera knew that the princess, though not the real power on Idus, could use her position to put a damper on the deal Lavera had in mind to get Zareth's freedom. She must keep her wits about her when the event took place. But for now, she wanted to enjoy every last moment

she had with Zareth. Nothing felt more important than that, right this moment being in his arms.

She'd never felt so fulfilled in all her life with a man. Especially, not like the giant man laying next to her, who was both gentle and wildly fierce in their lovemaking and his adoring her being and body each time he touched her.

She slowed her breathing to normal, not wanting his empathic abilities to pick up on her stray and trouble emotions. She knew he could read minds too, but she'd learned long ago how to keep anyone from invading her thoughts. Though she thought about the troubles ahead, she still felt divine contentment in his strong warm arms.

He deserved his freedom and more. He deserved to be able to choose where he lived and whom he loved. She wanted him to come to her with that feeling of freedom, to love her and more. For indeed, she realized she had fallen in love with him. Though strong and fierce like an ox, she knew him to be gentle and compassionate too, and very loyal to those whom he befriended and loved. She hoped when the morning came, he did not regret their passionate lovemaking and their sharing of deep emotions.

His breathing sounded ragged and yet peaceful. His arm, once around her tightly moments ago, slackened a bit. She waited for him to fall into and even deeper sleep. She closed her eyes momentarily, basking in his beloved presence. The medallion had been shoved down and out from her thigh. She glanced down to see that. For an eerie moment it glowed. She shifted her leg slightly. It slid off the couch and thumped softly to the carpeted flooring.

As his breathing quieted to an even keel of contentment, the medallion too went quiet as if also going into a deep slumber. She held her breath for precious moments. When neither he moved nor the medallion glowed, she gingerly eased out of his arms. She quickly gathered her clothing up and dressed. Not taking a last look back at him, Lavera darted towards the door. She palmed the lock and the door slid back. Quickly ascertaining that on one was in the corridor, she hastily retreated to her own quarters.

She took a long hot bath hoping it would relax her. Yet no matter how hard she tried, even when she went to bed, all she could think about him, and dread, in some ways, what the next day would bring. She hoped in time he would not stay angry with her.

CHAPTER SIX

Zareth awoke startled. He rolled to one side. He grasped the coverlet that lay crumpled beside him. It felt as if he were grasping his heart instead. She hadn't stayed with him. He'd hoped she would wake up with him the next morning. They made love several times during the night, and it was later on before they fell completely asleep in each other's arms, even though they took that slight doze. He groaned in despair. Had the fates deigned that this then would be his only time of completeness?

Looking at the timepiece hanging on the far wall, he realized he slept half of the daylight hours away. He jumped off the couch, picked up his medallion off the floor, gathered his discarded garments, and tidied the couch and surrounding area. Immediately afterwards, he went to shower and change. He quickly donned a less formal tunic and matching pants of a dark brown. Putting his medallion on, a pair of soft-soled boots and patting down his hair, his toiletries were completed. He hastily left his quarters, intending to find out what he could about the mysterious woman he'd fallen in love with.

Though he still felt weary, it wasn't from lack of sleep. His heart ached as if were tied in knots of despair, which gave him a lot of restlessness, and grief. Despite the fact that he'd wanted to know more about her last night, her sexual allure, and vibrant personality kept his mind busy in other ways. He wanted to know her name, to find out where she came from. To see if there was anyway Orla would release him from being her endowed. He did not think it likely, but he must try. Then he would find out about the woman he'd shared those ecstatic hours with and see if she still felt the same as he did.

Zareth knew in his heart and with his empathic abilities, that somehow he effected her heart as well. His mind became less fogged as he recalled something she said about Okshart and it being similar to the Earth wine. Had she known who he was then? Did she come to

him, so knowing, only to see if she could make a conquest of Orla's fiancée? He knew the two women had taken an instant dislike to each other. For what reason he didn't care, but it bothered him she might know who he was, while he knew nothing about her.

His thoughts didn't dwell much on the subject as he neared the council chambers of the royal family, and he felt and slightly heard voices filtering in the near distance. He slowed his pace more, letting it seem as if he were going about his normal routine, just in case it was Orla or one of her many attendants near by.

He saw the doors to the large, main council chamber wide open. It meant a non-formal business session was in order. Though most men of Idus could attend, they were not allowed to participate in any negotiations unless required by a female superior. He cautiously made his way into the meeting room. Two tables of a soft brown oak centered the better part of the room, but around it lay other sitting areas and refreshment tables which servants stood at the ready in case a guest or royal member needed something.

At one end of the main table, he saw Queen Shaika of Idus, Princess Orla and their main councilwomen in what seemed to be the end of a meeting. He stood to one side, as required of him, and stood waiting amongst some other males and a few females. A door to what he knew to be an antechamber opened. Two people came out. Zareth had to tighten his lips in order to keep his mouth from opening in surprise.

Walking alongside the alien stranger from last night was his sister Natia. Her slight forehead ridges were reddening, and he knew she must have been in a heated argument. His inner senses told him she felt aware of him in the room, but knowing protocol, she would not glance at him until she could. What then was going on? He kept his face somber, yet something told him it could be a touchy dealing, by the studiously fierce faces of the women situated around the table.

His sister and the stranger sat with their backs to him at one end of the table, as bade to by the queen. He kept his hands behind his back, lest his nervousness gave him away. He concentrated hard, fine-tuning his ability to filter voices. The princess' loud, undignified screech did not make it easy. He concentrated harder, yet kept his face impassive as he glanced in Orla's direction.

"You cannot let this Earther take my endowed, Mother."

The queen angrily snapped her fingers. It was the first time Zareth had seen anyone control the spoilt princess with such a simple

gesture. “You will be silent, Orla. My councilwomen and I make these final decisions, not you.”

Zareth wanted to smile, but dared not. Yet, Orla’s last words were not lost on him. Especially not with her looking angrily at him. What had he done to put her in such a foul mood that she would disobey her mother? Had the discussion in private with his sister and the stranger been about him? Was his sister negotiating for his freedom? He almost felt uplifted and did his damnest to hide his feelings.

The shock of realization kept his face impassive. Then anger kept his emotions deep in check. Why had his sister not come to see him earlier if she were on Idus? His eyes darted from the princess to Natia and the stranger. Natia worked, he knew, for one of the most well known Earth traders in the galaxy. Lavera Tallys. The humanoid female could be none other than his sister’s business superior. He wanted to groan, wanted to scream at them all.

He was not a piece of property to be bartered back and forth. Yet, knowing it would hurt his father’s standing in the Atten solar system, he kept quiet and continued to listen in as best he could; and to watch the gestures any of the people made with their hands, or with their lips.

“Ms. Tallys, the council and I agree to your trade. Princess Natia will be your welcomed officiator of future dealings between your companies and Idussian holdings.” The queen turned to glance at his sister. “You may take your brother from the room and see to his preparations for departure. I will conclude signing the contracts with Ms. Tallys. You too may leave, Orla, and take your entourage with you.”

“As you wish my queen.” Orla said through gritted teeth. She held her head high as she gestured for her attendants to follow her. Without looking at him, she strode haughtily from the room.

He kept impassive still, until his sister rose, bowed with a nod to the queen and councilwomen and then walked his way. “Follow me, Zareth.” Her words were simple and he did naught but do as she suggested.

Without looking back at the other women in the room, he quietly followed in his sister’s wake. Out in the hall, were other people staring at them and whispering as he and his sister passed by. He ignored them, following a discreet pace behind his sister, through a few more corridors until she stopped before a door he recognized as

the entrance to his own apartments. She pressed her palm into the mechanism that would allow it to open. It was not until the door slid behind them that he turned and released a breath.

Natia let out a cry of joy and threw her arms around him. “You’re free, Zareth! Tell me you mind heard all that was said.”

He nodded and a slow smile crept up his face. “Am I truly?”

“Yes.” She hugged him fiercely again. “Lavera made it possible. When we leave here today, you will be free to go home if you wish to.”

He pulled from her at her words, and his mind opened to hers. It was easier to speak with his twin that way. “How is it possible? Why am I allowed to leave now? Am I not now your boss’ property?”

“I understand your anger, Zareth, but you belong to no one. I could not, no dared not come visit you, or the queen or Orla might have squelched the deal. I have been so unhappy with you being forced to become an endowment to Orla. It affected my work. Lavera noticed and with her persuasive abilities, coerced me to telling her what ailed me. She said she would help find a way to free you. She wants nothing more than to see me happy, brother. It has cost her plenty to have you freed. She is my friend, not just my business chief. In fact, she has recently made me a partner. Do you know what that means?”

He looked questioningly at her. “I am confused. Why is she doing all this? It may not be an Earther’s custom, but she could claim to me by Idussian law now.”

“I just got here late last night, but was in time for the negotiations early this morning. After Queen Shaika made her demands, Lavera and I were given a few minutes of privacy in the antechamber to discuss things. We also talked about you, Zareth.”

Zareth groaned and sat down on the big sofa. “She knew who I was all along.” He mind spoke the statement more as a fact than a question.

He felt his sister sit tentatively down next to him. She spoke back into his mind. “Yes, but what we spoke about was not what your mumbled groan implies. Lavera doesn’t want you to be her endowed fiancé or anything of that nature.”

He felt his face redden. Combing his hands through his tousled locks, he glanced at his sister. He kept more pertinent images from his mind so she would not pick up on his anguish, or the night he had spent in her boss’ arms. He did not want his sister to know any more than she probably guessed.

“If I am not beholden to her, how will we repay her for the expense she has been out? I will not...”

Natia pressed a hand to his lips. “Shhh, Zareth. Lavera wants nothing from you. Father will pay for this slight to you, not you or our people any longer will suffer because of his mishandling of Urlida’s resources.”

He knew she picked up on his confusion. “How? Our world hasn’t been rich in things to trade for years. What could Earthers’ possibly want from Urlida?”

Her wide smile made him nervous.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Zareth felt instant relief at his sister's next words.

"She has arranged for the grains Urlida needs to be sent from Idus on a regular basis in exchange for Idus getting unlimited supplies of various luxury items from Earth and some of their mining colonies her Earth parent's companies control."

"But what does she get in return for all that," he signed his concern to Natia.

She chuckled lightheartedly. "In return, Father is agreeing to turn the Urlida's southern regions of islands over to Lavera's family's major terra forming company so that they can make some kind of resort there. One of her youngest brothers scouted it out while you were here."

"Well I'll be damned. They think they can turn those wild lands into a resort?"

"Lavera and her brothers think so. She says Earth people like unusual landscape, especially in relation to what she calls their vacation getaways."

"Then all three worlds will benefit."

She nodded again. "And you will have your freedom, Zareth. As soon as you are ready, a ship awaits our departure."

It was a dream come true to him, and yet he still felt deflated. Why had she done this then if not to keep him for the same reason that Orla had? He should be angry with her, and yet knowing last night had not been a prerequisite to him being Lavera's bartered plaything, eased his anguish. Yet, his heart still felt bereft. The medallion, laying against his chest,, felt warm for a split second, then it too felt as cold as he did inside.

He glanced at his sister, closing his mind to her. Instead of resuming their mind talking, he hand signaled to her. "I will be ready within minutes. I will take no more than what I arrived with, which I can carry within a large travel bag."

He rose and hastily gathered his belongings. His sister led him out of the palace without hindrance from anyone or anything. They traversed to a spacecraft-docking bay after taking a tram to the outside of the capital. He followed her aboard a large, modern cruise ship. It was one he would have liked to travel upon to see other worlds. He took in all the details of the up to date shiny, metallic ship, but did not get more than a minute glance as they passed by any crew personnel he and his sister encountered.

Eventually she showed him to quarters aboard the ship. He was extremely impressed by the grandeur of the large cabin. It was clean and as nearly shiny as the outside of the ship. Every amenity he could desire was aboard the Earth vessel. This was a lot more pleasant to his eye than his quarters back at the palace, no matter that he'd strewn books around which he had kept to occupy himself and keep away from Orla.

"It is so good to see you again, Natia." He embraced her quickly. "I know it must have been hard for you. I thought of countless ways to escape there, but duty kept me imprisoned, I think more than the endowment contract did. It's still hard for me to believe that I'll be off this damn planet soon."

She reached up and fondly touched his shoulder. "You will be out of here very soon."

He dropped his large bag on a nearby counter. "Where will we be going?"

"I unfortunately must cut our reunion short. I have to stick around here for a few days to make sure some of the trade arrangements are finalized."

"Then you'll not be coming home, or wherever I'm to be taken?"

"I'm sorry, Zareth. Other than the ship's crew, you and Lavera will be the only passengers. I must go now." She reached up and kissed his cheek. "Lavera will take you where ever you wish to go. I'll be in contact with you as soon as I can."

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead, before signing to her. "I will be fine."

She studied him deftly for a moment, he felt, before she spoke again. "I think that it's best. I'm not as strong an empath as you, but I can feel your heart is aching."

He nodded and sighed. "I know you don't ask out of respect, but you were not wrong in your assumption."

She fiddled with her left wrist and saw her take off the Okshart bracelet the women of the family usually wore. She held it out to him. “Take this. You’ll know what to do with it when you feel the time is right.”

“That is your property, my sister. I cannot...”

Natia put a finger to his lips and opened her mind to him. “I want you to give it to Lavera if she’s the one your heart truly ache’s for. Do not begrudge me this custom. I hold her in high regard, Zareth. There’s more to her than you know, and much sorrow in her heart. Now I must go. Take care of yourself, and her until we reunite.”

When his sister left, he sat at the small table to one side of the room. The chair was comfortable and the room pleasant enough, but still, inside he felt empty. How could he face the woman who freed him, and whom he lost his heart to in one incredible evening? He’d had the courage to keep Orla at bay physically, but he might not be able to do so with Lavera. He wanted to find it within himself to keep his emotions and his desires in check the next time he saw Lavera Tallys. They needed to talk, to clear things up between them.

What would he do when they came fact to face again? Did he feel angry with her still? His heart knew she’d done the trading for him. She would not make him her subjugated fiancée as Orla did, as most Idussian women did to their mates. Zareth knew Lavera was not like that.

But did she love him as he loved her? Did she want him for more than that blissful night? He needed to find out. Within his darkened heart, a light suddenly filtered through. He took the medallion out from his tunic and stared hard at it. The jewel in the ox-heart glowed. He smiled to himself. He thought of his name and the Earth wine and of Lavera.

Her heart belonged with his. The medallion glowed more. It knew his innermost secrets. He held the bracelet in his hand that his sister had taken off her wrist and given to him. Together the two symbols brightened sporadically together. Then they suddenly died out.

He didn’t dwell on it as beep at the door immediately halted his thoughts. He heard it a second time before he reached the door panel. He pressed it in and stepped back as it slid open. He stood dumbfounded for a moment as he saw Lavera standing here. She looked unsure of her self, and he felt the last vestiges of anger towards her ebbing away.

How could he be angry with her when all she did was get him his freedom. Had she done it for just his sister or for love of him too? She glanced up at him, her eyes weary; and he felt, her heart also pounded with some despair. Her lips trembled but shed didn't speak any words. Her worried eyes told him everything he needed to know.

Within moments, he held her securely in his arms.

Just as the door slid closed behind her, he brought his lips down over hers. He captured her groan, making it his own. Her arms entwined around his neck. She kissed him back fiercely. Still holding the bracelet, and without missing a step, he picked her up in his arms, carrying her over to the chaise lounge near the table. Pulling her down with him, he deepened his kiss, mingling his heat with hers.

Long minutes later, he pulled his head back from hers, looking down into her glassy eyes. She was soft and pliant against him and with her bewildered face laced full of questions. He opened his mind to her. He'd sensed her empathic nature before, but he was unsure if she could read into his mind.

"Tell me what we shared was not just a whim, a fling." His thoughts echoed gently into her open mind.

She blinked her eyes and a wide smile spread across her lovely face. "I can hear your voice inside my head. I didn't know you could do that."

"Ah, Lavera, there is more I can do, if you'd like me to show you."

One hand reached up to tentatively to caress his cheek, while her other sneaked down to cover his groins. "You are endowed in other ways, which I was ecstatic to find out last night."

He chuckled. "Last night was the most wondrous experience of my life. Tell me I did not sense wrong during our coupling. Right now you vibrate with love in all your being."

"You were not wrong." She answered him orally. "I didn't think love at first sight was ever a possibility for me. Last night meant more to me than I can say. It was also why I left you."

"I was angry with you at first. But after I talked with Natia, I slowly understood why you left. I cannot thank you enough for what you've done for my world and me."

"Your love given freely is all I desire, Zareth. You owe me nothing. Not even that if you do not wish to give it."

He groaned and crushed her mouth once more under his. She responded fervently to his kiss. Still he pulled back, to say words to her with his mind and heart.

“I love you freely, Lavera. I come to you that way now. I have no desire to return to Urla.”

“If you don’t mind being a partner in my life, there’s a whole universe out there I’d like you to explore with me.”

“Then you will be my life partner and no one else’s?”

“On my world we call it marriage.”

He then glanced at the bracelet he cupped within his hand and held it out to her. “Natia gave this to me. In our customs, a female member will bequeath her family heirloom to a male sibling to help him stay bound to his true mate. I want you to be that.”

Her eyes misted as she slowly took the bracelet. “It matches the emblem of the ox-heart in your medallion. Are you sure? There would be what we call a wedding on my world, but I would not want you shackled to me unless...”

He put a finger to her lips, stopping the words he heard in his mind and read on her lips. “I am sure. Bond with me, marry me in your customs or mine. Whichever you prefer, just as long as your wondrous body and heart stay mine forever.”

“You are no longer another’s property, but I do want your heart and body to belong only to me. I could not bear another woman having you.”

“That, my dear Earther, is one deal you’ll be bound to for the rest of our lives.”

She put on the bracelet and it glowed suddenly, in rhythm with his medallion. “I think I’ve found my true mate. My heart is endowed to you forever, beloved Lavera.”

“Good, then come here and show me what other goodies you’re capable of, my Okshart prince.” At her soft command, he was more than happy to show her just how well equipped in body and mind he was, to take care of any needs she could ever want for the rest of their lives.

THE END