

# Midnight Showcase

Erotic-aah Digest ISSN 1555-5496 Vol.06-25

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*Softly, Softly, Catchee Monkey - Olivia Lorenz*  
*Gorilla Tactics - Marguerite Turnley*  
*Smoke and Mirrors - Mila Ramos*  
*Crow Like Me - Bridghid Parkinson*

# **MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE**

## **Erotic-aah Digest Vol. 06-25**

**Jaded Beasts V**  
**Monkey - Rooster**

**MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE**  
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Jaded Beasts 5, Monkey-Rooster

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### **Credits**

Vamptations

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## **Jaded Beast V, Monkey & Rooster**

**Monkey** – The monkey can thrive at most anything they try or do, regardless of their tendency to get readily dispirited. Although they are resourceful and have a very compelling disposition, this being is not always trustworthy to some.

**Rooster** – Although self-important and self-absorbed, the cocks are brave and diligent and are excellent judgment makers. They always want to learn new things, and are highly proficient in many areas, despite their foolishness.

### **Softly, Softly, Catchee Monkey – Olivia Lorenz**

Xinran steals Konstantinos' priceless monkey statue and his beleaguered heart. Which will she choose him or the other jaded beast?

### **Gorilla Tactics, Marguerite Turnley**

Anthony escapes from a zoo. Tamsin is lost in the desert. A Jade pendant is the key to her alien heritage. Together they will survive.

### **Smoke and Mirrors, Mila Ramos**

Ana Fiore and Dakota Hastings are rival doctors vying for Chief of Staff position. Snowed-in at a conference, the doctors must face their pasts and feelings.

### **Crow Like Me, Bridghid Parkinson**

Tommie thought The Guardians were just bedtime stories. Her modern Guardian cannot stop the destiny that brings them together, but they will avenge her murder.

**Softly, Softly, Catchee Monkey**  
**By**  
**Olivia Lorenz**

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<http://www.triqueta.net/olivialorenz>

**Softly, Softly, Catchee Monkey**  
**By**  
**Olivia Lorenz**

Lin Xinran locked the door of the toilet cubicle and checked the contents of her rucksack one final time. She could hear the chatter of a couple of women as they washed their hands, and she tried to detach from their conversation, carefully laying out the items she would use later.

They seemed incongruous, placed on a white plastic toilet seat. Two pieces of cotton cloth, cut to size—ten by fourteen inches, with the longer sides slightly frayed to provide grip—and beside the cloth, an ordinary plastic bottle of hand-cream. Except it no longer held hand-cream, but highly adhesive organic glue.

There was one other item: a small, tennis-ball sized object that had passed undetected through the meagre security at the entrance to this large provincial art gallery and museum.

She glanced at her watch. Timing was crucial in this operation. If the information at the meeting-point was right, the guided tour of the collections should take an hour and a half, and they should be at the Eastern Art gallery within forty minutes. The glue would be tacky, still within its optimal period for adhering to the wall. But if they were held up...

Xinran made her decision. Quickly, she opened the bottle of glue, and with the deft strokes of long experience, she applied the adhesive to the first layer of cloth. Then she laid the second cloth directly over the first, taking care to align the threads of warp and weft to give the combined cloth the extra strength it would need.

She finished by spreading the remainder of the glue in broad swathes across the top surface of the cotton. Using the lid of the bottle, she massaged the glue into the fabric until there was an even spread. Then she tossed both lid and bottle into the sanitary bin.

The bathroom door banged as the women went out, still chatting to one another. In case there was anybody left in the room, Xinran flushed the toilet in her cubicle. The tortuous sound of the plumbing covered her movements as she shuffled open her rucksack and eased the glue-laden cloth inside. She clipped each corner to a frame hidden inside the bag, and then she carefully swung the rucksack onto her back.

Finally, she pocketed the ball-sized item and strolled out of the cubicle to wash her hands. Xinran glanced at her reflection, marvelling at how calm she managed to look in these situations.

Depending upon the circumstances, she would usually dress up in a glamorous gown, or cover her face and body completely. Today she had to look nondescript, like a foreign student. Her dark almond-shaped eyes were free of make-up, and she wore her shoulder-length hair down, rather than in her usual lazy upsweep. Down, her hair swung around her cheeks and blurred the shape of her face.

She doubted whether anyone would speak to her. If they did, she knew she could pretend to mangle the English language well enough. Xinran imagined that most people would discount her, seeing only what she wanted them to see: a demure Chinese woman of average height and small build.

She squeezed liquid soap from the dispenser and rubbed at a smear of glue that had stuck to her finger. It wasn't her appearance that was making butterflies dance in her stomach—it was the difficulty of the task.

This was her twenty-third operation, but this one was different. The level of skill in executing it required much more than dodging guards and high-tech security. So much could go wrong with this, and even though she'd practiced for several weeks beforehand, this would be the first time she'd tried this technique on a genuine fifteenth-century fresco. If she'd made a mistake with the consistency or amount of the glue, or if it didn't dry quickly enough, she ran the risk of destroying the fresco completely.

Xinran tried to put that thought from her mind. She dried her hands on a paper towel and then went back out into the entrance hall of the museum.

There was a small group of people gathered at the meeting-point, where a sign listed the times of the guided tours. Xinran had been careful to choose the lunchtime slot, certain that it would be the most popular. She scanned the group—an elderly couple, a few students,

some tourists—and then she joined them, standing at the back so as not to draw attention.

As a grandfather clock in the entrance hall sounded the time, a man in smart clothes with an identity badge pinned to his lapel came towards them. He greeted them in a loud, nasal voice and began the tour with a brief history of the collection.

Xinran had done her research before she'd arrived in England. Not just on the piece of art she had come to steal, but also on the city and the surrounding area. In her line of work, it never paid to take anything for granted. Things could go wrong, and back-up plans were a necessity. She knew she could rely on the city's public transport system to get her away quickly and safely, and if she needed to, she knew she could lay low in the small Chinatown a few blocks away from the museum.

Not that it would be necessary. Xinran was confident that everything would go smoothly today. Now she just wanted to get on with it, before her nerves had time to sap her belief.

The guide led his group through glass doors into a long gallery hung with Pre-Raphaelite paintings. According to his practiced spiel, this was the highlight of the collection. Xinran looked at the romantic, wistful images of sad-eyed women and felt no sympathy for them. She had been raised to ignore romance as a distraction, and this sumptuous reminder of it seemed to suffocate her. Her life might have lacked masculine attention, but she told herself that being free and independent was preferable to being caged like one of these Pre-Raphaelite beauties, pining for the love of a man.

Xinran pretended to pay attention to what the guide said as they continued through the gallery. They were not encouraged to dawdle: the guide's terse recitation of facts showed that he wanted to be elsewhere. Xinran took this as a good sign.

With each step further along the tour, she felt her heart race. Sweat prickled her hairline and dampened her sides. Her palms felt clammy, and she held tighter to the straps of her rucksack. The guide's voice seemed to come from very far away, and so she found herself following sheep-like the motions of the other tourists—look here, exclaim there, nod at this, smile at that.

She checked her watch. Half an hour had passed, and only now were they leaving the art galleries for the museum section. Xinran began to worry. For ten minutes, she listened to the guide talking



about the city at war, and finally they were on their way upstairs to the Eastern Art gallery.

Xinran could feel the hard stone of the steps beneath her feet as she hurried ahead. She could feel the slight weight of the rucksack. Even though the stairs weren't steep, her breath caught in her lungs as she approached her target.

She stepped over the threshold and stood back against one of the window bays, loosening her rucksack so she'd be able to swing it down from her shoulders. Her gaze scanned the room, searching for cameras automatically although she knew this museum only monitored the entrance and exits. She gazed at the painting she would soon steal: only six by eight inches big, it had been plastered into the wall along with several other frescos.

Xinran forced herself to look elsewhere, admiring the collection of Chinese, Japanese and Korean artifacts that ranged in date from prehistory through the late nineteenth century.

The rest of the tour party came into the gallery. Xinran moved about quite obviously, touching the lacquered furniture and peering into the glass cases so that others in the group did the same thing. The guide did not stop them, too interested in delivering the next part of his lecture. He pointed out things of most obvious interest to the average Westerner, such as the samurai armor and the Japanese swords or the embroidered screens of the Qing Dynasty. He did not once mention the tiny fresco that Xinran had come to collect.

She inched around the furniture until she was close to the panel that her client wanted so badly. It was a Ming Dynasty depiction of a Buddhist scene, showing Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, bestowing a blessing on the Monkey King before he set off on his fabled Journey to the West. To Xinran, it looked unimportant compared to the larger scenes that decorated the wall, but she had long ago given up questioning the taste of her clients. She was an art thief, not an art critic.

Xinran lowered her rucksack to the floor, as if it was a little too heavy. Then she pretended to give her attention to the rest of the guide's talk. She even went over to the far window to examine the view and to look closely at some detail on a cabinet he claimed was important.

"Next we'll go to the Egyptian gallery," the guide said. "You will see a Late Period mummy in there as well as a rather fine sarcophagus. If you'll all follow me."

He was about to turn and lead the party back onto the stairs when he noticed the rucksack on the floor. He called to Xinran, “Miss, your bag—don’t forget it!”

“Oh, thank you.” She started toward it.

The guide smiled and went out of the gallery, with the rest of the group following obediently behind.

Xinran seized her chance. She only had a few seconds while the room was empty. Working quickly but methodically, adrenaline giving her an icy calmness, she opened the rucksack and unclipped the glue-covered cloth. In one swift, fluid movement, she stepped up to the fresco and slapped the cloth directly over the little panel. The glue was the right consistency: it stuck fast to the wall, almost hugging the fresco beneath it as she smoothed down the top layer of cloth firmly.

Then she bent to collect her rucksack. Without a backward glance, she hurried out to join the tail end of the group as they filtered into the Egyptian gallery.

Xinran did not allow herself to relax. She waited patiently while the guide told them about canopic jars, the nature of Egyptian social life, and a few tall tales about mummification that made his listeners laugh. She joined in with the laughter, attempting to act naturally.

“Now we’ll go back through the Eastern Art gallery to the medieval wing, where we will conclude our tour,” the guide said, and once again he led the way.

Xinran walked in the middle of the group. Her heart was hammering so loudly she was certain people could hear. She strained to hear the conversations ahead of her. Would anybody notice the small piece of cloth affixed to the wall? Would anybody suspect her?

As they went through the gallery again, the elderly couple slowed her footsteps. The man wanted to take a photograph of the samurai armour. Xinran stood aside politely so that the man could line up his shot, hindered by his wife who kept reminding him not to use a flash. While they were busy with their camera, Xinran glanced towards the panel she’d covered.

She was more than relieved to see that it was completely unobtrusive. The fine cotton mesh of the cloth acted like a piece of gauze, and the organic glue had rendered it almost transparent, so that the colours of the paint could be seen through the cloth. At a casual glance, nobody would notice the cloth was even there. She guessed that, even if somebody did spot it, they would assume it was meant to

be there—after all, she'd seen other restoration work going on throughout the museum.

Now she had to give it time to dry—twenty minutes should do it—and then she'd deploy her cover.

Her chance came not long afterwards. The group was walking through the medieval wing when Xinran noticed a storeroom to one side, its door ajar. It seemed to be empty of anything of value, and there were no voices from within. Like most of the rooms inside the museum, it had thick walls and a high ceiling. It looked ideal for her purposes.

Xinran put a hand in her pocket and withdrew the tennis-ball sized object. She quickly turned the top and bottom in opposite directions and then, after a quick glance around to be sure that nobody was watching, she tossed the object through the open door of the storeroom.

The tour continued. She admired the medieval church triptychs and some wooden statues full of wormholes. She even started to listen to what the guide said as they passed through each room.

And then it happened: a sudden, sharp bang and the immediate shrill of the fire alarm.

Xinran turned, acting as surprised as anybody else, to join the panicked chatter of the group.

“What was that?”

“Do you think it was a bomb?”

“No, it can't be!”

“I hope no one's hurt.”

“It came from back that way, I think. There was nobody there when we left.”

“I can't smell much smoke. That means there can't be a fire, surely?”

The guide seemed as confused as the rest. He tried to calm the group, pointing out the nearest fire exit. Other visitors hurried past them in different directions, and so the group broke up in confusion, some heading for the stairs while others followed the guide to a staff exit.

Xinran was the only one to retrace her steps. Quickly she moved through the empty galleries, ducking through the acrid cloud of the smoke bomb to enter the Eastern Art gallery. Without giving herself time to think too much about what she would do if this went wrong, Xinran strode over to the gauze-covered fresco. With one fluid,

powerful movement, she took hold of one side of the cotton and tore it from the wall.

It made the strangest sound: a dry, coughing noise and then a crackling shudder. Xinran was almost shocked that she'd managed to do it successfully. She stared at the sudden nudity of the fresco. Its original mortar was still in place, but the pictorial layer now inhabited the glued cloth canvas, every detail captured and transferred from one medium to another. Now she had to get it away from here and into a fresh canvas of lime casein before she could stabilize it.

Hearing voices and footsteps on the stairs, Xinran transferred the cloth with its precious passenger into her rucksack. She walked calmly to the door and began to descend, one hand on the railing and the other clamped over her mouth as she pretended to cough from inhalation of the drifting smoke.

The museum security guards only gave her a brief glance as they hurried past her. They told her and the few other visitors on the stairs to go quickly to the muster point outside, and thus her escape was assured.

Xinran made her way out into the street, the fire alarm still shrieking as the museum doors closed behind her. For a moment, she mingled with the rest of the dismayed visitors, gradually moving backwards until she'd edged out of the crowd.

As she made her way from the museum, the fresco safe in her possession, Xinran was startled to feel not the usual warm glow of a satisfaction at a job well done, but a feeling of emptiness. She tried to push it from her mind, but the feeling clung to her, forcing her to examine it.

*Perhaps it's time to quit this job.* Even as she considered it, Xinran mentally shook her head. She'd made a vow. This was the path she'd chosen in life, and nothing—and nobody—would stop her.

\* \* \* \*

“Stop!”

Konstantinos applied the brake with a little more force than was necessary, bringing his silver Mercedes to a standstill directly in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Syntagma Square. While the Presidential Guards remained as expressionless as the carved warrior behind them, the early morning tourists jumped and exclaimed, turning around to stare at the car parked at a rakish angle across the pavement.

Dangerous driving was the norm in the centre of Athens, but there were always those who wished to complain about it. Kon's action brought an ill-tempered blast of a horn from a lorry, the *ting-ting-ting* of a tram bell and a cacophony of shouts from other drivers.

Ignoring the brief moment of havoc he'd caused, Kon switched off the engine and turned to his companion. "What is it, *moro mou*?"

"You said we were going somewhere romantic."

He inclined his head. "We are. We're going to Sounio."

She reacted as if he'd said they were jumping into a pit of snakes. Her frosted pink lips pursed in a moue of disgust, and he was sure he could see actual panic in her eyes despite the veil of her designer sunglasses.

"Sounio is on the coast," she stated flatly. "You didn't tell me we were going to the beach. Take me back to the hotel. I want to fetch my bikini."

"Cora, there isn't much of a beach at Sounio."

"Then why are we going?"

Kon sat back in his seat and sighed. Through the windscreen he could see the pigeons patrolling in front of the tomb, pecking for crumbs dropped by tourists.

"We are going, *moro mou*, because it is romantic. You said only yesterday how you longed for me to do something romantic. Take a risk, you said—"

She tutted and held up a hand to silence him. On her middle finger was the silver ring he'd bought from the trendy little boutique in Marousi on one of their first dates. She'd seemed like the perfect woman for him back then, unlike the local beauties he'd courted. Cora was German, with a degree in media studies and her own career. She shared his love of fast cars and snowboarding, but now he was beginning to realize she was just like all the others.

Yesterday, when she'd told him to take a risk, he'd thought it was a sign, some divine ordinance showing him that, at last, this was the woman he'd been seeking for so long.

"I think our idea of romance is not compatible," she said, and stared out of the window at the Presidential Guards with their kilted skirts, white stockings and black pom-poms on their shoes. "I was expecting a flight to one of the islands. You promised me a day on Santorini, don't you remember? And then perhaps dinner at the Grande Bretagne..."

Kon raised his eyebrows. That was the kind of trip on which he took business clients and corporate guests. It was not a day he wanted to share with a woman.

“The menu at the Grande Bretagne is limited,” he said. “If you want to eat out tonight, let me take you to a place I know in Plaka. They can make any dish you want, and I guarantee the ingredients are the freshest you’ve ever tasted.”

Cora sniffed, a sign that she was unimpressed. “At least in the Grande Bretagne, you know what you’re getting. These back-street taverns you’re so fond of, they have cats and dogs running around the kitchen, and you never know how clean everything is. At the last place you took me, the chef also served at the bar and sat talking to the customers, for God’s sake!”

Kon’s smile was strained. “That was my cousin’s place. I told you.”

She sighed. “You Greeks. Everybody is your cousin.”

“Yes. We are all family.” His voice hardened a little as he looked at her.

Cora might have shared her name with the Greek word for ‘maiden’, but innocent and virginal she certainly was not. Her hair was dyed platinum blonde; she was tanned and honed to an inch of athletic perfection, and her breasts, though Kon knew they were natural, managed to give the impression that they were the result of good surgery. She was what he liked to call a honey girl: a woman who tasted sweet, but if one had too much of her, she would leave a sour taste in one’s mouth and the dulled senses of a sugar-rush headache.

Not for the first time, he wondered why he always ended up dating honey girls, and the answer was still the same: *because you need to find the one to break the curse...*

He told himself he did not believe in the curse. Civilized people didn’t have time for pagan threats. But still... one could never be too careful. Beneath the veneer of sophistication, Kon was at heart as superstitious as any other Athenian of his class and upbringing.

“I mean it,” Cora continued, flicking her hair from her shoulders. “Take me back to the hotel. If we’re not going to the islands then I have plenty of other things to do today.”

“What could be more important than a romantic picnic by the sea?”

She pursed her lips and gave him a withering glance. “Is that the limit of your imagination? A picnic? Anybody can go on a picnic!”

Kon rubbed his forehead as he looked into the rear-view mirror. Behind him, through the tinted glass, he could see a young couple strolling hand in hand, a child toddling in front of them and waving its hands excitedly as it ran towards the pigeons. He almost smiled as the birds fluttered up in alarm, sending the child running back towards its parents, but then he remembered that he was in the middle of a discussion—or was it an argument?

Wearily, he brought his attention back to Cora, who was sitting very straight and tense as she waited for his comment.

“What was it you didn’t like about the picnic?”

“Forget it!” Cora looked irritated. “Me, sitting on a rock looking at the sea, while the wind tangles my hair? I’ve only brought a light factor sunscreen, too—how can you expect me to sit out in this blazing heat?”

Kon shook his head. The day was warm, but it was hardly blazing hot. “We can go to Porto Rafina instead, if you like.”

“I don’t like!” Cora glared at him.

He gave up, lifting his hands in both surrender and dismissal. “Okay. Fair enough. You can get out now. It’s only five minutes to the hotel.”

Cora peeped at him over her sunglasses. “You’re not coming with me?”

“No. I’m going to Sounio.”

“On your own?”

Kon sighed in exaggeration, waving one hand at the crowds in Syntagma. “Of course not! I’ll simply find some other girl to keep me company.”

There was a moment of silence, as if she wasn’t sure if he was serious or joking, and then Cora said coldly, “I see. Well, if that’s how it is...”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s that easy.”

She opened the door and put one foot outside the car. Before she got out completely, she said, “By the way—the exhibition tomorrow night?”

“Don’t worry, *moro mou*,” Kon said cheerfully. “You need not waste your time. I know you hate old things. I wouldn’t want you to suffer an art exhibition for my sake, especially now that we’ve split

up. It's the least I could do to spare you such a fate. Go safely now, Cora. Have a good day."

Before she'd even shut the door, he started the engine. He grinned when the door slammed closed and gave Cora a jaunty wave before he pulled out into the teeming chaos of central Athens' traffic.

By the time he'd traveled two hundred yards and got stuck in a gridlock, he'd decided it was pointless to drive down to Sounio alone. Kon tapped his fingers against the steering wheel as he waited at the lights, considering what to do. It was rare that he had some genuine time off, rather than work-related socializing, and it would be a shame for him to waste it.

The traffic cleared. As he drove down Leoforos Vasilissis Amalias, the gleaming greyish-white outcrop of the Akropolis rose on his right from the cluster of buildings, ancient and modern, that made up the district known as Plaka. He'd been born and raised in this neighbourhood and knew every one of its streets and squares. It was still the heart of the modern city, as vibrant today as it had been in the past. Red brick Byzantine churches jostled against faded Ottoman townhouses, ramshackle tenements and utilitarian 1950s concrete constructions, and above it all stood the Akropolis.

Like every native of Athens, Kon had grown up with the rock of the ancient city as a permanent internal compass. Whenever he returned to the city after time away, he would automatically look for the familiar shape of the Parthenon on the summit. To see it signaled that he was truly home; and yet, day in, day out, he never paid much attention to the ancient site.

The dark leafy green of the National Gardens beckoned him on the left, but Kon kept driving with half his attention on the Akropolis. Against the backdrop of a brilliant blue sky, the Parthenon seemed to shine like a second sun. Even the grey and white crags of the outcrop seemed friendly. By the time he reached the junction at Hadrian's Arch, he'd decided to spend the morning revisiting the Akropolis.

He turned off the main road into the district of Makrygianni. Within two blocks he'd found a parking space. As he got out of the car and locked it, he glanced with interest at the building opposite him.

Despite the hike in prices and surging interest in real estate caused by the Olympics and other world-class events, many parts of the city remained under-developed. The majority of properties were family-run businesses that had existed, in some cases, from long



before the Turkish occupation. Many did not turn enough profit, and it was only pride and a sense of honour towards their ancestors that kept the owners still in the market.

Kon could appreciate the sentiment, but he also had a head for business and a keen eye for spotting potential—at least in real estate if not in women. The building he looked at now was almost derelict; its windows boarded over and rust from its roof pylons bleeding into the unpainted concrete. It was three stories high and covered a third of the block. At street level, it provided enough space for at least half a dozen boutique-style shops, but was occupied in the corner by only one run-down store that appeared to be selling household equipment by the display in the window.

Intrigued, Kon crossed the road for a closer look. He noted the width of the pavement, the traffic on the road, the other residences and businesses nearby, and then he glanced towards the end of the street, where the view was of the southern slope of the Akropolis and a slice of the fan-shaped Theatre of Dionysus visible behind a dark row of cypresses.

Making a mental note of the potential of this place, he wandered over to the store and examined the window display. The glass was dusty, with handprints stark against the grime. Inside, he could see a selection of mops, buckets, and brushes, all available in several garish shades. A faded cardboard sign offered a twenty percent discount to shoppers who bought more than four buckets.

Kon was wondering why on earth anybody would need more than one bucket at a time, let alone four, when the door opened, and a woman came out of the shop to look at him.

He guessed she was in late middle age. She wore a black dress with a brown and cream patterned apron over the top, and her hair was only partially held back with a dark kerchief. She strayed no further than the door and then folded her arms. Her expression was neither friendly nor mistrustful, but Kon detected a certain wariness.

“What is it now?” she asked.

Kon was surprised. “I’m sorry?”

“Your lot were here only yesterday. Measuring. Taking pictures on those fancy cameras. Making a lot of noise on their telephones.” The woman tossed her head disdainfully.

“It’s all right, I’m not with those men. I just parked my car here,” Kon said, gesturing across the street. “I was curious about the building, that’s all.”

“The developers want it,” the woman said darkly.

“Really? Did they say what for?” Kon looked up at the façade of the building again. He could imagine a number of projects that would be possible with the size and location of the place.

The woman’s expression did not alter, but scorn was evident in her voice when she replied, “A supermarket, that’s what they said. Like there are no supermarkets in this neighbourhood!”

He nodded. “You’re right. There are already two markets nearby, and one of those is less than a year old. Building another in this location would be a waste of time and money.”

“You sound like you know what you’re talking about.”

“Hopefully I do.” Kon smiled at her. “I’m a developer, too. But it was only coincidence that brought me here, nothing else. I was planning on visiting the Akropolis. I haven’t been up there for many years. Isn’t that typical of us Athenians? We ignore the great heritage surrounding us.”

She gave a disdainful sniff, but unfolded her arms. “I am from Volos, myself.”

Kon grinned. He thought he’d caught a whiff of accent. “Then how do you come to be here, auntie?”

She flapped a hand at him. “Don’t call me that. I feel old. If you must know my name, just ask for it. You must know we don’t stand on ceremony here.”

“My name is Konstantinos,” he offered first, politely.

The woman nodded in acknowledgement. “Maria Petraki. This is my shop. Do you want to buy a bucket? You see we have a special offer—a discount...”

Kon laughed. “Thank you, but no, Mrs. Petraki. I would be interested in buying your building though—I take it this is all yours?”

“It’s not for sale,” she told him abruptly. “I told that to those men yesterday, but they wouldn’t listen. They said I should take the money they were offering, because if I delayed, it would mean complications, and complications cost money...”

“And so any future monetary offers would be lessened,” Kon finished for her, and he shook his head. Such a tactic, along with outright bullying and intimidation of recalcitrant or unwilling owners, had been a problem for decades, but in recent years it had become much worse.

Kon hated the thought of people being cheated of their properties and swindled out of adequate compensation. He thought for a moment

and then asked, “Forgive me for asking, auntie, but... how much have they offered you?”

Mrs. Petraki gave him a crafty look. “How much would you offer?”

Kon shrugged. “Without seeing inside, I can only give you a vague estimate based on equivalent properties of this size and state of upkeep. Also, bearing in mind the location... Makrygianni all the way down to Philopappos could become the modern-day Plaka, you know, with the right developer behind it...”

Mrs. Petraki gave a barking laugh. “And I suppose you are that developer? Stop stalling! For all that I like my neighbours to see a handsome young man flirting with me on my doorstep, you haven’t answered my question.”

Kon grinned. “Okay. If I were being honest, I would offer something in the region of six hundred thousand Euros.”

“Six...?” Mrs. Petraki stared at him round-eyed, and then she cursed. “Those rascals! They offered only half that!”

“Which company was it?”

“Apostolis and Pappandreou. Mr. Apostolis came himself. He thought he was so high and mighty in his big car! As if anyone around here will forget how he used to catch frogs from the pond and empty them out in the street. Those poor creatures, how they used to hop! He was a naughty imp back then. I suppose he has grown up to be a rascal, just like his father, and his father before him...”

Kon tried to guide the conversation back on track. “Did you sign anything?”

“Not yet. The place is not for sale. Do you see a notice anywhere?”

He laughed and reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, taking out a business card. “Listen, auntie. Do me a favour—call my office and make an appointment. I’ll handle this personally. Apostolis and Pappandreou are good at building supermarkets, but they don’t give the best price. If you don’t want to sell, I can put you in touch with a good lawyer who’ll protect you from those rascals.”

He paused and gave her a charming smile. “And if you do want to sell, give me a call. I’m known as a fair man. Ask around—you’ll see. I won’t cheat you.”

Mrs. Petraki studied the card he’d put in her hand. Realization lit her face, and she looked up. “Ah, Konstantinos Antoniou, of course! The man who made a fortune out of the Olympics! I have seen you in

the newspapers. I knew I recognized you from somewhere. My cousin's husband sold you some land near Glyfada, you gave him a generous price then..."

Kon smiled and nodded, embarrassed by her effusion. "That's good."

"But wait," Mrs. Petraki said, putting her hand to her mouth. "What happened to that curse, the one the papers talked about? The curse of Aphrodite? Are you still afflicted by it, Mr. Antoniou?"

\* \* \* \*

It always came back to the curse. It didn't matter that it was an old story; that the media had fastened on personalities with more important issues than his: Kon was haunted by it. As he walked along the road towards the entrance to the Akropolis, hands in his pockets, he forgot to admire the ancient sites he was here to see. Vaguely, he registered the archways and crumbled golden façade of the Odeion of Herodes Atticus, the Roman theatre cut deep into the foot of the Akropolis, and then, as he turned up the slope, he noticed the tour buses and the crowds of visitors.

Even though the day was still early, it was already too warm for some tourists, who stood around listening to their guide and cooling themselves with hand-held fans. Kon made his way through the groups and bought a ticket, declining the offer of two touts who offered to show him around the site.

The marble-paved path meandered upwards through a grove of olive trees, cypresses and citruses. Cicadas whirred idly from their hiding-places, providing a pleasant background noise that made the sound of the traffic seem to fade away. Kon enjoyed his walk, pushing all other things from his mind as he looked up at the imposing shape of the Propylaia, the old entrance to the summit of the Akropolis.

Where the path forked, an enterprising Athenian had set up a drinks van, selling fresh orange juice. Kon stood in line and bought a cup, taking it over to sit on a piece of ancient masonry beneath an olive tree.

The sun had yet to heat through the marble. Sitting in the shade, sipping the frothy orange juice, he realized he hadn't spared a thought for Cora. He was sure she would have hated this trip even more than the picnic at Sounio. There were bigger crowds on the Akropolis, but none that would pay her any interest, and Cora liked to think she was the centre of attention.

It wasn't just Cora. Every woman he'd dated before her, especially over the past couple of years—since the Olympics, since the curse—had ended up being the same type. They were beautiful and independent, but with that independence came a selfish streak and a desire to be noticed and applauded for minor triumphs that, to him, were not triumphs at all.

Kon came to a decision. Since he'd made such a mess of things until this point, he would leave everything up to Fate. This would be a test. He would date the next single woman he saw, whether she was young or old, attractive or hideous. He'd date her even if she turned out to be a warty old grandmother from his native district. That was taking a risk, wasn't it?

He closed his eyes and sat back against the twisted olive tree as if he were merely enjoying the cool shade, and then he waited for Fate to poke at him. He listened to the sound of tourists wandering past, their feet in boots, trainers or wholly impractical flip-flops. He listened to the music of the different languages and accents. He tried to imagine what each woman looked like as they walked past him, just from the sound of her voice or from the squeak of her shoes against the worn marble.

There was a moment of silence in the wake of a large tour party. Kon opened his eyes to see not the warty old grandmother he'd feared, but a pair of slim, shapely legs and a pert bottom clad in denim shorts.

Kon stared at her, gathering his wits. The woman was bent over, tying the lace on one of her canvas shoes. From the golden colour of her skin, he knew she couldn't be a local girl. An Asian babe, then; some Oriental beauty... Kon sat up as the woman finished with her shoe and straightened to her full height. He noted her trim waist and the muscle tone in her bare arms, and wondered if the front view would be as bewitching as the back.

She turned around, and Kon stared some more. Her hair was caught up in a loose topknot, secured with a bone pin, with loose wisps framing her oval-shaped face. Her eyes were a sweep of darkness, her nose tiny and straight, and her mouth was full and sensuous like a peony bud.

He wondered what it would be like to kiss her mouth. Her lips seemed so ripe and luscious it was suddenly difficult for him to concentrate on anything else.

She slipped her bag over one shoulder and made to continue up the path.

Kon knew he had to act before his Fate-chosen date could get away. He stood up and moved towards her. "Excuse me, miss," he said in English, hoping she would understand him.

The look she gave him was wary and distant. "Yes?" she replied in the same language, "what is it?"

Kon smiled in what he hoped was a disarming way, and then he realized that she would think he was a lunatic if he just asked her out. He kept on smiling.

Fortunately, she seemed to understand. Kon wondered if he really could be so lucky to find a woman who read his mind at the first meeting, but then his hopes were dashed with her next words.

"You are a tour guide? You can show me the Akropolis?"

He stared at her, nonplussed, and then said, "Yes. Of course."

His Oriental beauty smiled and came closer. Her smile was bewitching, lighting up her face. He noticed she was wearing nude lip-gloss, and wondered how it tasted. She looked at him expectantly and raised her eyebrows.

"How much?"

Kon tried to clear his mind of erotic thoughts. He coughed, looked around, and finally guessed a sum. "Twenty euro."

"Oh, that is so reasonable!" Her smile broadened. "At the ticket office, they were asking thirty euro."

"Those guys are rascals; they try to cheat tourists," Kon found himself saying. "You should always look for a guide after the ticket office. All the best guides are there. Like me," he continued, getting into his new role and tapping his chest, "I am an excellent guide. I have lived in Athens almost my whole life. You ask me any question, and I can answer it!"

She seemed impressed. "So, do I pay you now or later?"

Kon waved away the offer. "Later, later. Let us enjoy this magnificent place first before we speak of money. My name is Konstantinos Antoniou—" he said his name slowly, and was gratified when she repeated it, stumbling a little over the pronunciation, "but you can call me Kon."

She hefted the slight weight of her bag on her shoulder and held out her hand formally. "I am Lin Xinran."

He shook her hand, feeling how her tiny, elegant fingers almost vanished in his large masculine grip. Kon remembered that, often,

Asian surnames came first, so he said, “Pleased to meet you, Xinran,” and was rewarded by a smile.

He tossed the empty paper cup into a rubbish bin as they walked up the hill towards the Propylaea. He felt relaxed and happy and was content just to stroll in silence with his beautiful date.

“Well?” she prompted.

Kon looked at her, forgetting his role. “Oh,” he said, remembering, “Sorry. I was just wondering how you came to be here on your own. Usually people visit the Akropolis in a group.”

Xinran snorted. “First, Mr Antoniou, let me tell you I am Chinese, not Japanese. I believe there are jokes about the way Japanese tour parties run about and take many photographs. That is as much a stereotype as people saying all Greeks are cousins who like boys and dance to *Zorba*.”

He chuckled. “Point taken.”

“Second,” she continued, “I am here on my own, for a few days only, before I go back to Shanghai. I have never visited Greece before, so I thought to treat myself to a small holiday.”

Her English was gentle and hesitant, the consonants softening at the end of a word so he had to move closer to hear what she was saying. He was taller than her by several inches, and so, when he gazed down at her, he noticed how her hair was not midnight-black, as he’d assumed all Asian hair to be, but it had a dark red sheen to it that he found fascinating.

“Your English is good,” he said, recalling himself with an effort.

As if she suspected him of patronizing her, Xinran responded: “So is yours.”

Kon spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “Thank you. I learned from an American tutor. And you? Where did you study?”

She gave him a look. “Beijing.”

“You never studied abroad?”

“You needn’t look so surprised. I have traveled more extensively than many women of my age in China. I was fortunate to have the opportunities.”

He dug a little more. “With family, or...”

Xinran’s expression darkened, and she shook her head. “With work.”

“And what do you do?”

She hesitated a moment before she answered, and so when she said, “Computing industry,” Kon knew she was lying.

"I thought China was becoming a leading manufacturer of computer equipment these days," he remarked casually, and sensed her stiffen beside him.

"Yes. But we use some components built in the UK."

"Oh, so you were lately in England," Kon said, still keeping his tone light. "I have been there a few times. I have a cousin in London."

She glanced at him, her suspicion melting away. "A cousin?"

"Yep." Kon flashed her a grin. "Okay, he's my second cousin, but still. What you said about the Greeks being cousins is sometimes true. I guess that's how stereotypes are made."

Xinran laughed, a genuine full-bodied sound that made him laugh, too. When it faded, they smiled at each other. Kon was about to admit to his small deception when she nodded towards the Propylaia.

"You'd better start earning your fee, Mr. Antoniou."

"Please, I prefer 'Kon'," he said. "Mr. Antoniou is too formal. It makes me sound like my father."

"Okay... Kon." Xinran pointed up ahead of them. "So tell me about this building. What is it? It is not the Parthenon, I think?"

"No, the Parthenon stands behind this," Kon explained. He tried to recall some facts from long-ago history lessons and articles he'd read, but all that came to mind were the myths and legends his father had told him when he was a boy. He supposed they were as good a place as any to start. He could always glean more factual information from the explanatory plaques around the site, or by eavesdropping on a genuine tour guide.

They walked slowly up the worn marble steps to the grand entrance to the Akropolis. The stone was gleaming, rubbed slippery-smooth by centuries of erosion, both human and weather. The ancient staircase was steep, and Kon offered his arm to Xinran. She leaned on him slightly; her fingers cool against his bare forearm.

Kon started talking just to keep his mind focused. "You see, Xinran, how thick is the stone here. This site was fortified against attack, because it was a holy place as well as a city. The temple of Erechtheus is built on top of an older temple that protected a sacred olive tree that grew from the spear of the goddess Athena. She and the sea-god Poseidon fought over possession of the city, and their dispute was settled by a king who asked the gods to grant a gift to the city, so that its people may decide their protector."



Xinran smiled, humouring him. “Athena gave the olive tree, that much is obvious. I have seen this myth on the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. But what did Poseidon give?”

Kon frowned in sudden disapproval. “We don’t call them the Elgin Marbles. Lord Elgin stole them from us.”

“I thought he bought them.”

“From the Turks!” he snapped. “Those rascals were invaders in our country, and they had no right to sell the marbles to the English. They were not for sale!”

She nodded in understanding. “You support the move to bring the marbles back to Greece?”

“Of course I do. Every Greek supports this.” Kon didn’t think it was the time to reveal that he was one of the leading members of the repatriation committee. He gestured to the other side of the Propylaia. “We are even building a new museum in which to house the marbles, when the British government returns them.”

Xinran touched his arm. Her expression was sympathetic, but her eyes were fervent. “I hope you will get them back,” she said. “Countries should not be robbed of their heritage. The past is too important to let it slip into darkness. We should remember...”

She stopped herself from saying anything further, turning away as if fearing she’d already said too much. With an abrupt change of subject, she pointed into the distance. “Is that the sea?”

Kon smiled. She’d been so passionate for a moment, and he wondered if it was the fate of the Parthenon marbles that had fired her, or if she’d been referring to something else. He decided he wanted to know more about what made Xinran passionate, and so he moved to stand beside her.

“Yes, it’s the sea. Actually, that was Poseidon’s gift to the city—salt water,” he said, recalling the myth. “The god struck a rock and a spring came from it, but it was a salt-water spring. It is also inside the Erechtheion, but you will not be able to see it, just as you will not see the olive tree of Athena. These miracles were lost in antiquity.”

“What a shame,” Xinran said with a sigh. “It would be nice to see a miracle.”

Kon led her over to the Erechtheion, detouring around a large tour group so he could try to overhear some of the guide’s spiel. He was disappointed when he heard the guide speaking German. Despite his intimate contact with Cora, his understanding of the German language was only basic.

Fortunately, it seemed as if Xinran was content to listen to his recounting of myths to explain the site's history rather than wanting a recitation of facts. He stopped to one side of the Erechtheion and told her about the legendary king of Athens, Erechtheus, who had not only been the judge in the contest between Athena and Poseidon, but who had suffered much personal sacrifice for the sake of his city.

"Sacrifice?" Xinran repeated.

"Erechtheus had four sons and four daughters," Kon explained. "Of course, all men in those days wanted sons, a bit like—" He stopped short, aware that he'd been about to make a crass generalisation.

Xinran smiled slightly. "Like the Chinese? You are not far wrong, Kon. Surely everyone knows how we have a shortage of women and a surplus of men. Government policy is trying to reverse the trend, but it will take a long time. And in the countryside where I grew up, baby girls are still seen as a nuisance. It's changing, though; especially in the cities..."

She sighed and waved a hand, the problem too big for her to solve alone. "But tell me about this King Eric."

"Erechtheus," Kon corrected with a grin. "Well, the king had four daughters, and he loved them very much. One day, a son of Poseidon was killed and so the sea-god demanded the death of one of these daughters. The unfortunate girl was chosen by lot, but when the time came for her to die, her sisters swore to join her. The four girls leapt from this spot and perished on the rocks below."

Xinran shuddered. "What a waste."

"Their father died not long afterwards," Kon continued, indicating that they should continue their walk around the site. "He was struck by lightning for daring to arrange a human sacrifice of his own flesh and blood."

"That is hardly fair! How could he have ignored the demands of a god?"

Kon paused as a chill went through him. He wondered if he was guilty of ignoring the demands of a goddess. But no—his was a curse. Surely, that was different. He pushed the thought aside and tried to answer Xinran's question.

"I guess it was an ancient Catch-22 situation. Erechtheus could not ignore Poseidon because he owed the god. But human sacrifice was a crime against Heaven, and not only that, because he killed his own child, it was a crime against the family and therefore the state.

Really, Poseidon had it in for him from the start. Better for him to have jumped off the rock rather than his daughters.”

“Truly,” she agreed, her voice distant. “But then, a daughter owes allegiance to her father—and to her country—above and beyond what she owes to herself.”

He didn’t know how to follow that and so was silent.

In the direct sunlight, Kon couldn’t help but notice the faint smattering of freckles across her nose. He realized he was staring when Xinran gave him an embarrassed look and covered her nose with her hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Your freckles are cute.”

Xinran let her hand drop. “Cute?” She sounded astonished. “In China, we try to get rid of them. My friends have all had the skin-whitening treatment.”

Kon shook his head slightly. “Why would they do that? Your skin is lovely. There are plenty of pale Westerners who pay lots of money to get a tan. You can see some of them here.”

He waved a hand at the people around them, most of who were dressed in shorts and sleeveless tops or t-shirts. He continued, “By the end of the day, they will be red from the sun, and it will hurt. In a few days, they will have a tan. Then it fades. If they are unlucky, they will wither before their time. For the very unfortunate, they could get skin cancer. So I do not think it is a good thing for people to want to change the colour of their skin. God made us the right shade for the places we live in. We should not seek to change that.”

Xinran looked at him with new interest. “You believe in God, Mr Antoniou?”

Kon shrugged. “Why not? One or many, it is all the same to me. There is a power that we cannot understand. Give it any name you wish: God, Allah, Buddha, Zeus, Aphrodite...”

“I thought she was the goddess of love.”

He nodded. “She is.”

Xinran’s gaze sharpened. “Is?”

Kon covered his slip with a charming smile. “Do you not believe in Love, Miss Lin? It is an ancient and powerful force, far older than the place where we now stand. Love is divine and inspired—”

“I suppose so.”

She turned her head to look at the view, and Kon realized he was losing her attention. Hurriedly he said, “Let’s go into the museum

before that big group arrives over here. You'll be able to see the artifacts more closely."

They spent half an hour in the cool interior of the museum, where Kon was saved from having to invent any factual knowledge by the presence of numerous information panels describing the history and symbolism of the various statues, pedimental sculptures and other objects found on the Akropolis. The arrival of the large German group hastened their departure, and after Kon spoke briefly about the myths surrounding the Parthenon, they retraced their footsteps to the Propylaia.

Kon surreptitiously checked his watch. They'd been together for just short of an hour and ten minutes. In his book, that wasn't long enough to be a proper date. Besides, she'd said she was only here for a few days. He needed to spend more time with her.

"Now we shall visit the Areopagus," he said, hoping his tone sounded commanding enough that she'd agree. "The Hill of Ares, god of war—and the site of the law courts of ancient Athens."

"Great," Xinran said with enthusiasm. "Is it far?"

"Just on the right as we walk down the hill," he replied as they descended the steps of the Propylaia. "Look there. You can see it."

A short walk took them to the site, a smaller outcrop of rock with narrow, rough-hewn steps and weathered lumps said to be ancient seats on its flat, slippery summit. It was surrounded by dark green cypress trees and from the centre of the Areopagus was afforded a spectacular view of both the Akropolis above and the Agora below.

Kon allowed Xinran to go up the steps first, talking almost continually to distract himself from staring too obviously at her denim-clad bottom that waggled enticingly as she climbed. He told her about the various legends associated with the place, and when he eventually fell silent, she looked at him.

"How is it that you know so much about mythology? Tour guides normally have limited knowledge, enough to cover the basics and a few common tourist questions. But you seem to know so much."

"You are harsh on tour guides," Kon joked. "Some of them—us—really love our jobs."

"You love it so much you do homework?"

Kon gazed down at her in consternation before he realized she was teasing him. He chuckled and said, "Maybe not. Actually, it was my father who told me about the old myths."

"He was a teacher?"

“No. A carpet-seller.”

Xinran turned to stare at him. “Carpets? I thought in Greece everyone had marble floors.”

“You’d be surprised.” Kon gave her a wry grin.

“And you didn’t go into the family business,” she said, wagging her finger at him. “You became a tour guide instead.”

Kon felt his smile slip. “Yes, that’s right.”

From the Areopagus, they strolled down the hill to the main road, where they stood together awkwardly for a moment. The spell of friendship he’d experienced on the Akropolis strained a little with the reminder of modern reality as cars and buses drove past them, the noise and fumes filling the air.

“Well,” Xinran said, “thank you for the tour. Twenty euro, you said?”

Kon watched as she found the money and held it out to him. He didn’t want to see her walk away from him so soon. They’d only spent a couple of hours together, and he wanted to know her better. He reached for the money, improvising quickly.

“That’s right,” he said, waving the two red ten-euro notes, “but for this price you have a guide not only for the Akropolis, but also for the rest of the day. I can show you many interesting places. The Kerameikos, for example: the city’s ancient cemetery and potter’s quarter—there is much to see there. The Agora and Roman Agora, you saw them from the rocks—these are sites you mustn’t miss. Or I can show you around the museums, the smaller places that many tour groups miss out...”

Xinran appeared to be considering his offer. She frowned and brushed back a wisp of hair from her face. “All for twenty euro?”

“Yes. But you will have to pay entrance charges and other costs, of course,” Kon added. “I am good value for money. You won’t find a cheaper guide in the whole of Athens.”

“You do seem to be enthusiastic about your job,” she said, her gaze twinkling. “Okay, I agree. I would like to see around Plaka. Can you show me?”

“Of course!” Kon hoped he didn’t sound too eager. He raised a hand and signaled to a taxi as it cruised towards them. “I was born in Plaka and spent my childhood there.”

“That’s right. Your father’s carpet shop,” Xinran remembered. The taxi pulled up. He opened the door for her, and she gave him a

smile as she got in. “Will you show me where your father had his shop? I would like to see it.”

Kon climbed in after her and shut the door. “Sure. But there are more interesting things to see in Plaka.”

He leaned forwards and instructed the driver to take them to Plateia Mitropoleos. When he sat back into the sun-warmed leather seat he shared with Xinran, he gave her a smile. His day, which had started so inauspiciously, seemed to be improving every minute.

\* \* \* \*

Plaka was always busy, but, close to lunchtime, the narrow streets were thronging with people, both tourists and locals. Kon took this as an excuse to walk closer to Xinran. At times, he was even able to gently cup her elbow in his hand to steer her through the crowds. He hoped his palm was not too damp, but even if she noticed his clumsy gallantry, she did not remark on it other than to give him a smile now and then. It was enough.

They wandered past souvenir shops selling reproductions of ancient Greek pottery, tie-dyed cotton dresses, straw hats, and concertinas of postcards whose bright colours had faded through exposure to the sunlight. A polyglot chatter surrounded them, and carried on the faint warmth of the breeze came the smell of cooked food: garlic, baked cheese, the sweet sharpness of tomatoes.

“Are you hungry?” Kon asked as they walked past a tavern.

Xinran shook her head. “Not particularly. I had a big breakfast.”

“That is the healthy way to do it,” he agreed, thinking of the scant cup of black coffee he’d gulped down at half-past seven that morning. His stomach rumbled, and he laughed to hide his embarrassment. “But maybe I am not as healthy as you.”

She hid a smile behind her hand. “Then you should eat.”

“I wouldn’t want you to have to wait for me,” Kon protested. “I know—up here there’s a bakery. Have you tried spanakopita?”

“Spanner-what?” Xinran laughed.

“Spanakopita. It’s a pie of filo pastry, filled with spinach and feta cheese, and sometimes onion and garlic, depending on where you buy it. You’ll see: it’s delicious - perfect for a snack. Come on!” Kon grabbed her hand in his enthusiasm, and they hurried together down the street.

After a brief stop for their lunch, in which Xinran had to concede that spanakopita was indeed delicious despite the pastry crumbs that

clung to her t-shirt, and which Kon wanted desperately to be allowed to brush from her pert little breasts, they continued their walk.

He detoured around the place where his father's carpet shop had once stood without mentioning it, instead drawing her attention to another church, or an Ottoman residence, or a glimpse of the Tower of the Winds.

She listened to him without comment, her gaze scanning the buildings as they walked, and he wondered if she was really hearing what he was saying. Since they'd come to this part of the district, she'd seemed to withdraw into herself even more, as if her mind was elsewhere.

"And Emperor Hadrian," Kon continued gamely, "was also famous for creating not just Hadrian's Wall, but also Mickey Mouse."

That got her attention. Xinran turned her head towards him, a frown creasing her brow. "What did you say? Mickey Mouse?"

He grinned. "I just wanted to know if you were listening."

"Of course I was!" Now she looked cross. "You were talking about Emperor Hadrian. You thought my mind was wandering? I paid twenty euro to listen to you talk!"

She seemed so angry that Kon felt ashamed of himself. It was a new feeling for him, and he wondered at it. Not because of her anger, but at the fact that he felt guilty for deceiving this lovely young woman. Fate had given him a wonderful gift, and he was wasting his time with her in making stupid jokes.

"Xinran, I'm sorry," he said, holding his hands out. "I am a fool. I am used to getting things my own way..."

"Then it's a surprise that you have any clients at all," she snapped. "I thought a tour guide was supposed to accommodate the wishes of the tourist."

"Um, yes," Kon said, speaking slowly as he thought fast, "but also we work to a schedule. You know, we all have our favourite places that we want to share with our clients. And so I sometimes get upset if a nice client such as yourself seems not to like the tour."

He held his breath while Xinran digested all this, and then she gave a sharp nod, accepting his explanation. "Okay. But remember this is my holiday, so I should get to choose which places I want to visit... and which parts of your talk I want to listen to or not," she added, her cheeky smile returning.

Kon gaped at her in comic exaggeration. "You are saying I am boring?"

She giggled, her hand to her mouth again.

He puffed himself up, thumping a fist against his chest. “We Greek men have our pride! I am the best tour guide in Athens, and now you say my words are boring—such a thing is not to be borne!”

Xinran gave up on giggling and laughed out loud. “You are very good,” she admitted, when he’d stopped posturing, and they walked on together. “What can I do to make it up to you?”

“You could come out for dinner with me tonight,” Kon said before he thought about it, and then he gave himself a mental kick when he saw her reaction.

Her smile became polite as she said, “That’s kind of you, but no, thank you.”

They fell silent for a while, until Kon said, “I didn’t mean it. Well, I did, but... it was genuine. I like you.”

She gave him a startled glance and then lowered her gaze. “I’m not used to this. That’s all.”

“Chinese men don’t invite you for dinner?” Now it was his turn to be surprised. “What, are they blind or something? They should be queuing up for you!”

Xinran’s smile was weak. “I just don’t have much time for dating. With my work... it’s complicated.”

“You said you were in the computing industry.”

She almost jumped, caught in the lie, but she recovered quickly. “Yes. But I work long hours and travel a lot. It’s not good for a stable relationship.”

“What about a fun relationship?”

Xinran half-smiled. “Is that what you’re looking for, Mr Antoniou?”

Kon scuffed his polished shoes against the cobblestones. “You know, first thing this morning I would have said yes. But then I met you.”

She looked at him steadily and raised her eyebrows, making no comment.

He sighed and rubbed a hand through his hair before gesturing that they should take the next turn on the left. “Yeah, it sounds like a pick-up line. Not a very good one, at that. But it happens to be true. These past couple of years I’ve had many fun relationships, and that’s what they were—fun. Not serious. You might not believe me, but I did go into each relationship thinking that this woman would be The One.”



“The one for what?”

“The one to break the curse.”

Xinran stopped in the middle of the street, almost causing a couple to walk into her. “You are cursed?”

“Yes.” Kon gave her a half-embarrassed, half-flippant look. “Truly. If this was a pick-up line, I would invent a less humiliating story.”

She started walking again, but slowly. Kon was relieved she wasn’t running away from him. He’d never told any of his other girlfriends about the curse, but then, most of them were well aware of it from the gossip pages or the Internet. They’d been the ones to raise the question of the curse with him and only then as a joke.

Xinran seemed to be thinking about it seriously. “A curse is not good,” she said at last. “Is it in business? Is that why you were looking for clients on the Akropolis rather than leading a big tour party?”

Kon was beginning to wish he’d been honest from the start about the whole tour guide thing. Although he’d enjoyed playing that role, it was rapidly becoming a stumbling block between them. “Er, no,” he said truthfully. “It’s not a curse on business. It’s...”

He paused, and decided to push his luck. “If you really want to know then I’ll tell you. But only over dinner.”

She pulled the shoulder straps of her bag a little higher and gave him a look.

“A drink, then,” Kon tried again.

Xinran shook her head. “You asked me if I ever had fun relationships. No, I don’t. I’m sorry, Mr Antoniou, but you’re wasting your time with me.”

“I don’t think you’re a waste of time, Miss Lin.”

She smiled. “You would say that. I’ve paid you twenty euro to be nice to me.”

“Hey! Some tour guides are rude and arrogant even if you pay them two hundred euro,” Kon said, trying to sound aggrieved. “Although for that price, you’d probably get tea at the Grande Bretagne...”

He let his sentence tail off when he realized she wasn’t listening. A fine old wooden Ottoman building with a frontage that leaned precariously against its neighbour, a more modern brick-built structure, caught her attention. Kon recognized it as the museum of

the Lemos Foundation, which was also playing host to the art exhibition he and Cora had been due to attend the following evening.

Xinran walked over to the discreet notice board placed on the door and looked at the advertisement for the exhibition. As it was written in Greek with only a few basic lines in English, Kon offered his help.

“You know we Athenians are like magpies, collecting pretty things,” he said. “The Lemos Foundation is like those other museums I told you about, the Benaki and Goulandris. These families are wealthy philanthropists with diverse artistic collections. Here is a truly international exhibition, opening tomorrow night. Look here,” and he pointed to the pictures of some of the objects on display: “you can see interesting things—an ivory figurine from India, or this gold crown from Vergina... and here is a jade carving of a monkey from ancient China.”

“Tang Dynasty,” she said swiftly, and when he glanced at her, she blushed.

“I believe so.” He tapped the notice board. “That’s what it says here.”

“What an interesting exhibition,” she said, her voice neutral.

Kon smiled. “Alas, tomorrow night it is entry by ticket only. But there is a number we can call, and I will ask if there are any tickets available for the following day. It says it will open to the public from that time.”

Xinran made a negative gesture. “My flight home is the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Kon hesitated. He had a free ticket for the opening night, of course, but he did not want her to think that he would expect anything from her in return. It had crossed his mind to use the ticket as a bribe if she would go out with him that evening, but such a thought seemed sordid.

He did not know what to do.

She shrugged and turned away, looking up at him with a smile. “Never mind. There are plenty of other museums in Athens. It was just that this one is in such an attractive building.”

He brightened. “Yes, indeed. Ottoman, late eighteenth century, built in the style of the wooden *yahs* of Istanbul. The museum joins onto it at the side and back in this new building, but if we walk down this alleyway, you can see more of the original structure...”

He led the way into a quiet, narrow street that opened at both ends onto busy roads. While he pointed out features of interest, he was pleased to see that Xinran was paying close attention to everything he said. She even asked a few questions about the interior of the museum and how it related to the old wooden building and where they now stood.

As they walked away, he said, "It is really a shame you will miss the exhibition, since you seem so interested."

"It's not important," she said. "I like wooden buildings, that's all. Where shall we go now? I would like to see the National Archaeological Museum, if you have the time to show me around."

Kon pretended to check his watch. "Of course I have time! Remember, I am your willing slave until the twenty euros run out. By my reckoning, you still have another three hours before that happens. Come this way, we will get a taxi."

\* \* \* \*

The halls of the museum were cool and well lit. Visitors spoke in hushed tones except for the few tour guides who recited their facts loudly before ushering their parties on to the next must-see exhibit. Kon started to trail along after one such party, thinking that Xinran would be able to listen to a real guide rather than his poor efforts, but she halted in the middle of the main entrance hall and waited for him to say something.

It had been a long time since he'd been around the National Archaeological Museum, and so he shrugged and said, "Where would you like to start? There is so much to see. You could probably spend several days here."

Xinran studied the leaflet that she'd been given at the ticket office. A floor plan of the museum was included, and she frowned at the Greek words before Kon came to her aid and told her about the various rooms and famous objects on display.

She said she wanted to see the Mycenaean treasure, and so he led her through into the central part of the building. He saw how she glanced around at everything – not just the artifacts themselves, but also the display cases, the security guards in their dark uniforms standing near each door, the height of the roof, the windows, and the CCTV cameras tracking their movements.

This puzzled Kon. He asked, "Does your computer job have anything to do with security?"

For a moment, she looked shocked. Her bag slipped from her shoulder, but she caught it quickly before it could fall to the floor. By the time she'd swung it back into place, Xinran's expression was calm and open. She smiled at him.

"I was just curious to compare the security here with that of the British Museum. I visited it the day before I left England, and, in one gallery, I stood too close to a stone panel on a wall, and I set off an invisible alarm." She laughed, self-deprecating. "It was very embarrassing!"

"Sounds like it," Kon agreed, smiling. He wanted to believe her, but her behaviour had set off its own invisible alarm within him. It niggled at him, but he pushed it away, giving her his full attention again.

"Over here," he said, pointing to a large display case that contained a death mask of beaten gold that was said to have belonged to King Agamemnon.

"The father of Orestes," she said, looking from the artefact to Kon. "Did I remember it right? You mentioned him on the law court hill."

"The Areopagus," he corrected. "Yes, that's him. So you were listening."

She gave him a glance that suggested he shouldn't underestimate her, and then they moved on. For the next half hour they explored the exhibits of the ground floor before he suggested that they go upstairs.

"Mainly it is pottery," he said, checking the floor plan, "but you might find the Thera frescoes interesting."

She reacted oddly again. "Frescoes?"

He folded the leaflet and handed it back to her. "Yes, they're very famous. A whole city, called Akrotiri, was found buried on the island of Santorini—or Thera, as it was called back then. It was destroyed many centuries ago in a volcanic eruption. Some people say that Thera was the location of Atlantis, but I don't know if I believe that. What I do know is that the man who discovered these frescoes was later killed at the site while he was working."

Xinran was quiet for a moment, and then she said, "Another sacrifice. Your country's history seems to thrive on it."

Kon gave her a bemused look. "What about China's history?"

"Your history asks for individual sacrifices. Mine..." She hesitated, seemed to shake off her strange mood, and smiled at him. "Never mind. Let's see the frescoes."

Upstairs, Kon stood aside and watched as Xinran brushed past him to enter the fresco room. She seemed delighted with what she saw.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, ignoring the famous images of the fishermen and the boxing youths. Instead, she went straight for the fragmentary painting of a rocky landscape tufted with plants, through which moved red goats and blue monkeys.

“Cute, aren’t they,” Kon said, coming to stand beside her.

“The monkey is one of the animals of the Chinese zodiac,” she said, her eyes shining as she admired the fresco. “Actually, it is my birth sign.”

He glanced at her. “Is that like our zodiac? What does the Monkey mean?”

Xinran shrugged. “It’s not for one month, like the Western zodiac, but for the whole year. Monkeys are said to be inquisitive and clever. They like to have fun. They are good actors.”

Kon nodded. He could believe that. She’d done a great job of playing the part of coolly disinterested for most of the day, but he couldn’t shake off the feeling that maybe there was a spark of something there between them. Or maybe he was just fooling himself.

“They like to get their own way, too,” she continued. “They can be selfish.”

“I don’t think you’re selfish,” he said quickly.

Xinran laughed. “You barely know me.”

“We have spent the day together. I can form an opinion from that.”

“It might be a mistaken opinion.” She lowered her gaze and smiled.

Kon wondered if she was flirting with him. He seemed to have forgotten even the most basic rules of the game. He tried to recall how he’d behaved with Cora when they’d first started dating and realised that he couldn’t remember. He had a vague idea it involved alcohol and the offer of a cruise around the Saronic Gulf on his yacht.

He didn’t want to court Xinran like that. She was different. She was special.

*She was The One.*

Kon jerked back from the thought and blinked at the scampering blue monkeys in bewilderment. Where had that come from? And how could she be The One to lift the curse when she was going back to China in less than two days? He knew next to nothing about her,

except that she made him feel like a new person, as if he'd been reborn, full of energy and excitement...

*Take a risk on her.*

Kon almost laughed out loud. The curse was cruel indeed if it required him to place his heart and soul in the care of a woman he'd only just met; a woman who, although mysterious and beautiful, would leave him in forty-eight hours to fly to the other side of the world. Whoever said love was blind had failed to take into account that it also possessed a warped sense of humour.

His muddled thoughts swung to a halt. *Love?* He wondered. *Where did that come from? I don't love her... Do I? Is it possible?*

While Kon tried to gather his wits, reeling from this sudden terrible—and wonderful—realization, he could only watch in silence as Xinran examined the monkey fresco.

"Why are they blue?" she asked, turning to him for an answer.

Kon struggled to form a sentence. "I don't know."

In desperation, he glanced at the information panel, scanning the Greek as well as the English text. "It doesn't say. But the monkeys are a species from Ethiopia. You can see similar animals in frescoes at the palace of Knossos on Crete, so the monkeys must have been pets brought from Egypt during the Minoan period."

He silently congratulated himself on sounding calm and collected despite his inner turmoil. He tried to look at the fresco and not at Xinran, certain that if he gazed at her then he'd give himself away, but he couldn't stop himself.

Her reddish-black hair gleamed under the spotlights, and he could see the smooth curve of her cheek, her skin golden and her lips dark. Her eyelashes, he noticed, were long and straight, not needing any mascara to enhance them. Her neck was graceful, her collarbones just visible at the scooped neck of her t-shirt. Her breasts were thrust forward with the way she stood, and the chill of the air-conditioning had made her nipples peak against the fabric.

"Kon?" She glanced at him, seemingly unaware of his tormented fascination. "How can they be pets? They are wild and free in this painting."

He cleared his throat and pointed to an illustration of another fresco on the panel. "Here it says that monkeys could have had some religious significance. You can see them with a goddess and a woman collecting saffron."

“In China, we have a legend about the Monkey King,” Xinran said. “He had many adventures. Although quick-witted, he was also arrogant until the Buddha taught him a lesson.”

She smiled at the blue monkeys on the fresco. “I have always admired the Monkey King. He was impulsive, which I am not; and he acted alone, which is what I must often do. He had the courage and belief to face a divine being so much more powerful than him...”

“And you have done that?” Kon joked.

Xinran was silent, her expression suddenly closed tight.

Puzzled by her reaction, he tried to change the subject. Pointing to a different fresco, he said, “Take a look at the dolphins. Don’t you find them cute, too?”

“I don’t like fish,” she said diffidently, turning away.

Kon chuckled. “I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Why?”

He smiled at her. “For when I take you out for dinner tonight.”

She half-shook her head in irritation, but at the same time she looked pleased by his persistence. “I already told you...”

“I know. But—” Kon’s palms were damp. He’d not felt so nervous about asking a woman out since he’d been fourteen, but then Xinran had already turned him down twice. A woman had never turned him down before today. Take a risk, he reminded himself; third time lucky...

She tilted her head to one side, looking up at him. “But?”

Kon grinned. “But you should be like your Monkey King. Act impulsively for once. What harm will it do?”

She opened her mouth to protest but made no sound.

“See? You cannot say no. The monkeys agree.” Kon waved a hand at the fresco as if they were his partners in crime. “Dinner tonight. And I will pay. After all,” he added, “I have twenty euro.”

\* \* \* \*

Xinran was glad she’d agreed to the invitation to dinner. At first, she’d been hesitant—not just because it was out of character for her to accept a date, but also because she found herself genuinely attracted to Kon. Experience had taught her that liking something, or loving it, would often mean disappointment and pain. It was best to avoid complications, especially in her line of work.

They had arranged to meet at the restaurant. Xinran arrived early: an automatic reaction, and one that she found herself wondering at as she sat in a well-lit corner and sipped a glass of chilled retsina. As

soon as she'd walked in, she'd started to evaluate the best ways of escape. She never went anywhere without knowing exactly how she could get out.

She wasn't sure what the date meant for her. Xinran told herself it was a pleasant means to pass the time—often she was nervous the night before an operation—but Kon seemed so genuine that she didn't like to think of him as a diversion. Besides, she reminded herself, this little flirtation could go nowhere. Her flight was booked, and she had a job to do. She was sure that Kon would be deeply hurt if he knew that she'd been using him this afternoon.

While she waited, she looked through her bag and removed a printout of a photograph. It was of the jade monkey that was being exhibited at the Lemos Foundation tomorrow night. Made of highly prized white jade, the monkey stood only five inches tall. It sat up on its haunches, its tail curled to touch the back of its head. In its forepaws it clutched a fruit, and its head was lifted as it glanced to one side as if it had been interrupted at its feast.

It was a charming, exquisitely detailed piece of carving. Xinran sighed as she looked at it. If she had the money, she'd ask for a copy of the little monkey, but she knew her employers would frown upon such a request.

With the photograph had been the usual terse description from her employers. She'd worked with the organization for so long that there was no need for them to repeat their standard instructions. If she were caught then she would have to face the penalty stipulated for theft in the country of her arrest. Her employers would not help her directly: they would offer assistance only through ambassadorial channels, as if she was a normal citizen of the People's Republic of China.

Xinran folded the picture back into her bag and reached for her glass of wine. She'd been impressed by Kon's passion for the repatriation of the Parthenon Marbles. Many people seemed to be vocal about it, even in London where the sculptures were housed, but so far the British government had withheld its permission for the return of the stones. They said it would set a precedent that would mean the majority of the world's greatest museums being denuded of their exhibits, as countries demanded back their antiquities.

Idly, Xinran wondered how, if the Greeks had been in the position of her employers, she'd have undergone the theft of the Parthenon Marbles. It was an intriguing thought, but a practical



impossibility. The artifacts she retrieved were not large-scale items such as the Parthenon Marbles; they were much smaller, easily portable and immensely valuable.

They tended to be found in the hands of private collectors or in bequests to provincial museums. Her employers were quite happy to go through the correct governmental channels to repatriate larger works of art that had been removed from China over the centuries, but for the smaller items, they sent out Xinran or one of her colleagues.

The jade monkey belonged to a private collector. It was a rarity not only because of the precious white jade, but also because it was unusual for the monkey to be depicted during the Tang Dynasty. She liked to think it had some connection with the legend of the Monkey King accompanying the Buddhist monk Xuanzang on his Journey to the West, but that was just her fanciful imaginings. Two years ago, Xinran had recovered a white jade winged horse from a private collection in Holland. It too had dated from the Tang Dynasty, and she was certain that the master who'd carved the horse had also fashioned the monkey.

Not that making such connections had anything to do with her job. She was hired to go in, 'collect' the pieces and return them to her employers, who would then arrange for the objects to filter back into the public domain via a complicated system of loans from tiny provincial museums or philanthropists, before they finally took their place in one of the major collections at Xi'an, Shanghai or Beijing.

Sometimes it could take years for a 'collected' artifact to make its way back into the system. Because China had been closed to the West for so long, and computer records were incomplete and written records were unreliable, it was easy for the authorities to recover stolen antiquities from the West and pass them off as new finds.

Xinran knew that many European private collectors did not formally list their acquisitions, and so when an artifact was stolen, it was often written off without the owner reporting the theft. Objects stolen from a museum or a serious collector tended to be recorded on the Interpol database, and officers would be on the lookout for any such items appearing for sale. But with pieces stolen to order, it became almost impossible to trace anything—especially if the artifacts were stolen not for an individual, but on behalf of an entire country.

There was a burst of laughter from the door as a group of locals entered the tavern. Situated towards the edge of Plaka, close to the

foot of the Akropolis, it was not as lively or popular as some of the other places she'd passed today, but it had a warm and cosy atmosphere. The patrons seemed mostly to be local families and foreign couples who didn't care that the décor was a touch shabby and that the furniture didn't quite match. They knew, as did Xinran, that quality was often hidden on the inside, not on superficial display.

She finished her drink and pushed the glass aside. The waiter was busy with the new arrivals, and so she picked at the small dish of stuffed olives and cubes of salty cheese that had been served with the *retsina*. From the window, she could see the street busy with people strolling through the warm evening. As she looked, she spotted a tall, broad-shouldered man making his way towards the tavern, and her breath caught in her throat.

It was Kon. If she thought he'd looked good this morning when she'd first set eyes on him, it was nothing to the way he looked now. He'd dressed up for their date and was wearing a dark casual suit with an open-necked white shirt that contrasted with his olive skin and black hair. He smiled broadly at her as he entered the tavern, sketching a wave that revealed the flash of his gold watch. His teeth were white, one of the canines slightly crooked. That intrigued Xinran. Her Shanghai friends all had perfectly capped teeth, and so she found Kon's naturalness appealing.

She'd never been attracted to Westerners before. One of her old school-friends had married an Englishman, which was considered quite a coup in her hometown, but Xinran had never understood the fascination. Now, as this sinfully sexy man sat down opposite her, she began to recognize the lure of being with someone so different—not just in looks, but also in culture and upbringing. It was a risk for her to date any man, but she sensed that Kon was worth taking such a risk.

Now, as he looked at her, she wished she'd packed more clothes for this trip. She'd only brought tourist-casual outfits and was wearing the most glamorous piece in her wardrobe—a scarlet button-through dress of a soft, silken material that had a flared skirt that ended just above her knees. It was comfortable rather than sexy, but Kon stared at the way it draped over her body as if it were a high couture gown.

He did not comment on the fact that she was early. Instead, he nodded to her empty glass and asked, "You've already had a drink?"

"The waiter said I should try the *retsina*."

"Did you like it?"

She wrinkled her nose. "It's a bit strong for my taste."

"Then let's get something else. The wine list is pretty good here." He pulled the leather-bound menu from its slot against the wall and turned to the back pages. "You prefer red or white?"

Xinran shrugged. "Red."

They studied the rest of the menu together. She was pleased that he didn't force his suggestions on her, but instead asked questions about her culinary likes and dislikes before he pointed out which dishes might suit her. They tasted the wine and settled back to enjoy a drink while they waited for the food to arrive.

"When I went home to change, I had a look on-line," Kon said. "I remembered what you said about the Chinese zodiac. I wanted to know what my sign was, so I found a site about it. You know, I'm a Dragon. I guess that's a good thing, right?"

She gave him a cautious look. "It's considered one of the most favourable signs because it was linked with the emperors."

"Yes," said Kon with a cheeky grin, "but more importantly, the Dragon is compatible with the Monkey."

Xinran gazed at him. His smile was so endearing that she burst out laughing. "I have to tell you, Mr. Antoniou, you score top marks for persistence."

"Hey. Don't knock it, Miss Lin. It got me a dinner date tonight."

"True. But that means you have to tell me about this so-called 'curse' you mentioned this afternoon," she teased.

He put down his wineglass. "It is a curse, a real curse," he said, his happy expression suddenly somber, and she realized that he truly believed it.

"It began two years ago, with the Olympics." He speared an olive with a cocktail stick but didn't eat it. "You know that many of the venues for the games were rushing to complete to schedule. With the whole world watching, none of us wanted to fail. It would be a terrible shame if the nation that invented the Olympics had fallen so low as to be unable to host them properly on their return. Not that we cut corners," he added. "We just worked very hard, maybe too hard."

He spoke quietly, so as not to be overheard. She sat forward across the table, bringing their heads together in an intimate pose. Her gaze fixed on his face as he talked, and the cadence of his words, combined with the soft lighting and the sound of conversation from elsewhere, created a hypnotic effect. It was as if they were the only ones there, and Xinran had to force herself to pay attention to his

words when she realized she was looking at the shape of his mouth and wondering what it would be like to kiss him.

“It wasn’t just the venues that were being constructed,” Kon continued. “It was a great time for us: a time of expansion. We built new offices, shops, bars, schools—everything. We bought up all the land around the city and out across the plain. And one of those parcels of land belonged to my family. It had been ours for generations, for so long that we owned it before there were even written records. It was my birthright, but it was little more than a dusty section of concrete that my grandfather had tried to make into a supermarket fifty years ago.”

“So you sold it?” Xinran guessed.

He moved the olive around the dish. “I developed it. Turned it into four packages of real estate: several apartments designed for urban couples, a crèche and playgroup, a chemist, and a café-bar. But some of the workers were doubling up, contracted to two jobs at a time. With the Olympics, everything was crazy. I could not be everywhere overseeing everything. Of course, the Olympic venues took up most of my attention—I did not even think of my own land...”

Xinran took pity on the olive and stole it from the stick, popping it into her mouth and enjoying the burst of sharp bittersweet flavour. “What happened?”

Kon gave her a small smile. “It was only later that I found out that the workers, when they were preparing the foundations, had discovered an ancient shrine. Properly, they should have informed the authorities, and work would have been suspended while archaeologists examined the find. But with time pressing, the workers decided that, since my grandfather had built a supermarket on it a few decades ago then the shrine could not be of any importance. So they built over and around it.”

He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “The very day after I was told of this, a woman, very beautiful, approached me as I was on my way to work. She was tall and blonde, and... really, I cannot describe her, because she defies description. She told me she was Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, and that I had angered her for not treating her sacred shrine with respect. She told me I would not find love, no matter how hard I searched for it, until...”

He broke off, looking embarrassed. “But you will probably not believe me. Who would think they could see a pagan goddess in the middle of a modern office building! It sounds like madness.”

Xinran selected another olive, considering her response. It did sound a little crazy, but she had seen the effect of curses and magical beliefs in her hometown. One of her first assignments had been to steal a box that supposedly contained a sacred scroll, which had a curse laid upon it. No one else had dared to take it, but Xinran believed that she was immune. The power of the living was far greater than that of an ancient curse. The box and its scroll had been easy for her to steal, and she had never encountered any problems since—apart from her loneliness. But she told herself that that was her own choice, and not the result of the curse.

“The thing with curses,” she began carefully, “is that if we believe in their power, we give it that power.”

“Normally I would agree,” he said, “but this is different. I saw Aphrodite. She appeared to me. I would not have believed it had I not seen her with my own eyes—a beautiful golden goddess, speaking to me one moment and then gone the next. I was standing in the lobby of my office building, and the receptionist swore that I had stood still and held a conversation with something invisible, and that when I walked away, I was as pale as a ghost.”

“But what do you have to do to break the curse?”

“I have to take a risk on a woman,” Kon said, and then he smiled too brightly. “So now you know why I’ve been dating so many women, from waitresses to billionaires’ daughters. I’m trying to take a risk, going out with someone new or exciting in the hope that she’s The One.”

Xinran gave him a narrow glance. She was certain there was more to it than that. The way he’d finished his story rang false. Surely there was something he was not telling her about the curse. She thought about it, wondering what else it could involve, and then she gave a mental shrug as their food arrived.

As soon as the waiter left, she returned to their conversation. “What is all this about property development? You told me you were a tour guide.”

Kon set down his knife and fork, his expression comically guilty. “I lied.”

Xinran nodded. She'd suspected so. The watch on his wrist was expensive, and obviously not a fake. A tour guide would not be able to afford such a thing. "Why did you lie?"

"Because I asked Fate to bring me the woman who would break the curse. And Fate pointed me to you."

She stared at him and then started to get up from her seat.

Kon leaned across and laid his hand over her own. His touch was warm and gentle. "Please, Xinran," he said, "you can be angry with me, but at least let us enjoy our meal together. My cousin will be upset if you leave now. He will think his cooking is at fault."

She sat down again, looking around in confusion. "Your cousin owns this place?"

"Yes. A first cousin this time, not a second cousin."

She cut a piece of her meat and ate without really tasting it. "It's good," she said politely.

"Now you think I'm really crazy," he said, looking squashed.

"No," she said. "I just wished you'd been honest from the start."

As soon as she said it, Xinran felt a twinge of guilt. As if she could take the moral high ground! She'd lied to him, too. One lie each: she decided that one cancelled out the other. Her conscience was clear... but she still felt bad.

Kon gave her a lopsided smile. "Well, be honest now," he said; "if I had simply asked you out this morning, you would have said no."

She pretended to think about it. "I might have said yes. You're a handsome man, after all. Your invitation would have appealed to my vanity."

He stared at her in bemusement. "What vanity?"

Xinran laughed. "Okay. I would have said no."

"Even though you thought I was handsome?" Now he was preening a little, making her laugh even more.

"Because I don't like getting involved."

He nodded in understanding. "True, you're not here for long."

"It's not that." She felt her smile fade. "It's because every time I let myself love something, it gets taken away from me."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Xinran felt mortified. She hadn't meant to say 'love'. She hoped he wouldn't take it the wrong way.

Fortunately, it seemed that Kon was a gentleman, for he made no reference to that word. Instead he asked, "What do you mean?"

She hesitated before she replied, but he looked so interested and kind that she found herself telling him the truth.

“It’s about my father,” she said, picking at the food on her plate. “No matter how much I loved him, it wasn’t enough. Not through any fault of his own but because of circumstance... because of what he had suffered.”

She frowned at the memory. “My father didn’t smile very often. When I was a child, I made it my goal to make him smile at least once a week. Sometimes he would go for days without even the hint of a smile. My mother used to tell me not to expect too much, but I would not listen to her. I thought I could make him happy.”

Kon leaned forwards. “What happened to him, to make him so sad?”

“What happened to everybody in those times,” she said, shrugging. “The Cultural Revolution. My father was an academic, an intellectual. He was one of China’s foremost art historians, an expert on the works of the Tang Dynasty. He was a young man, but he loved his books. When the Cultural Revolution was declared, he spoke out against it. He tried to save artifacts and temples from destruction. He said we were murdering our heritage. Such talk was against the principles of the Party, and so he was punished.”

She paused, almost as if she could remember the scenes for herself: her father’s anguished silences filled by her mother’s gentle chatter as she recounted a history that Xinran had never known.

“They sent him to the north-west provinces, where the air is always dusty, and it is difficult to make things grow,” she said. “They sent him there in the company of thousands of others – actors, doctors, lawyers, merchants. Anybody who did not immediately agree with the wishes of the Party. Anybody who was different or clever, who had a voice. And then they tried to crush them into the dust.”

Xinran heard her voice wobble. She took a gulp of wine to steady herself. She’d never spoken about her father before—not like this, to a stranger.

“They made him work in the fields. It’s backbreaking work, Kon. Even a healthy young man would find himself crippled after a few days. My father did his best, but he was... not like you. Not strong and muscular. He was raised to an indoor life, the son of a wealthy family. That made him even more of a target. They took his property for the state. They beat him when he failed to repeat their slogans of

indoctrination. He saw his friends suffer and die. But he was stubborn. He lived on.”

Kon was silent, looking at her with deep empathy.

She tried to give a carefree laugh. “I know this is not an unusual story. Everybody suffered, some more than others. But this was my father. I only ever knew him as a wraith. Mother would tell me stories of the man she fell in love with, and it was as if she spoke of a different person. I never knew how she could bear to stay with him when he was so changed. But she loved him no matter what.

“When I was younger, I often marveled that he found the energy to sleep with my mother to make me. Later I realized he did it to continue our family, so his child could... not seek vengeance, because that would be impossible, but to continue our line was enough. It showed that they hadn’t won. They might have broken him, but somewhere in his spirit, there was still a spark of resistance, of hope... His child was that hope for the future. And that was me—a girl, when he wanted a son.”

Xinran heard the bitterness creep into her voice. “He never said as much, but I know he was disappointed. That’s why he wouldn’t smile at me, no matter how hard I tried. He wanted a son, not a daughter. I couldn’t blame him. And so I tried to be like a son for his sake. I studied hard. I gained places at the best schools. I went to university and took my degree in art history, his field of research. I thought that, at least, would make him happy.”

She took a deep breath and then exhaled, relaxing some of the tension from her body. “He died two days before my graduation. I came top of the year. I had a job offer from the National Museum in Shanghai. He never knew. My mother said he was smiling when he died, but I was not there to see it.”

A silence fell, and then Kon said, “You loved your father.”

“Of course I did.” Her voice was fierce. “I still do.”

“So, because you loved him so much, you keep away from relationships, in case you cannot make your man smile the way you could not make your father smile,” he said softly. “Is that it?”

Xinran felt tears welling in her eyes. She ducked her head and blinked them away before he could see. “Something like that,” she admitted.

“Expectation is a terrible thing,” he said, reaching for her hands and clasping them warmly. “You shouldn’t burden yourself like this. Let someone help you...”



She tried to withdraw her hands. "There is no honour in asking for help," she said, but the fire with which she would usually say those words was missing. "And honour is everything. My work is dedicated to Papa, in the hope of restoring some of the honour to our family."

He looked puzzled. "Your computer work? What is it that you do, exactly?"

Xinran nearly bit her tongue at her foolishness. The wine was relaxing her inhibitions a little too much. She would have to be careful of what she said.

"It's not important," she said, dismissing it with a quick smile. "But my father would be proud of me, I hope."

"I'm sure he is," Kon said. "He has a beautiful, spirited daughter. Any father would take pride in you."

She felt a flush of warmth steal through her at his compliments. She knew his words were sincere. Lifting the wineglass to her lips for the final drop, she asked, "And your father? You never did show me his carpet shop today."

"It's not there any more," he said, and his tone was so abrupt that she glanced up. He looked embarrassed and shook his head. "As you said, it's not important."

"Clearly it is, or you would not look so prickly now."

He tried to laugh. "The Greeks invented psychology, and you try to best me at it? That is not fair."

"According to you, the Greeks invented everything," she said dryly, "but that does not make you better or wiser than the rest of us. Besides, we Chinese invented gunpowder long before the West. One cannon beat ten psychologists."

Now his laugh was genuine. "Only if you're looking for a quick, definitive and permanent answer!"

"Isn't that the best kind?"

"Not always. Sometimes it's best to go slowly and enjoy the process."

As he signaled to the waiter, Xinran wondered if they were even talking about psychology any more.

\* \* \* \*

The streets were quieter as they walked out into the night. Full of wine and good food, Xinran felt at ease with Kon. She slipped her arm through his, enjoying the contact. For a while they wandered

through Plaka, going where the whim took them, from the foot of the floodlit Akropolis to the modern buildings near Mitropoli.

They stopped in front of a bar that played rock music. Xinran glanced up at him, puzzled. It wasn't her kind of place, but if he wanted to go in for a drink then she was willing. But he made no move to enter the bar.

Before she could ask, the answer came to her. "This was your father's carpet shop, wasn't it?"

He nodded.

"What happened? He sold it?"

Kon's expression was shadowy in the darkness. "No. I sold it. It was my first property deal, and it was against my father's wishes."

He shook his head, his voice low and angry. "I was young, full of arrogance. My father wanted me to follow him into the business. But I didn't want to be a shopkeeper. I wanted more. Like you, I'd studied hard, but it was not to win his respect. It was to become better than him, to rise out of this place and become someone. My father said I had ideas above my station in life, and maybe he was right—but I had the determination to try."

He started walking again, and she caught up, linking her arm through his and pressing closer, offering silent comfort.

"My father was afraid of taking risks. He remembered what had happened when his own father had tried to build the supermarket. It had failed, and the family lost a lot of money. It was a blow to our pride, too. The carpet shop was the limit of his ambition, and he thought it should be the same for me. I tried to tell him that the world was changing, that I could take his shop and turn it into something successful, something that would ensure custom. But he was afraid. He said I took too many risks and that I would fail, like Grandfather. Better to be safe, he said."

"You fought with him," Xinran guessed.

"Yes. Bitterly, like two dogs over a bone. I needed his shop to get started. When he had a stroke, I had power of attorney. He could not work in the shop any more, so I developed it myself, transformed it into that bar. It took months of hard work, but it paid off. I sold it for a good profit that allowed me to hire a private nurse for my father. I thought he would be happy, but he was furious. He could not admit that he'd made a mistake in judging me."

Kon sighed. "And the more money I made, the angrier he got. I know it was because I was willing to take the risk that he could not. I

believed in myself, when he did not. He resented that. It poisoned our relationship right to the end.”

“Seems as though both of us tried too hard for our fathers’ affections.”

“Family and honour is important in both our cultures,” he agreed. “But perhaps we should think more of ourselves and the future, rather than always looking to the past.”

Xinran nodded slowly, glad that the night hid her face. She thought of the job she had to do tomorrow night and felt the pricking of guilt.

“That is why I found it so ironic that to break the curse, I need to take a risk,” Kon continued when she was silent. “I have spent all my life taking risks, and now...”

“Now someone must take a risk on you?”

He stopped and looked down at her. “Yes.”

Xinran did not hesitate. After all, this afternoon he’d told her to be more like the Monkey King, impulsive and exuberant. She wanted him: he was different, he understood her despite the cultural barriers. Even if it was only this moment, it would be enough, a memory she could take with her when her business in Athens was over.

“I dare,” she said, turning her face to his. “My hotel is nearby. Let’s take the risk together.”

\* \* \* \*

Her room had a view of the Akropolis. The floodlighting picked out the shape of the Parthenon and dropped into relief the crags of the outcrop. Xinran stood and admired the view. This morning seemed like a long time ago; it felt as if she’d known Kon forever, rather than the length of the day. So much could happen in so short a space of time. She knew that from her work, but she had never expected it to happen in her private life, too.

She could hear him moving behind her; could feel his warmth as he came to stand with her at the window. Together they looked up at the ancient temple, pure and wondrous against the night.

“I don’t know why I’m doing this,” she said. “I don’t know you.”

“You do.”

Something in his voice made her turn around. Then he was altogether too close for her presence of mind, his hands moving down her arms. His eyes betrayed him. Her senses swam: she breathed in the musk of his scent as he came closer.

Time stopped. No longer aware of the surroundings of the room, of the chill of the night breeze through the open window, Xinran's existence shrank down to a kiss so tender, so desperate, that she never wanted to leave it. She sank into it, feeling the whisper of eyelashes brushing over her skin, the hard enamel of imperfect teeth and the yielding tongue, the contours of the mouth that now smiled, exultant, at the kiss.

Kon broke it, shaking his dark fringe from his glittering, gleaming eyes.

She looked at him, breathless, thinking that he had finished with her, and then he gently rubbed his nose against hers in a gesture she found strangely reassuring despite the tumult he'd awakened within her.

"Xinran," he murmured. "You are The One."

By now, she had lost all semblance of rational thought. "Yes."

Kon slid his hands down to her shoulders and leaned towards her. She tilted her head for another kiss, smiling as he settled his lips at the very corner of her mouth to press tiny butterfly kisses over her skin.

She moved her head, her mouth, until the kiss became more than tentative. She felt dazed by Kon's closeness: his scent, the feel of his skin beneath her lips. The kiss deepened, Xinran responding, meeting his tongue with her own before drawing back, stroking and teasing until Kon groaned.

A ripple of lust shot through her at the sound. She moved her hands to his waist and then lower, slowly caressing the taut curves of his buttocks through the fabric of his trousers.

"Mmm," Kon murmured, his eyes drowsy with desire. He gave her a tender smile. "More?"

Xinran nodded, not trusting herself to speak. He took her hand and led her over to the bed. They sank down onto the duvet, realigning their bodies almost automatically so that he rested over her comfortably, naturally.

"I've wanted to do this all day," Kon admitted, one hand sliding up over her arm to cup her breast, fingers teasing the nipple through the scarlet material.

"Oh..." she moaned, arching up slightly, her limbs heavy with languor and her movements slow.

His fingers went to the first of the buttons of the dress and slipped it free. He smoothed back the sides of the silk to reveal her

throat. She could feel her pulse beating rapidly, her skin warm and flushed with arousal.

Kon undid more buttons, breathing in the sweet, intoxicating perfume that rose from the warmth of her breasts. He murmured his approval of her black bra, patterned with lace roses. He trailed his mouth over the lace, his tongue and fingers seeking the peaked nipples.

Xinran gasped, her head going back and her hair spilling from its topknot as the sharp, delicious tug of Kon's teeth glanced through her. Her instinctive response was to push upwards, and he moved so that his erection pressed between her thighs.

The buttons were all undone, the dress pushed back in a crush of silk. He paused, half-rolling from Xinran to look down at her, stroking her skin.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered.

His hands were on her breasts again; easing down the lacy cups of the bra so he could touch her, suckle at her without encumbrance. She squirmed, perspiration trickling down her spine and sticking the dress to her skin.

"Kon," she moaned, her voice taking on a desperate edge, and she shuddered helplessly as he ran a hand the length of her body to her thigh, softly stroking, before it moved towards her sex.

He kissed her once more and smiled into her eyes as he slid from the bed to kneel on the floor, his hands now on her hips to move her gently into a new position. He let his mouth travel over Xinran's belly, tracing a delicate whorl around her navel, and then he moved lower, his tongue exploring the lace of her panties. He drew back a little and pulled the tiny scrap of fabric down over her legs, dropping it to the floor before shifting closer.

Kon's hair stroked the insides of her legs. Xinran trembled as he brushed his nose against the curls at the juncture of her thighs. He pressed his palms to her thighs; his fingers stroking her flesh as he gently eased her legs further apart.

She groaned in pleasure as he looked up at her, a wicked glint in his eyes, and then he lowered his head, still smiling, and put his mouth on her.

His tongue curled about her clitoris, flicking at it with gentle, deliberate caresses. Xinran arched her back, gasping, her head spinning at the sheer wanton, wicked thrill that possessed her.

“Hush, *agape mou*,” Kon murmured, and she sighed with pleasure at the order. Now his hands moved again, dancing over her skin to seek her nipples, his fingers closing about them to tease and torment as he lapped at her sex.

She responded, wild with excitement, pushing her hips up to meet the dart and thrust of his tongue, writhing against his mouth and feeling her sex grow wetter and more slippery. Kon dipped his head lower, licking and sucking, then drove his tongue deep inside her for a moment.

Her thighs closed about his head almost instinctively, and she heaved up from the mattress, crying out as the distant whisper of orgasm ran through her.

Kon worked at her breasts, rolling her nipples between his fingers until she whimpered at the sharp aching pleasure; then he closed his lips over her clitoris again and flicked his tongue faster and faster.

Xinran arched up towards him and hung suspended, time halted, breath caught, her body quivering. Then she began to shudder, mewling in breathless, gasping ecstasy. He caught her thighs and held her still, his tongue tensed against her as she jerked her hips wildly, orgasm rushing over her.

He rose from the carpet and pushed her back onto the bed. She sprawled across it, her pulse thundering with excitement as he stripped, the size and strength of his erection proof of his arousal.

“Open your legs,” he said, looking down on her. “Wider. I want to see you.”

She did as she was told, spreading herself open for him and groaning as he moved towards her, lifting her thighs and hooking them over his hips. He teased her a minute longer, then thrust hard inside her, all the way, in one long stroke.

Kon closed his eyes for a second, holding himself still as if he savoured their moment of union. Xinran squirmed beneath him, locking her ankles at the small of his back and lifting her hips to meet him, urging him to penetrate her, possess her.

“Oh,” she moaned, pleasure spiraling through her as he moved slightly. “Kon, do it, do it now—”

“Yes,” he whispered, suddenly withdrawing his entire length from her to plunge back in, his weight driving her deep into the mattress with the violence of their coupling. Xinran screamed in pleasure, giving herself up completely as he thrust into her again and again, each time harder than the last until she thought she’d die of

bliss. He held her down, his hands grasping her hips to keep her spread open to his thrusts.

Xinran moaned and cried aloud as she felt a second climax rushing up on her. She wrapped her arms around Kon and kissed him as she came, gasping against his mouth. She could taste herself on his tongue as they kissed, a hard, direct embrace that demanded everything and spared nothing.

And then he gasped, pulled his mouth free of their kiss to fling back his head, his body tensed and shuddering with the sudden brutal force of his climax.

She shut her eyes on the sensation, the sheer pleasure of feeling his cock buried deep inside her, throbbing as he came, and then she held him tight as he lay over her, trembling and panting for breath.

Kon raised himself up on his elbows, sighed and then kissed her again, this time slowly and lovingly. “Wow,” he said. “I never...”

She giggled, and then sobered quickly. “Me neither.”

They lay curled together, heartbeats slowing, their worlds coming back into alignment. He nuzzled into her hair and asked, “Can I stay?”

Xinran didn’t know how to answer. Of course she wanted him to stay, but it wasn’t that simple. In the end, it seemed that he took her silence for an answer. He sighed again, sad this time, and murmured, “I understand. I just hoped... But these things are never easy.”

She lay still, only realizing then that the floodlights on the Akropolis had been switched off. The night sky was deep blue, wrapping their intimacy in cool darkness. When he moved from her side, shuffling for his clothes on the floor, she wanted to tell him to get back into bed with her and stay... but she couldn’t do it. She was afraid. She couldn’t take the risk.

She curled the duvet around her body, scared of speaking in case she gave herself away. Her eyes closed; she didn’t want to see him leave. Instead she listened to the sound of him dressing, and then she felt the mattress dip as he came close to her again. His hand ran over her arm, raising goosebumps more surely than the chill of the night breeze.

“Xinran,” he said awkwardly, “there’s something else. Don’t think I’m trying to bribe you, or reward you, or to make you think better of me – I’m not like that. I know I’ve behaved badly towards you. Not telling you the truth about who I am, but I really do... like you.”

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. He'd stumbled over the word 'like'. She wondered if he'd meant to say something else but decided it was impossible. She couldn't dare to hope for more.

"It's about tomorrow night," he continued. "The exhibition at the Lemos Foundation. I have tickets. Would you go with me?"

\* \* \* \*

The Lemos Foundation museum was dark and quiet, so different to the glittering event that had been held there only a few hours before. Then it had been lit with bright spotlights that reflected from the display cases, making it seem as if each artifact was a precious jewel set against a velvety black background.

A few hours ago, Xinran had attended the function in a brand-new dress, purchased last minute from one of the boutiques in the city. Kon had been beside her, one arm resting around her waist in a loving rather than possessive manner.

She'd been aware of the curious looks her presence drew as they'd entered the little museum. The other patrons had obviously been expecting Kon to arrive with someone else, and so she knew it wouldn't be long before the more gossip-hungry of the society set would come over to question them both.

But Kon had been a gentleman, turning any pointed queries around, gently reminding them that they were there for the art—and for charity. The first night was to collect donations from the guests to support a number of charities that the Lemos Foundation was linked to, and a significant portion of the revenue from the entrance fees to the public would also benefit the charities.

Xinran had felt uneasy about that. She dropped some euro notes into the donation bucket, which was shaped like an ancient urn, in an effort to assuage her guilt. It was easy to steal from wealthy people who had no real understanding of the objects they owned, but it was something else to steal from a charitable organization.

Now, dressed not in her glamorous dress but in smart, sensible clothes that would draw little attention on the streets, she picked the old lock and entered through the front door, boldly and without hesitation.

She knew the security guard didn't work after hours. He'd been seated at the front desk earlier in the evening, smiling at the guests and helping himself to the canapés. Now the museum was empty, protected by its own antiquity and a simple security system. Xinran had been surprised at just how easy this would be. Considering the



value of the items on display, she'd expected a more high-tech system, but the longer she'd spent circulating and chatting with the other guests, she came to realize that most of the donors had no care for the value of the objects they owned. It seemed to be about the prestige of possession alone.

The front desk contained the small bank that controlled the CCTV cameras, the blue lights of the tiny screens flickering in the darkness. She glanced at the screens that covered the exhibition hall and removed the cassettes, ripping out the recording tape before slipping them back into the machines.

She paused, looking over the panels for the lighting in the exhibition room. The commands were in German, annotated by scraps of paper written with Greek taped to the panel. Using her knowledge of the first language and ignoring the second, she switched on the low level lighting that illuminated only the floor space around the display cabinets.

A heavy glass door sealed off the rest of the collection. She'd tapped it gently with her fingernails as she and Kon had walked through to the exhibition. Thick enough to be bullet proof, she knew she'd waste valuable time trying to break through it. Instead, the weakness was in the keypad system. She was grateful that the Europeans still used such outdated models: it made her job so much easier.

A four-digit number accessed the keypad. Xinran blew a layer of fine talcum powder over the surface of the keypad and checked which numbers were most often used. It still gave a frighteningly long list of variables, but she'd worked against worse odds. It was all about methodology, patience, and a bit of luck.

Within ten minutes, she'd hit the right combination, and the door clicked open. She was in.

Leaving the door wedged ajar, Xinran slipped into the main exhibition hall, automatically checking the CCTV cameras. Their lights still blinked, but she knew they weren't recording. Quickly, she crossed the room, making her way unerringly to the cabinet where the white jade monkey sat beside an Aztec mask. On the shelf beneath was an exquisite fifteenth century Flemish triptych. If she wanted, she could take them all and net a small fortune for herself on the side—but the thought never even crossed her mind. She was a professional, here to do a job for her country, to take back what rightfully belonged to her people.

As she sorted through her keys for one small enough to fit the display case, Xinran bit down on the flash of guilt she'd been trying to ignore all evening. Earlier, as she and Kon had walked around the exhibition admiring each piece, he'd told her that several of the artifacts belonged to him.

"A habit I picked up from my grandfather," he'd said with a smile, "except he would collect ancient pottery from wherever he went in Greece. It's illegal now, of course, to do that. The pieces he found weren't anything good, not like those you saw yesterday in the museum, but he was pleased with them nevertheless. He said it was our link to the past: it showed how humble we had been, and how we should still be humble. After all, don't we still eat from plates made of simple clay?"

Xinran had smiled, and allowed herself to drift away when some of his acquaintances approached to speak with him. She had moved around the exhibition, examining the room layout as much as she feigned an interest in the artifacts. She looked into the glossy brochure she'd been given and read about any number of pieces. And then she found herself looking at the jade monkey.

She checked the catalogue listing in the brochure. She skimmed over the short description, her gaze fastening instead on the name of the owner: Konstantinos Antoniou.

"It's mine," he had said from behind her, and she'd felt a shiver go through her at how close he was: the feel of his breath on the back of her neck, the warmth of his hand on her waist.

"You didn't mention it yesterday," she said.

"At that point, I was still pretending to be a tour guide. How could I own a priceless jade statue?"

She'd turned to face him, masking her interest with a smile. "How did you come to own it? The monkey is so cute."

He'd shrugged. "I happened to be in London one time and went into an antiques place. I saw this monkey just sitting on a shelf. The dealer said he'd come from a house auction. Probably it was in the collection of an ex-diplomat. There was no provenance, but I had it checked by a few independent experts and, well, I like him. He's a cheeky monkey, don't you think? See the way he's holding that fruit."

Xinran had laughed. "That's a dragon-fruit."

"It is?" Kon had looked comically amazed. "So your Monkey holds my Dragon's fruit in his paws..."

"It could be a she," Xinran had said, giving him a wicked glance.

Kon had stared at her, his gaze darkening with desire, until she'd turned away. She didn't want to get any more involved. It was bad enough that she'd spent so much time with him already.

Now she hesitated as the key turned in the lock. She removed the glass panel, setting it carefully on the floor, and then she looked at the shaped white jade.

The monkey sat there, its tiny hollowed eyes looking back at her.

She didn't want to do it. She didn't want to steal from Kon.

Xinran told herself she was being ridiculous. She'd got close to marks before in order to steal from them, so why was Kon any different? He was just a man, no matter how handsome and intriguing and crazy he was with his wild belief about the curse of Aphrodite. He was just a man, like any other.

She reached out and took the jade monkey.

\* \* \* \*

Xinran sat in the departure lounge and stared at the long sweep of the aeroplane's wing. When she glanced at the clock, she saw there were still almost forty minutes before take-off. Surely they would begin boarding soon, and then she could forget the events of the past few days.

It was eleven hours back to Shanghai. Time enough to reflect on what she'd done, what she hadn't done... and to concoct a story for her employers as to why she'd left Athens without the jade monkey.

It had been a surprisingly simple decision to return it to Kon. As soon as she'd got back to her hotel room, she'd sat on the bed and looked out of the window at the dark shape of the Akropolis silhouetted against the starry sky. Two days ago, she'd said it was a place of sacrifice, of men and women dying for their city or their country. But they'd done it through choice; unlike her father, who'd been forced to his sacrifice by an oppressive government.

And it had been her choice to sacrifice everything in order to gain her father's happiness and to restore his honour—and all it had brought her was heartache and loneliness, and a job that she couldn't ever be proud of, no matter how much she excelled at it.

It wasn't enough any more. Xinran knew she had to stop being a sacrifice for someone else and for her pride. She had to change: she needed to take a risk—not on Kon, but on herself.

She knew then that she'd go back to China without the jade monkey. The risks of stealing had been outweighed by the chance of a new life. Her employers would be unhappy with her, but she hoped

they'd understand. There was always the risk that they wouldn't, but Xinran knew she could handle it. Still, what she'd decided to do roused butterflies in her stomach.

She'd supposed that all new things, strange things, were at first frightening. And with that came a memory, unbidden: of how it had felt lying in Kon's arms, with the taste of his kisses still on her lips and the reality of his body, hot and hard against her own. How good it had felt, how sweetly right, and yet how afraid of it she'd been...

She'd gone down to reception and asked for a padded envelope. Sitting in the lobby she wrote a letter, wrapped the jade monkey in newspaper, and put both into the envelope. Then she'd handed it to the receptionist and asked that it be courier-delivered to the office of Konstantinos Antoniou as soon as possible.

She'd gone back to her room and slept for a few hours, waking with the true dawn. Then she'd showered, packed the last of her things and checked out of the hotel. The taxi-ride to the airport took her past the Akropolis one final time. She glanced up at the Parthenon and then looked away.

Now Xinran woke from her daydream when the tannoy—public address system—grated overhead. The passengers around her shuffled as they sat up in anticipation of their flight being called, but it was only for the plane to Frankfurt. There was a relaxed slump back into their seats, and newspapers and conversations were picked up again.

She glanced around as a few more passengers entered the departure lounge, automatically examining their clothes and attitude in case they were undercover police. They seemed to be tourists, and she relaxed—only to tense again a moment later as a woman approached her.

"Excuse me," the woman said in English, "but are you Lin Xinran?"

She nodded, eyeing her warily. "Why do you ask?"

The woman gave her a small smile. "There's a gentleman outside, a Mr Kon Antoniou, who wants to talk to you. Security won't let him in; he doesn't have a ticket. He says would you just—"

Xinran grabbed her rucksack and was out of her seat before the woman could finish her sentence. She turned back and thanked her then hurried to the gate where the female attendant at the security barrier stopped her.

"Please—let me pass, I have to see someone," Xinran said, barely looking at the attendant as she peered around the gate. Through the

glass, she could see tantalizing flashes of Kon in a dark blue suit as he paced back and forth.

"This flight will start to board in about ten minutes," the attendant told her. "You don't have much time for a goodbye to your friend."

Xinran gave her a grateful look. "I have time enough."

And then she was out on the concourse, out of the little glass holding-pen of the departure lounge, and there waiting for her was Kon: breathless, flushed, worried, his hair tousled and his eyes shining. In his hand was the jiffy bag containing the jade monkey and the note she'd written him early that morning.

They circled each other in a strange dance upon the concourse, too shy and restrained to touch the way they wanted to do, giving one another flickering glances that tested memory and desire.

Xinran moved closer into Kon's space, until she stood too close for friendship but not quite close enough to be able to claim the intimacy of a lover. "You got it, then," she said, nodding towards the envelope.

"Yes," he said, his voice husky. He took a step forwards, his jacket brushing against Xinran's coat as he came closer still, within reach of the heat from her body. "But I can't quite believe it. Maybe I misread it. You should tell me yourself what you wrote there."

Xinran looked away sharply, embarrassed, and afraid that her declaration wasn't enough for him now. "As you lied to me, I lied to you. I'm an art thief. I steal for my country to protect our heritage. I was sent here to fetch your jade monkey..."

"Not that bit," Kon interrupted. He came even closer still, his hands reaching up to grip her arms. "I don't care about that."

"But—but..." She stumbled over the words, gazing up at him. "I couldn't do it. I'm not happy with this life any more. Being here made me realize that. Knowing you made me want to change."

"Why?" he asked softly, and she knew he was pushing for her to say it.

"I—" Xinran began, aware of the press of time, "I..."

The attendant interrupted them, calling above the sound of the tannoy, "Did you hear that, miss? They're boarding now. The gate will be closing in five minutes."

"Five minutes!" Xinran turned back to Kon. "I have to go. Kon, I'm sorry I stole from you. Sorry I wasn't the one to break your curse..."

"I'm not sorry," Kon said. "And you are The One, Xinran. I know you are. Just tell me what you said in your letter, please..."

Xinran shook her head. "Kon—"

"Just tell me! Is it so hard to say it out loud?"

The attendant approached them, her voice gentle as she took in their rigid postures and bruised expressions. "Miss Lin," she said to Xinran, "if you want to make this flight, you really have to come through now."

Xinran looked at her, helpless and confused. "I don't know what to do."

The attendant shrugged and turned away. "One more minute. I'm sorry, miss."

"I love you," Kon said softly.

"I know." Xinran tried to draw away from him. "Kon, please..."

But he refused to let her go. "Xinran, I love you."

She tried to look away, but she couldn't quite manage it. Her voice trembled with emotion as she said, "I love you, too. That's why I couldn't take the jade monkey. That's why I'm here and not already on the plane. Because I love you."

Kon stared at her. "You do?"

Xinran held his gaze.

Behind her, the attendant said, "They're waiting for you."

In that moment, all Xinran saw in Kon's eyes was pure fear.

"Miss? Are you getting on this plane or not?"

And that moment stretched out endlessly, stretched tighter and tighter.

"No," said Xinran at last, "no, I'm not getting on that plane."

A moment later, she saw her decision reflected back at her: stunned, shaken, and then absolute relief. "You're crazy!"

The attendant laughed at Kon's gasped comment. "Crazy is about right. Did you have any luggage, miss? Because if you don't get on the plane, the flight will have to be delayed while we get it back."

"No," she said shakily, "no luggage. Just this rucksack. I travel light. You can check my ticket and see."

The attendant looked at her ticket and nodded then radioed through to the departure gate. She looked at her and said, "You did the right thing, miss. You don't want to travel half the world away only to realise you've made a mistake."

She turned to Kon and added, "And you take care of her. Cherish her the way a gift of Love should always be treated."

Xinran stared at the attendant and then looked up at Kon. His face was pale, first with shock and then with awe.

“You—you’re...” he began.

“I’m just here to make sure everything goes according to plan.” The attendant smiled, revealing herself, golden and dazzlingly beautiful for a moment, and then she turned and walked away.

They stood together on the concourse and looked at the spot where the attendant had vanished into thin air.

“Aphrodite,” Kon whispered.

“Your Goddess of Love,” Xinran said. “She was real.”

They looked at each and then jumped when the tannoy blared above them, calling the flight to Limassol.

“We can catch the next flight to Shanghai,” Kon said. “Tomorrow morning.”

Xinran raised her eyebrows. “‘We’?”

He put his arm around her as they began to walk towards the airport exit. “Of course. You don’t think I’m going to let you go so easily now, do you? And besides, I want to be there when you hand over the jade monkey.” He pushed the jiffy bag into her arms.

“But... it’s yours.”

“No. It’s yours.” Kon gave her a loving smile. “I might not be able to bring home the Parthenon Marbles single-handedly, but I can repatriate this cheeky little monkey. I want you to have him as a gift. Then you can do with him as you will.”

“My employers can have him,” she said, “along with my resignation.”

“That’s risky,” he said.

Xinran laughed. “Yes. But you showed me how to take a risk.”

He tightened his arm around her waist. “And you taught me that, while the past is worthy of our sacrifice, we also have to take care of our future.”

“The future,” Xinran echoed, holding the jade monkey tight.

“Our future,” Kon corrected. “Together.”

The End

**Gorilla Tactics**  
**by**  
**Marguerite Turnley**

Anthony escapes from a zoo. Tamsin is lost in the desert. A Jade pendant is the key to her alien heritage. Together they will survive.

<http://www.marguerite-turnley.id.au/>



**Gorilla Tactics**  
**by**  
**Marguerite Turnley**

A slight movement of the ground caught Tamsin's attention as she sat for a moment to catch her breath. Her lengthy dark hair blew in the wind, the long black satin skirt and blouse she had worn to a party the night before were now covered in dust, her black high heeled pumps totally destroyed. Her gold chain bracelet had disappeared, probably stolen by Billy Marsden, but at least she still wore her jade pendant. If anyone tried to remove it they would receive a nasty shock.

Tall and slim, Tamsin worked hard all her life to stay fit, knowing she might be forced to leave her job and move on to another part of the state, or even move to another country. Staying under the radar had become a matter of life or death.

If she appeared on a database of any kind she could be found. That meant she could not drive a car, could not register to receive unemployment benefits and could not go to a hospital. Being injured with anything more than a slight scratch or a headache could lead to a doctor or a hospital wanting to be paid for their services, a difficult situation if you had no money and no security or insurance. It would also put her on a list of people trying to escape detection. Her photo would show up on video footage of visitors to hospital. The world could be a dangerous place, if you were different and didn't fit in to the normal family situation, life could be hell.

Her family was anything but normal. Her mother had always kept an eye on her, knowing the family heritage could be a danger to her. When she was a child she knew her father was a man to stay away from. That fear forced her to create a world within a world, a place of refuge. The woodlands behind her home gave plenty of room to hide. One of the places she found to disappear into was a small cave close

to the river. Too small for anyone except a small animal or child, the hole in the ground had become a refuge for rats. Small lizards also crawled over rocks to find their way to safety. They became her lifeline to an alternate world.

At ten years old, Tamsin made friends with creatures of all kinds and, because of her talent, she could talk to them and they could talk to her. They shared a common language, accepting each other as part of the same creation.

That talent extended to her teachers and fellow students at school. Able to link into their thought processes, she knew what people were going to say before they opened their mouths. Accused of cheating in exams, she pretended to be less than intelligent, allowing other people to win in arguments, staying out of the way during confrontations.

In reality, she had intelligence far above any they could master. In mathematics and languages she excelled. In Art she could see the world as no one else saw it, a place of beauty and promise.

Uncomfortable with conversations and interaction between her classmates, she became isolated, a loner, a reject in society. None could get near her and soon no one bothered to try.

Tamsin's mother was called Coral. She also had psychic abilities. During a time of great conflict when her husband accused her of stifling their daughter's abilities, Coral disappeared for a time, taking Tamsin with her back to their home planet.

She decided her daughter needed to know where she came from and how they lived on Barak. It became a lesson in denial. Coral would show Tamsin places where the family ruled with an iron hand. Tamsin tried to fit in and understand the culture. She looked similar to the Barakians but there the similarity ended. Some lower class Barakians were a tortured race, born to servitude. The upper class, a group in which Tamsin and Coral belonged, lived a life of luxury. Intimidating the poorer members of the world to the point where they could said or did nothing to make their lives worth living. They would obey or be crushed.

Tamsin didn't want to stay on Barak, so after a few weeks they returned to Earth. Coral told her husband they had been visiting their home planet and to keep him from beating them both, she said they had been to a training school for wayward girls.

Learning the ways of torture and felonious activities was the primary goal of the school and he was satisfied as he continued with his criminal life. Tamsin and her mother were allowed to fade into the

background and continue with their lives, unfettered to the yoke of family obligation.

Not long after that time, Coral became a victim of a Barakian virus and died. Tamsin's life began to spiral out of control as she mourned and all she could do to survive was retreat from her father. He had turned into a madman, with no humanity left. It was time to move on. Planning her escape was easy. She had been thinking of ways to disappear for many years. All she had to do was put them into action. So, like a puff of smoke, she disappeared.

\* \* \* \*

Tamsin often felt the stab of loneliness after she left home. With no one to talk to except the people at work, she decided to break out and have some fun. When she was invited to a party, she felt perhaps a new world could open up for her.

The party she attended had been a mistake; one she didn't intend to repeat. The people attending didn't know her, and clearly she didn't fit in to their world, the clothes she wore didn't fit into the more casual environment. Too classy, too expensive and they made other partygoers treat her like a total misfit.

Someone had brought along a video camera and focused it on everyone who came in the door, saying it was for the revelers to remember who came and what they wore. As soon as Tamsin walked in she momentarily freaked out, wanting to smash the machine in little pieces. Her work friend, Susan, who immediately went in search of some other friends, and alcohol, had invited her. She didn't come back, so Tamsin sat in a corner and drank a soda while waiting for a chance to leave.

That is when she saw Billy Marsden. She'd met him a week before at the Veterinarian hospital where she worked as a cleaner. Billy seemed already half way to an alcoholic melt down when he sidled over to Tamsin and asked her to dance. Not having anything else to do and feeling out of place, she accepted. Without any experience with men and their ways, she fell into his trap, thinking he showed interest in her personally.. All Billy really wanted was a quick trip to the nearest motel.

Tamsin, when he offered to drive her home, went outside and climbed into his car, not fully aware of the lengths Billy would go to get her alone. When he pulled his car to a stop outside a sleazy motel on the edge of town and tried to get her to go inside for a drink, Tamsin slapped his face and tried to get away.

His method of persuasion was to cop a feel. When groping didn't work, Billy turned ugly. He slapped Tamsin around and then tied her to the seat belt while he drove out into the desert, promising all kinds of pleasure if she agreed to go quietly. When she told him to go to hell he said, "If you try to get away, I'll throw you out in the desert and leave the coyotes to feast on your bones. How do you like that, sweet cheeks?"

Tamsin didn't like it but when she suggested Billy had rocks in his head he freaked and belted her around some more. She could have killed him but his final blow made her hit her head on the windscreen. When she woke up a few hours later, she was lying on the back seat of the car. Billy stopped the vehicle and, dragged Tamsin out, dumping her on the ground.

The only thing that saved her was her ability to heal. Anytime she broke a bone as a child she hadn't needed treatment. The wound would burn for a while and then tingle. A short time later the healing would be complete. The healing was a natural process Tamsin inherited from her mother. Being from another world, she possessed several gifts not shared by humanity, and healing supernaturally was just one of those special ways she managed to survive.

The absence of any other sound or movement in the harsh desert landscape caused Tamsin to look close at her surroundings. Tufts of desert weeds looked barely clinging to life. Her eyes focused as she saw the earth shiver slightly about twenty paces to her left. A shallow depression appeared as the red sand sank and rippled, a small hill in front of her led to more sandy hills. Several small trees shaded the otherwise barren land. A few straggly buildings heralded the outskirts of a small town. Tamsin had no immediate fear of whatever was in the ground; she was more than capable of taking care of herself. Now she felt too exhausted to care about triviality, concerned only with finding shelter for the night.

The only thing that would make her life worth living at this point would be having someone to share that life. Most nights since she had left her home, dreams came of a lovely fantasy world inhabited by strange mythological creatures that could fly to the heavens, and people filled with kindness and love. Nightmares canceled them out soon after, memories of pain, suffering and torment inflicted in the name of vengeance by her family.

Guilt rode her hard as she came to terms every day with her lonely existence. Being unable to change the situation, she

nevertheless felt she had abandoned humanity. She longed to have someone to wake up with in the morning, looking forward to a new day instead of back into the past, someone she could confide in, a friend, and more, who would not judge her. The loneliness of her family history sometimes became a burden too great for her to bear.

Being touched by the gentle hand by someone who loved her was all she longed for.

Despair invaded her mind as she strained her eyes along the dirt track. Surely someone would come along. Walking for hours in the hot sun had been torture. Remembering how Billy Marsden had left her out in the desert after she'd refused him the night before, she wished she'd used her power to shrink her enemies down to shriveled scraps of meat.

Unfortunately, she couldn't do it unless they stood right in front of her.

Using that power would be an abuse of her god given talent and she had vowed never to go down that path.

Billy had hardly stopped his car before roughly shoving her out into the road and driving away into the night, the sound of his mocking laughter echoing in the wind as he tossed her his greasy cap. The bastard sure owed her something and she'd see that he paid in full. The filthy cap didn't go anywhere near covering that debt. Finding him would be her pleasure. Giving him the shrink test would totally make her life worthwhile.

A vision of a tiny man trying to climb into a garbage can to get food gave Tamsin a momentary buzz. What a trip. He deserved everything life threw at him.

For a moment Tamsin drifted into a daydream of revenge, how she would denounce Billy and how he would publicly beg her forgiveness. But then she was partly to blame for trusting so easily. Now she knew why she never got close to anyone. Even if she did want to shrink him, she had to get back to town and walking seemed like her only option. Despite everything, she could not lower herself to the cruel ways of her father, the very reason she ran away.

She had to leave her enemy alive so he could remember what he had done to her for the rest of his life, and be reminded every day of the mercy she had shown him. He should also have vital parts of his body shrunk or removed so he could not use them in the sadistic manner he enjoyed, but that would come later if all other attempts to humanize him failed.

Tamsin put her hand to her throat and gave a sigh of relief. The jade pendant her mother left to her when she died, still hung around her neck. The pale smooth stone seemed to have a life of its own and instilled her with a sense of purpose. She could survive whatever life threw at her.

Her family history of wanting revenge and violence toward anyone who crossed them followed from her home world of Barak. She'd had been born on Earth in the year of the monkey in 1980. This meant a lot to Tamsin, she felt a pull toward the ancient Chinese civilization and their practices. A lot of the Chinese beliefs mirrored those of her alien culture, those that hadn't been tainted with the cruel and demanding ways of the dictator types. Unfortunately her father followed the ways of the cruel, sadism his battle cry.

Her mother died several years ago of an unknown virus carried across from the home world. The leader of the clan on Earth was Tamsin's father, Vargo. He'd controlled Tamsin all her life, leaving no room for her personal inclinations. She followed Vargo's orders or faced punishment. Being sent back to the home world was the accepted punishment for recalcitrant family members.

Being sent back to Barak meant Tamsin would be enslaved to a robber baron named Pediotor, a cousin of Vargo, who enjoyed taking females and subjecting them to mind control experiments. When they were totally under his control, he would use them for sadistic torture games while he watched. Voyeurism was his game of choice because he lacked the equipment to personally participate. His victims performed and he watched. If they didn't do all that he demanded, they died horribly.

Vargo and Pediotor formed a secret society of killers and predators. It formed the basis of a new religion on Barak, one that taught that the cousins were Gods and must be obeyed in all things.

Males were given slightly different treatment. They were given rewards for participating in sadism games. A special chamber at Pediotor's self-proclaimed Palace held equipment for them to practice with.

Just because Pediotor and Vargo were in league together, that didn't mean he wouldn't use her for his own devious purposes. That also didn't mean her father wouldn't sell her off to the highest bidder.

Having seen what kind of monster her father could change into, Tamsin held a reasonable fear he would turn on her and end her life. When she turned twenty-one in earth years, Tamsin decided to leave

home and strike out on her own. She escaped to another part of the country and made her own life without her father being involved. Her only usable skills were cleaning so she used them to find work. She cut all ties with the family but one legacy of her life was a psychic connection to them. She could not cut that out of her life but it would be kept secret until she became sexually active. At that time the channeling process would be activated and her father would once again have access to his daughter.

Until then she would be safe, unless she came into contact with predatory males like Billy Marsden who had no respect for anyone. Living life alone was the cross Tamsin had to bear for her so-called freedom.

She put her hand down to scratch her ankle. It burned and felt like a bite from an ant. Harder she scratched, until she felt blood begin to trickle down. She tried to make her tired gritty eyes focus but she had also been bitten on her leg and wrist and the pain was excruciating. Her skin now throbbed and itched all over and Tamsin knew she had to move. Then she saw the tiny black and red creatures swarming around her and knew she must be sitting on an ant's nest and in danger of being eaten alive. Finding water became a priority. If only she could dive into a lake and be safe, because ants can't swim and she could drink endless amounts of cool sweet water.

Feeling movement under her she tried to stand only to fall onto her side into the sand. What is happening, she wondered frantically, as tears rolled down her face, unable to do anything but roll onto her front and try to stand up. Recently, the area had been declared an earthquake zone. She'd heard on the news the land was riddled with fault lines so the movement in the sand became clear. A tremor probably occurred and no doubt there would be more to come.

The irony of her situation seemed to be that she could cry bucket loads but didn't have anything to drink, and the supernatural healing process took time to work. She also needed to be in the right frame of mind to heal, and being depressed didn't help.

Then she saw them. Bites, small and red with purple centers, they were all over her arms and legs. Even as she watched tiny lesions formed on her hot sun burned skin. It was a nightmare, especially since she couldn't see the ants, except one tiny black ant giving her skin a final crack of the whip. He died as he lived, fast and furious, beaten to death with a pair of high-heeled pumps dragged off wounded feet.

When Tamsin looked at the ground and saw hundreds of ants now heading underground, she thought they must have been trying to escape the movement of the earth. Some returned momentarily, trying to get a feed of her flesh before they escaped the coming cataclysm. She had always been told by her mother to watch the ants and follow their example. Maybe she should try to escape while she still had a chance. But which way?

Brushing herself down, rapidly beating at her limbs and body with terror filled movements, Tamsin tried to stay calm. Breathing hard and fast, she began to believe she would never be free of torment. She took off her shoes, tore her stockings off and heaved herself to her feet. She began to run, stumbling in the hot sand, frantic to distance herself from her pain. Sharp stones and cactus plants bit into her feet as she ran. Her shoes soon became an impediment to carry so she discarded them on the roadside. Moments later they sank slowly into the sand as it began to ripple with the coming earthquake.

Her collapse happened suddenly. Like a pricked balloon, air left her lungs and her legs shook. With dry lips, Tamsin tried to find the energy to stand. She desperately needed water but none was available. Her only source of comfort was the cool jade pendant lying between her breasts. It also seemed to ripple and have a life of its own.

Unable to move, she lay there, baking in the sun, almost devoid of life as the ground shook around her. A shadow appeared over her. Large and intimidating, the creature had long hair and grunted like an animal. Tamsin screamed as she was poked and prodded, then dragged across the desert by the arms. She was suddenly lifted and slung over a shoulder like a sack. Having no energy for a fight, she slipped into unconsciousness.

When she woke up lying on a rock ledge in a huge dark cavern, Tamsin thought she must be in trouble. Still dressed in the black satin skirt and blouse she wore to the party, she wished she'd chosen her clothes more carefully. The outfit turned out to be a mistake, a disaster. Everyone else wore casual jeans. Her pendant still hung around her neck and was safe.

What if the creature brought her to his lair to kill her and devour her body? But then, if it needed food she guessed she wouldn't still be alive. Any other reason for kidnapping her was unthinkable. Then she heard the sound of running water and she looked around, she was lying next to a stream. The water suddenly splashed onto her face. The large figure appeared beside her, water dripping from a giant



leathery hand on to her fevered brow. It felt like heaven. Then the creature smiled at her, his face surprisingly gentle.

Covered in red, brown and white fur and she could see he was some kind of ape or other primate. He could almost be human. The biggest shock happened when he spoke to her, in English, saying, “don’t be afraid.” His voice sounded deep like a growl, but definitely human and surprisingly sexy.

“My God, you can talk,” she muttered, shaking her head in disbelief.

He said, “Don’t worry. I’m not going to eat you. I thought you could use some water so I brought you back to my place...er, my cave. I know it’s primitive, but at least it’s in the shade and the ants moved out a while back.”

“I was stuck out in the desert. How did you find me?”

“Instinct. I was out looking for something to eat and I found you.”

Tamsin looked up quickly and moved back. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing. You’re pretty safe. I only eat plants and sometimes I enjoy chewing on cacti. For my teeth, you know. You’d be too prickly for my taste.”

Tamsin almost smiled back, but then she asked, “How is it that you can talk? You’re an orangutan aren’t you?”

He grinned. “Yeah, at least I was, but I’m human too so I use gorilla tactics to get what I want. Gorillas are supposed to be tough, so I thump my chest and pretend to be out of control. I snarl and jump around to scare people so they leave me alone.”

“Sounds dangerous. What if people fight back or call animal control?”

“I still have the genes of an orangutan. They might be mixed up in my gene pool with human DNA but we are the smart ones in our world. We negotiate. I could talk the predatory humans out of making that phone call. Talking is something I learned when I lived at the zoo. The scientists who ran the place pretended to be ordinary keepers so the public wouldn’t know what they got up to.”

“What did they do?”

“Injected us with mind control drugs. They operated on us so our bodies changed. The drugs we were given forced changes to our DNA so we’re not strictly animals any more. We have human genes implanted in us. So I guess I’m a hybrid, and I’m constantly

changing.”

As she watched, he turned his head and rubbed his ears and chin. They seemed to grow smaller and more human.

Tamsin looked closer but the movement under his skin had stopped. “How did you do that?”

“It happens every day. I don’t do it deliberately. I just let it happen. Stopping is possible, but I don’t want to. The chemicals I continue inject into my blood keep the process going.”

“How could anyone do such a thing?” she asked.

“To a poor dumb animal, you mean? I reckon they were getting paid heaps. They kept feeding me snacks and talking to me while they experimented on me with chemicals. I think they were trying to see how human I could be. I figured out how to talk when I was just a little guy. I also found out how much safer I would be if I didn’t talk back. I learned to keep my mouth shut and stay alive.”

“That’s a miracle. How come you aren’t in the news?” Tamsin understood immediately how he felt. She’d also learned not to draw attention to herself.

“No one knew. Manipulating the system was only one of the lessons I learned.”

“But you’re here, in the desert. You could have been safe in another part of the zoo, after they finished with the experiments. They don’t put animals in cages so much in open zoos these days, do they?”

“You’ve got to be kidding. A zoo is the last place to be safe. It’s a jail. Even an open zoo isn’t safe. Have you seen what kids throw at critters in the zoo when no one is looking? They laugh at you and there’s no privacy, no bathrooms. I’d rather be free and master of my own fate. And I can wear whatever clothes I choose, or I can go without.”

In the darkness of the cave Tamsin could see by the glow of her pendant. Her rescuer was as naked as the day he was born. She swallowed hard at the implications of his state of undress and moved away slightly, looking at the walls of the cave and the river that flowed nearby.

“I understand about freedom,” she said. “I grew up in a stifled environment. There were a lot of secrets in our family. Still are. I escaped from them and made my own life. I don’t fit into the everyday world, either. If anyone found out who, what, I am I’d be copping those experiments.” Tamsin stroked the jade pendant around her neck and breathed a sigh of relief. So long as the jade lay around

her neck she could not be harmed.

So, what's your name, Mr. Gorilla man?" Tamsin asked.

He watched the pendant for a moment, as if wondering at the power that seemed to emanate from it.

"Anthony. I was named after my generic title of anthropoid ape. Anthony was the closest to that name. Primates, including monkeys, chimpanzees, gorillas, gibbons and orangutans fit into that category. Man is in there too, so the scientists at the zoo lab thought to blend them us all into one being. Me. I could become the man to prove their theories correct."

"How did you end up here, out in the desert?"

"I escaped one night after I realized my primate buddies were brain dead from the chemicals. I was the only one left. No one saw me leave because I climbed up high and leapt over rooftops. Orangutans can do that because they climb trees. You might have noticed I get around. Trees are easy."

Tamsin looked at the man-ape before her and sighed. "Yes, Anthony. I noticed you leap tall buildings in a single bound. You also have muscles to die for."

"Thanks, I think. Security was slack at the zoo. Budget cuts. Before I left the lab I injected the scientists with primate drug so who knows how that ended up. They probably changed into gorillas and became brain dead. I didn't wait around to find out. They got exactly what they asked for."

"Sounds fair. So what happened then, after you escaped?"

"Before anyone noticed I'd gone, I left town, traveling at night. I survived because I move fast and I'm a vegetarian. I also stole pants and shirts from someone's clothesline. An extra large jacket helped because I could hide my long arms in the sleeves. A hat helped, I dressed like a man and no one noticed I'm not quite human. Every day I changed a little more, and injected myself with the humanizing drugs I'd stolen from the lab. They had plenty ready to go. Might as well continue what they started. As a man you get better treatment than an ape and I get more respect. I went into a store and stole some razors. Before I knew it, I learned to walk, talk and bullshit like anyone else out there. I got a job digging drains and earned some cash."

"So why are you here, hiding out in a cave?"

"I got sick of pretending to be civilized."

Tamsin could see there was more. "And?"

He grinned. "My hair grew so much I quickly looked primitive again. And shaving every day is a pain so I decided to take a hike."

"I know. I feel like I had a close shave today."

"You did. I nearly leapt in the other direction. If I had, I'd have missed you."

Tamsin grinned. "You're a prince, Anthony. An ape, but still a prince."

"Come on," he said, "I'll show you how we primitive males entertain ourselves in caves. When the sun goes down, we play."

Tamsin spent the rest of the day swimming in the underground cave with her new best friend, and learned about enjoying life as a misfit.

The only thing she wore was her jade pendant. She would never be without it. Being naked in the darkness with Anthony gave her a sense of freedom. To feel so comfortable with any other person was welcome relief. Everything about Anthony put her at ease. Even when they accidentally bumped into each other there was no sense of fear. He might make her tremble with anticipation, but she knew he would not hurt her.

Anthony asked about the jade pendant. Where had she acquired it? When she explained about inheriting it from her mother, he reached out and touched the stone, bringing it strangely to life. He said, "Tamsin, this thing is alive. And it's getting warmer. Can you feel it?"

Suddenly uncomfortable, she moved away from him and he released the pendant. Tamsin knew the heat of the pendant directly linked to her sexual side. A side she'd never explored before and never expected to. "Sometimes I feel it vibrate but it's never gotten hot before. You have hot hands, Anthony."

"I think the stone is alive, Tamsin. When I touched it I felt it vibrate."

She knew he wanted to get closer to her secret life. The pendant was the key to her keeping out of sight, away from her family. Their psychic connection with all of her clan was such that if she used her powers and transformed into the being living beneath her skin, she would be found. That being would come to life immediately if she gave in to her internal desires and allowed a man into her body and her mind.

Never before had she come so close to giving up everything for a moment of passion and fulfillment. If she let him in, Anthony would

be the one to change her life, permanently. She wasn't sure she felt ready to take that final step. The consequences could be disastrous, for both of them.

The memory of her clan's deadly inclinations toward strangers who fell into their nets, made Tamsin step back further from involvement with Anthony. Although he didn't know it, his life now hung in the balance and her keeping out of his life could mean his survival.

Tomorrow, she would go back to the desert to see if Billy returned and then she could get back to her *normal* life, cleaning at the local dog boarding kennels. At least those animals didn't give her a hard time. Staying with Anthony in the cave asked for trouble, especially since she was beginning to like it way too much. But to Hell with it. Living this way was too much, if she must fight her father she would. Her mother always said, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Living on earth supplied her with many sayings, none more valid than that one. Tamsin wasn't dead yet and Anthony still had the power to change into the man he wanted to be.

Tamsin thought of Pediotor on Barak. If he transported to earth summoned by his cousin, her father, to play predator games, that creature would kill Anthony as fast as a rattlesnake. She had to keep her man safe at all costs.

Anthony rescued her and shared his secrets with her. Tamsin would stand up for the man she wanted if she must. She would go back to see if Billy showed up and return to her life in the city to keep Anthony safe and off her family radar. Perhaps Anthony would come with her and they could look after each other.

She would even find another place to live where they could make a new life, together.

\* \* \* \*

Billy drove along the road, back to where he'd dumped Tamsin. In an excess of rage and alcohol he'd driven away from her the night before. Now his faint and belated conscience, coupled with his parent's angry disgust at his actions, forced him to retrace his journey and find her. His orders were to bring her back to town, but Billy worried about what people would say if he didn't find her. Mud sticks, so if anything had happened to her the cops would come after him.

It's not fair, he thought bitterly, I asked her to dance and bought her drinks. She owes me something for that. Silly bitch, she's

probably still sitting where I left her waiting for me to come get her. At the thought of her relief when he picked her up, he began to think it could all be worthwhile. She'd probably be all over him and ready to come across without any more pressure on his part. Gratitude could be a powerful motivator.

Then he saw her. Tamsin ran in his direction, waving and yelling. Billy stopped his car and got out. He watched her and scratched his head. She looked clean and well considering a night in the desert. What on earth was she doing now? Stupid cow he thought. Anyone with half a brain knew it wasn't smart to run in the heat, especially without a hat. The road seemed to ripple slightly and Billy shook his head, certain the heat was playing tricks with his eyes. There appeared to be a creature tracking Tamsin. Billy had never seen anything like it in the desert before. It looked totally out of place, dangerous, tall and hairy with long arms. He wished he'd brought his gun, but his father had confiscated it a few days ago when Billy shot the neighbor's dog.

The only weapon he had was a tire iron but that was in the trunk. Trembling in fear, he jumped back in his car and drove away, tires screaming. He looked back through the rear vision mirror. When Tamsin stopped suddenly, the creature leaping along after Tamsin also stopped, crouching with his hands on the ground.

He appeared to be waiting for something.

Belatedly, Billy felt a snag of conscience. But then he thought, forget Tamsin. After giving him the run around and refusing him the night before she deserved whatever happened. She could look after herself.

Billy didn't count on the rippling desert, he couldn't drive straight and a cactus spiked a tire. The creature leapt toward the car, grunting and waving his arms, and Billy jumped out of his defunct vehicle. Then he started running. A moment later he fell in a heap on the ground, his well-fed body exhausted, the creature almost on top of him.

Billy thought he was a dead man. All he needed was the strength to roll over and get it over with. As he grunted and rolled, spitting sand out of his mouth, he thought, hang on, maybe the animal will take a bribe? That's what he'd do. He watched the animal come closer. It looked like an ape. I can always bend over in an emergency he thought. It's not like it's a new thing.

Tamsin finally reached Billy, just before Anthony. She was gasping for breath and sweating profusely, her black satin skirt and

blouse covered in dust. She said, "Billy, what are you doing? Couldn't you see me waving? You shouldn't have made me run in the heat like that. Now I'm itching all over from these ant bites and it's driving me nuts." She doubled over and held on to her side.

Anthony stopped a short distance away from them, waiting and watching.

As he sat up, Billy said, "What the deal with the ape man?"

Tamsin looked at Anthony and smiled. "He's an orangutan, Billy. His name is Anthony."

"Whatever. What's his beef?"

"That ape man found me and took me to his cave. I won't tell you what he did to me, but it was unbelievable. I've never been up close and personal with a primate before. Except you, Billy." Tamsin laughed. "Unlike you, he's incredibly well equipped. A real man. At least Anthony gives a girl what she wants. He has everything I need."

"So, if you liked it, Tamsin, why did you run and scream?" Billy asked as he watched the gorilla kick and bash the car, as if he knew what cars were for. He never believed Tamsin for a second after the way she'd fought him off after the party. But still, what if...?

"I didn't run away from him, you idiot, I ran towards you. You looked terrified and, silly me, I thought you needed my help."

"Nah, I don't need you, Tamsin. I don't need anybody."

"Don't worry. It won't happen again."

Billy looked at the gorilla climbing into his broken down car and said, "What the hell! What does the stupid ape think he's doing? My tire is flat. The car's not going anywhere."

"What do you think he's doing, brain dead? He's checking out your wheels, and he's looking for a jack."

"Nuthin in there, Babe. I ate all the burgers and fries last night."

"I said jack, not snack. You've got dust in your ears. You need your hearing checked. If you came out here looking for me, you could've at least brought me a soda."

Billy looked at her and backed away. He swallowed and said, "What's wrong with you, Tam? That rash looks real bad. You're infected. You should see a doctor." Without another word he started to back away from her contaminating presence. "I'd give you a lift, doll, but the car's been totaled. Besides, the gorilla has the keys."

The gorilla dangled the keys in his huge hand as he backed out of the car. He tossed them from hand to hand, then, very deliberately, he put them in the ignition."

“What the hell?” yelled Billy. “That’s an ape. He can’t do that. Besides, he hasn’t got any clothes on. Pervert!”

Tamsin laughed. “Got news for you, Billy. He did do that and a lot more. And he did it better than you. Where he lives being naked isn’t a crime. It’s an advantage.”

Billy stood silently as Anthony reached under the car and started jacking it up. He changed the tire and kicked the car again, gorilla style. He turned toward Tamsin and put his thumb in the air. This was a gorilla like no other and Billy could not believe what he saw. Anthony came toward Tamsin and opened the door of the car. He said, “Get in. I’ll take you back to town.”

Billy came suddenly to life, fighting mad. He shoved Tamsin aside, pushing Anthony out of the way. “My wheels pal. Get your own transport.” Then he jumped in and drove off, leaving Tamsin and Anthony at the roadside.

Billy didn’t want her to see how the talking ape thing scared him. Anyway, if Anthony was that good she could stay out here with him.

\* \* \* \*

A few miles down the road, Billy ran out of gas. That fueled his rage against Anthony and Tamsin. How dare they survive in the desert, and he, the only real man, gets ripped off by the gas-guzzler. As he whined and tried to find his mobile phone, he realized he’d smashed it on the steering wheel and thrown it away when it didn’t work. He decided to walk back to Tamsin and her hairy friend and get a little payback.

Cursing vividly, he wrenched the door open and climbed out, looking in vain for other traffic. “Bloody hell,” he shouted, kicking the car in impotent rage. Billy always drove, never walked, and hiking in the heat would be torture. He longed for a cold beer. Even a drop of water would do.

Walking down the center of the empty, dust filled road, Billy wished he still lay on the hard concrete floor at the party, drunk and surrounded by his friends who were equally screwed and going nowhere. Wearing a baseball cap, a short-sleeved shirt and jeans, he wished for non-existent shade. The roadway burnt through his boots and thick socks, the pain of it exquisite, like needles of fire darting into tender flesh and piercing the nerve endings.

Lights began to weave in front of his eyes, focusing and fading, bringing to mind last night’s alcohol consumption. His skin began to flare with heat in tiny points of pain all over his body. He looked



down and immediately threw himself to the side of the road and deposited all that was in his stomach.

“That bitch”, he moaned as he lay in the dirt retching violently. “She's passed on whatever disease she had to me.” He tried to crawl to the edge of the road and find some shade but before he could accomplish this hopeless task the ground rippled and rolled around him and he sank into the sand. First his feet and legs, then his body and finally his head and arms. His screams were instantly cut off as his mouth was filled with hot gritty sand and he spat it out. All that remained above the surface was his head and his bitten and swollen hands, twitching violently before forming rigidly into fists.

The ripples moved on down the road toward the town. The only sounds to be heard were a soft rumbling and a cracking sound as rocks broke open and scattered. Birds fell silent until the ripples passed, and then they took flight. The sun began to set as a cold wind rushed across the barren land. Billy felt his body lifted and the world went black.

\* \* \* \*

After going back to the cave, Tamsin looked at Anthony, seeing the changes to his body. He no longer looked like an orangutan. His human form had taken over. She said, “I don't know why I wanted to help Billy. He abandoned me to the desert. But still I couldn't just let him die. I suppose I'll have to go back to the city when he recovers enough to move.”

“Do you have any family?” he asked.

“Yes, I have a father but I can't go back to him. He doesn't know where I am and that's the way it has to stay.”

“What to you want to do, Tamsin?”

“Stay here.”

“Then stay. I'll take care of you. There's plenty of food if you know where to look.”

“My father is a dangerous man, Anthony. He will come after you. Plus Billy will want to go back, so I should just go with him. You are better off without me.”

“I can take care of myself, and you.” Anthony came closer to Tamsin, stroking her cheek and brushing aside her long dark hair. Totally in his human form, he put his arms around her and kissed her lips.

“Anthony, there are things you don't know about me.”

“I look forward to discovering all your secrets. I'll tell you more

about my secrets at the same time and there will be nothing between us but love. That is what I offer you.”

From that moment on she was lost. Time became meaningless as he drew her down on the soft bed of leaves he had made in the cave. He groaned as he found the clasp on her satin skirt and drew it down over her hips, following it with the blouse and her underwear. In moments she lay naked, waiting desperately for her lover to join her. He slid down beside her and kissed her, her whole body vibrating with pleasure.

The Jade pendant still lay around her neck and it glowed as he entered her body, giving her everything he had.

As an orangutan he had powers and abilities beyond human comprehension. As a human his gifts were beyond price.

She knew the path she chose would be dangerous for both of them but felt compelled to be with Anthony. He drew her into his world and she didn’t look back, not then. The next day would be soon enough to count the cost.

\* \* \* \*

Tamsin woke next morning, knowing her life had changed forever. It wasn’t just that she lay on a layer of leaves and felt totally satisfied for the first time in her life. Being naked didn’t bother her either. It felt natural. After all, Anthony was also naked. She turned and watched him as he walked around the cave, picking up her clothes. That wasn’t like any man she had ever met. Maybe this man had talents unheard of in the human population. She couldn’t wait to find out what else he had to offer.

“Good morning, Tamsin. I’ve got something to tell you.”

She sighed. “Can’t it wait, Anthony? I’ve got things to tell you too.”

“Okay, what is it?” Anthony seemed only too happy to delay his explanation.

“I’m hungry,” she answered.

“Is that all?”

“Not for food.”

“Oh, that.” Anthony grinned. “Yeah, but I have something to do first.”

He turned and picked up a white box. “If I don’t do this first thing, the results will be inconsistent.”

Tamsin saw the syringe in his hand and took a breath. “Is that drugs?”

“Sort of. It’s a male hormone drug with some extra chromosomes. It’s what I’ve been taking ever since I escaped from the zoo laboratory.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“Not if I do it every morning. Haven’t you noticed how much I’m changing, Tamsin. Soon I hope the changes will be permanent, but for now I must inject every morning first thing.”

“Yes I can see the physical changes.”

“I’m becoming more human every day.”

Tamsin stepped back from her orangutan lover and said, “But I like you just the way you are, Anthony.”

“I want to be human. Then I can be with you anywhere, not just in secret.”

Just then they heard a cough and a sneeze. Anthony turned toward the back of the cave. “Sounds like Billy is awake. We better put on some clothes.”

“Yeah.” Tamsin groaned “I’m glad you dragged him out of the hole after the earthquake, but do we have to keep him here, right next door to our bedroom?”

“Yeah. I’m giving him some booster shots to keep him alive. He’s changing too. Some of those chemicals I brought with me from the zoo laboratory are perfect for Billy. He wanted to act like an animal, now he’s getting his wish. Don’t worry, it won’t be permanent.”

Tamsin laughed as they dressed. “It might teach him a lesson. Maybe he’ll learn to act more humanely. I like my animal better. He looks almost human.”

Anthony brushed his long mane of hair out of his eyes and grinned. “Don’t forget, I’m still a gorilla at heart.”

There was a crash next door. Anthony opened the door to check and was thrown backward by the angry man and landed on the floor.

Billy found a weapon, a glass bottle, and had broken it. He screamed, “You can’t keep me here, you ape. I’ll cut you first. Then we’ll see who gets out of here alive.”

Anthony had no defense against the crazed maniac as the beast in Billy attacked. He tried to get up but fell again as Billy lunged forward with the jagged glass. Blood flowed from a wound on Anthony’s shoulder.

Tamsin felt the air in the cave change. She knew the time had come for her to change too. Anthony had traded his primal instincts

for humanity and was in peril for his life. Tamsin would not let Billy hurt him any more. She just hoped she didn't kill Billy in the process.

The Jade pendant glowed and vibrated with power. It seemed to explode with light and be absorbed into Tamsin's body. She felt herself slipping into another form, another dimension. Her father was there, waiting for her. In the form of a Barak predator, a humanoid, he stood tall and lean, his face marked with the scars of battle. In a voice from the depths of depravity, he said, "So, daughter, you've given yourself over to the humanoid ape. You know what that means, don't you?"

"I know you will try to destroy him, as you destroy everything you come into contact with."

Tamsin's father, Vargo, laughed. "That's the way of our clan. We are the avengers of our world. Pain is our creation. This creature polluted you and he will now pay the price."

"No, Father, you will not destroy the one I love. He has gone through the fires of damnation to be in this world. I have lived on this planet for a long time without you and have learned that I have the power to change. That power was a gift from the one I love. Anthony. I am stronger than you now. I fight in the name of love, you will not defeat me."

In the second it took for Tamsin's father to gather his strength and change into human form, moving into the dimension occupied by Billy and Anthony, she also shifted and became a mythical dragon like creature with the speed of lightning and the strength of ten gorillas.

In her new form she was called Hellios and flames spewed from her mouth to engulf her prey. The battle was fierce and bloody and within seconds Vargo fell to the ground. A scream could be heard emanating from him as he burned. Moments later he shifted into a large beast of prey with the body of a dragon and teeth ready to devour anything and anyone in his path.

Hellios and Vargo were no longer father and daughter. They were mortal enemies.

Vargo shifted back, encircling Hellios who rose to her full height and struck, her speed enabling her to gain the upper hand. In moments Vargo shifted into the body of a snake. As a reptile Vargo had the advantage of slithering into a small space to strike. He moved toward Anthony who, knowing he would not survive a fight to the death between the two enemies, had taken the opportunity to get out of the

way. Billy Marsden also tried to escape the mayhem but was trapped at the back of the cave. The only way out for him was the river. Unable to swim, he sat on the ground, crying like a child, shaking in fear.

Vargo slid past Billy but was taken down by Hellios who flew for a moment then landed on her victim. He had no chance to avoid her slashing claws and his cry of agony could be heard throughout the cave and beyond. An earthquake began to take hold, rocks fell while the river surged and the ground shook.

Time stood still as the earth mourned.

When the conflagration was over, Tamsin reverted to her human form and Anthony rushed toward her, knowing the battle was over. The snake shifted back to human form in a second but as he lay dying he sent a psychic message to Barak.

Pediotor arrived moments later to take up the fight. In human form, his naked body was large and white with huge rolls of fat. It also had scales and gills, a leftover from his shift to a flesh eating fish in the shape of a plesiosaur. His bald head shone like a polished dome and his small black eyes were flat and shone with evil. Anthony held Tamsin in his arms as he watched the cousins who came together and shifted into one being, a two headed hydra.

A pair of evil twins, without conscience or understanding for others, they were two sides of the same coin, irredeemable.

Tamsin knew what she had to do. She kissed Anthony gently and said, "Wait for me, my love." I've got a little business to attend to. I'll be back."

"Wait! If you think I'm going to stay here twiddling my thumbs while you go after those freaks alone, you've got another think coming. Tamsin, I'm a man. I fought long and hard to become one. I'm not letting my woman take the fall for me. If we fight we do it as a team. I don't want an argument."

She paused, thinking of what could happen if she didn't act fast. Anthony could die. Billy would die. No great loss but she couldn't allow it to happen on her watch. She could be defeated and spend the last few seconds of her existence regretting she had been born.

When she left home to live alone and without interference from her father, Tamsin vowed, if she set eyes on him again, she would fight for her freedom or die trying. Now the time had come to fulfill that vow. Her father and his evil cousin would kill the man she loved if she allowed them to live. If she remained as Tamsin she would be

killed in a second.

The two heads of the hydra writhed and shook the ground as they battled for their own supremacy, each trying to stamp each other out, vying for the right to exist and they tried to peck their eyes out. Their hatred for their own kind bled into their performance as a team. If their minds were in tune they would be formidable. Moments later another earthquake trembled and rocked the cave, forcing the hydra to stop trying to kill itself and concentrate on survival.

Rocks fell, engulfing the cave and filling the river with rubble. A sulfur drenched mist began to fill the air, drifting through to the tunnel, which was the only path of escape, except for the river. The roaring of the evil duo threatened to cause another catastrophic quake.

“Okay, Anthony.” Tamsin shook her head. “Those two are in conflict with each other right now. If I shift into Hellios I could probably defeat them. If you value your life you will stand back out of the way. It might get bloody.”

“It’s already bloody. Look at the river. The water’s red. Tam, I want to help. That you could probably defeat them doesn’t cut it with me. I want some reassurance. Here’s my plan. If I roll some rocks toward the hydra, I could give you an edge. Knock it off balance. I know you’re strong when you shift as Hellios, but these two are so evil I don’t want to take a chance they might win. I couldn’t live without you, Tamsin. Not after all we’ve gone through.”

“Anthony, I promise, I won’t take any chances. Tell me what else you have in mind. Be quick though. We don’t have much time.”

“They will be distracted for a few seconds trying to see where you are. They won’t know you can change to Hellios. If ever I saw two brain dead idiots, these are the pick of the bunch. They’re so busy admiring themselves and thinking they are gods, nothing registers. To them you are still a weak human female without value or abilities. They wouldn’t recognize a planned attack if it bit them on their ass.”

“Sounds good, Anthony. You’re thinking like a politician. We could move to Barak and you could run for President. It might not be a bad planet without Pediotor in charge.”

He grinned, all the while keeping an eye on the two-headed hydra. It showed no sign of slowing down as it spun around, biting and snarling, screaming with rage. “President? That’s your thing, Tamsin. It’s about time you found yourself a job. I’m going to be too busy beating my chest and keeping the cave clean.”

Tamsin grinned. “Sounds good. Bite them on the ass, hey? I

could really get my teeth into that. I can always use an edge. How big a rock can you lift? I think the ones at the edge of the river are about the size of that car Billy threw me out of. Would that be too much?"

"Hey Babe, that should be a breeze. I've been practicing my gorilla tactics. Back in the desert I was king. Not quite as tall as the Kong, but almost as strong. My body might be human now, but my strength is the same as before. I can lift anything you throw at me."

Tamsin looked over muscles gleaming with strength and purpose. She wanted to stroke them and test their ability to hold her. His long red hair flowed over his shoulders, giving him the looks of a Norse god, his dark eyes gleaming with intent. His intelligence shone through as Anthony prepared to defend his woman.

"Gotta go now, my gorilla man. I think our time has run out."

Once again she became Hellios, defender of the weak and abused, mortal enemy of Pediotor and his evil cousin Vargo. Her mother, a woman who had also suffered at their hands, would have been proud.

The screaming two-headed hydra was taken by Hellios and ripped apart before being thrown into the river. The water filled with blood as the writhing pulsating fiends were held under by a woman who had reached breaking point. Enough was enough. It was time for the cousins to pay the price for their evil ways.

They died as they lived. With blood on their hands.

Silence reigned for a moment then Anthony and Tamsin could hear Billy Marsden groaning and sobbing.

All that remained of the conflict was a drift of green smoke and the stench of defeat.

Tamsin's father, Vargo, was no more and the connection to Pediotor had vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Anthony sat on the floor, watching the mythical creature occupying the cave slowly change back to human form. The woman he loved began to reappear. A drift of green smoke formed the shape of the jade pendant around Tamsin's neck.

She knelt down at his side and ran her hands over his shoulder. Momentarily the wound burned, and then rapidly began to heal.

He looked into her eyes and said, "You were right, Tam. We both have secrets to share. I wanted to be human so I allowed the DNA experiments to continue. You didn't want to change so you kept that part of you secret. Now everything is new. We can be together and

start a new life.”

“Anthony, do you understand what has happened? I have become a being from another world. My alien abilities are inside me now. I am a member of a clan of shape shifters. Once you start shifting, you can never go back.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing, shifting my shape from orangutan to human. I’d say we’re both on the same page, Tamsin. I just don’t do it as fast or as well as you. I wish I had the ability to shift like that and not need these damn injections.”

Tamsin grinned. “That can be arranged. I’ll show you how to shape shift with the speed of light. The jade pendant is the key. Mine was given to me by my mother.”

“So how do I get one?”

“You already have one.” A drift of green smoke permeated the cave, then a piece of green jade in the shape of a monkey appeared on the ground next to Anthony’s hand.”

“Where did that come from?” He reached out and stroked the jade, feeling it vibrate and grow warm. “That’s amazing.”

“You wished for it and your wish was granted.”

“Now all I need to do is find out how it works.”

“I’ll show you, Anthony. Just follow my lead.”

“I’ll follow you anywhere, Tamsin. To the ends of the earth and beyond.”

A groaning sound came from the edge of the river in the cave. Tamsin said, “I think we better do something about Billy. It’s strange, Anthony. I’ve changed. I don’t want to get revenge on him any more. He’s nothing.”

“Then let’s take him back to the city where he can get on with his life, however long that may be. I’ve got an idea though.”

“What’s that?” she asked as she slipped her hand in his and they walked over to the cowering victim of circumstance.

“You said I now have the ability to shift, the same as you?”

“Yes. All it takes is the will to change and it will happen. Do you want to do that now, Anthony? We can do it together. You can choose who or what we become.”

She smiled at him, knowing a new chapter of their lives was about to open.

He said, “I learned something about my choices in this as I waited for you to return to me. I listened to the jade voices inside my head and they said I should speak to Billy with my mind. He also can



be changed and become a responsible member of the human race. I now have the ability to show him how to do that.”

Tamsin and Anthony took Billy by the hands and helped the quivering mess onto his feet. He shook violently and refused to look at them. Anthony climbed into his mind and said, “Billy, we are going to take you home. You are safe. All that you have seen and heard is now past. You will not remember anything except being found in the desert and rescued by a lady on a white horse. Sleep now and you will wake up, in your own bed, and you will be a changed man. Never again will you be cruel, insensitive or rough with women. You will be a new age man and you will revel in it. If you return to your evil ways, you will be returned to this cave and become food for the rodent population.”

Billy’s eyes rolled into the back of his head as he immediately slipped into a deep sleep. As he lay on the floor of the cave, Tamsin shifted into the body of a beautiful woman, dressed in white. Anthony slowly became a white horse, and as he changed Tamsin was there beside him, stroking him and encouraging him.

Psychic communication flourished as Anthony tried to express his gratitude.

Stamping his feet, he said, “Tam, this is fantastic. I’ve never felt so alive. All those injections I had are in the past. The suffering is over. I’ll never be that monkey again. Being a horse is so much better. I can run. You can climb on my back ride me to the end of the earth. I can change into whatever and whoever I want. Thank you for such an incredible gift.”

“You deserve it, Anthony. You are my prince. All that I have is yours.” Tamsin’s white gauze gown drifted around her slim body, giving her a wraithlike appearance, her long dark hair flowing around her hips. The jade pendant around her neck glowed with inner fire.

They took Billy into another realm and transported him to his home in the city, leaving him lying in his bed, dreaming of horses and a lady in white with a jade pendant.

In moments they returned to the cave where their love of each other began. Tamsin smiled gently at Anthony and took his hand, leading him to their bed of leaves. “We’ll have to do this again, my love. That was quite an experience. I didn’t know I had it in me to be kind. I thought I would always be my father’s daughter, an evil demon who had to follow the edicts of the clan.”

Anthony smiled. “I knew you could be kind. I saw that in you

from the moment we met.”

“Wasn’t I unconscious?” she teased as she reached out and ran her fingers through his long red hair.

He groaned. “Yes, but I knew. Apes are psychic. Something inside me recognized the woman inside you. Whatever shape we become, we are meant to be one flesh. Right now, I have an urge to make love to a real live woman.”

Anthony pulled Tamsin into his arms and laid her down, the cave their own palace of dreams. He kissed her with tenderness, then began to show her how blending together could be the ride of a lifetime. He entered her world and she became part of his. They would never be apart.

The earthquake they felt shaking their world was an inside job.

Tamsin held his hands and looked deeply into his eyes as their bodies began to change and drift into shimmering green mist. The jade pendant quivered with excitement. Neither knew where they would end up, but they didn’t care, so long as they were together.

The End

## **Smoke and Mirrors**

**By  
Mila Ramos**

Dr. Ana Fiore has earned her reputation “Dr. Ice” by her solid work and rigid personality. Sent to a conference for determination of Chief of Staff, she is snowed in with rival and colleague Dr. Dakota Hastings. Face-to-face with Dakota, she learns she isn’t the only expert at illusion.

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## **Smoke and Mirrors**

**By  
Mila Ramos**

### **Chapter One**

The early morning of a clear and barely lit sky held the promise of a new day. The dawn rays seeped into the expansive six-building complex known as Huntsville Medical Hospital. Night personnel of various trained professionals left for respite, as the day crew took over. Reading over assortments of charts, graphs and medical literature, the rhythmic ballet of the machines and monitors soothe the workers keeping things in a calm and stable motion. At each station, on every floor, the usual barrage of paperwork was filled out by head nurses and signed off via corresponding doctors. On the recently built Pediatrics building, the flow of traffic was special as were the patients. Specializing in several children's specialties, the Huntsville Pediatrics Building housed the best doctors who had spent their lives perfecting their art.

The second floor of the Pediatric building housed the Neurology Wing filled with the nation's most brilliant minds. Though the current activity on the Pediatric floor was slow, nurses and doctors kept their usual routine. Patient's vital signs were monitored and needed medication administered. Down at the end of the hall was one of their most dedicated doctors arguing with Pathology over the progress of one her patient's reports.

"This is Dr. Ana Fiore still waiting on Pathology reports...Yes I know I called earlier...I see your powers of observation haven't failed you yet...Well, Deidre, I'm going to explain something called urgency...Yes I know you know what that word means, but it has obviously failed your range of understanding. I have a patient who's in the Intensive Care Unit, and I need the reports that Pathology has

still failed to send. I ordered the biopsy two weeks ago and I still am getting the run around....Yes, I'm sure you are extremely tied up, but how can that procedure take two weeks when normally analyzing and reporting takes a two hours from start to finish?....So when will my report be ready?....Really next week....Well Deidre how about this idea. I expect that Pathology report on my desk in 30 minutes or I'll walk you through the fine details of work termination with your employer...Do we understand each other Deidre? We do? Oh good, speak with you soon."

Hanging up the phone, Dr. Anabella Fiore let out her annoyed sigh and stretched her neck. Frustration started with the minute she walked through the building doors the previous night. The flame though had a mind of its own and kept dancing long into the night and now into the early morning. A majority of the irritation was the just recent confrontation with her colleague, Dakota "Cody" Hastings. Dakota had no end to making the day go straight to hell in a hand basket. Most of the irritation didn't stem from that directly though, the opening of the Chief of Staff position became the winner.

The candidate list was already made and she had made it along with Dakota and another doctor, Shannon Worth. All three candidates were qualified and respected neurosurgeons, but the final decision came to the current Chief of Staff Samuel Hennessey. After years as the hospital's head, he was stepping down to 'enjoy the good life' for as many years as he could. Though many of the fellow doctors and staff didn't believe he would actually retire, it seemed this time he was serious. With the list of candidates out and floating through the building, the departure announcement looked more believable.

No one at the current hospital knew that Samuel Hennessey was her father and she wanted to keep it that way. The pressure from his stepping down added to her current anxiety, but she understood that it was time. Strange, that even after all the years she had been working with her father side by side, he still hadn't mentioned anything about retiring. That was he didn't mention anything until she forced the issue. When confronted about the issue, he finally stated his intentions. He promised her mother a two month cruise out somewhere and she knew they deserved it. She envied her parents for their marriage. Though married to a doctor wasn't an easy life, being married to a neurosurgeon wasn't a picnic either. Ana remembered many days and nights without her father around, but it didn't stop her parents from giving her the best education and life possible. Neither

love or support were in short supply in her life. As the oldest of five, she grew up knowing that even though her father wasn't able to be around for certain moments in her life, he was there for the most important ones.

When she decided to enter neurosurgery, she changed her last name to her mother's maiden name –Fiore– and walked through the prestigious doors of her father's specialty. Her father seemed pleased and in certain senses, she felt the torch finally passed over to her. Going through the exact rigors her father endured, there was a special, unspoken bond between her father and herself. She understood just what he sacrificed those years he had to be gone and the reason he did it.

Years later, she became the doctor, but the situation was a little different. Being the best neurosurgeon in Huntsville Medical made things just down right difficult when it came to different requests, and any medical need that didn't need a male type of approval. It was hard being one of the few female neurosurgeons in Huntsville, Indiana. Yes, there were some things that could be tolerated, things that could be disposed of with just two Tylenols and a stiff drink.

A small thing to deal with, compared to the accolades she received for her work in Neurosurgery from the many Neurosurgical Boards. She worked hard for her Neurology specialty in Pediatrics. Those who understood the rigors of Neurology knew that it took years for a surgeon to become licensed and specialized in their field. Only the best could perform an operation on the brain, just those who had endured the rigors could proudly be called neurosurgeons. She took that distinction as a badge of honor. With that distinction, she put all her time and effort into the dream that became a reality.

Using part of her salary and constant contributions she received from various donors, the Huntsville Medical Center was able add a floor and add a Fetal and Neonatal Neurological wing. Outfitted with state of the art equipment and staff, it had through time become the best hospital in Indiana. Currently in national hospitals, Huntsville Medical was ranked fifth but she knew after the Pediatric Neurosurgery Gala that would hopefully change. With new incoming surgeons and donors, there would hopefully be more improvements to the quality of patients.

This of course didn't matter to most of the staff at Huntsville Medical. Through instance and interaction, Ana became known as Dr. Ice. She was cold, callus and the hardest surgeon to work with; she

knew and admitted it to herself. It didn't matter that she spent most of her time taking care of her patients or that the rest of her free time went to the working as chairperson of the Neonatal wing going to conferences, charitable meetings, and seminars to make sure the wing was running smoothly financially.

The hard work strained and taxed her personal life, in more ways than she ever liked. She knew herself to be reasonably attractive. At 5'6, she had several stunning assets, which she thanked to her long and distinguished Irish and Italian heritage. She was blessed with full, luxurious head of flaming auburn hair, each lock fused with the color of sunbursts. The fiery tresses reminded her of a dangerous, wild and untamable woman instead of what she thought it to be, just simple stroke of genetic luck. Many times she would twirl her hair in her finger and lay amazed at its rich shade.

Her mother once said her hair color reminded many of a Phoenix, its radiate flame changing hue and intensity depending on where you looked. Her eyes were purely her father's, green as the Emerald Isle she descended from and which she would soon one day be visiting for a vacation. Though at times it irritated her, she knew each feature she received from her parents were ones she would never change.

There were times, like any woman, she wanted to change her shape even if it seemed a little bit extreme. There were several instances after working out she would stare at her full figured curves and wish to the imaginative Slim Fairies for slender hips and thighs. She had curves and plenty of them to go around. With almond-shaped green eyes, long thick eyelashes, and lips so full it would make Angelina Jolie jealous; her countenance at times passed her for an impish fairy than for a doctor. It was some of these features that won the attention of a good number of men.

It didn't matter that her genetics attracted the men to her, most of the men she dated wouldn't have noticed any of these important elements. To her, in her own honest opinion, they were too self-involved in themselves and their careers to really find out about the woman they could possibly share a few good moments. Pity, some of her dates had some great potential. She learned rather quickly that most men were intimidated by a beautiful and smart women; yet; she could only think it was their fault if they were insecure.

She did have a meaningful relationship once, but that was a matter best saved for when she could dedicate time to truly reliving the memory. Touching the jade stone around her neck, the memory

seemed to want its one-point-five minutes of fame. As she took a deep breath and closed her eyes, she let the only relationship that meant the world to her surface from the ashes.



## Chapter Two

She remembered that last conference she went to with Dakota. It was four years ago, and three months before their wedding. They were on consultation in China, and luckily the hospital sent them both there for a week. Some of their time was attending the conference on neurological developments, but some they spent meeting and discussing with different investors about fund-raising the project for their hospital.

At that time, the new hospital wing was short funded and everything that had been put into it might have been lost. She never gave up hope though; she knew there was something on the horizon to save the hospital. With Cody's help they were able to locate one of the wealthiest donors for Pediatric medicine, Henry Miles. He was stated to be in China at the time of the symposium and word of mouth said he looked to build a pediatric hospital for specialized care. Though it wasn't specific just what the care would be for, she knew she needed the opportunity to pitch the idea of a children's hospital to take in some of the most required and rare forms of specialty. The only problem was the details. The times, places and how-to's were jumbled and confused. She had no clue how she might actually sit down and talk to this man about the offer. All she did know were the key words 'he was looking for a hospital to fund'.

Working hard and trying to make sure the presentation was correct, didn't stop her and Cody from enjoying each other's company. In truth, she wouldn't have wanted it any other way. There, lying in the arms of a man she could have easily given her life to, she had been given an amazing gift that night. A gift, that years later, he would never know of, or how much it meant to her. Her fiancé, the man she wholeheartedly wanted to marry, held her close and kissed her body, reigniting the fire that burned to a slow ember. They were suppose to spend the day working on what information they should use for their presentation, what exact figures they needed to write up

to give to Mr. Miles. Instead, when they arrived from the conference the evening before, they spent the whole of the night and the previous day making love. Her fiancé, Cody, smiled as he touched her cheek and made love to her again ignoring her protests that they needed to get working.

He was insatiable that weekend, moving her in any way he needed and wanted. Each and everything he did maximized her pleasure until she begged him just to stop. The fact that she actually began thinking work became more enjoyable only made Cody determined to distract her even further. After many long splendid hours and listening to the slight snoring of a man depleted of strength, Ana finally snuck out of the bed, and the room, after she showered and dressed for the errands waiting.

Entering the well lit living room that was completely messed by their clothes strewn all over the place, she picked up several articles checking each of the pockets. In her faded pair of jeans, she found the number for Henry Miles. After locating the benefactor was indeed coming to China, she and Cody had more problems though finding his personal number. It took time, but the information was finally located. Though Cody disagreed with her plan, she wanted to meet the Mr. Miles before there were any actual transactions between any banks, lawyers or accountants. Besides, she thought as she put on her shoes, it couldn't hurt to size up the man prior to giving a presentation about the hospital. It was vital, no matter what anyone said about the character of the man who willingly wanted to put forth so much money, to see how genuine his gestures were.

Over the years of coordinating the fundraising of the hospital, she noticed most benefactors usually wanted something in return. Besides the normal building dedication and naming, she unfortunately had to deal with sexual advances. It was the same phrase, different languages, 'a favor for a favor' as most of them would say. She had never succumbed to that level. Her reasoning was she didn't want to go through the labor only to find out the price was much steeper and resulted in losing her job. Pulling out her cell phone, Ana opened the fridge and quickly drank some milk as she waited for the call to pick up. Maybe instead of a direct approach as she always did, doing the subtle approach would work for a man like Miles. Maybe-

"Hello" A deep British accent answered.

"Hello, is this Mr. Henry Miles?"

"Yes, it is. May I help you?"

“Yes sir, this is Dr. Ana Fiore. I believe some people have contacted you about my building project for Huntsville Medical Center in the United States.” Well there went subtle out the window.

“Yes they have. How may I help you, Dr. Fiore?”

Ana paced faster around the room as she bit her lip trying to find the right words to warrant a meeting before the actual proposal offer and presentation.

“Well, sir, I wanted to meet you before the presentation. I had some questions I needed to ask you.” Yup forget direct; let’s just go into bulldozing, she thought as she listened to the silence over the phone.

“Of course, meet me at the Hotel Rialto in an hour. I’ll have the concierge bring you to my room.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Goodbye, Doctor.”

\* \* \* \*

Standing outside the Hotel Rialto, Ana looked up at the magnanimous structure, held on to her papers tightly, took a deep breath and entered through the rotating doors. Inside the lavish and beautifully decorated inn, Ana took a moment to come to terms with the grand extravagant expanse of the hotel. Remodeled and updated to stand the test of the time, it stated that the structure was well over seventy-five years old. She couldn’t be sure, but by the authenticity of each and every fixture, she became impressed.

Too absorbed in the intricate and fascinating details of the structure, she moved too late and walked into what she assumed was the concierge.

“Doctor Fiore?” he said briskly.

“Yes, that is me.”

“Follow me please. Mr. Miles is waiting in his suite for you.”

Following the very elegant man, Ana took tried to take in as much of the scenery as possible. The detailed precision of most of the artifacts could have been late 1800’s by the way they contrasted certain features in the hotel, yet added a regal quality to the entire room. As they entered the elevator, Ana kept herself occupied by noticing more details.

As the doors closed, the concierge turned around to Ana with a strange look she could only describe as a mixture of concern and apprehension.

“Doctor Fiore, please be aware that Mr. Miles is quite an eccentric person. He wholeheartedly believes in the Chinese Zodiac and is a firm believer in the abilities of what may come from a person. Please do not be fearful about anything that might happen.”

Staring at the man before her, Ana couldn't help but think she made the biggest mistake in her life not informing Cody. Maybe she should have said something to him, woken him up or even dragged his butt down here. Told him something so that she didn't feel like she made the worst mistake and just signed her own death certificate.

Stepping out of the elevator she turned around, and watched as the concierge stayed in the elevator, pointing the way for her. When the door closed, she looked around her environment for an exit sign and it was located on the other side of the hallway. A good sprint if she needed to run and run fast.

Heading to the only visible door in sight, Ana carefully reconsidered her options, though kept the truth of the matter in mind's sight. She needed Henry Miles to be the new benefactor of her Pediatric hospital. Lifting her fist to knock on the door, the creak of it opening slowly, only helped in instigating her accelerating her heartbeat. Her heart pounded faster as gentle smoke drifted out and welcomed her presence.

“Mr. Miles? It's Dr. Fiore, we spoke over the phone?”

Walking into the space, the chill up her spine heightened, as several candles were the only light. She didn't know how Mr. Miles had managed to block out all the light in the hotel room especially for early afternoon, but it got accomplished. Making her way into the center of what she assumed to be the living room; she was greeted by a man dressed impeccably in a black suit.

“Mr. Miles?”

“Hello, Dr. Fiore, I have your check on the table for the new hospital and any other needed expenditure included.”

Startled by his statement, Ana quickly looked around the room. This situation was perfect for a criminal ambush. She could easily imagine her body floating somewhere in a river and the truth never revealed. All she received in return for her outlandish thoughts were a chuckle and rather amused look from Mr. Miles.

Walking up to the check, the multiple zeros clearly indicated the man was serious about business. Henry Miles had written a check for well over one million dollars for the construction, and start up of the hospital.

“Mr. Miles, I couldn’t possible take this. It’s...well frankly too much!” She stared at the check, amazed how that many zeros behind such a number could feel so light.

“Well Doctor, if you wish I can take back my offer-“

Sticking the check behind her back, she took a step back shaking her head. “No! No that’s okay. I just had a moment of modesty there. If you wish to spend this money by all means I’ll make it work for the hospital. Thank you so much, Sir.” As she was about to turn around, Henry Miles grabbed her arm.

“One more thing, Doctor, there is something I need you to do for me.”

Great, she thought thinking the worst, drug smuggling. “Yes, Sir?”

He took out a black box intricately inlaid with various designs of animals. Each animal had jewels in its eyes from what she could tell and when he opened it. Inside, it revealed a jade necklace with an intricate Chinese design and words inscribed. Ana stared carefully as the stone seemed to do some rather quick holographic change and then disappear to its regular jade.

“I need you to take this necklace.”

She stepped back instinctually. “It’s not a drug scheme is it?”

Henry Miles chuckled, but his face was anything close to light-hearted. “I have performed my duties as the necklace has asked me to do. Now you must wear it till the duties have been fulfilled by you.”

What in the world was this man talking about? It had to have been the fact that he gave her a check for a huge load of money. It had to be the only reason he was giving her such a necklace with hardly any explanation. “Huh?”

“This necklace will help the wearer find the one it is meant to be open with. In your possession, you will see everything inside another human being. You will be able to see into the heart of others for the truth and only the truth. Your senses and self must be untainted and uninhibited by rage or jealousy. You will see the truth in a manner that may horrify you. But be warned, the truth you seek is one that will be undiluted in every sense. Use it wisely and if you do, the necklace will tell you soon enough when it is time to move on.”

Ana pondered her thoughts as she stared at the box before her.

“Please, Doctor, I don’t have much time.”

Taking the box and sliding it in her purse, she was quickly ushered out of the apartment and to the elevator. Before the doors

closed, the only sentence Henry Miles said that had stayed in her mind years later and were to be his final words before the elevator doors closed.

“Honesty is the key.”

A month after that conversation, Henry Miles mysteriously disappeared. Implications of his disappearance were still unsolved to the current day. Two months after his disappearance, Cody left her standing alone on their wedding day. On that day, she finally decided to wear the necklace.

### Chapter Three

A code STAT alarm broke through her reverie and brought her back to the present. She gave herself a moment to absorb the memory. Her thoughts weren't on her work and they weren't going to be on her work until the reminiscence passed. It seemed so long ago since that day in China. Touching the necklace in more habit than pondering, she took a deep breath and wondered just how true Henry Miles words were. The necklace never came off from that moment on and it actually worked a good part of the time.

Though she did use it through her day to day life, she mainly though she used its abilities for dating. Nothing better than having a charm that can open your eyes to the truth, and she clearly saw it in the men she dated. Of course telling people about just how she got the necklace and why it was so important didn't help matters. None of the men she dated knew anything about that part of her past. Even those she had dated for several months didn't qualify for that type of trust and knowledge.

No one knew about it, but this and many other factors kept her emotionally distant. This plus all of the complexities her life carried, she remained to be aloof and unapproachable. It worked for her job; got the things she needed completed and finished in a functional amount of time. With such a mentality it did earn her the reputed nickname the 'Ice Queen' or Dr. Ice.

She wrote it off though, everything that had led her to this exact moment of time. It wasn't her fault she couldn't find a man who could really spark the inside of her heart. She had a man who made her swoon at the mere timbre of his voice, but things didn't turn out so well. She hadn't felt that type of stirring in along time, not since Cody. It's not that she hadn't tried searching, but most of the men she dated wanted a maid or mother, not a lover and companion. She wanted someone who could take control in the bedroom, satisfy her down to her last sexual desire but still be able to romance her and

make her feel like she matter. Tall and non-existing order in this day and age, but that special man had to be out there.

The phone rang breaking her thoughts again and luckily just in time.

“Dr. Fiore?”

“Good, Ana, you’re still in your office.”

Dammit, she mentally replied as she tried to keep her annoyance at bay, what did he want now? Irritation didn’t come close to the spiteful resentment towards her fellow colleague. Letting out a deep breath, she gripped the phone with all her strength.

“Dr. Hastings, how may I help you?”

“Hennessey wants to talk to us in his office. I think, in my opinion, it has to deal with the Neurology conference coming up in Northern Italy. He said he’s sending us to make presentations and from there determine whose going to be Chief of Staff.” The baritone voice of her colleague spoke confidently over the phone. The slight tinge of arrogance worked its way up her spine, firing the neurons labeled ‘back-talk’ to gather strength for the offensive attack.

“I shall wait for his phone call then. Good-bye.”

“Ana, wait.”

“Dr. Hastings –“

“Ana, you know my name is Cody.”

“Dr. Hastings, I am currently rather busy...” “She continued talking, unfeeling to his current impatience.

“Ana, don’t act like this-“

“So if this is a social call-“

“Dammit, Ana, quit acting like a bitch.”

“Please keep them to an absolute zero.” She continued without care to his growing impatience. “We have already discussed our relationship in quite exhausting detail.”

“Ana, that was four years ago, let it go.”

Rage, undiluted and pure burst in her veins. “Sure, you do it first.”

She slammed the phone down knocking it out of place. Her hands trembled trying to replace the phone and regain her composure. She walked to the bathroom and performed her ritualistic breathing exercises to calm her nerves. It didn’t matter what Cody did or how kind he was, he still affected her enough to lose her calm. She still loved him even after all the pain he caused her.



Dr. Dakota Hastings, brilliant doctor, ex-fiancé, jerk extraordinaire.

He probably sat there at his desk staring at his 8-ball asking what were the chances that he would piss her off. She could just see what that ball said 'Outcome looks good'. She knew he had her number on speed-dial just to make her work days a living hell. The man lived to be an insufferable pain in the ass. Maybe there was a special section on the 8-ball that said 'Get a life'. Well at least one could only hope.

Cody had been trying to make amends for the pain he caused her years ago, but she had to put all that pain in the past. She had moved on with her life, advanced the hospital donations to begin the construction of another necessary building and moved on. Yes, she had to interact with Dakota on matters of Pediatric Neurosurgery only when necessary but she made sure their paths never crossed. Now after all those years she had to prepare herself to be in his presence. The meeting with Hennessey wouldn't be all too bad; a meeting was tolerable. But if Hennessey was sending them to a conference, she didn't know how long she could last without ripping his head off.

## Chapter Four

Sitting inside Dr. Samuel Hennessey's office, Ana kept her smile to herself as several interns rushed passed staring into the office, trying not to focus their eyes on her; eyes that were wide with fright and panic. The soft chuckle of her father's secretary, Jackie, only confirmed the new interns had already heard the rumor of 'Dr. Ice.' Okay, so maybe being called Dr. Ice had its privileges. Usually after the new interns were briefed as to the procedures of their new job and their requirements, they were introduced to the hospital gossip in one way or another.

"You do know they're just frightened of your reputation don't you, Ana?" Jackie said with a huge smile on her face.

Jackie was probably the best secretary her father had ever had. For well over 20 years Ana had considered Jackie almost a surrogate mother whenever she had stayed at the hospital with her father while her mother was off somewhere with her siblings. Even when she had to endure the heckles from her colleagues when most found out she was the daughter of the Chief of Staff, Jackie would only smile and reveal a juicy piece of gossip about whomever said it.

She continued to relax her head against the wall taking in the semi-quietness of her environment as her eyes closed for a few minutes. Mentally she went over the list of things to do until her day ended and soaked up the peace needed to keep her sanity. She had a couple meetings she needed to go to and speak to each group about the new machinery for the Neonatal wing. Though it was all necessary and vital, most of her thoughts drifted to when she would be able to spend time with Nathan. Nathan was one of the constant forces in her life that kept her going during her low points. After Dakota left, she didn't think she could make it emotionally. Being stranded at the altar doesn't just hurt a person but it takes away a sense of trust a woman could ever have in a man. That is until she met Nathan.

“Anita, is there something wrong?” A deep and musical lilt caught her attention.

She opened her eyes and at once smiled as she found her father in her view sight. He had always called Anita since she could remember. Her mother told her that the suffix *-ita*, added to the end of her name meant ‘little one’. Somehow even after all the years she had been working with her father, she always felt like his little girl when he called her Anita.

“No, I just heard you needed to see me.”

Her father stepped aside and motioned her inside his office. Standing to her feet, Ana leaned over and placed a kiss on her father cheek. Even after so many years, she still felt like a little girl whenever she walked into his office. Many times during her childhood, she would enter her father’s workplace and admire in awe of the many awards and photos all over the walls. She knew the layout as personally as she knew the layout of the brain. One wall was dedicated to her father’s many awards and diplomas, another wall was dedicated to his family and the final wall was to his hobbies. On the wall meant for his relatives were ancestors’ photos, childhood snapshots of kids, and now grandchildren, daughter in laws, son in laws, with a few photos of his own marriage.

Moving to the seat in her father’s office, Ana sat down and looked around at the photos she knew so well.

“So, the asshole tells me you needed to see me.” She started the conversation as she got comfortable.

“Anita, he’s a doctor.”

“I’m sorry Papa. Dr. Asshole said you needed to see me.”

“Annabella, that is enough of that ghastly language, you know better, young lady.”

Rolling her eyes, she watched as her father came around and sat behind his desk. In his mid 70’s, she couldn’t believe that the man who was at the top of his career was soon retiring. He was a very formidable man well over six feet; his salt and pepper hair though changed due to the years added to his stature. She could see where some her features came from, but it was his eyes that she knew she received from him. They were the same shade, same eye shape and even same thickness of lashes. Now those eyes were giving her the displeased look that at times she dismissed with her spunkiness and at other times took seriously.

“Well, Papa, he is an asshole. I’m not lying to you about that.”

“Anabella, I will not have you say such disreputable things about one of this hospital's top doctors.”

“Oh please, Papa. That is same doctor you were ready to kill four years ago for leaving me at the altar. Remember?”

“Regardless of that, he is still a good doctor.”

“Whatever. Anyway that good doctor said you needed to see me. What is it about?”

“As I'm sure you are aware, I'm stepping down from my position of Chief of Staff.”

“You know I don't believe you, Papa.” She smirked as he raised an eyebrow.

“Anyway, I am stepping down and I need a doctor to replace my position. I have three candidates; you, Dakota and Shannon. The three of you are extremely competent and very valuable to this office, and I shall make my decision after the Neurology Conference.”

“I already knew this, Papa. What is it that you are not telling me?”

“I'm sending you and Dakota to the conference in Italy and Dr. Worth to Ireland. After this conference, I'll have a better idea of who I want replacing me.”

She didn't hear anything past the part that she had to go to a conference with Dakota. She was going to have to bear his presence continuously and be civil to him. She was going to have to listen to his ideas and to his decisions about presentations. She was going to have to stay possibly in the same vicinity with him. They would be nearly inseparable during the conference, just like in the past. This was not possible, at all.

“Look, Papa, I'm sure Dakota going to this conference is not necessary at all. He can stay here and you can see how he is doing with the hospital in that way. I can even stay here and he can go to the conference, but you don't need to send the BOTH of us to the conference.”

She knew her request was reasonable, hell it was beyond reasonable. Why in the world did she need to go to the conference with Cody? Then the answer stared at her square in the face; her father rubbed his chin and his eyebrow slowly rose. Not only was the decision set in stone, he didn't like being challenged on his conclusion. Just as smoothly, his eyebrow lowered and her father leaned forward.

“Ana, I know you are still hurting from what Dakota did. He had his reasons; just as you have yours for disliking him. It’s pretty well known that I would like for you to take my place as Chief. This is in truth my passing the torch to you. But there is a committee that you have to convince with your work, not your actions towards a doctor. There are things that need to be done for the continuation of this hospital and that is going to be very significant in helping the committee make their final decision. Yes, my recommendation of who I would like is vital but the work is what is going to determine it. You need to speak with the contributors and additional doctors for recruiting and subsidy of the Neonatal wing. Dr. Hastings, on the other hand, will be doing presentations and speaking to other directors about continual funding for the proposal of our new building.”

She bit her lip, restraining herself from standing up, stomping her temper and running out the door. With smooth elegance, she leaned back in her seat and let out a deep breath.

“Alright, but I want it noted in my file I’m completely against this.” She had to resign to the fact she would have to be around Dakota, but that didn’t mean she didn’t have to like a second of it or make it bearable for him.

“I also expect compensation for having to endure this Papa. Why couldn’t you send Shannon instead with Hastings, they’ll get along fabulously.”

“Ana, the Neonatal and Fetal Neurosurgery wing is your idea from conception to building. It wouldn’t be proper to have Shannon doing this. Besides, it was you and Dr. Hastings who had the idea from the beginning, the whole idea should be realized. I’ve made a package of all the new contributors in the field of Neonatal Neurosurgery, so you have an idea of how to prepare your pitch.”

“Okay,” she replied with a deep breath.

“You will be going to Turin, Italy. The conference starts sometime next week and I expect to get updates on how things are going. Dr. Hastings will be arriving shortly so I must have a moment to prepare the things I need to speak with him and prepare him as well when he delivers his presentations.”

“Of course, I’ll get to work on this at once.” Ana rose as realized she was very smoothly and effectively dismissed by her own father. “Please let me know when you would like to speak to me again about the matter, Dr. Hennessey.” Picking up the package that was

designated as hers, she quickly thumbed through the paperwork her father needed her to review and walked towards the door.

“Anabella, don’t think I’m dismissing you. I just need to prepare the papers Dr. Hastings needs. After he’s done, why don’t we go and have dinner?”

Nodding as she walked out the door, she smiled back at her father. “Sure Papa, just call me when you’re done.”

As she closed her father’s door and walked past Jackie bidding her goodbyes, Ana opened the door. On the other side of the entrance stood Dakota and she realized it was really the first time she had been this near him in a very long time. For the past four years, they had worked in the same hospital and she had managed to make sure they were never in the same vicinity of each other. She switched to graveyards and he had remained during morning shift. Whenever they were on the same rotation or at least placed where they had to do interaction, Ana had made sure the dealings was done through interns. Every single communication needed to be done through the nurses, interns, anybody or else she would have snapped.

After he had stood her up at the wedding, the following week at work was not only uncomfortable and painful but it was downright unbearable. She knew where he was, she knew the route to his office. It was all very simple but she forced herself never to see him, never to interact with him. He left her. He had wanted out apparently from their relationship and she didn’t get in his way. After that day, sometimes their interactions were brief, sometimes he would call her on the phone but she had remained as she was at the moment; cold as ice.

Staring into his eyes, memories flooded her mind. Some of the memories she honestly had no clue belonged to her as the necklace hummed against her skin. Different moments when they first met, heated kisses during their long nights and day shifts at the hospital, dinners and many quiet moments with each other. Touching the jade piece and smoothing her thumb and forefinger over it, the cloud of haze cleared from her mind.

“Ana,” he said in surprise.

“Dakota.” She nodded in acknowledgement and moved past him.

“Ana, wait!” he called out as he grabbed her arm.

Stopping with her back to him, her arm in his clutches, she took deep breaths trying to control her heart from beating as fast as it normally had around him.

“I know we’re going to be sharing a flight and it is up to us if we wish to share one of the large suites there. I was thinking maybe we could meet up before our flight and get our schedules in order.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Pulling herself out of his grasp, she walked quickly down the corridor to her office, shutting out the residual memories that entered her mind.

## Chapter Five

Damn him, she chastised herself as her body roared to life after so many years of silence. Damn him for waking up every single nerve in underneath her skin that had been forced into silence. With the awakening so did the memories return. Those magical nights in his arms as he pleased her continuously until she thought she would burst. There was one night that forever was seared into her cortex and she knew nothing could remove it from its place.

Opening the door to her office, Ana slammed it behind her and plopped down in the sofa in her office. Closing her eyes, she remembered of the only photographs she hadn't burned up or torn after their break up. It was of the both of them, snuggled close together and in love. It was taken many years ago; the week getaway they decided to venture upon.

\* \* \*

They spent the week at Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts and it had been a complete shock when Dakota had mentioned it. She had loved the smooth delivery he used to recommend they go visit. He used the approach of a medical conference and had even gone out of his way to make fake brochures stating time place and guest speakers. At first she thought it couldn't be possible but the legitimacy of the papers was so believable she had to accept it as truth.

When they arrived in Massachusetts, she knew she stepped right into a fairy tale. The scent of the air was completely intoxicated with the perfume of the sea. It was chilly and yet calming as the temperature dropped degree by degree as the sun got closer to setting. The ocean off in the distance rushed towards the jagged rocks pushing up spraying mists of water to the surface. Each crash exploded with a hidden intensity and called to the stirring emotions in her soul. The moment Dakota put his arms around her, she forgot everything.

They checked into to one of the local hotels and enjoyed themselves as every whim was satiated. It was a house with beautiful designing as the rugs, chandeliers and different guestrooms each



offered the best it could possibly offer. With Egyptian cotton linens, luxurious comforters and delectable food to offset the physical sensations, a person's frayed senses were soothed and they were transported into a dimension of exquisite bodily heaven. Having a fireplace within the room only added to the dream of sensuality she was already encased. Dakota used that to his advantage, and she was grateful to say she enjoyed every bit of it.

She was making some food in the expansive kitchen in the suite, but mostly she needed to do something to keep her hands busy. Dakota had left to get a few things from the store and that only left her with the radio. Raising the volume to the stereo, she peacefully hummed the tune on the radio. She moved smoothly to the beat of the tune losing her self to the rhythm.

Without warning, a pair of warm arms came up behind her nuzzling into her neck. Her eyes closed instantly and the warmth of the man behind her filled every single bit of her heart. As his lips settled on her neck, his soft kisses heated up the nerves which did nothing more than wake the rest of her body. She tried to wiggle out of his embrace but he only held on tighter. It was fairly evident the constant movement she made against him did more than excite him.

Unashamed of his biological reaction, Dakota pulled back her hair and laid kisses everywhere he pleased.

"Is dinner almost done?" he asked with a purr in his voice.

"Yes, shortly there shall be some food."

Laying more kisses on her neck, Dakota smacked Anna's butt and headed into the bed room. "I'm going to take a shower."

Raising her eyebrow with a very mischievous glint, a wicked plan of mass proportion formed. Setting the stove to low, she thought for a few moments. Counting down the time she heard the shower start, she waited for the right opportunity. The moment came to light when she heard Dakota Hastings humming.

Quietly sneaking in, Anna undressed and smiled to herself. Sitting every so gently on the bathroom toilet, she swung her foot to the tune of Dakota's humming. An inner laughter pressed hard, and for a split second the horns she knew hid so carefully were in full display. Admiring her fingernails very briefly, she flushed the toilet. The next sounds were the melodic sounds of shock.

"Shit!" Yelped Dakota as he literally jumped out of the shower and stood into the open bathroom area.

“Yes my love.” She smiled innocently looking up at him. *Oh my, that shower did nothing to calm him down.* She blatantly stared up at Dakota. “You know, Cody, you do make quite a lasting impression with that stance.”

“You are going to pay, woman.” He glared at her as the water rolled down his hard chest; his eyes a deep sea blue.

Cody pulled her to her feet and pulled her roughly to his lips. She was in her extreme playfulness and didn’t want to waste anything to be that way. Crushing her body into his, she felt as he lifted her off her feet and continued to devour her. He deeply tasted her and groaned when the heat of her body left his own. Pretending boredom, Anna turned and walked towards the bed. Soaked head to foot, the man before her was a specimen of heavenliness. Dakota was truly handsome and it showed from his dark brown hair to his deep sea blue eyes. As her eyes roamed down his hard muscles, every female bone, and muscle in her body melted and turned to putty.

Watching as Cody slowly moved her back on to the bed, her eyes never left his. His face could only be described as hunger. He kept staring at different portions of her body, concentrating mostly on her breasts and as his eyes drifted to the junction between her thighs. Before she could say anything to his look, he pushed her back onto the bed.

“Am I still in trouble for the bathroom?” She smiled innocently.

“Yes you are,” he said as he rose over her, and began nibbling on her ear. His mouth trailed down, tasting licking, sucking on her flesh. As he took one of her nipples into his mouth, the beginning of many sensations started.

Ana cried out loudly, clutching tightly on to Cody as his hands aided in quickening the heating of her body. She opened her eyes and couldn’t believe the look of unrestraint sexual hunger he exhibited. Physically, her body was electrified; mentally she just couldn’t keep up. Groaning in pleasure, she felt him shift above her and held on as best as she could. She couldn’t control her breathing, as he moved more comfortably in position over her. She couldn’t think, couldn’t form any true thoughts.

“Cody?” she barely said, trying to catch her breath.

“Yes, baby?” The seductive purr was still in his voice.

He gradually slid down her body; his kisses made her tremble. Sitting back on his ankles, she stared at him as he waited but yet lightly touched her skin.

She couldn't say anything, only lay there watch Cody in awe and amazement. Then as he moved his hand to his cock and stroked himself with great leisure, the heat pooled in the junction of her thighs. She was in a trance as his hand moved up and down, enticing her. She didn't feel as Cody pulled her legs apart and roughly pulled her closer to him. She stared at him completely excited while he smiled in victory. Slipping his finger into her heated body, her head dropped back and she let out a deep moan. It hadn't been that long since the last time they made love but at the moment it would seem like eons.

He slipped another finger inside her and she shudder harder than before. Holding them inside her for a second or two, she savored the feeling of his hands inside her. Leaning forward, she looked up into his eyes as he started a rhythm with his fingers while he watched her arch, tense and cry out.

Spreading her legs further open, she closed her eyes for a brief moment, taking in a deep breath until another sensation rocked her system. Cody had moved his mouth right between her legs and teased with the tip of his tongue, her aching pearl. Ana moaned and slowly started to rock her hips. She was desperate for more pressure, more feeling, just more of the sensation he was giving her. Cody kept the steady thrusting of his fingers inside her as he slipped inside another. She couldn't take it as she sucked and licked more of her juices and nectar into his mouth as he relented in his pleasuring her. Unable to contain the tension, she cried out loud.

"Cody, please!"

Cody devoured her as he licked her pearl a little harder, thrusting his fingers deeper as with every withdrawal he sent her higher on different planes of sensations. She couldn't stop her hips from bucking, but that didn't stop him. She groaned loudly as he flicked her now sensitive and swollen pearl with the tip of his tongue. She couldn't take it; she couldn't fight off the sensations anymore. Stiffening as the pressure built upon itself, the first tremors coursed through her body and finally she let out a scream.

Unrelenting, Cody pushed her towards another peak, she screamed again, overloaded with frenzy. Leaving her shaking uncontrollably, she watched as he moved up from her legs with nothing but a pure smile of satisfaction all over his place.

She couldn't form one clear thought in her head, she couldn't think about anything but what she needed. As he crawled up her body

and settled his weight over her, she touched his face gently. His skin was burning up, his whole body felt like a flame against hers.

Without any warning or noticed, she felt him push inside her a little. Ana moaned and tried to raise her hips but was stopped. Holding her down, he whispered in her ear taunting her, and kicking her sexual tension up another notch.

“When I’m good and ready, my love.”

Pushing in another fraction, Ana trembled. Bracing himself and without warning he moved deep inside her completely, and started immediately pumping his hips hard and fast. Ana gasped and moaned, closing her eyes and held on to Cody as he began moving with long steady strokes. Keeping her in constant excitement, she felt he moved once in a while hard and deep to add the needed rousing on top of the many sensations.

She opened her eyes and looked up at Cody with passion-drunk eyes. She couldn’t think past what she was already feeling and he was sending her even higher on that plane. As a shiver ran through her body, she closed her eyes all the while he feasted on her quivering, yielding form. He hooked one of her legs over his arm and the other over his shoulder as the sensations intensified and strengthened. She watched as he closed his eyes and steadily increased his tempo. Already she had screamed in pleasure as her release brought satiation, but she still gave in more to the unbelievable feelings. Moving her hips in counter motion to Cody’s thrusts, she whimpered in his arms.

He let out a tense groan that Ana instantly knew was his crossing point. Moving harder, dominating and possessing her, she felt his hips slap up against her with firm strokes. She could feel him push into her body as much as possible, the drugging and overwhelming peak exploded in her mind as she tightened her limbs around his tense form.

Succumbing to the height of physical and emotional pleasure, she cried out as he took her lips in a deep kiss, swallowing her cry. Using his remaining strength to ride out the waves of her orgasm, she moaned as he tightened his grip on her body and released himself inside.

She could only weakly hold on to him as he collapsed in her arms. She didn’t know what came over him, why he took such control and possession over her, but she wouldn’t mind if it happened again.

\* \* \* \*

Ana opened her eyes, getting her bearings as she yawned and checked the watch behind her. She had fallen asleep for two hours. Though the rest was necessary, it was only when she sat up that the tears rolled down her cheeks. She hated that her emotions were still tied up to Dakota Hastings. Now she would have to spend another week with him in a conference. Though the work needed to be done for the hospital was clear, she was extremely put off by the fact they would be spending time in close quarters.

Standing to her feet and walking over to the mirror, Ana fixed her hair and made sure her image was pristine. Though things around her may be falling to pieces, she insisted at all times to be well-kept and personally organized. For now, her current thoughts yielded to how she would behave around Dakota. She needed more than a mental pep-talk to survive a week around him, she needed to gather her wits collectively and prepare for battle.

## Chapter Six

The descent towards Turin, Italy only stirred the nausea deep within Ana's stomach. She gave herself various pep talks in hopes to mentally deal with the fact she would be in close quarters with Dakota. After 15 hours, her muscles were stiff and aching but according to the schedule there would be a couple days of rest and relaxation before the actual hard work of the conference would begin.

She was rather tense the first few hours of the flight. Dakota had tried to strike up a conversation but she couldn't bring herself to say anything to him. The conversation was short and brisk; said what needed to be said in words. Yet strange enough through out each and every interaction around him, her necklace hummed. She couldn't pinpoint what was happening but she did know that every time he would try to say something a vision appeared in her mind. Something wasn't right about that, but she wasn't going to explore it at this moment of time. As the plane touched down, Ana breathed in deeply and said a small prayer for strength.

"We have a car waiting for us at Hertz," Dakota stated as he moved through the cabin.

"Okay."

"We can go pick it up after we have our luggage."

"Okay," she said again, keeping her eyes straight ahead.

"Ana, you know you can say more than what you've said the last fifteen hours."

Ana turned around and gave Dakota a look meant to chill every thought he had to the bone. She had to remain reserved and detached in every way possible. She couldn't fathom what the hell was going on to make her actually agree to stand his presence for this conference. With a mixture between seething and not amused, she gave Cody the first sentence she'd said in over fifteen hours.

"Yes, I suppose I could, but what would be the point?"

Dakota came forward to block her path and stared down at her. His eyes blazing into hers and sending a small shiver down her spine.

“Ana, do you think you can work on being civil towards me during this conference?”

Her lips tightened as she stared at Dakota trying to find her cool as one second clicked to the next minute. The humming in her necklace roared to life as memories that clearly were not her own filtered into her mind. For a small moment, she was no longer seeing out of her eyes but now out of Cody’s eyes down at her. Shaking her head, she looked up again, her guard now down as she took in the sight. The man was unbelievably attractive; dammit he’s was down right hot, but that shouldn’t mean anything to her now. It shouldn’t mean anything at all. All it meant was that she still was not immune to him after all this time. Why couldn’t she be immune to him? He broke her heart in the worst way a man could ever do to a woman.

The thoughts gradually built until the shiver traveled up and down her spine. If she forgot all circumstances of just how much she had to rebuild after the break up, she could stop herself from picturing the strong muscles in his arms as he enclosed her in his arms. She could just push out the vision of his biceps they flexed and relaxed whenever he moved her body to a desired position. Shaking her head again slightly to wake herself out of the daydream, she turned around and continued walked off to the car port. She just needed to survive the next week or so and things would be fine, she would make it the rest of the time while she was there.

\* \* \* \*

“Hey Ana, I’m going to make some dinner, is there anything you would like to eat?” Dakota yelled across their suite.

‘I want to eat your liver with fauve beans and a nice Chianti’ she chuckled with her best Hannibal lecture laugh but then made her self think of surgery practices before her mind wandered off into dangerous categories. Nodding her head instead, she watched as he left the living room and head towards the kitchen.

For the past two days, they had taken the time to relax. The hospital rented a villa for them so as they wouldn’t be distracted while they prepared their presentations. During that time they were able to go through Turin to look at the various museums, trattorias such as Birilli’s and the small little details that made Turin a special city. They even went to the site where the 2006 Olympics were held just to feel the vibes coming from such a nationally televised area.

For as much as she protested to hate him, she found herself warming up to Cody as in the past. They were if anything civil friends

in public. She was speaking more to him and he was in turn speaking civil back to him. The tension she had noticed around his jaw had relaxed and the humming around her necklace was constant.

Their tour of the city had first started at the Via Palazza di Città, an old church built by Emanuele Filiberto. Built as a promise before the battle of San Quintino, the church was built according to plans in 1667 and 1680. The beauty and site of the church was enough to bring her to tears. The seventeenth century baroque style building brought a sense of peace to her tumultuous mind but made her drift again to that day Dakota left her standing at the altar.

The day was still clear in her mind as her necklace hummed louder. She had been preparing herself for over two hours, ridden down to the church as guests were entering the church way in their best church clothes. Soft pastel colors on the women, dark suits on the men, each looking their best and only adding to the beauty of the day. Yet when she entered the walk way to make her descent down to where her soon to be husband stood, she saw no one there. The groomsmen were standing in their places, but the groom wasn't in sight. As she walked up to the altar, with each step she said a small prayer that Dakota would appear. With each step she came closer, the fear grew exponentially. The thoughts didn't stop as they spiraled into oblivion and the one day that meant her whole life became a day of pain and chaos. The person she thought she would be spending her life with...didn't show.

One year later, he appeared at her doorstep and found a woman unlike he had known the years before. She knew she was no longer the loving and sweet Ana standing before him, but a woman that had been jaded by a broken heart.

"Ana?"

Quickly turning to avoid his stare, she looked over a young couple who were kissing each other and laughing quietly afterwards. That would have been...

"Ana are you crying?"

"Forget it, Dakota, I wouldn't give you that pleasure."

Running his hand through his hair, he raised his voice a notch higher. "Dammit, Ana. That was four years ago! Do you really want to get into this now? Because if that's what it's going to fucking take let's get this over with!"

She jabbed a finger into his chest, the rage building. "Don't you get pompous on me, you fucking asshole! If I have a moment of tears



then you know what, I can do it. You left my ass at that altar. Though it doesn't mean shit to you, it was the world to me. I loved you and I was an after thought to you. I knew my father must have been out of his mind to pair us together for a conference. I want to rip your fucking head off every time I see you. So do me a favor, stay away from me." She needed to get out and get a fresh breath of air but what Dakota told her stop her cold.

"I asked your father to put us together for the conference."

Rubbing her temples with her eyes closed she tried to block out the pain in her heart. The necklace around her neck was getting to be quite irritating now that it wouldn't stop with its incessant vibrations. "You know, Dakota, in my delusional anger, I swear I thought I heard you say you requested this trip with us together."

Silence answered her and just as she was about to lose her cool, the color drained from her face as she heard the answer she didn't want to hear. "I did."

She couldn't form a coherent thought and did the one thing she did when she lost all idea; she punched Dakota.

"You requested this? What is wrong with you? Do you enjoy making my life a living hell?!"

"It is not about you dammit! I need to make it up to you. I want to mend the hurt I did to you. You need to know why I did that!" he screamed back at her.

Pushing against him Ana back up and closed her ears. "What the hell do you need to tell me now that you couldn't have done then?" Grabbing for her arm, Dakota pulled her out of the building. She struggled against him trying to find some break in his grasp. "Tell me now Dakota."

"Not here in front of everyone," he said.

"Why the hell not, you've publicly embarrassed me before?" She struggled harder.

"Dammit Ana, I was scared okay. I was fucking terrified so I ran and took the first plane out of the country and landed in China, where we had that great trip. Do you remember that trip? Do you know what happened? I met someone who gave me this damn necklace. She said that when I wore it the matching pair would cause it to spark to life and that's how I would know what I needed to do."

"What the hell are you talking about?" She shoved again.

"You're necklace, Ana! You have the symbol opposite of mine." He pulled out his own. A different symbol and writing were listed on

it. A snake of some type wrapped around the symbol. All this time she saw it, she thought it was just the medical insignia but now understood why her own band kept humming every time she was near him.

Frustrated and just wanting a moment to put the clues together, she kicked his shin with all her might. Running as fast as she could, she immediately searched frantically for a taxi-cab. She needed to get out of the city and damn side of the hemisphere. Of all the things that could possibly occur! Her father plotted with the asshole on this.

The ride back to the villa was uneventful and tense to say the least. The shock of betrayal and that Dakota had the gall to want to ask for forgiveness after so long. Ana stared out the window quietly wiping the tears away from her eyes. The snow was falling heavily but as the flakes fell, it only helped in hardening her reserve and her heart again. She had to get out and get out fast. Who the hell was this man she knew as Dakota Hastings? How low could he go? Apparently her father had forgiven Dakota and conceded to his wishes. The enemy had not just infiltrated her barrier of trust; he was running free to cause damage.

Getting out of the taxi before it had a chance to stop, she made it inside the villa looking for some type of barrier to keep her safe from the lies coming to surface. She couldn't give him a chance to spew his lies everywhere. She wasn't giving him a chance to get a word, a thought, or even an arm near her. Ana slammed the bedroom door behind her, and locked it using a chair for reinforcement. There was no way in hell that bastard was coming through the door. Taking a moment to find her center, she pulled out her suitcase and rapidly began to pack her clothes. She was leaving Italy on the first flight available. One week with Dakota Hastings; no way in hell was she going to tolerate it.

"Ana, open up, let me explain." He said banging on the door and wiggling the doorknob.

"No!"

"Ana, the necklace you have. It was given to you by Henry Miles. The man who disappeared a month after we left China. When I left you, I met his wife. Her name was Susan Miles. She told me all about her husband and the danger he was in. She thought she would be in similar danger because of some bad business deals he did and she found me. She knew he had given the check to you for the hospital, she found you that way, and then she found me. When I ran,

it was she who brought me back. She talked to me; help me see a few things. She helped me see just how important you are to me, how important we are to each other. Dammit Ana, I know I was wrong! Let me explain.”

Rolling her eyes, she kept packing ignoring the voice she was desperate to run away from. Cody didn't stop though, he kept telling her everything he did during the time they were gone. Where he was the day of the wedding, everything he did. He told her how he stayed under a cloud of alcohol. He wanted to forget and even leave the medical profession to do another career. Everything that was hitting him at the time and how he thought he was going to break. She couldn't take anymore of his words, and screamed back at him through the door.

“You don't even know what you did to me do you?! I died that day!” Hitting the door with her fist, the explosion of anger and confusion burned through her veins. “Explain? Oh the great Dakota Hastings wants to explain! Tell me, what in the world is so important that it took you this long to say?”

“I didn't mean to leave you at the altar!” He yelled.

“Oh! Well, Cody, that only took you four years to admit? Thanks. That will sure revved up my morale!”

“I know about Nathan.”

She stared at the door, shaking her head in denial. He couldn't know. There was no way possible. She made sure no one knew about Nathan. No, he's lying there's no way he knows about Nathan. Picking up the phone, she quickly searched through the phone book for an airline phone number. She could only thank the heavens that she knew the Italian language. Finding her carrier, she began the long process of booking an emergency flight. She was getting out of here and she was getting out fast. There was no way she was staying a second long in this villa, city or country with that man.

“You don't know what you're talking about. Leave me alone!”

“No, Ana, that's not what I meant.”

“Fuck off!” she yelled.

The phone clicked and a chipper voice answered the line.

“Hello. Thank you for calling American Airlines, this is Denise how may I help you?”

Trying to compose the fear in her voice, she replied as calmly as possible. “Yes, this is Ana Fiore; I'd like to book an earlier flight back to the United States.”

“Currently we have no flights going into the United States Ms. Fiore. The weather has made it difficult for the pilots to leave.”

No, no, no, no. She had to get out of here and find Nathan. She wanted to tell her dad that something came up and she needed to go on vacation for a while.

“Difficult? It didn’t seem that bad?”

Standing to her feet and walking over to the window, she pulled back the curtain and nearly dropped the phone. How could the weather have changed so quickly in a matter of moments? It was snowing a bit when they had decided to explore, but nothing that suggested the weather would change for the worse. As the snow flakes came down in an accelerated rate, Ana looked up to the sky and silently cursed. “You have got to be kidding me. This can’t be a sign. It just can’t be a sign. I can’t be stuck here with Dakota. There’s just no way possible.”

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience, Ms. Fiore. Thank you for calling American Airlines.”

Oh you too, she replied with added curses. Holding the phone tightly in her hands, the long tone seeped into her mind sending her thoughts to pathways she didn’t want to believe could be possible. She didn’t want to accept the hellish reality of having Dakota in the same vicinity. Dropping down to the floor, Ana rolled into a ball and rocked herself as tears streamed down her face.

## Chapter Seven

### *Four Days Later*

After their huge argument, she stayed inside her room calling the airlines for any way to get a flight out. Each reservation person told her the same thing; no flights going out. The banging at the door had stopped, but she didn't feel ready to open it. Late at night when she knew he lay asleep, she would walk out and venture into the kitchen to get food and any other necessary items. It was at the beginning of the third day when she knew she would have to face Cody. They had their conference in about two days and they needed to prep.

They were completely snowed in and could not leave the villa they temporarily resided in. Not only that, the conference was temporarily delayed. That only meant when things were much clearer to continue, she would still have to endure Cody's presence. Talk about a merciful and every loving higher being. This is what true hell resembled, looked like and felt. It seemed like the scenery of heaven, pristine and gorgeous. Once you zoomed in closer to said heaven, you realized that you would be forced to spend it there forever when it was found out you were missing very valuable commodities like...water, air, and other human beings. The best part of that hell lay in the fact that not only would you be there possibly by yourself, but more than likely you'd have to be forced to stay with someone you didn't get along with in the first place. You would have to spend it with someone you specifically told 'you wouldn't have sex with even if they were the last human being on earth.'

It was about 4 am when Ana quietly opened the door and peered out of the bedroom listening for some time. By the soft snores, she knew the enemy lay asleep and she didn't want to wake it up. Scanning the living room, she caught sight of her adversary asleep on the sofa...without his jeans or shirt. Her nemesis used tactics of psychological warfare. He must have known his rippling abs would taunt her reserve as it did many years ago. She knew seeing those

tight muscles in his legs and back would push her brain to instantly think of their heated past moments on the sofa, the floor, the kitchen floor, the kitchen counter. Mentally hissing, she hated the clad only boxer-wearing foe as she closed the door and banged her head against it. She was in Hell, and Dakota Hastings guarded Hell's gateway..

Slinking her way out of the bedroom, she tiptoed to the kitchen and opened the fridge door quietly. Taking out just the necessary items of food to make it through the day, she stopped with a strange sense of being watched. The kitchen lights suddenly came on and the enemy now blocked her path out of the kitchen.

"You know if you needed food all you had to do was ask," he said drowsy but his voice still laced with anger and something else unidentifiable.

"Stay away from me, Dakota, I'm warning you."

"Or what, you suck at boxing, Ana, you always have."

Taking a step forward, Ana threw a right-handed punch that only caused Cody to swing her around and twist her arms so she became immobile under him. Pinned against the counter with both arms now behind her, she struggled against him.

"Dammit, Dakota, let me go!"

"No. Not until you hear me out."

"Never!" She struggled harder but only added to the pain lacing through her arm at the moment. "You have nothing to say, and you don't know anything about Nathan! You're lying!"

"Nathan is my son, Ana."

She stopped struggling as the tears welled up in her eyes. He knew and didn't say anything. All those years, the day when he came to her doorstep, she had given birth the month before. Nathan lay asleep upstairs, and she'd slammed the door in his face. She had made sure that there was no way he knew about Nathan.

"Don't you dare get near my child!" The mother instinct filtered through her veins as she struggled harder.

"Dammit, Ana, why do you think I would want to hurt my own son? My son, Ana! We had a child and you never told me."

"You left me. You left me and I didn't hear from you for a year. Now you want me to give you sympathy. No. Nathan doesn't know anything about you, and he will not. If he asks, you're dead to him, as you are to me!" She screamed.

"That isn't true and you know it, Ana. I know you better than you think. You've thought of me over the years. You've thought of how I

wanted you, how you wanted me. All the different places we went to, and all the ways I've explored your body, and you mine. Don't lie to me, because I know that's a bunch of bullshit."

"No, I don't. I don't think about you at all. You're a damn cautionary tale for me, nothing more." She continued struggling as suddenly she was turned and now face to face with Cody, her hands were pinned behind her.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she tried to control her breathing. Something felt different now, something strange. It was a feeling she couldn't describe. Looking up into Cody's eyes, she heard the words Henry Miles had spoken to her. 'Honesty is the key.'

As the phrase repeated through her mind over and over, she watched as the snake on Cody's necklace moved in the same manner she had seen hers move years ago.

"I hate you." Tears rolled down her face. "You left me alone, and pregnant. You weren't there to help me. You weren't there when Nathan couldn't sleep in the middle of the night. You weren't there when Nathan was really sick and I was terrified. You weren't there when I was alone with my parents giving birth. I hate you so much. And you did all, because you couldn't deal? Fuck you, Cody! I learned to deal, I learned to move on. Instead of trusting me, all you did was run." She turned her head as the tears fell freely.

Lowering his head for a moment and nodding. "I deserved that, each and every single one of those thoughts you have and more. I'm sorry, Ana, I really am. I ran, but I'm not going to run anymore. Dammit, I've wanted you back since before that day I saw you at the door. I was there at the hospital when you gave birth. You forget how many friends we have in the medical field. I saw Nathan. I saw you that night after you gave birth. You were never alone. But I know you didn't want me there. I saw how you put father deceased on the baby's crib for father identification. But dammit I had to try. I had to try to get you back. I've wanted to be with you every since. Even when you avoided me at work and you did everything in your power to make sure we had nothing to do with each other. Give me a chance, Ana, I promise...I promise. I won't hurt you like that again."

Shaking her head, as the tears fell freely a humming pulse shocked her and Cody at the same time. In that brief moment, she saw the truth in Cody's words and in her own. She saw everywhere he'd gone and the pain he had been in. She heard his thoughts, heard everything that happened between them in the past two years, but

from his point of view. The one memory in his mind that convinced her of the truth in his actions, was on the day Nathan came into the world. Ana lay asleep in the bed and he had quietly snuck into her room. He laid a kiss on her forehead whispering he loved her and left her flowers by her bedside. He then walked down the corridor to the nursery and stared in at the newborn babies. Pointing to the bundle that was his, he watched as the nurse brought his child to the window. He was allowed entrance and for a few moments held his baby. He kissed the small head and turned around to shed a tear at the child that belong to him.

“I’ll make it up to you, little man,” he whispered to the baby. ‘I’ll make it up to you and your mama I promise.’

When her vision cleared, she stared up at him. He held on to her even from that moment. Even though she tried her hardest to shove him away, he still fought tooth and nail to be with her.

“You’ve been seeing Nathan?”

“Yes, when you send him to your parents, your father calls me.”

“How long has this been happening?”

He inched closer and touched her cheek with his thumb. “For about 3 years. It took me a while to get your parents to let me in the door.”

“All this time, and I didn’t know?” She stared up at him confused, but feeling the weight on her heart lessening.

“Yes.”

She blinked rapidly processing the thoughts and feelings rushing through her and did the one thing she could only think of to do...besides punching him. She kissed him passionately and completely on the lips.

Cody responded just as quickly and let go of her arms. The moment he did, she wrapped them around him and deepened the passion. He lifted her up in her arms as they continued kissing. Years of distance and hurt melted away faster than they both realized. As Cody walked back from the counter with Ana in his arms and was about to turn out of the kitchen, they heard the light clinking of metal falling to the ground. They both turned around as the necklaces they once wore lay on the floor.

Ana clicked the lights off behind him and kissed his neck. “We’ll get them tomorrow. I need you too much right now,” she said turning his head.



Consumed by her passionate kiss, Cody disregarded the jewelry and headed into the bedroom, closing the door. He could have sworn he heard something in the kitchen but opted to look into it tomorrow. Tonight he was far too busy.

\* \* \* \*

In the dark kitchen, as the two necklaces laid disregarded on the floor, the holographic images of animals pulsed and filled the kitchen with light. In its brief light display, a human hand picks up the necklaces and places them back into the black boxes.

“Henry, don’t you think you should leave them a note telling them the truth?”

“No Susan, our job was to only bring them back together. They don’t need to know the truth behind our gifts. Besides, you don’t have to call me Henry anymore.”

The woman who had given Dakota his necklace stared at the door as the soft and faint sounds of the young couple’s lovemaking drifted through the door.

“It only seems fair that they know they had us watching over them, Dakota.”

“I know Ana, but they wouldn’t believe that their future was coming back to save them. Let them discover that on their own. Are you ready to go home?”

“Yes.” She smiled at him with bright eyes. “You know this was the night that the twins were conceived.”

The future version of Dakota smiled and touched his hand to her cheek. “Yes I remember. I also remember proposing to you again. Come, let’s go home.”

With a kiss to his wife’s lips, the past faded from their sights, with knowledge that it was now safe and secure.

The End

**Crow Like Me**  
**By**  
**Bridghid Parkinson**

Tommie thought The Guardians were just bedtime stories. Her modern Guardian cannot stop the destiny that brings them together, but they will avenge her murder.

<http://bridghidparkinson.blogspot.com>  
or <http://www.myspace.com/dbparkinson>

**Crow Like Me**  
**By**  
**Bridghid Parkinson**

Tommie walked home to chase away the remaining stress from her body. Rather than take the transit bus home, she walked the full distance from her offices in downtown Philly. The rhythm of her feet usually gave her solace as she tapped out her pace, slowing only at an intersection. The blurred sounds of the crowds and the cars normally blended into a drone that could quiet her tired mind. The billboards and concrete at every turn became a familiar escape.

It just wasn't working for her tonight. At the end of the week, she often looked forward to getting overtime on a Saturday, but tonight she wanted to be as far away from the office as she could.

Her shoes tapped out the pace for her thoughts. Her skirt wrapped around her legs uncomfortably, but her mind wrestled with the problems at work rather than her clothing. She welcomed the chance to go home and relax.

In the last couple of days, work had become worrisome. Usually, there wasn't much stress when developing games for consoles, and she took great delight in testing the products. Her supervisors were great and looked to her as the person to meet project deadlines. The usual problems with office politics or squabbles between coworkers used to jangle her nerves, but—in comparison to what she found on the server this week—that was nothing.

She started clicking through directories, looking for the new screens to add to the game for the transitions between levels when she came across a picture of a young woman. Although she was wearing makeup, and lingerie, there was a serious doubt in Tommie's mind whether this girl was legal enough to be posing for any type of sensual pictures.

*What are these pictures doing in the screens folder for a PG-13*

*game?*

She stared at the image. The girl on the screen couldn't be more than fifteen.

Tommie closed the window quickly and opened the next image. The hollow stare of another young Asian girl came back at her. No smile. Makeup created the only luster in her face. The dark haunting eyes were hollow and empty.

*This can't be right.*

She searched the folders and discovered hidden directories. Videos, web directories and a transaction server. She made screen shots of the directories and put the images in her home directory. That night, she logged into the work network from home, burned the offending material to DVDs and then deleted it off her Home drive.

She didn't say anything at first. She went back the next day and discovered her computer login locked up, the main offices reset her user name. She logged in again and her email was flaky. All of her messages showed as 'read' and some of her folder messages showed as 'unread'. She knew corporate policies let the main offices review any email at any time. She never said anything in email that she didn't want to say over the radio. She was still able to work, and she found she could still access the drives where she found the pictures. She gathered several screen shots and put them in another drive.

The real shock—today—came when she discovered her project permissions tampered with, and the supervisor gave her 'busy work' because she couldn't access her game project files.

After a day of adding action plans to a database, she was ready to choke on the monotony. She couldn't get access to the drives that had the curious pictures, and she couldn't even access her own work or the place where she put the screen shots for proof.

*What is going on? Keep your mouth shut and work.*

These thoughts consumed her as she walked home along Tenth Street. The proximity to Philadelphia Chinatown was comfort for her family and frightening for living in a modern city. Even knowing the dangers of the city, Tommie found it difficult to focus while she walked. Someone at work knew she was in the pornography folders, and they were covering their tracks. She knew the managers could access what she did and her ID left tracks in the log files.

She was also afraid of the implications; someone at work was running a porn server.

She stepped off the curb into the alley. The little rails up to her

apartment never looked so good.

She saw a man standing on the stairwell. With his hands in his pockets, he was watching her and waiting. Dark hair had loosened from a ponytail, and it brushed his shoulders. The tunic caught her eye because it fit well over his broad shoulders. *He has beautiful dark eyes. He's mixed Asian, like me. Beautiful.*

Tommie heard an engine rev. The horn on the street blared through the mixed sounds.

She turned but couldn't tell which car had honked, and everything felt like she began moving in slow motion. The traffic on the main street blurred into the noises from the ally.

She looked to the steps of her apartment again, but the man she admired was gone.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the chrome of the SUV.

From the rooftops, she heard a rooster crow.

\* \* \* \*

"Lin Yao...?"

The voice was distant. Tommie could feel the mists in the darkness. The rising light was clearing away the shadows. They were comforting. In the shadows, there was quiet and solitude like she never believed possible.

*Beautiful Jade Treasure.* This meaning always held special memories for her because her father would speak to her in Chinese and translate it for her and her mother.

"I need you with me," a man's voice called, closer. "We don't have much time!"

The voice ripped apart the peace of the darkness. The images still blurred, but slowly the events started to come back but the longing began to go back to the darkness.

*What is a rooster doing in downtown Philadelphia?*

*The stories... the Guardians. Grandmother told the story of the twelve Spirits. Nai-Nai?*

"Tommie," the man's voice was clear. "Focus, stay with me."

"Yeah?" she answered. She could see that she lay on a bed and filmy curtains surrounded the small room.

"Come on, sleepy head...breakfast is waiting."

She opened her eyes and saw a tray.

"*You tiao and dim sum,*" the voice said, but a man behind the tray became visible.

"How about corn flakes?" she sniffed, and the smell of the deep

fried bread, or *deep fried devils*, greeted her. “Is that coffee, too?”

“Yes, that I could manage,” he answered.

Even if breakfast was traditional Chinese, it looked like it was manageable.

“Who are you?” Tommie asked. She looked up into a face that could be her own if she were a man. He had light skin and rounder eyes to indicate a mixed heritage like hers. Her half-Chinese father married her mother of Norwegian decent.

“Logan,” he answered.

Tommie stopped and stared. “I’m sorry, I expected something a little more profound.”

“A little more Chinese?” he laughed. “Even America needs its Guardians, but the name is Chinese, meaning ‘little hollow’.”

Tommie sat up on the bed. “I don’t...” she started but her head was swimming, and she couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Easy, eat first. Take it easy.”

Tommie’s head whirled with confusing images. “How did I get here?”

“What do you remember?”

“I don’t know...I don’t remember when I fell asleep.”

“What do you remember last?”

“I was pissed off at work. I found smutty images of women on the computer. Someone was hiding their beat-off material at work.”

“Did you find the source on the server?” Logan asked.

She had to stop and think about it. “Yea, and then my login and permissions got messed up, they had to give me busy work until the main offices got it straight.”

“Did you document it?” he asked.

Tommie had to stop and think. “Yes...I took screen shots of some of the pictures and put it in a work folder that I use.”

“What else do you remember?”

Tommie thought about it, “Just little bits and pieces. I burned DVDs later.”

Logan looked at her, waiting for the explanation.

“I walked home to relax. I was walking past Chinatown. I couldn’t get work off my mind and thought I could go running.” She continued to think about the sequence of events. “You were waiting for me at the apartment.”

“Do you remember anything else?” he asked.

“No...a horn...a rooster...” Tommie stared. “I don’t remember

getting back to my apartment. I must have fainted. You found me and brought me back here?”

“It’s for the best,” Logan took a deep breath and explained. “The car horn you heard was from another car trying to avoid an oncoming SUV.”

“I hate some drivers! They drive like idiots.”

“You might hate this one more.” His tone was quiet, and he gently caressed her leg, “I swooped in and grabbed you—your spirit—before the SUV barreled through the alley and gave you the injuries.”

“I feel fine.” She patted her leg to verify the condition.

Logan nodded. “You should. You are in good shape.”

A small, cream-colored dog jumped up on the bed. The fuzzy head cocked to the side, and the whippy tail flipped in a metrical fashion before he finally sat down and gave a short bark in greeting.

“Fling?” Tommie couldn’t believe her eyes.

The little dog gave two more short barks before he stepped forward and brushed her leg with his front paw.

“It is you! Oh, Fling, I missed you!” Tommie scooped the little dog into her arms, and he started to lick her face.

Logan started snickering before recovering his composure to ask, “Okay, I have to know, how did he get that name?”

Tommie couldn’t contain her giggles as the excited little dog wiggled and whimpered.

“Nai-Nai took him for a walk when we first got him. I was a child. He had a few tummy problems because of the stress of having a new home, and she took him out a lot. She came inside one morning, sputtering in Chinese, and ranted, ‘Him Fling! Him Fling Poo!’ but we didn’t understand what happened at first. We discovered he gives a backward kick in the dirt to try covering his poo, but he doesn’t see where he is kicking. His name has been Fling ever since.”

“What happened?”

“Fling died about a year ago...he was old.” Her gaze drifted down to meet the eyes of the little dog. Tommie stroked his wiry fur, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

Logan reached out and squeezed her hand.

“When you swooped down to get me, you didn’t get all of me.”

“No, it was your time. The Great Ones make the rules, I am only a servant.”

“You are a Guardian? Why couldn’t you guard me?”

“I did. I guarded you from the day you were born. It has to be for the greater good. I will continue until your path in this world is clear.”

“What good does my death bring?” Tommie knew her tone accused him of being lax.

“It is difficult for you to understand because many people feel the end of their life is the final end to all they held dear.” Logan looked into her eyes and spoke softly as the tears continued to fall. “In truth, it is merely a beginning. In the world below, you will see how your life and death affected many people. You will see the people that loved you, but you’ll also see the wickedness your death exposed. We will work to punish that wickedness. I need your help. I can’t make this right without you.”

The silence lingered. Logan’s eyes told her the truth, there was still more work and new discoveries in the world around her. His eyes flashed with urgency.

“What do we have to do?”

“I have to teach you, but we must first go to your apartment. You made copies of the files?”

“Yes. Two DVDs, I hid them in my bedroom.”

“We have to get them out of your apartment. The men will be ransacking your apartment and looking for any copies of the files.”

“I thought you were supposed to be protecting me?”

“I am protecting you! I have been very busy the last two weeks!” Logan’s eyes pleaded with her. “You are here, and everything that you are is safe. If we don’t act soon, the men could get away with killing you and exploiting young Asian women.”

“What about breakfast?”

“What breakfast?”

Tommie looked around; she was now standing in front of him, in the alley, with her work clothes and shoulder bag. Logan wore the same Asian attire that she saw when she first saw him on the steps.

The police blocked a section of the alley and yellow tarps covered a section of the road. None of the gathering crowd noticed their actions in the alley.

“I’ll explain later.” Logan said urgently. “We need the DVDs.”

\* \* \* \*

Tommie ran up the steps to her apartment, close on the heels of Logan.

He turned to her at the top of the steps, “As soon as the police have cleared the scene below, a man is waiting to break into your



apartment. I need you to close your eyes, hold my hand and step forward quickly. Ignore what you feel. I will explain the details for you once we get to safety.”

“But, we are ghosts, they can’t hurt us!

“No! We are *not* ghosts! You will be like me, a Guardian. I didn’t want to believe, but I knew it was true when I saw the *Lin-yi*, the new form you came to take. We can die in this form, too! I will explain later. Once this is over, you can determine if you wish to stay.”

Tommie stared into his eyes and found a gentle plea in their dark depths. The stories of the Guardians made her feel like humanity was a starting point in a long chain of events in the life of a spirit. In her childhood, she hoped the tales her grandmother told were true.

Logan gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head in an upward motion, questioning if she was ready, and held his hand out.

Tommie grasped his fingers but felt a tingle. She watched as his jaw went slack, but he nodded.

She closed her eyes and felt the tug of his hand pulling her forward. She stepped inside with a brush of electricity passing through her as she crossed the threshold of the tiny apartment.

Logan stopped, so she opened her eyes tentatively. She was now standing in her apartment.

“Where are the discs?” Logan asked.

With little time to think about the mess she left from watching a movie the night before, she moved straight to the nightstand and tried to open the top drawer, but her hand passed through.

“I’ll get it.” Logan made a movement through the top of the table but came up with only a handful of bills. He laid them on top of the stand and reached again, this time pulling out several discs.

Tommie immediately recognized the code she marked on the top disk, which included the server name. “The top discs!”

The remaining discs clattered to the top of the stand, Logan took the discs to the desk in the corner.

“Okay, do you have a friend that would understand the discs and keep them safe?”

Tommie tried to think of someone, but she couldn’t endanger anyone else at work. “Karla!”

“Good. Is your computer running?”

“It should be...it goes into sleep mode when I am not here.”

Logan made a motion with his hand, and the laptop case opened slowly, the screen came to life and her desktop shone brightly. “We

need to write her a note.”

“What do I tell her?”

“Spell her name for me.”

Tommie spelled out her name. As she said the letters, they came up on the screen in spite of Logan’s jerky movements that resembled conducting an orchestra more than typing.

“What’s something you have done with her recently?”

“She talked on the telephone last night about me finding some funny stuff on the server. I didn’t go into details.”

“Something else...something that would tell her it’s really from you.”

“I’m feeling much better since my breakup with Wil. I still hate watching movies alone.” Logan watched as her words came up on the screen. “After our talk last night, I thought it would be best to send you the proof of the problems I found on the server.”

*“...please take these discs to the District Attorney’s office if anything should happen to me. I believe I am followed at work. I am going to take a different route home. It is dangerous for me to have these images since they prove there is a porno server on the work computers and the owners may be exploiting other Chinese women.”*

These words appeared on the screen without prompting.

“My love to you and Figaro...Tommie.” She watched over his shoulder. “No, it’s I-E at the end...it still auto-corrects to Y.”

“Who’s Figaro?”

“The parrot,” Tommie chortled.

Logan enlarged the font and printed the letter. “Do you have an envelope that will fit the disc?”

“Of course. The mainstay of every geek.” Tommie laughed. “In the bottom drawer, near the back.

Logan focused. A larger envelope came floating out of the desk without disturbing any of the other contents. Tommie watched as he folded the paper into precise thirds and then in half again. He slid the note and the disc into the envelope. He focused and then grasped the envelope tightly in his fingers. “Turn around.”

“What are we going to do with it?”

“Take it to Karla’s apartment,” Without any mystical changes, he put the disc inside her bag. “Unless you have enough postage stamps to drop it in the postal drop box?”

“Um...no.”

“Let’s go, quickly.” Logan pulled her to the door. “Now would

be a good time to leave.”

\* \* \* \*

The apartment door burst open, and two men came running through. Tommie’s alarm caused her to inhale for a scream, but Logan covered her mouth.

“Be careful. It’s possible they would hear you, but they would hear the crow of a rooster.”

“No way...”

“I’ll explain.” Logan raised his finger to his lips to silence her. He took her hand again and began running out the door.

Tommie had no choice but to follow at the same pace. Once they made it to the street, she found the sky darkened to late evening already, and the streets were quieting from the earlier bustle of rush hour traffic. They slowed to a walk but Logan didn’t let go of her hand.

“Where is Karla’s apartment?”

“It’s another six blocks from here. You promised you would explain a few things for me once we are safe.”

“Well, we aren’t safe, but it’s a good start.” Logan gently stroked her hand with his thumb.

His touch felt safe, and to her, it felt as real as it would have when she was alive. They walked through the streets of Philadelphia without regard to traffic.

“Okay...you came to me with breakfast, but it disappeared.”

“Subjective suggestion—an illusion, if you prefer but the Elders helped. I moved us both out of harm’s way from the scene below. You were lying down so, to keep from shocking you, I generated the illusion of a bed. It seemed to you, at first, that you were merely sleeping. The food would have been real to you had you started eating. Once you began to remember what you were doing, I couldn’t control the illusion so I slowly returned both of us to the alley.”

“Fling?”

“Fling is real. He loved you during his life. He is a different form of spirit, like all animals, but as we move through the realms, you will see him more.” Logan snickered. “When he sensed you here, he came to you. When you patted your leg, he thought you were calling him to come up to the bed, so he jumped up. He stayed in his realm when you came around to this world.”

“When we passed through the door?” Tommie was curious.

“We have substance to people that live on the same level as we

do. We can fight each other and get injured. Our substance is intangible to the people of the material world, but some of them can see us. Have you ever caught a glimpse of someone out of the corner of your eye but turned to discover they were not there?”

Tommie nodded.

“Well, a couple of times, it was me. When you were young, do you remember the night you followed a boy that had a glowing ball?”

“Yes! It got dark, and I should have gone home, but I found the ball, and he went around the block. And...it was you!” she accused.

“I had to lead you home. There was a dangerous man in the alley, and I had to lead you away from him and around the long way home.”

“I got spanked that night!”

“It beats getting kidnapped, doesn’t it?”

Tommie mused that she probably got the better end of the situation, in spite of the painful outcome. “Is there a way that you can interfere with the troublemaker and not make the person you guard aware of it?”

“Of course! Do you remember the guy accusing you of stealing his designs when you created the screens of the towers? You saw him playing games at his desk, and you continued to work on your images. He tried to take credit for your work, but you turned it in faster than he could. You reported his lazy attitude. He was looking for you during the lunch break, capable of violence, but I made him paranoid enough to confront your boss, who came down first. Big mistake—he took a swing at the boss. Management fired him, but you never knew the full story about what happened.”

“Not a bit.” Tommie realized they had only walked as far as the first of the six blocks to Karla’s apartment, but she was enjoying the discussion. The feel of his hand in hers was comforting.

“Focus on me.”

Tommie looked up into his eyes as they walked. The sounds of the busy street were a blur in the background as she tried to absorb the information about this new existence. She looked forward momentarily, just in time to see the lamp post as she passed through it to another stretch of sidewalk ahead. “Okay, no more monkey business. I want some answers!”

“I am a servant of the Rooster, you won’t get Monkey business from me!” Logan stood straight, with his shoulders squared, defying her to make another accusation.

“We just walked *through* traffic in that intersection.”

"Of course! You think like a human." He resumed walking.

"Well, up to a couple hours ago, that's exactly what I was!"

"I simply distracted you so you would not think like a human. We are being followed by a servant of the men that killed you, and I wish to keep us safe from harm." Logan grinned smugly.

"We are being followed?"

"Yes."

"He's not human?" Tommie asked.

"No. He's human, but he has talents for seeing."

"So if we blend in to the crowd, he may not know he's not seeing a human?" Tommie asked.

"Good strategy."

"Let me lead the walk, you don't think enough like a human."

They continued along the streets, but Tommie kept an eye on the traffic, walking with the people out for a late evening stroll in the heart of Philly. They crossed with the lights and walked around the obstacles Logan might have passed through.

"So, how did I get to have a rooster as a guardian?"

"The year you were born."

"But, I wasn't born in a Rooster year!" Tommie announced.

"Yes, you were, you were born in January, before the New Year transitioned."

\* \* \* \*

On the steps to the apartment building, Logan stopped her. "No good, he's still followed. He can see us."

"Okay, we embarrass him into leaving and think we've gone somewhere else." Tommie looked around and saw a recessed entrance to a lower floor apartment at the corner. She pulled Logan toward the door. She took off her oversized jacket and put it on Logan, pulling the hood over his head. "I need your help to hide, but I want passers by to think we are making out, if not going for balls-to-the-wall sex."

"No good...regular people won't see us...and the person following won't hear the usual noises."

"Silent then!" she said. "Push me against the wall and hump against me like we've been at it for hours, and you are close to coming!" Tommie nestled into the jacket to hide her face.

Logan began thrusting against her in earnest.

Tommie thought about her luck to be stuck in an alley with a fantasy man, only to pretend to have sex. His touch was still warm, and she thought about how, if they hadn't been clothed, it would take

one tiny position shift to drive his cock deep inside her body. She felt him brush against her inner thighs, and she could feel his cock harden. If she didn't know they were fully clothed, she could have been convinced of two people having vigorous sex in the alley from the regular view on the street. The people passed without notice.

Finally, one man passed them, his step irregular and frantic, as if he were searching all the doorways and alleys between the buildings. His step stopped in front of the stairwell before he muttered, "Oh, fuckers, in public. Geez!" and then stomped off to the next block.

Logan stopped the thrusting movement and dared to peek up to the street level. "I don't believe it...that worked!"

"Let's double back to Karla's place, quickly. He won't see us again when we are in the building."

Logan removed the jacket, but Tommie found she didn't need it. The temperature felt fine. She hung the jacket over her arm and resituated her backpack on one shoulder.

They walked quickly to the building. Logan again took her hand and held it gently. When they came to the front door, locked by a pass key, Logan looked at her and nodded to suggest that she close her eyes again as they did at the apartment.

Tommie closed her eyes when moving through the glass, but she kept her eyes open for the remainder of the walk into the building and then signaled Logan to go upstairs.

The front door to Karla's apartment looked welcoming.

"Hey, do we just hand this to her?"

"I can, but you can't...yet." Logan answered.

Tommie hung her head and thought of all the things she would love to tell her old friend.

Logan transformed to a young Chinese boy of maybe ten years old, right before her eyes. His clothing transformed with him. "Give me the discs and stay here. I'll make sure I look like that young Korean boy that lives next to you."

Tommie fished out the discs. When she faced him again, he looked remarkably like her neighbor Yung Yi.

"Anything you want to tell her?" Logan asked.

"She's my best friend, we were college roommates. I could think of hundreds of things to tell her, but it doesn't seem to matter because I'm not here anymore." A tear trickled down her face.

"What can I tell her so that she would know it's from you?"

"Tell her, 'Tommie sent it because you have a level head, and it

balance well.' Make a motion of putting the disc on top of your head."

Logan turned to the door. After knocking, the door opened just a crack, and Logan said with a heavy Chinese accent, "Hello, pretty lady."

"How did you get in the building?" Tommie could hear Karla demanding an explanation.

"Nice man...let me in door downstairs." Logan bowed to her after every clause in his sentences. "Pretty lady on street...give me ten dollars to bring this to you. Tommie, Lin Yao, pretty lady, tell me you levelheaded. Tell me, Karla know what to do with this." He raised the envelope over his head as Tommie instructed.

Through the open door, Tommie could hear Figaro squawk before Karla stepped forward to be visible in the doorway. The crazy parrot let out a wolf whistle before saying "Tommie!"

"Lin Yao, pretty lady," Logan repeated. "Tommie love Karla much, but needs your help." He held out the disc to her with both hands.

"Thank you." Karla's apprehension showed as she stepped back and then closed the door cautiously.

"Go upstairs, to the top of the roof." Logan instructed as his body quickly changed and grew to the looks she knew.

Moving to the stairs and walking up this flight of steps felt alien to Tommie because she'd never been in any area in the building other than Karla's apartment. Standing on the landing, Tommie heard the door to her apartment open again. "Tommie?" Karla called out but the catch in her voice sounded like a strangled sob. The sounds of sadness caused Tommie to stop.

"We can do more for her later, but she must grieve for you. Don't try to rob her of that." Logan cautioned her.

"I need to grieve for myself, who are you kidding?" Tommie stared at the floor of the stairwell. The ache rose, and the realization settled in that life, as she knew it, was over.

"You're right." Logan took her hand and led her silently up the remaining stairs to the roof.

\* \* \* \*

The sights and lights of nighttime Philadelphia made Tommie breathless, as always. In the hustle and bustle of the big city below, the people couldn't see the forest for the trees. They bustled to and fro, worried about the family, bills or traffic. Some people were worried about the crime or lingering problems with work. Most of the

people walked along the streets with their head down, lost in their own worlds of worries. Tommie couldn't scream at these lost people from the rooftop. She simply wished the people could look out and see the larger city that they all called home. The City of Brotherly Love winked at her through the many lights over the horizon.

Philadelphia became the city where she no longer lived as a human. Her perception of the world didn't change, but she knew the truth of her experiences could only have meant a grim death. Looking back, she could only regret the things she never did, and looking forward, she could only imagine what the new life held for her.

"It's always been a beautiful city." Logan looked over the ledge of the roof, his hair blowing in the wind.

"What next?" She dropped her backpack and jacket on a covered vent and wondered what use she would have for them.

"You have strength so you are not a lost soul, hardly a ghost at all. This is a new life. Rather than an ending, it's a beginning."

"What did you do in your early human life?" Tommie asked.

"I worked in Chinatown. My family came to the United States in 1854. We work to keep some of our Chinese traditions, but I didn't understand the details. I saw myself as an American. I was born to a white man and a Chinese mother, but the whole family stood out from both of the cultures, neither Chinese nor American. My father adapted well to Chinese traditions. He wore traditional Chinese clothing, and the people were respectful of him in business. But, he was not in their confidence. I tried to wear American-styled clothing and stood out among the people, like my father. I had an easier time when I would work and the family had a successful store, but we were alone."

"Two worlds and you didn't belong in either of them." Tommie understood well, she enjoyed going into a store with her mother, and the instant Tommie called her 'Mom' people in the aisles would stop and stare.

"Many more people are of mixed blood in the world today but in the modern world, there is also a new brotherhood. The people now see less of the outside and accept what the people have in common."

"Like you and I," she answered. She leaned against the corner wall near a large vent. She watched him looking down to the street and around the rooftop, now guarding them both.

His long hair fluttered in the breezes around the building. He turned his gaze to her, but the silence lingered.

\* \* \* \*



*If you only knew the truth of what you've spoken.*

Tommie's gaze now bore into his heart. Sweetly, she compared him to herself. His dream finally came true, she could now see him, talk to him and touch him. In the years since her birth, he adored her from a distance. Now, he hoped she might choose to live in this realm, and he prayed for the chance to love her. In the trials of guiding her through the obstacles that would lead to her death, the Elders remained silent about her outcome.

Announcement of her pending death agonized him. He fought the Elders, even when he knew it was futile. He knew they did not make the rules; they, too, were servants. He once had envisioned watching her grow, as a woman, mother and grandmother, but he now knew it was for naught. His fury knew no bounds, but he slowly came to see the plan to bring her murderers to justice. Her death was the beginning of justice and protection for thousands.

He also fully understood the Elders' warning from the beginning about watching over those whose heart would be pure. Never before had he encountered a more disciplined but innocent soul. She had learned lessons in the world and from people around her. Through the years, watching her learn often drove him to madness. He wanted to scream to her on the days she cried in frustration, but he followed the principles he served and guided her slowly.

He couldn't take away her heartbreaks because she needed to learn from them as well. He could drive her to talk to friends and find ways to lessen the aches of heartless boyfriends. He could compel her to jog to relieve stress and drive her curiosity to explore her world. He could ease her fears when she tried new activities. He could even ease cravings for chocolate during her cycles, but he could only guide her in the path that she chose, and he could not push her along that path.

Through it all, he understood what it meant to love someone and permit them to grow. Even if she never understood his gift, he would forever know the joys of giving it.

Taking her hand had been unsettling because he felt a thrill with her that he never knew before. It was difficult to look at her tonight because now she could see him and, from the look in her eyes, could even read his thoughts.

"I have many things to show you," he finally forced the words from his mouth, but he still could not tear his gaze away from her eyes as the lights of the buildings glittered in them.

The arrival of the red and blue flashing lights finally allowed him

reason to move to the front of the building and look into the ally.

“Is something going on in the building?”

Logan held his hand up and focused on the approaching men.

“She says she has information,” said one of the men below. “All we have right now is a hit-and-run with trace evidence. She knew too much about the victim to ignore, but I don’t think she knows the young woman is dead. It might be touchy.”

The men approached the building foyer, and Logan could no longer hear them speaking.

“They are the police officers, going to speak with Karla. She called the police. The authorities are involved, but they are going to give her confirmation that you are dead.”

“I don’t believe this myself.” Tommie hung her head.

“I need you to understand.”

Tommie looked up at him, but this time the tear rolling down her cheek distracted him. He reached up and brushed it away with his thumb, but she turned and nuzzled the palm of his hand.

“I must show you...the principles of...moving in this world.” He struggled to maintain control. Her soft skin teased his hand, and her anguish pulled at his emotions because he could now help her.

*There is time.* The voice of the Elder was clear to him. *Actions can heal the heart more than words.*

When Tommie looked up again, the luster of her dark eyes held him. “You feel real to me.”

“I am. We are now the same. Your old body is gone but you are here,” he answered. With the implied permission of the Elder, he moved closer.

Her head leaned down and nestled onto his shoulder. The winds quieted in the corner, and the scent of jasmine wafted up.

The feel of her hand on his back sent a charge through his body that awakened his cock as it had with the lewd demonstration in the doorway. He wrapped his arms around her, his reactions be damned.

Tommie didn’t speak, but she shifted against him, and her body relaxed. The sounds of Philadelphia life around them melded into a distant discordant rhythm.

He felt the stress of the day ebb away, and her body against his felt like the fantasies he enjoyed in the quiet times he watched her sleep. He might have been content to enfold her in his arms if it weren’t for the tiny movement of her head and the brush of her lips against his neck that sent another jolt through him. “Sorry,” she

whispered.

“It’s okay.” He looked down into her face, now so close.

“It’s too easy.”

In his heart, he knew she was right. It would be easy to surrender to her touch. He straightened, standing tall again and trying to force his cock to submit to his will. He also felt she found a moment of peace to accept her role in the destiny that lay ahead.

“If I am no longer human, what are we?”

“We have come to a place that is neither human or spirit, another existence but a blend of both worlds. I will teach you the names, but the circumstances of your life decided your presence here long ago. Often, Guardians roam helping anyone in need. Now, I know more about your role here, but I don’t know the full details, yet.”

“They don’t tell you.”

“They...meaning the Elders...will always make sure I have the information I need, but only when I need it.”

“It sounds boring.”

“Not really. The Elders have a sense of humor.”

*Pucker up, Romeo!*

Tommie stepped forward and playfully kissed his lips, staying close enough to let the ends of her wispy hair brush his face. “You didn’t expect that, did you?”

“No.” Logan drew her close again. The lure to hold her in the shadows of the rooftop felt easy but he had no desire, or instructions, to do anything else. Had it been wrong, the Elders would have cautioned him against touching her or insisted he instruct her.

The sparkle in her eyes now looked playful.

Kissing her again, he gave in to the temptations of drawing her into a passionate embrace, and her body caressed his even down the lengths of their legs. He enjoyed the silky feel of her clothes against his hands and her eager lips against his. His cock began to swell again, and he gave in to the thoughts of her skin against his.

Her mouth opened and a tiny moan escaped before she rose up to meet him in another hungry kiss. Her hands traced the embroidery of his tunic down to the hem and then back up, sliding underneath the thin shirt to take heated claim of the skin on his back.

He held tightly to her, hoping that in some way she understood how he had already watched over her and loved her.

\* \* \* \*

Tommie marveled at her brazen actions, but something about her

situation told her she wouldn't have a chance to enjoy it later.

The air between them prickled with a need to touch, and his swollen member against her belly twitched for attention.

She savored the smooth skin of his back and threw caution to the wind. Her nipples tightened, and she could feel the extra moisture at the top of her legs. Her new body knew instinctively what her mind was only beginning to understand.

When his hands followed the curve of her back down her hips, she wasn't the least surprised to feel the material of her skirt traveling upward as his hands made the return journey.

Her own hands traced around Logan's waist and found the tie holding his loose slacks in place. With a small tug, the knot gave way, and the smooth material slid downward exposing the rising staff.

Logan pulled her hips closer and used his free hand to pull aside her panties and plunge a finger into the damp curls.

Desire spread quickly, and she wanted only to touch with any part of her body. She reached her hand around the growing penis and stroked the smooth skin.

His finger pushed to the opening of her channel and pressed into her body slowly, before retreating and then driving forward again. As his hand pushed forward, he pressed her clit against her body.

A ledge of bricks afforded Tommie the chance to stand closer, but he wouldn't move his hand except to drive it deeper into her body. The wiggle of his fingers spread fire through her belly.

She settled into a comfortable rhythm of rolling her hips gently with the precarious balance against the wall. She worked to fill the need that lit fire in her body and caused her to shudder.

Logan finally shifted and aimed his thick cock into her body. The push was slow, but his cock filled her with desire, extending through her entire body and inflaming the sensitive nub of her clit.

He retreated and pushed forward again, using his hands on her hips and back to draw her closer.

She felt the thrill of the end of his penis reaching the limits of her channel and rolled her hips in short strokes to keep the head hitting against the opening of her womb. The thrill of the exhibitionistic display, combined with his tender touch, and the fire growing inside her body, left her wanting to hold him tight for hours.

Logan pushed his hips forward and moaned.

She loved to hear the satisfaction he gained from her effort. He held her tightly as she moved, but her clit ground against his body and

the thrills threatened to send her over the edge. The attempt to keep the rhythm caused her to whimper. She made no effort to control the noises because she knew they couldn't be heard in the regular world.

Logan kept his hands on her lower back and guided her. He groaned while he struggled to maintain control.

She opened her eyes to look at him, and the eye contact only brought a new connection between them. The head of his cock hammering deep inside her body caused her belly to catch fire. Within a few frantic strokes, her clit tingled, and prickly heat radiated out to the rest of her body as every muscle tightened.

Logan kept the rhythm going when she had trouble moving, but his groans became grunts as his hips pushed out the rhythms.

A final jolt of electricity through her body caused her to cry out. Tight muscles over her body pulsated with the release, and her legs trembled. She squeezed her eyes closed against the flashes of color that surrounded her from her racing heartbeat.

A deep groan came from Logan, and his eruption throbbed inside her body as he filled her.

Logan held her tight as they began to settle down. He shifted his hips slightly, and his staff withdrew from her body.

She opened her eyes to see his head leaned against the wall, eyes closed. His breathing began to slow, but his chest still moved with the deep breaths of air. When he opened his eyes, he looked upward into the night sky for a moment before looking back down at her. She couldn't speak a word as she gazed into the wells reflecting his quiet inner thoughts.

He pulled her closer and clung to her. He whispered, "Thank you," in her ear.

Tommie thought his expression was charming, but it was unusual to her to hear an expression of gratitude. Her past boyfriends could barely stay awake much less express any emotions about her or their time together. She kissed his cheek, hesitant to speak because further words might ruin the peaceful feelings.

Logan shifted one arm to resituate their clothing, but his other arm kept her close in a gentle embrace.

\* \* \* \*

When the sounds of Philadelphia intruded on the tender moments, Tommie finally stepped down from the ledge and used a hand to reposition her clothing. As they settled against the wall again, his arms engulfed her shoulders. She felt safe against all the crazy

events that surrounded her that evening.

“Hey, cut a guy a break, I forgot my passkey!”

Logan stiffened. “That’s him!”

Tommie heard a man’s voice from the ground level almost as clearly as if he’d been just a few feet away from her.

*Easy. Don’t move. Don’t speak.*

Tommie did as directed from the unseen woman’s voice.

*I am Hiroga, and I will explain. The man below will not get past the door, but don’t let him know you are here.* The voice alarmed Tommie, but Logan held her tightly and nodded.

“She is an Elder. Trust her,” Logan whispered.

The man below continued to swear out his frustrations. He tried to plead with another resident to let him in the door when two more voices came from the doorway.

“What’s going on here?” a brusque voice demanded below.

Logan whispered in her ear, “That’s one of the detectives talking to Karla. The first resident he tried to con called the police.”

“Look...I left my wallet on the coffee table. I live in 3B.”

“Let me see your license.”

“I told you, it’s on the coffee table!”

“We have no proof of what you are saying. The resident with a passkey to apartment 3B says he’s never seen you before, and he’s pressing charges.”

The sound of the handcuffs rang out clearly. The man started swearing when the officer began, “You are under arrest, you have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law...”

The man tried to run, but the quick sounds of a scuffle proved he didn’t get far. “Man, I just want to get my shit from this bitch and her punk-ass boyfriend. They went in the building—up on the roof. They have my movie discs!”

“One down,” Logan whispered. “But we need to leave. The cops will be here soon.”

*Use the fire escape stairs.*

Tommie grabbed her jacket and bag and followed Logan to the side of the building. The flimsy metal steps always looked precarious. Some residents had hung laundry outside or filled the tiny landings with planters or even rubbish.

*Use the ladder on the outside.*

Panic struck when Tommie looked down at the items she held.

*Throw them down.*

Logan started descending the fire escape ladder and looked to her to follow. As the Elder directed, she threw the jacket and book bag over the railing but rather than falling to the dimly illuminated street, they disappeared.

She started climbing down in spite of her fears of heights. The descent seemed quick, and even her work shoes let her feet pass over the tiny rails.

*When you get down, take Logan's hand, close your eyes and walk with him toward the street.*

Tommie jumped down the last few remaining rungs of the ladder and stood in front of Logan. The smile that greeted her calmed her fears. He reached his hand up for hers. "I'm taking you to the Elders."

When she took his hand, she heard the voice of the man arrested at the front door, "There they are!"

"Close your eyes. Let's go." Logan tugged her hand.

She closed her eyes and moved forward.

The voice of the officer in the distance said, "It's just cats."

\* \* \* \*

"We're here," Logan said.

By Tommie's perception, she hadn't walked more than six feet, but she now stood inside an ancient temple of some type. Nothing like it existed in Philadelphia, unless it was a scene from her games.

The hint of recognition brightened. She now stood in the first level of the Pyramid of Sunulae. She had dreamed of the temple so many times she created the screens for a game. Her boss loved the images so much that the company created a game out of the premise of her ancient ruins. The scene before her now looked nothing like the plans she concocted for the game; instead, it looked new.

A tall woman with gray hair and dark skin came to the door. "I am Hiroga, the one that spoke to you in the alley."

"Tommie Lin," Tommie stopped a moment and offered the Chinese version of her name, "Lin Yao."

"I have been following you. Tommie is fine if you prefer it."

Tommie nodded. The features of this woman were different but comforting.

"You are confused."

"Quite." She looked around. The inner sanctuary levels held different terraces, covered with hanging plants in a fashion she'd previously seen as an artistic representation of the Hanging Gardens

of Babylon.

“Your life, as you knew it in Philadelphia, is over.”

“I got that part.”

“You were destined to come here. We knew from the beginning, but we couldn’t see the circumstances of your arrival. You uncovered a large crime syndicate, and they murdered you to keep their secrets. That act will undo their organization, but more people must be involved. You must alert several people.”

“I thought all this was...well, Chinese.”

“The disciplines we follow are Chinese, but the wisdom of the people comes from all over the world.” Hiroga led her to a ledge at the base of a temple fountain. “Logan became your guardian because of your similarities in life. It is through those similarities he has come to love you. With those similarities, you can continue to work together.”

The words, ‘he has come to love you’, struck Tommie. Her mind reeled back to their time on the roof and the perplexing feelings that stirred inside when he told her, ‘Thank you’.

“You were bold on the roof, but it helped in many ways. Your liaison with Logan enabled me to establish contact with you, but it also secured your bond to him with the shared energy.”

Tommie looked to where Logan stood when they entered the complex building and found him talking to an older black man. He somehow sensed her. When he looked up, his disciplined stance relaxed.

“There isn’t much time. You have to go to your office when it opens and get your supervisor to see the same images you found. You also have to show him the log files. He will try to call your apartment because he thinks you are late for work, but your father will answer the phone and give him the news of your death. With the screens and the news, he will know to call the police. You will have to protect him because others will come.”

“I need different clothes,” Tommie said as she plucked at the filmy fabric of her work clothes.

“That’s easy, follow me.”

\* \* \* \*

When Tommie returned from the back chamber with Hiroga, Logan still waited. A quick bath and a clean outfit helped her feel better. She selected a simple green tunic, leggings and soft shoes. Hiroga had bound her hair with leather straps and not even a wisp



dared come loose from the ties.

Logan said nothing as she approached. Once she stood in front of him, he used his fingers to lift her chin and kissed her.

Tommie enjoyed the thrill of his lips and the knowledge that his interest in her was more than a cheap thrill.

“We are going to your office,” he explained. “Your boss knows nothing of what transpired last night.”

Tommie nodded.

“You also won’t need to close your eyes when traveling to the sanctuary.” Logan took her hand but gave a nod in the direction they should walk. She followed his gaze as they passed through the door.

“Think about the hallway in the building that leads to your office, just outside Joanna Dawson’s door.”

She’d stood at the door many times, waiting for Joanna to get off the phone while holding more discs for review. Lights around Tommie flashed and blurred. In a brief moment, she was standing in the exact spot she envisioned.

The empty hallway didn’t have the full lights on. A man whistled a tune as he sorted papers on a table. She quickly recognized the melody of the old rock song because her boss whistled or sang it constantly. In the side copy room, Steve McLain sorted the action plans for the day on a large folding table.

*He has to find the paths to the screens you discovered.* Hiroga’s voice came to her clearly. *He can get to the servers.*

Steve passed them in the hallway and took his seat at the first open cubical. She saw the keystrokes to access the terminal and then he entered the first of several passwords to access the programs and storage areas. Several directories opened in tiny windows around his large screen display.

*Use your finger like a mouse. Find the directories again.*

Steve spun in his chair, rolling to the folding table near the entry and he started making coffee. He opened a large box of donuts and began arranging the table for the Saturday shift.

Tommie turned to his screen and found the window with the closest directory. Each new layer of files and folders nestled among the many screens for the games.

The last directory opened when Steve rolled back, confused by the new window on his screen. He clicked another window and concealed the critical information Tommie wanted him to see.

Tommie tapped the screen insistently and made the problem

directory active.

Steve didn't understand and he used the mouse to bring up the other window again.

Tommie tapped the needed window and made it take up the full screen by clicking the Maximize square on the top of the window.

Steve finally stopped and looked at the contents of the window.

Long moments passed as he read the image names that scrolled on past the bottom of the display. "That's weird."

Tommie touched the screen again to highlight a log file bearing her employee ID.

"What in the world?" Steve opened the text file to discover all of the tracking from Tommie's access over the past week. He looked at the directory window and clicked on a random image to discover a lewd picture of three young women on a bed.

For the first time, Tommie heard profanity from Steve as he checked the image names on the log with each of the images in the directory. He verified most of the contents of the log file and saw the same images she had seen and several of the videos.

He picked up the phone after checking his phone directory, and Tommie saw him dial her apartment phone number. "Hi, may I speak to Tommie, please? This is Steve McLain, her boss, and I need to hear from her...What? No...oh, dear...no! What happened? What have the police said? No, I think I need to talk to them. Do you have a number for the detectives? Okay. Thank you. I'm very sorry."

Steve hung up the phone and stared. The normally chipper face looked somber, and a tear trickled down his cheek. Never before had Tommie considered the news of her death might affect him in this fashion. He picked up the phone and dialed the number he'd scrawled on the notepad.

She stepped away from the desk and waited while Steve spoke to the officers.

After hanging up the phone, he rested his head in his hands.

"Take care of the others, Steve," Tommie said quietly.

Steve straightened in his seat and started to dial the phone, using a list of the twenty people in their Art and Simulations department. One by one, he explained, "Don't come in today, we are closing until Tuesday. Tommie Lin died last night in an accident, and it's under investigation by the police. No, I don't know anything else."

After the last call, Steve tried to pour himself a cup of coffee, but his hands trembled too much. He sat the cup down and grabbed a

napkin from the stack as the tears fell freely.

Steve found a reprieve when the intercom speaker crackled with the voice of the security guard asking, “Are you expecting the police? Two detectives are here to speak with you.”

Steve strolled over to his desk, “I’ll be right down.”

*Walk with him.*

Tommie looked back at Steve’s desk to see the screen saver had engaged and flashed varied game screens.

“Are you okay?” Logan asked.

“I used to think my boss was one of those terminally happy people that always smiled, no matter what.”

Logan pointed to Steve’s vanishing feet on the stairwell.

Following the boss was easy for Tommie; finding two men, hiding under the stairwell on the second floor, came as a shock.

*I see it. Keep following. They can’t see you.*

Hiroga’s voice was reassuring. Tommie arrived downstairs to see two officers in suits flash their badges at Steve.

This time, Steve led the men to the office using the elevator, only to arrive in the department to find papers falling onto the floor. Tommie could see Logan, but it looked like the men were knocking the papers off as they passed by the desks.

“Damn it!” one man cursed. She recognized one of the men hiding in the stairwell. “Watch where you are going!”

“Hey! You guys aren’t supposed to be here!” Steve yelled.

The two strange men started a dead run to try to reach the back server room.

“Freeze! Police!”

The officers ran after the men and drew their guns as the two tried to unlock the security doors.

“Two more criminals down,” Logan said.

\* \* \* \*

It took a half hour for another car to arrive to transport the two men to the police station.

Tommie watched as the detectives sat with Steve, and he explained the access log and the images on the server. After several phone calls, he arranged for the police teams to access the servers.

*Follow Logan to the warehouse.*

Tommie looked up, and he nodded.

More lights flashed, and they stood in an older industrial section, not far from I-95. One security gate offered protection for a large

group of warehouses and shipping containers, but the security guard didn't even notice as they passed.

"Is it always this exciting for you?" she asked him.

"Until a few weeks ago, it was almost boring." Logan winked.

He led her to the back. A pile of debris and old palettes stood against the fence where porcelain berry bushes had grown thick between the boards. Now the plants were shriveled, but the black berries still dangled from the stems. "We need to light fire to this brush, get it to catch the old crates and scare the women out."

"What women?"

"The women in the pictures."

"The security guard will call the police?"

Logan nodded. "Just 911, but it will get some attention because he'll tell them about all the women running from the building." He kneeled and ran his hands over the board closest to the dead plant material. Within seconds, the wood began smoldering, and then tiny flames began to crawl over the plants.

Tommie couldn't believe what she was seeing and pulled him back by hauling on the collar of his tunic. "Careful!"

Logan laughed as he rose to his feet. "You will learn that simple fire doesn't hurt us. You can master the elements so you can even avoid harm from bullets. I'll show you." He stood with his hands in his pockets, and they watched the side door of the warehouse.

In a few moments, the plant material and old shrubs began to catch the crates and pallets, and the flames created a column of smoke that filtered into the broken, upper windows of the warehouse.

Logan held his hand up as if calling to someone in the distance, but Tommie heard the early morning crow of a rooster.

The first exclamations from inside the warehouse turned into screams. A door opened on the side of the building, and women started running out in varied states of dress. In the distance, Tommie could see the look of disbelief on the security guard's face when he reached for the phone.

Police and fire trucks arrived, and the security guard opened the gate. Several men from inside the warehouse were screaming at the women, but they refused to heed the commands now that they knew the authorities would help them. One woman spat in the face of one anxious-looking man just before the police pulled him away in handcuffs.

"Eight more men down, two more to go." Logan said. "The rest

will start tumbling down like a house of cards.”

“Which ones?”

“Your killer and the man that hired him. We get them tonight because they are arranging the final payoff. Right now, we go back to your office.”

\* \* \* \*

Steve stayed busy with a large team of investigators, going over every detail in Tommie’s cubicle and all of the stations.

“This place is crawling with cops. What do we need to do?” Tommie asked as one of the officers sifted through her trash and separated papers from the banana peel and stale bread crusts from her lunch. To her embarrassment, her trash hadn’t been taken to the refuse bin the night before, but she realized that the police would find her checklist of the server codes she could no longer access.

“Nothing, yet.” Logan wrapped his arm around her back and tugged gently to guide her away from the busy office.

Tommie walked with him slowly to the supply room. Shelves surrounded a large room with boxes stacked high along one wall. The light was still on because it appeared that the police checked this room previously.

“You’ve never had a fantasy about making love in your office?”

“No, but I’ve never dated a co-worker.”

“Or, worked with a lover?” Logan’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Not until now.” Tommie had to snicker. She’d heard of a few office romances happening in the company, but a bed of boxes didn’t rank in her top fantasies. If he’d truly been watching her, he certainly knew about her past boyfriends and boring fantasies.

“The cops shouldn’t come in here.” He held his hand up, and the door closed slowly until the catch finally clicked in place.

Tommie didn’t budge as Logan stepped closer. It felt like he was challenging her, and she had to prove she could face him.

“I treasure what happened last night, and I hope that you might stay when this is over.”

“I’d like to stay.” Tommie remembered Hiroga’s remark about his love for her. “I am sure we could explore.”

“We have work and training, too.”

The air crackled. In spite of the setting, the energy of his gaze enfolded her like a warm blanket. Her heart began to thump in her chest because she could smell the deep woody scent in his clothes.

He leaned forward and let his lips graze hers, seeking permission.

Tommie welcomed him and rose on her toes to meet his kiss. His arms drew her closer, and she nestled against him, enjoying the knowledge of how he filled many roles in her life.

His kiss lit fire to her again, as it had the night before. Last night, she was bold and daring. Now, she wanted to love him with the same passion he gave her before. Her tongue reached out to taste his lips, and she brushed it across the ends of his teeth.

Logan's mouth traveled along her neck, only to separate from her long enough to slip off one more garment. Their clothing fell to the floor piece by piece, and the gentle touch of his hands over her bare breasts made the tender skin react and pucker.

She used her hands to explore the muscles she could now see. Her thumbs traced the outline of hair that ran from his belly button down to the top of his slacks. She untied the pants and they slipped to the floor, with his penis quickly rising to meet the challenge.

Her own pants slid to the floor, and she stepped out of the tiny shoes. His mouth danced over her shoulder and to her breast.

Gently he lifted her and laid her on the boxes. His tongue only stopped the assault to let her shift onto her back. He sucked each breast before he kissed his way down to the top of her legs.

He flicked her clit with his tongue until it stood out, begging for attention from the folds of skin. Each time he lashed it, he sent a shiver through her.

She craved the feel of his cock stuffing into her body and his tongue driving her crazy.

When he stood up, raised her knees and pressed into her body, she was ready for him. Within a few strokes, he settled into a rhythm, and the sensations built from deep inside her body. Her body contracted against him, and she couldn't control the way she reacted to his touch.

"Good. Relax." Logan thumped against her legs, driving into her body like a battering ram.

She lay back against the boxes, and her orgasm exploded.

He didn't stop when her body tightened. He pressed forward and let his cock playfully twitch inside to tell her he was ready for more.

It didn't take long to calm, and the illicit feel of the storeroom only added to her desire.

Logan started thrusting again slowly. He drew both her legs straight into the air and caressed the calves as he pushed the head of his cock to the center of her body. Just when it seemed he couldn't go

any further, he pressed a little extra and buried the head against her most sensitive parts.

A second wave began to build, and Tommie heard his grunts in pleasure. Feeling his touch and knowing the satisfaction he gained were equally important to her pleasures.

Logan began pushing with tiny thrusts.

The idea of him erupting inside her body again almost sent her over the edge; her body contracted, and Logan moaned in response. The pace quickened, and the ripples built from deep in her belly and grew outward. With a final contraction, her body exploded.

His reward was immediate; with a grunt, he pushed forward to fill her with pulsing spurts.

She relaxed and let him lean against her legs while using his hands to stroke her body back to the real world.

She finally lowered them around his waist and sat up, but she wasn't sure of the searching gaze in his eyes.

He watched her intently.

"I love you, too." Tommie answered.

\* \* \* \*

In the dark alley that night, Tommie saw the chrome of the SUV, but she didn't recognize it from the sketchy memory of the night before.

"That's it," Logan explained. "You get to do this on your own."

"Stop him? Are you out of your mind?" Tommie couldn't believe her ears. "He killed me last night!"

"The parts that count are here."

"My human body is on a slab in the morgue."

"And your new body is just as lovely," Logan answered playfully.

Frustrated, Tommie glared at him. The short lesson this afternoon about energy, movement and mass sounded as provoking as a high school science class.

"Relax, you only have to get the license plate number and put it in the record on the investigating officer's desk."

She turned to the SUV and read off the tag. The mix of letters and numbers on the plate was easier to remember if she could attach words to it. She stared at the plate long enough to compare it to, "one, three, bird, tree, seed, nest."

"Let's go."

*One. Three. Bird. Tree. Seed. Nest.*

The sound of Hiroga's voice echoing her reminder let her relax as she took his hand. The lights flashed around them before they came to the front of the police station.

*One. Three. Bird. Tree. Seed. Nest.*

Logan pulled her forward through the doors to a desk with folders. A pencil slid across, and Logan flexed his fingers. "What is it?"

"One. Three. Bird. Tree. Seed. Nest," Tommie repeated.

The letters came out on the paper, looking like the license plate 13B-TSN. He moved the slip of paper to the open file and folded the two pages together so the note would not be lost.

"That's them!" they heard a man scream.

*Don't move.*

Hiroga's voice was unmistakable, but the excited voice of the man from Karla's apartment was also clear. A lifetime seemed to pass before the officers pulled the man from the room.

"Okay. We can get out now," Logan whispered.

They ran quickly, and Tommie knew they ran through walls and objects like desks, but it didn't hurt her. They made it to the street in front of the station, and she realized the excitement was finally over. "Is that it?"

"Well, the cop has to investigate the license plate. He'll discover it matches the witness description of the SUV, and he'll find fibers from your coat. They will arrest the driver and charge him with murder. He'll give up the names of the people he's worked with to get a reduced jail sentence, but they have the death penalty waiting."

"So, it's over?"

*Not yet. Ready for another assignment?*

Logan smirked when he nodded. He might have heard his own Elder, but he seemed to know what Hiroga had just told Tommie.

*Two children need a little special protection. Go two blocks and look in the alley on the right side.*

They walked, hand in hand, down the street. In the alleyway, air filtered up from vents in the street, but the alley was empty.

"Where are the children?"

A couple wandered their way into the alley, holding hands.

On the side of the alley, a sinister form lurked behind a dumpster, watching the couple.

"Make him paranoid, whisper in his ear," Logan suggested.

"You can't get them both," Tommie whispered.



He heard her. The man looked around the alley but returned his focus on the approaching couple.

Tommie approached him and whispered, “The cops are close. They’ll find you. The bitch will scream. They’ll lock you up.”

Like a frightened cat, the man jumped from behind the dumpster and ran down the sidewalk at full speed.

The young couple gasped, but the man pulled his lady close and slipped into the door of the apartment. “Guess we just caught some homeless dude taking a leak. How are *you* feeling?” he asked his companion.

“I’m still as horny as we were in the theater.” The young woman giggled, and the door closed behind them.

“Where are the children?” Tommie asked.

*She’s pregnant but doesn’t know it yet. The twins have a chance at life if their mother is healthy.*

“How are you feeling?” Logan asked her with a wink.

“A little cocky,” Tommie teased.

The End