



## **Scented Lust**

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## Chapter One

Jordan couldn't tell how long she'd slept, but she woke feeling rested, physically and mentally satisfied, for the first time in she didn't know how long. She looked around the cave of a room. A cave not just because of its cavernous size, but because the room's corners and every spot where wall met ceiling was curved, beveled, like glass. The ceiling was high too—maybe fourteen feet—and it was textured in an old pattern that reminded her of plastered-over flower stems and vines.

The walls and ceiling were painted in an odd shade of grayish-green that she thought would have made a smart pants suit, but which she'd never seen on a wall. It was as much that strange color as anything that made Jordan think of a cave.

She hadn't said or heard any noise, but she expected sounds to echo. *Borderline creepy. Funny,* she thought, *I didn't notice any of this last night.*

The furniture was sparse for such a big room; the large bed she was in, night stands on either side, an old fashioned double-door wardrobe and an antique desk that she thought was rather feminine looking. Each piece of furniture was dark mahogany. All of it was shining like somebody had used a whole can of lemon Pledge and more than a little effort.

There was the faint scent of lavender in the room. It was like somebody's grandmother had slipped some lavender sachets all around. She couldn't pinpoint the exact locations emitting the odor, but she thought its presence seemed entirely appropriate for such an old-fashioned look.

Jordan sat up and rested on her elbow. The beautiful nude stranger next to her stirred. She lifted the sheet and took a long, hard look. *Mercy, he could model and most people would think they were looking at airbrushed perfection.* She felt like a shameless hussy when she realized she was licking her lips.

*He has to be younger than me. Nobody, not even a buffed man, should be allowed to look so good lying flat on his back after the age of thirty.*

He was white but tanned to a shade just short of her sienna brown color—at least that's what she thought. His eyelashes were so thick that, at a glance, it seemed as if he was squinting through partially opened dark eyes. She had the strong desire to lean over and bite, to take just a little nip, of whatever part of his luscious body her mouth found first.

Her eyes traveled down his lean, albeit muscular body. Although his manhood was flaccid, she could see he'd been blessed in more ways than one. She fully expected to be sore when life required her to get up and walk again.

That nagging voice inside her that always had too much to say tried to guilt trip her back to the previous evening, but her joy wouldn't allow it. She'd already decided to wait until she got home to relive everything, including the inevitable guilt, and her mind was holding her to it. Plus, she knew she would have to tell Leeana, her best friend/confessor, *everything* when she called to let

her know she was back home and all right.

Jordan continued her study of the tanned eye candy. At the club he'd introduced himself as Artest, and he'd corrected Leeana when she'd called him Art. The hair on Artest's body was as dark as the thick mop of longish loose curls on his head. The curls were arranged so perfectly that at first she'd questioned the randomness of them, until she saw him running his fingers through them as he pondered one of Leeana's many questions. They fell back into the same perfect order.

He was just a percentage point or two from being too hairy for her taste, but she noticed that most of it was concentrated on his chiseled chest. His legs and arms were well within her acceptable hair range. The color of the hair on his head was the darkest brown with just a hint of deep red. It took her a moment to remember the name of the color, and when it came to her, she almost said it aloud. Umber—he was a deep umber-haired hottie.

He stirred again, and she knew it was time to get out of there. It was the first time in her life, all thirty-two years, that she'd had a one-night stand, and she wasn't about to get caught in the embarrassing morning-after getaway.

She knew she would regret her actions later. Jordan had received good home training from an old-fashioned older woman—all of which she'd ignored the previous night.

He'd proven to be so much fun and so smart, but she doubted that she could build a relationship around such a casual pick-up. Like the commercial says, you never get a second chance to create a first impression. Just another example of Jordan Greene's lost opportunities, she said to herself, and she fought the numbing effect the thought usually hatched.

Sighing, she sat all the way up and learned that it wasn't going to take actually walking to spark that between-the-legs soreness. Her mind flashed to the previous night's vigor, and she felt a hot wave of shame overtake her body. Her body burned with prickly heat. She wondered how legitimate sluts managed the humiliation.

*Please let me get out of here before he wakes up, and I promise I'll never do anything like this again. Especially now that I have last night to remember.* She grinned in spite of herself.

Jordan found her clothes on the floor next to the bed—exactly where she'd tossed them. She stuffed her bra in her purse and pulled her look-at-me sweater over her head. *My good old hussy red sweater—it's never failed to get me attention yet.*

He mumbled something as she was putting on her new midnight blue panties. The bra and panties were a set she'd bought after work on Friday. It was the last day of school before Spring break, and the underwear was her congratulations gift to herself. She'd made it through her first term as a college instructor.

Maybe somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she was going to force herself to go out and meet somebody too.

“Don’t move!”

After she got over the initial shock of his voice—and yes, it did echo—she turned around and found him dressed and standing near his wardrobe. It was so confusing she actually looked back at the bed to see if he was still there. *Surely he’s a twin.*

“Excuse me?” Jordan said. Regardless of his apparent catlike abilities to hyper-move around his bedroom, who was he to tell her she couldn’t leave?

“Don’t talk either.”

“Who the hell. . .”

Before she could finish, he was standing next to her with his hand over her mouth. “There’s somebody in my house,” he whispered in her ear.

She nodded to let him know she understood, and he removed his hand.

He inched closer to his closed bedroom door. With his eyes closed, he patted the door in several spots, high and low, with the flat of his palm. “There’s two of them, both inside. I can’t fight them and protect you too. We’d better leave. Where do you live?”

She was beginning to suspect a scam. She still hadn’t heard a damn thing. “Look, I had a great time last night, but. . .”

He touched her neck with the flat of his palm, much like he had the door. “Thank about the place where you live,” he said in a soulful, gentle voice that sounded far away.

“What?”

Jordan tried to turn and look at him, but she couldn’t move. From the corner of her eye she could see he wasn’t there, but somehow it seemed as if she still felt the pressure of his palm on her neck.

*I only had two drinks last night. Something is very. . .*

Before she could finish her thought, everything went dark. Before she could scream from her sudden blindness, the light was back.

Except that they were standing in the living room of her little one-bedroom apartment.

“Who, or better yet, what the hell are you?”

“That, little girl, is the kind of thing you should ask *before* you go home with a stranger.”

## Chapter Two

“How many exits do you have?”

Jordan heard his question, but she couldn't answer. She couldn't do anything but stand there in the middle of her living floor staring at him. She looked around the room. It was still cute, well-coordinated in muted mauve and blue colors, with limited art and no frilliness.

“If they followed, we don't have much time. Tell me!”

He grabbed her shoulders. The expression in his eyes made her think he wanted to shake her. She didn't know what stopped him, but she'd been told she could throw some mean looks. He stopped not because he saw a fighter, but because he saw a woman on the verge of tears.

“Do you have more than one door?” He said it softly, like he was talking to a child or a limited adult.

She nodded and pointed to the kitchen.

“You've got a back door?”

Again she nodded.

“Do you have a Bible?”

That snapped her out of it. “Of course I have a Bible!” *I'm a good Christian girl, last night notwithstanding.*

“More than one?”

She had to think about that. “I've got a full-sized Bible and a pocket-size copy of the New Testament.”

“I said Bible, the whole thing!” He was hollering again, but this time he caught himself. He cupped both of her cheeks in his big hands. She looked into his eyes and knew he wanted her to feel safe. “I'm sorry, Jordan. I'm not a bully. I just don't want anything to happen to you. Do you understand?” He cracked his full mouth but only made a slight smile. That smile was enough to make him gorgeous again.

She nodded, but inside she was screaming, *hell no, I don't understand!*

“What about a crucifix?”

“I'm not Catholic. What's going on? How did we get here?”

“Not now, Jordan. Do you have a cross of any kind?”

“Yes, it’s in my jewelry box.” She nodded in the direction of her bedroom.

“Go get it and the Bible. Hurry,” he said, and then he added, “please.”

Jordan left him spying out into the hallway from the peephole. The thought of sneaking out the back door crossed her mind and then crossed it again before she returned to the living room. The only thing that stopped her was fear. She figured anybody who could instantaneously make her appear in a place at least five miles from where she started could certainly catch her before she got down her creaky back stairs.

He took the Bible from her hands first and put it on the floor against the middle of the closed door. He stepped back and looked at it and then moved it a little to the left. “Does that look like the middle to you?” he asked.

“Yes, but I don’t like the idea of my Bible being on the floor.”

He glared at her like he’d never before heard anything so stupid. “Where’s the cross?” he asked, apparently deciding to ignore her Bible concerns.

She opened her hand and showed him the tiny gold cross and its gold chain. She noted that he took it like it was something unclean.

“No, Jordan. I’m sorry. I do respect your Bible and your cross.”

“What?”

He shook his head like he was trying to shake out the cobwebs. “Nothing. It’s awfully small, that’s all, but I guess it will have to do for now.” He pulled the chain from the cross and handed it back to her. “I’m going to need some tape. The strongest tape you have.”

“I don’t think I have. . .”

“I need something that will stick it to the door!”

The only thing that came to mind was some two-sided sticky linen-like material that she used to rip the hair off her top lip every other month or so. She decided to just go get it rather than trying to explain it. He wasn’t exactly the patient man he’d been the night before.

When she returned with the box and handed it to him, he did exactly what she’d hoped he wouldn’t. He read the box, took out a strip and then looked at her top lip. Jordan was glad she had used a strip the night before while getting ready for her big night out. Actually she was somewhat impressed. Most of the men she knew would have just assumed they were for her legs or bikini area, even after seeing the lip-sized strips she’d pre-cut.

He stood back and looked at the back door. “I would say this is the middle, what do you think?”

She nodded.

Artest pulled the waxy paper from one side and stuck the cross to the door. “Okay,” he said. “They definitely can’t come through the front, and this might keep them from coming this way. Where does this door lead?”

“To the laundry room’s back hallway, but you can’t get into that room without a key.” She spoke with firm sincerity in her eyes, as if they were talking about people who played by the rules.

Adorable, he thought.

He smiled. “The *people* we’re running from aren’t stopped by locks.” He licked his lips, and she got the feeling that he wanted to kiss her. As soon as she thought it, he smiled again and asked, “what do you have cold to drink?”

She opened the refrigerator and stepped back to let him look. All she had were drinks and wilted salad food. She was trying to lose ten pounds before summer. She chose to ignore the judgment in his eyes. *Not all women are Suzy Homemakers. Deal with it.*

He took a light beer.

“It’s not even nine o’clock yet,” she said and immediately regretted it. *What do I care if he’s an alcoholic?*

“The alcohol doesn’t affect me.”

“I’ve heard that one before.”

“No, really; I can’t metabolize it. It goes out just like it goes in. If I drink too much of it, it will irritate essential body parts, but that’s about it.”

“Then why drink it?” she asked.

“It gets colder than sugary drinks, and I crave cold. I run a little hotter than most people.”

That actually made sense. If the night before was any indication, he certainly ran hot. What didn’t compute was the fact that he walked back to the living room with his opened can of beer and sat down on her sofa like he expected to be there for a while.

“We’ll know soon.”

She sat down next to him. “What will we know?”

He took a sip of his drink. “Last night was special, Jordan, it was wonderful. It’s been a long time. A very long time.”



She didn't know how to respond to that. She wanted to tell him she'd never done that before, but wouldn't a woman who picked up strangers every weekend say that too?

"It was my first time out on a Friday night in almost two years." It wasn't quite the same, but she hoped he would take the leap of logic. Jordan really cared what he thought of her.

"I know."

"You do?"

"I do. When you went to the restroom, your friend, Leeana, read me the riot act. She told me I needed to leave while you were gone if I was out to hurt you."

Jordan laughed. For such a little thing, Leeana was fearless. "That sounds just like her. What did you tell her?"

"I told her the truth. That I wasn't looking for anything permanent, but that I would treat you and any other women I meet with respect."

Jordan tried not to show her disappointment, but then she remembered that in spite of his good looks and wonderful lovemaking, he was strange, and not in a way like any other strange guy she'd ever met. "How did we get here, Artest?"

He stretched out his right leg and looked at his shoe. She wondered why he did that, and the thought occurred to her that, with legs that long, he probably wanted to put his feet up on the table. "It's not going to make any sense, but we came the back way."

"You were right. That doesn't make any sense."

He stretched out the left one as much as the cocktail table would allow. "Have you ever been in a play?" His eyes were playful, teasing, and for a moment she remembered why she agreed to go home with him in the first place. That and the fact that vital parts on her body were growing cobwebs.

"Not since high school."

"Good enough. If you think about your world as being a play, where we are now is on stage. We got here as if we were moving around backstage. The ones chasing me can't come in the theater, but they can go anywhere around the outside of the playhouse until they're within about fifty feet of me, and then they can come backstage and on stage unless they are stopped by religious icons."

"And that would be the Bible and the cr. . . did you say *my* world?"

He put the beer can on the naked cocktail table and looked at the front door. She started to say

something about using a coaster, but he put his index finger up to his lips to indicate that she should shush.

“They’re out there,” he whispered.

She didn’t hear anything but the loud ticking of her kitchen clock. Jordan looked at the door and sat very still, hoping she would hear something, anything. When she looked back at where he should have been, he wasn’t there.

“They’re going around the back,” he whispered. As close as he sounded, she figured he was standing behind the sofa.

“How do you. . .?” She didn’t finish because she figured she must have blinked or something. She was still sitting on the sofa alone, but he was across the room in the kitchen, standing next to the back door doing that same thing with his palm.

She jumped. Shock and confusion were stronger than the urge to scream. There was movement in her peripheral vision. It was him, moving his palm, still flat against the door but touching different spots.

It took her fifteen seconds to stand up and walk to the kitchen—she knew because she counted. There was no way he got there the same way. Leaning against the stove, she decided to watch him carefully. Blinking was no longer an option.

She studied him until her eyes watered and he seemed to move at the same speed as anybody else. It was a good thing she was observing him so intently. If she hadn’t been watching, she might not have seen the head—actually, face—that came through her closed back door.

She screamed. Actually she screamed and crouched. At the moment she wouldn’t have been able to say why she crouched, but later she imagined it had something to do with growing up in the inner city. The man probably saw her, because she was straight ahead of him, but not Artest, who was standing on the other side of the cross. Artest pulled a knife out of . . . actually she didn’t know where the knife came from, but it was there in his hand when a bony leg in gray slacks started coming through the door.

“Get out of here now!” he screamed at her.

She looked at him in time to see him plunge the knife into the leg. When she stopped running, she was in the bathroom. It took her a moment to catch up with her thoughts. It was like one of those moments when a person gets up, goes to the refrigerator and opens it and then has to stand there to remember why. Jordan looked around the bathroom—and then she remembered. There it was on the back of the toilet. She picked it up and ran back to the kitchen.

Artest was shocked to see her returning. He started to say something but noticed what she had in her hands.

“Great, put it right here, under the cross!”

There was blood on her door, verification that she hadn’t imagined that leg or the knife. She placed the gold-colored Buddha under the cross, touching the door.

He hugged her—totally unexpected, but appreciated. “That’s big enough,” he said in her ear, “they can’t come in around that, I don’t care how thin he is.”

That scent of lavender, which she hadn’t stopped smelling since leaving his place, seemed to be coming from him. Considering that neither of them had had time to shower, she wondered how she smelled.

Since the next time she looked at him he was out of her arms and getting another beer, she didn’t have to think about it.

“You think on your feet. I like that,” he said once they were seated again. “So how did you, a good Christian girl, come to have a Buddha?”

It unnerved her that he used the exact words of her earlier thought. He took a sip like they might have been at a casual company barbecue, and that bothered her too. Of all the odd things that had happened since they met, *that* was his question? She knew it probably shouldn’t have, but it made her a little angry. She thought about not answering him and making him answer some of her questions first, but then she made the mistake of looking at him. He smiled at her in a way that made her feel like the only other person on the planet. “It’s a candle burner. I like scented candles.”

“How did you know it would work?”

“I remembered you said religious icon, not Christian icon.”

He nodded and smiled again. He looked like he might have been remembering everything, rehearsing it mentally, so he could tell somebody else. It reminded her of something a proud parent or teacher might do. He didn’t just smile with his mouth. His whole face looked tickled, right on through the top layer of his skin, like if she said one more word about it he would laugh aloud.

“That’s the last question I’m going to answer until you tell me who’s chasing you and why. And while you’re at it, tell me how we got here, and where is my car?”

His expression instantly became somber. He took a sip of the beer. “I’ll answer the easiest question first, okay?”

She nodded.

“Your car is probably in my driveway where you left it after you followed me home last night.”

She pictured the half-circled street in front of the mini mansion that he so casually referred to as a driveway.

“You surprised me last night when you said you would follow me. I thought for sure you were planning to give me the slip.”

*Clearly he doesn't have any mirrors in that big ass house.*

He grinned. “I knew it was an . . . unusual night for you. Even if your friend hadn't clued me in.”

She didn't know if she should thank him or apologize for an amateurish performance.

Shock briefly registered on his face. Thinking that he had heard something at the door, she waited for him to jump up again. He gave her a look she could only describe as sheepish, and then he took another sip.

“Jordan, I really enjoyed our time together.”

He was looking at his feet when he said it, but she assumed they weren't named Jordan too. He wasn't wearing sneakers. It was odd how embarrassed he appeared. Until that moment, she wouldn't have described anything about him as shy.

“Why aren't you freaking out? Most women would have by now.”

“Last night, I told you a little about my life. I'm used to strange things happening, but I have to admit, this has been the strangest twelve hours I've ever experienced.”

“Things must be more interesting at Sac State than I would have thought.”

It pleased her that he remembered where she taught. “Now that we've got the easy one out of the way, will you tell me how a head, or maybe I should say a face, was able to stick itself through my door?”

“Remember I told you about the stage and backstage stuff?”

“Ah—yeah, I'm not likely to forget that!”

“Okay, that's really all there is to it. He was able to do that because he was within fifty feet of me. We. . . these people aren't limited to time and space like humans.”

“Okay, who is he?”

“His name won't mean anything to you. I'll tell you what he is, but I don't expect you to believe me.”

“I'm not sure I believe anything that's happened since about nine o'clock last night, but try me.”

“He’s a Bloodsucker.”

“A Bloodsucker?”

He nodded, again with that shy look in his beautiful dark eyes.

“Meaning he sucks blood?” she asked.

“There’s several more names for them, but that’s it in English—all meaning he lives on blood that he sucks from his victims.”

“Are you trying to say he’s a vampire?”

“Yes and no.”

“Well that clears it up, Artest!”

He shifted uncomfortably and leaned forward, fixing his stare on her in a way that embarrassed her for kidding around. “Jordan, true vampires don’t exist. The myths about them grew out of real stories about Bloodsuckers or Sangsue, as we sometimes call them. Most of what you’ve heard is just part of the fable. They can survive in the sunlight, but they do better in the dark because of their unique vision. They do bite necks, but that’s where the vein is; there are big veins in other parts of the body, and I’ve seen victims attacked from other parts. There are hybrids now, but the original ones were not human.”

“Excuse me?”

“They come from a planet in another galaxy that no human could reach within a normal lifetime with technology that exists today.”

“And you know all this because?” She was pretty sure he was pulling her leg, but she was willing to play along until they got to the truth.

“I know all this because I share a heritage and maybe a bloodline with them.”

A chill ran down her spine. Jordan had survived for thirty odd years in environments that were more hostile than nurturing because she had good instincts—instincts that recognized the truth when she heard it. Those instincts were telling her that even if everything else he’d said was false, he did in fact share a bloodline with the beings they were talking about. “Are you saying you’re from another planet?”

“No, I was born here, but at least one of my ancestors came from that planet.”

He paused like he expected her to question him, but what could be said about such a thing? She figured if he talked long enough he would either convince her he was crazy or convince her he

was telling the truth, but at the current point, she could see the vote going either way. Do I want to know which, she asked herself?

“Are you familiar with the Dogon culture?” he asked.

She did a quick brain scan. She knew it was a word she’d heard before, but what she remembered just didn’t seem to make any sense when connected with the man next to her. “Aren’t they in Africa?” she asked. She taught history, but it was American history.

He looked at her, surprised, with a smile that almost reached his mouth. “Yes, they live in Mali on the river Niger. Most Americans have never heard of us.”

“What about them?” she asked.

“I’m Dogon.”

She looked deliberately at the beautiful man sipping her beer. He was dark, but only in the Caucasian world. There was nothing about him that was black African. If she had to pen his heritage down, she would guess some kind of unique Mediterranean blend. “You’re trying to convince me you’re black African?”

“No, I’m not trying to convince you of anything, but I can’t explain anything about my life without telling you where I came from.” Something happened in his dark eyes that would have caused a light bulb to illuminate over his head had he been a cartoon character. “I don’t remember a lot about my childhood, but I was born in Mali. I’m losing the image of my parents. I have no memory of my grandparents—it was too long ago. I remember bits and pieces of conversations, but I can’t put faces on the speakers anymore.”

“How is that possible? I’m probably older than you, and I can remember things that happened before kindergarten!”

He laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“You’re not older than me, Jordan. I don’t know my actual age, I don’t have any documentation, but I first came to this country soon after Jamestown was established, and I was an old man then.”

They were simple words, spoken in the same soft, seductive voice he’d used in his conversation before, but the truth of it burned like ice in her veins. Jamestown was part of American history—she knew exactly how long ago it was established. As strange as everything had been since meeting him, nothing scared her like that statement. As she mentally repeated it, she felt as if the two drinks she’d had the night before were going to rise up and spill out. Liquid burned in her throat as she held it down.

### Chapter Three

It wasn't often that he would admit, even to himself, that he was lonely, but he had been on Friday night. When he felt like that, every pain from every fight caused his body to ache with renewed freshness. There was a time, in the 1980s, when he used a little cocaine, and it, like the opium he used occasionally while living in England in the 1830s, could take away the hurt. He never got the high those around him spoke of so fondly, but both drugs could even out his pain. He often thought he could have become quite hooked on both or either drug if they hadn't caused him to lose his timing on the day or days that followed. A man like Artest lived or died by his timing.

On Friday morning he'd woken thinking, I need a woman. In all his years, an orgasm or two had come to be his drug of choice. The right set of circumstances could satisfy him for at least as long as she was in his bed. The right woman could stop the pain for days.

He was just about to give up when she came in.

Artest knew when he choose a bar near the university there was a good chance he wouldn't meet the right kind of women. College girls were adventurous and open, both traits he found exciting. They didn't ask too many questions about his apparent wealth and seeming lack of employment. Since they were still young and attractive, they didn't get hung up on the way he looked. Artest had never been comfortable with too much attention about his physical appearance. But he knew college girls could be immature and silly too. When they were insipid young airheads, he found even their voices too tedious.

He remembered that it had been so much easier in the 1920s and late 1960s. Flappers and hippies were always the best lovers, and they could usually hold an informed conversation too.

He'd always been attracted to women with darker skin—they reminded him of home. But African-American women tended to be suspicious of the tall, handsome warrior. He figured it was because they didn't know their own beauty, and they questioned why a man with his outer appearance would find them attractive. He could feel their inner sadness, and it didn't work for his libido. They couldn't just relax and enjoy the moment, and his work wouldn't allow him to take it too seriously. The same wasn't true anywhere else, not even in Canada, but the vibe ran consistently through black women in the States.

But she was happy. He felt it as soon as she entered the room. Artest knew her happiness wasn't shallow, based on her physical appearance—although she was very appealing. There was something in the way she moved that told him she was proud of some recent accomplishment. She was proud of herself.

He wasn't the only guy who noticed her and her friend. In a room full of horny twenty-something year old students, the two women stood out. He imagined the other guys saw them as attractive and mature—meaning experienced. But it was that very thing that stopped the college guys from approaching them right away. As the boys tried to drink up the nerve, Artest approached the table and made his announcement.

“I’m sorry, ladies,” he said. “I’m only going to be able to join you for one drink.” He pulled a seat up to the table, and the waiter stepped up immediately, just as he’d been instructed.

“You know what I’m drinking,” he told the waiter. “Give the ladies whatever they want for as long as they want, and make sure they get a taxi home after I leave.” He put a platinum credit card in his hand.

Jordan and her friend exchanged knowing looks, but neither asked him to leave. Male physical attractiveness had its advantage too. Leeana ordered another drink—Jordan passed.

Before he’d joined them, she’d been reaching out—he’d felt it. It was not normally a feeling that got a response from him, but her reaching didn’t feel needy—it felt welcoming. Artest wasn’t an empath, not a reliable one anyway. It was probably safer to say he had strong empathic tendencies. In a fight, those tendencies could be trusted to anticipate an opponent’s moves. But in just about every other encounter, he wasn’t so sure. Humans were the hardest to read, and females more than males.

No, Jordan’s pull wasn’t routed in need. To Artest, it felt more like she’d made a conscious decision to try to trust. Before he reached them, he could almost feel her pulling with one hand, but when he was with them he could feel her pushing away with the other hand.

Both of the women seem to think he was there to meet Leeana. The first fifteen or so minutes were sticky to say the least. Leeana seemed to be an interesting enough woman, and he found her physically acceptable, but the petite, pale redhead wasn’t even close to being his type. The challenge hadn’t changed since the first time he approached two female friends centuries ago—how to make the one he was interested in aware without insulting her friend. *Woman have no idea how difficult they make it for men when they travel in packs.*

Leeana would ask him a question, he would answer, and then he would ask Jordan a similar question. They went around like that for six rounds before Artest finally said to Leeana, “I just thought of a friend who would be perfect for you.”

She gave Jordan a look that he couldn’t interpret. Jordan announced she was going to the restroom. He expected them both to leave. Women often went in there together, but they didn’t.

“Okay, I get it,” Leeana said, as soon as Jordan left the room. “You’re interested in Jordan, no problem. But I warn you, you’d better be good to her. She’s been out of circulation for a long time, and it wasn’t easy finally getting her to come out tonight.”

He took a moment to explain to her that he wasn’t looking for anything permanent, but that he was always a gentleman with any woman in his company.

“I’ll hunt you down and hurt you if you hurt her,” she said just as he saw Jordan reenter.

It amused him that such a little thing would make such a threat, but when he laughed, she gave



him a look that could have cut steel.

Guys finally started coming to the table to ask both of them to dance, but each time Leeana would tell him, “she’s talking; will you settle for me?”

He thought that was a class move. Only a real idiot would’ve refused her.

Jordan started talking about growing up in foster homes, and Artest began to see why she was so guarded. He told her the abbreviated version of his life. It was actually bits and pieces from several human lifetimes that he put together for just such occasions. In an odd way they had a lot in common. He didn’t grow up in foster homes—in fact, the only time he’d had people around to love him and for him to love them back was when he was a child—but he had lived many lifetimes without them.

There had been five children in his family, and one other, his sister, was chosen for The Service. His other sister and two brothers had been dead for a very long time. It pained him to think about his remaining sister—they no longer communicated.

In the beginning, he’d tried to keep up with his nieces and nephews and then great-nieces and nephews, but it became too difficult to return and find yet another relative dead. He went nearly fifty years without visiting the area in an attempt to avoid that pain. But even now he could go to Mali and meet a stranger who had the face of one of his siblings. Each time it was like a dagger in his heart.

Of course he couldn’t tell her all of that, but he did tell her that he no longer went home because all of his relatives had died off. The look she gave him could have only come from another person without family.

She briefly touched his shoulder and said, “you don’t have to tell me what that feels like.”

That empathic part of Artest felt her pain, and he knew that she did indeed know and he wouldn’t have to tell her, but he also felt she was the first person in over a hundred years that he wanted to tell.

## Chapter Four

He didn't act like he was in a hurry to leave her apartment after the knife and Buddha banishment. Jordan figured he was too embarrassed to get another beer, but he made himself a glass of ice water that was mostly ice.

"You really are a hot box, aren't you?" she asked him.

He paused mid-drink and seemed to think before saying, "I beg your pardon?"

She repeated what she'd said to him again in her mind and realized that it was another one of those old expressions she'd learned from Mama May, and it probably meant something different nowadays. In fact, she was sure it meant something she hadn't intended.

"It's nothing," Jordan said. "Just an expression the woman I call my mother used to say." She still felt conflicted when she referred to Mama May that way, but she couldn't make her mouth just say, "my mother." She figured she went too many years being unable to say it.

"What does it mean? I was led to believe that as a man, I don't have a box." He smiled and added, "But if I did, I'm sure it would be hot sitting next to you."

She was thankful that the blood she felt rushing to her face wasn't visible. She instinctively pulled her hair over her ears so he couldn't see the rims, the one place likely to give her away.

"I'm sorry, did I embarrass you?"

"No, I'm not embarrassed. I just never would have taken you for the vulgar type." *Ha-ha, two of us can play this game, Mr. I'm-too-sexy-for-one-lifetime!*

He started laughing, caught himself and then looked at her and laughed harder in trying to hold it back.

She got the feeling again that he could hear her thoughts. *Can you hear me, Artest? If you can and you don't admit it now, you'd better not ever let me find out! But what could I do to him? Wait a minute—if he can hear my thoughts, he can hear me trying to figure out how to hurt him. Stop thinking. How can anybody stop thinking? Okay, think about something else.* She tried to picture the zits on the face of a young man in her History 201 class.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"You're bobbing your head and looking at me in a really scary way."

"I was thinking."

“Did it strain you?”

“I would say don’t quit your day job, but as I recall, you never told me what you do.”

She saw that her words lost a little of their impact because he was busy looking in his glass. She wondered if he’d seen an ant—they’d been a problem, but they didn’t usually show up until summer. Then she saw him pick up the smallest ice cube and pop it in his mouth.

Again Mama May entered her thoughts. Her surrogate mother would cook liver for her whenever she caught Jordan eating ice. She said craving ice was a sure sign of low blood iron. *God, I hated liver, but I would do anything to smell her cooking again.*

“I’m a hunter, Jordan. Hunting Bloodsuckers is my only job.”

“It must pay well.”

He laughed. “You’re wonderful. I’ve only told maybe ten people that in all my years, and that’s the first time anybody has said that.” He leaned over and kissed her quickly on the lips. It was more intimate than what they’d done the night before. It made something catch in her throat.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that,” he said.

She didn’t know what to say to that. She wasn’t even sure he wasn’t making fun of her. “Can I ask you about something?”

“Sure.”

“You keep giving me the impression that this whole thing is a big secret, but you seem to be very forthcoming about it.” He looked confused, and she added, “About the job and the Bloodsuckers, I mean.”

He turned in toward her and took her hands. Jordan wanted to snatch them away because he’d been holding that glass of ice water and they were cold.

“I’m sorry, are my hands cold?”

She did snatch them away and stood. “Why did you say that?” She didn’t mean for it to come out so loud.

“Because you grimaced, and you didn’t react that way last night when I touched you, so I had to assume my hands were cold. Was I wrong?”

“Oh, okay.” She sat back down. “They were a little cold, but that’s okay. Now, as I was asking, is it acceptable for you to tell people what you do?”

“No, almost nobody outside The Service and the Sangsue have any idea about it. There are

humans in every country who work for us—the assistant jobs tends to pass down through families—but they don't know everything about our work. Just enough information to do their jobs."

"Then why are you telling me?" Her glance fell on the pants he was wearing. They looked different from the ones she thought she'd noticed when he was in the kitchen. Either way, she realized, they probably cost more than she earned each month.

"Jordan, I really enjoyed being with you. . ."

"So you said. Why am I getting the feeling that I'm about to get the big brush off?"

"No, I want to see you again. I really do, but I'll need to start over with you!"

"No you don't. I like you too."

"Yes, I do. When I leave you today, you won't remember anything about this."

She laughed. "Yes I will. I'm not likely to ever forget you!"

He started to say something and stopped himself. He took her hand that he was still holding, balled it in his fist and kissed her knuckles.

It was the oddest and sweetest thing. She couldn't say why it scared her so much. "You're scaring me," she admitted.

"I don't want to, but it will be over soon. I have to do something to make you forget this. But I promise you. I'll see you again. I really want to. Will you allow me back into your life?"

"I don't know. Last night was unique—I don't usually go out at all. What do you mean make me forget?"

"It's nothing, no pain, no feeling at all."

All kinds of thoughts were going through her head. She couldn't get Mr. Spock's Vulcan mind-meld out of her mind. "I don't want to forget," she told him, afraid she might have sounded a little whiny.

"It's for your own good. The Sangsue would kill you if they thought you would remember them coming here. They have survived in this world all this time because my group are their only natural enemies."

"How would they know?"

"I don't know how they know, but they always do, and when we leave people with memories they always come up dead." He shuddered like he'd heard his words from somebody else's

mouth.

“You promise me you’ll find me again?”

“I don’t have to find you—I know where you live.”

“What about my car?”

“Tell me what you want me to do. I can take your keys and make sure it’s back in your parking space within an hour of leaving, or we can go back to my place and drive to a neutral place before I take the memories.”

“Won’t it scare me to just end up somewhere with a stranger in my car or in my apartment?”

“It might a little, but I have a lot of experiences talking my way out of it.” His eyes crinkled in a smile that brought a grin to her lips too.

“One more favor first?”

“Anything.”

“Will you make love to me again before you erase me?”

## Chapter Five

The night before, Artest had known before they left the bar together that she was special. He was ecstatic because he didn't think he could have "fun" anymore. It wasn't just the sex, it was Jordan; her company, her essence. She reminded him of a combination of two special women from his past. Her playful sass reminded him of his sister, Adama. His sister was one person in his mind before The Service and another one later. Artest still loved that first person with all his heart.

He thought it was probably her playful boldness that made the elders notice Adama in the first place. It was considered an honor to be chosen for The Service, but nobody looked forward to learning one of their children, certainly not two, had made the cut. It could be compared in today's world to learning an only child wanted to become a nun or a priest. Of course it's an honor to have one in the family, but goodbye grandchildren and a normal family life.

Jordan's natural sexiness reminded him of Halla, and that memory was bittersweet. He'd met Halla in England in the early 1800s. She was a servant to a nobleman's family. When he first laid eyes on her, he knew she was no man's servant. Her presence in that household suited her purposes. When he got closer to her and experienced her scent, he knew she had bloodlines from his country. He learned that she was a Hunter. They would have married, and it would have been permitted and altogether wonderful, had she survived her last hunt. He hadn't said her name aloud since the day he lost her.

Jordan was the first woman he'd ever compared to Halla.

Among Hunters, it's frowned upon to pursue a relationship with humans, but he'd meant it when he'd told her he would find her again.

Artest had allowed women in his life for longer than a single night before, but never one he'd told so much. Halla was the last one who'd learned early on what he was. If he found one particularly pleasing woman, they'd have what appeared to be a relationship until it was time for him to go out again. When that happened, he'd have to take her memories. It was never easy.

In the last thirty or so years, he'd been able to tell women that he had a very classified job that they couldn't discuss with their friends and relatives. That made it easier to leave when he had to go, without involving too many people. He found the women hurt less too when it wasn't out in the open for their friends and family to judge.

Artest knew the Sangsue wouldn't be gone for long. One good thing about them was that they were predictable. They always traveled in pairs, they attempted two attacks before they retreated, and they didn't leave witnesses. He didn't tell Jordan, but he knew that the two that came for him at his house and at Jordan's would continue to pursue him until he killed them or them him, even if it took months to do so.

Why now was the puzzle. Things had been quiet for months. The last two he was successful in "dispatching" had been at the first of the year. Usually their replacements revealed themselves in

two months, give or take a day or two. Young people would start turning up dead, and he'd know they were back. But nothing like that had happened until now.

Things had been quiet for almost five months. The last time so much time went by, the city where he lived was hosting a rock concert that was predicting an especially large turnout. Wherever young people were in abundance was where the Bloodsuckers went. Since it was their pledge to protect humankind, that was where the Hunters went too. There were always two or three Hunters in a college town.

Artest wasn't looking forward to taking Jordan's memories. He had every reason to believe she wouldn't be an easy woman to approach later as a stranger, but what he'd told her about the Sangsue was absolutely true. If she dies because to me, he thought, but he stopped himself. He just couldn't think about it.

When she'd announced her desire to ask a favor, he really hadn't known what to expect. She'd been so concerned about her car, he was half expecting it to be related to it. He'd learned soon after meeting her that it was her first brand new car and she was especially proud of it. He wasn't often surprised by anything, but her request nearly floored him. He'd sensed earlier that she was embarrassed by her previous night.

When she asked him to make love to her, he didn't answer right away. Artest couldn't answer because he didn't trust his ears. He had an active and vivid imagination, and he thought he'd produced the request. It wasn't until she sighed and he sensed that she was silently admonishing herself that he realized the words were hers.

"It doesn't have to mean anything," she said.

"I can't believe that. . ."

"That I would ask? It's no big deal," she interrupted.

"No, Jordan, that you would think you'd have to convince me of it. Of course I'll make love to you. I would enjoy nothing more."

## Chapter Six

She couldn't believe she'd asked him to have sex with her.

Before coming to Sacramento, she'd been engaged to her college sweetheart, they'd lived together for almost two years, and she'd never once initiated sex. Now, she asked herself, what was it about this man? He wasn't the first drop-dead gorgeous man she'd ever dated. On second thought, actually, he was. *But I had a date with a very attractive guy once.*

Jordan went to the senior prom with a guy cute enough to be a girl, and all he ever got was a goodnight kiss. Of course he might not have wanted much more—he came out of the closet after high school.

Len, her ex-fiancé, was handsome enough—certainly she found him appealing. It wasn't the way Artest looked, but in all honesty, she had to admit, that was what first got her attention.

"It's no big deal," she told him, since he looked at her like her indecent proposal had sent him into shock.

As he finally answered her, he took her hand. She was beginning to see that, apparently, he was a serious hand play person. Had someone asked what he'd said while holding her hand, she couldn't have answered. She was so embarrassed all she could hear was her inner voice screaming admonishments at her. Her own voice and the blood-rushing sound of raw shame were drowning him out. When he started leading her by the hand, her inner voice was stunned to silence.

"Yes, it is a big deal," he said as he placed her hand on his growing manhood. He looked her in the eye and smiled.

She felt as if she would melt if she didn't hurry and look away. Her face moved slightly to the left, but her eyes were locked on his.

There was so much he wanted to say and do with this woman, but he knew it wouldn't be easy for her to let him into her heart. For now, he was willing to take what he could get. "Stand up, Jordan—let me show you how happy that request makes me."

She stood, not knowing what to expect, but willing to take this new bold Jordan as far as she was willing to go.

He pulled her to him. Her willing body tingled as it meshed into his, that before-mentioned swollen part creating its own heat source as he seemed to fuse into her—as if their clothes didn't exist. His lips on hers started off with a feather-light touch and became more and more urgent as his tongue parted her lips. Jordan had seen him drink the beer, yet it tasted like sweet wine on his lips. That, with the smell of lavender, was so intoxicating the thought crossed her mind that she might be dreaming.



She broke the kiss when she questioned whether she would ever be able to breathe again. He looked at her, smiled, and scooped her up like she was weightless. With the confidence of a frequent visitor and without directions, he carried her straight to her bedroom.

The silly girly part of her mind wanted to obsess about her few extra pounds, but she noticed he wasn't even winded as he placed her on the queen-size bed. She was so glad that back in the day, Mama May insisted that she make her bed every morning before school. The room was messy, but her queen-size bed was made and inviting. The satin-finished bedspread was relatively new, and since it had to be dry-cleaned, she'd been avoiding eating on it. It was still the clean, pretty, robin egg blue it had been the day she'd bought it.

Jordan reached down to pull off her sweater, but he stopped her with a touch. Thinking he wanted to say something first, she waited, but it turned out he wanted to do it. He gently slipped it over her head while managing to caress every inch of her arms in the process. It surprised her to see him hold the sweater to his face and nose like it was something precious that he needed to drink in. He deeply inhaled before he let it drop, and a surge of heat shot through her and exploded in her groin.

He joined her on the bed. The awkward bra removal move wasn't a consideration because she hadn't put it on again after leaving his place. He buried his head into her breasts and again deeply inhaled.

"I love the way you smell," he whispered as he nuzzled and then kissed her neck. He then returned to her breasts, licking like the scent had a taste.

"And I you," she said. It would have been a good time to ask him the name of his fragrance, but he took a nipple in his mouth, and a feeling shot through her body that hit every lively nerve along the way before it exploded deep in her abdomen. Jordan knew women with full breasts weren't usually thought of as being as nipple sensitive as their small-breasted sisters, but if nipples could be more sensitive than hers, she didn't want to know about it. A girl has to get up and go to work, and if they could feel any better than his tongue rolling around, suckling and kissing both to hardness, she doubted if she would ever leave her bed.

"Do you have protection?" he whispered.

She had to force the words to make sense before she could answer. *Pro-tec-tion*? She had to think hard and picture the word. What's wrong with me, she wondered—is he pulling my brain out through my nipples?

Her mind finally flashed on the package of condoms she'd put in the nightstand drawer when she moved in eight months earlier. Jordan hadn't seen them since putting them there, but she hadn't been looking for them. "I'll look," she said as she rolled over and opened the drawer.

She found them under at least three degrees of panties, from pretty to everyday to that-time-of-the-month. When she turned to hand the package to him, she was shocked to see he'd removed all of his clothes.

“Wow. I’m overdressed.”

“Yes, you are,” he agreed. He helped her, and they pulled off her slacks with a single frenzied tug.

With both of them in all their glory, he pulled her on top as he rested on his back. “I’m not in a hurry; what about you?” he asked.

“I’ve got nowhere to go.” She was pleased that he was taking that approach. With the intensity they used removing her slacks, she worried that it was becoming a wham-bam, and, after the previous night, she didn’t think either of them should still have that kind of need.

He made a move and they were both resting on one side, facing each other. “I want to kiss every inch of your body,” he said.

Before she could grant him permission, if it was permission he sought, she felt his lips on her neck again. She tried to keep up with her own exploration of his strong body, but eventually the charge surging through her compelled Jordan to just lay back and enjoy it.

He thought her mouth was sweet until his tongue parted her lower lips. He drank in her sweetness, and in that moment, he knew no other man would ever taste her—not while he lived.

\* \* \* \*

Jordan felt she’d always been a little too uptight to verbalize her pleasure, but there was something about this man that made her moan from somewhere deep inside. When he entered her, she moved nimbly to avoid leaving him behind. He met her stroke for stroke, and they came together in a wondrous eruption.

They lay in comfortable silence until she found herself nearly falling asleep.

“That wasn’t fair,” he finally said. Before she could respond, he added, “I don’t want either of us to ever forget that.”

## Chapter Seven

Everything about Jordan was proving to be contrary to his usual. In the past, when he had an encounter with one of the Sangsue while in the company of a human, it gave him great pleasure to wash the human's memories. It was his only assurance that the Innocent would not be harmed because of him. But nothing about Artest's time with Jordan was easily expendable.

He decided he would do it while they were still in bed. She looked like she was falling asleep, and he knew if he added a little extra coaxing during the wash, he could make her rest comfortably. He figured he would slip out of the apartment before he had to look into those beautiful brown eyes again.

He placed the palm of his right hand on the side of her neck. She moaned and nuzzled closer, and it broke his heart that she thought his move was a caress. "I'm coming back," he whispered.

"You better," she mumbled, but he suspected she was sleep-talking.

Artest closed his eyes and pictured their encounter with the Suckers. Her body jerked as they often do during such remembrances. It pained him to know she was reliving her fear. Concentrating as hard as possible, he "saw" it all in reverse. Mentally, he took her back to the club where they met, and he left her at the table with her friend.

He didn't remove his hand until he heard her rhythmic sleep-induced breathing. Artest figured it was the best washing he'd ever done. He didn't want to leave even one memory that could cause her any grief.

He got up and dressed. Then he went to the living room and removed his water glass. After that, he went to the bathroom and was careful about putting the seat back down the way she had it. He couldn't decide if he should leave the religious icons or not. Thinking hard about it, he figured since he was leaving her sleeping, she could use the extra protection. That thought made him realize being with her had knocked him off his game. She was defenseless with or without the icons, and, in his right mind, he knew that better than anyone. When he was sure he'd reviewed and removed any indication that he'd been there, he reached for the front doorknob to leave. Then he heard a sound.

Artest turned slowly, poised to fight. He was shocked by what he saw.

Jordan was standing in the archway that led to her back rooms. She was holding a pillow in front of her naked body. Instead of shielding her nakedness, he thought the pillow, in its blue pillowcase, made her look even more desirable.

He was a stranger caught in her apartment.

He waited for the scream he expected to hear.

"Artest," she said, smiling. "Are you trying to sneak out on me?"



## Chapter Eight

She thought he looked adorable standing at the door, caught trying to leave. Even though she was teasing him about running out, the shocked look on his face made her question if she might have hurt his feelings. *How could such a big guy look so vulnerable?*

“I’m just kidding,” she felt she had to tell the poor thing. “It was my lame way of asking you, where are you going?”

He took his hand off the door and moved closer, but she noticed his steps seemed hesitant. “I figured I would surprise you by getting your car for you,” he finally said.

Jordan thought that was so sweet of him, but that didn’t explain why he wasn’t blinking. “But you don’t have my keys.”

“I’m like the Sangsue in that regard, Jordan. I’m not concerned with locks either.”

She found that fascinating. “Really, you can turn things on without a key?” She didn’t catch the double-entendre until he blushed. *I really wasn’t talking dirty. I’m not that clever.* She rehearsed the words but decided against saying them aloud.

Instead of answering, he walked over to the television and placed his palm on the top of it. It turned on.

“Show off,” she said, and he finally produced that lovely smile again.

“Since you’re awake, maybe you should get dressed and come with me,” he said. His voice cracked and made an odd squeak. It seemed to puzzle him.

“No, I need to shower. I’ll be here when you come back. We still need to do that memory thing, right?” His expression was priceless before he answered. She thought it meant he really wanted her to come with him.

“Right. But promise me you won’t go out anywhere, not even to the laundry room, on your own, okay? Don’t move the icons and don’t invite anybody, not even somebody that looks like a friend, inside.”

“How will I open the door for you?”

“You don’t. I’ll get in when I get back—that’s not the problem.”

“Is there a problem?”

“No, my dear, just an expression.”

He always had just a hint of an accent, but she heard it thicker when he said “my dear.” The sexy

music of it made a chill run from her abdomen down. She couldn't wait to call Leeana.

He left, and Jordan went to get her phone. She settled on the bed, ready for a marathon conversation, but Leeana wasn't home. She ended up telling Leeana's machine that she was home safe and sound and was probably going to spend the day with Artest. "I'll stop by after church tomorrow," she promised before the machine cut her off.

Jordan knew she really needed a shower, even though she could smell him on her body and a part of her wanted to keep it that way. The thought made her laugh. *Wanting to smell like him has to be slut-like behavior.* Her expression became more serious with the next thought: *I wonder what Mama May would have thought of him.*

*She always stressed ladylike behavior. She used to say if she taught me anything, it would be to act like a lady and to learn how to cook.*

*But you taught me so much more, Mama May. You taught me how to love.*

In the shower she expected to think about him but found herself reliving the day the social worker took her to her last foster home. Jordan was fourteen and counting the days until she was old enough to be released from the system.

Mama May wouldn't tell her age, she said a lady never did, but she was older than the average fourteen-year-old's mother. She was more like a grandmother. She was different from the other foster mothers too. She didn't try to pretend to be Jordan's friend, but she clearly wasn't in it just for the money. For the first few months they were like adult roommates. May told the child the rules, and then she stepped back and waited for Jordan to warm to her. Jordan did warm to her, and eventually May became her friend, and soon after that, she became her mother. She had wanted to adopt Jordan, but the courts wouldn't allow it because of May's age. One night, in her junior year of high school, Mama May invited some school and church friends, adults and young people, to witness their own personal adoption ceremony.

There was knocking at her door when Jordan turned off the shower. "Just a minute," she hollered as she ran to the bedroom to get her terry robe. She expected it to be Artest, but remembering his warnings, she checked the peephole first.

It was that face that came through her back door. Her heart jumped. She knew he probably couldn't get in because of the icons, but beyond that, she didn't know what she should do. She decided to pretend she'd been de-memorized already. She tried to think about what she would have said to him if she didn't know he wanted to kill her. "Can I help you?" she asked through the door. She tried to sound as cheerful as possible.

"I'm collecting for the Sacramento Blood Bank," he answered.

"That sounds like a good cause, but I'm not dressed. Just leave your literature by the door and I'll send something later. I promise."

“Thank you, ma’am.”

She waited until she heard his footsteps moving away, and then she went to the front window. Making sure she was hidden behind the curtains, she saw him talking to a second guy, whose face she couldn’t see. They seemed to be arguing, but she couldn’t hear them. They finally walked away. She noticed that, from behind, they were both tall and skinny and dressed all in black.

Jordan decided to use the rest of the time to straighten up her room just in case Artest wanted to spend the night.

## Chapter Nine

Another first, Artest thought, and this one wasn't a good thing.

He wasn't sure she hadn't been washed until he heard her call his name. There'd been many times in the past when he hadn't gotten the reaction he'd expected—people handle surprise in many different ways—but he'd never before failed to wash a human.

He didn't know how to think about it. Emotion was clouding his judgment; he needed help.

When he got outside her building, he called another Sacramento-based Hunter, Tyler. Actually, the name Artest had learned, when they were boys together, was Seydou. Artest still used it sometimes when the thought he was trying to express was more important than the greeting.

He called him Seydou when he heard his friend answer the phone.

"It must be important, my friend. It's been too long since I've heard that name."

"It is—forgive my haste."

"Of course. Continue."

Artest told him everything that happened after the wash.

"I don't understand. Who is this woman? How did you find her sleeping?" he asked.

Artest didn't want to tell Tyler about their night of lovemaking. It wasn't in his nature to speak of such things to any but the woman involved, but he needed his friend's wisdom. "We are lovers," he said.

"Yes, of course. I should have understood that. I apologize for my intrusion into your personal affairs, but it is necessary. You used the present tense—you will return to her?"

"Yes. She is a special woman."

"You wish to spend more than, say, another night with her?"

"I really do, but, under the circumstances, do I have a choice?"

"No, you don't. You must go back to her immediately and bring her in."

"Bring her in where? To my home?" That suggestion pleased him.

"No, you must bring her to the temple until we can figure out what went wrong. The Sangsue can't enter a temple without an invitation, and she's not safe anywhere else."



He was right. Artest wondered why he hadn't come to that thought himself. "To the temple here in Sacramento, or should I take her to the Priest?"

"Umm," Tyler said. "That's a tough one."

Artest could picture him thinking, with his dreadlocked hair falling forward into his widely set deep brown eyes. Tyler didn't go out for the hunts much anymore, and his appearance was becoming more like it had been in Mali. Hunters were supposed to be invisible, just as the Sangsue often were. That wasn't to say they couldn't be seen, but that they adapted to their environments. Unless they were living on Dogon soil—and all temples and safe homes were built on at least some ochre sands from Mali—they tended to have skin similar to the people in their environment. Artest found that in the United States, his skin was a combination of the many races and ethnic groups around him—most people considered it a deep tan or mixed race. Hunters often referred to their skin as that of a chameleon, but Artest didn't like that term. The transformation was too gradual for that label to be true.

None of the active Hunters in the States were as dark as the current people of their homeland, and those of them who were not in Africa or India tended to look lighter than their true skin color. When Artest lived in the Nordic countries for extended periods, he would become very pale and found he had a difficult time recognizing his mirrored image.

He suspected that Tyler was being trained as a priest and that was why he rarely left the temple. These things weren't discussed until it was to a Hunter's advantage to know. Since Tyler's home was built on Mali soil, it doubled as a temple, but the closest true temple was in San Francisco.

"Bring her here. The Priest frowns on relationships with humans. Maybe you should avoid taking her to San Francisco unless we're unable to help her. With all due respect, I'm really not up to hearing his jabbering about lust."

"You're very wise, my old friend."

"Flatter me later. Go back to your friend now."

Artest was on a city street as he spoke by cell phone. Jordan's apartment was in a well-populated area near the university and a large mall. They were never supposed to let humans see them disappear, as they needed to do to transport, but Artest was getting more and more concerned for Jordan's well being. He knew he couldn't go back without the car, and it was miles away. He stepped into the doorway of a restaurant and pictured his home.

When he rematerialized in front of his home, her car was where she left it—not that he'd had any doubts. A thief could do better. It might have been her first purchase of a new car, as she'd mentioned outside the bar, but it couldn't compete with the cars in his neighborhood or the two in his garage.

When she mentioned her cars with such pride, he realized how limited her upbringing must have been. Humans tended to annoy him talking about their things, but she spoke of it with wonder,

the way a child speaks of a valued toy.

With his sister already in the Service a year before he was “made,” Artest had very little memory of true poverty. He imagined his family had little compared to an American child’s, but they were on top in his village. They really were on top, literally—his village was built on a cliff, the Badiagara Cliffs.

*Where else would a people who are the conduits between heaven and Earth reside?*

Her car seat was so close to the steering wheel he almost broke his knees. He found that interesting because he didn’t consider her short. It made him think of her as the cautious person her friend had described, more so than anything he’d seen in her behavior.

He didn’t judge her for sleeping with him; he would never do that. Artest considered himself a good judge of character—it came with a long life. He’d known she was a quality person within minutes of speaking with her. What he’d had a hard time recognizing was that her failure to ask a lot of questions ad nauseam, the way most American women did, wasn’t due to a natural, carefree personality. She was a woman who’d had very little stability in her early life. As a child, she couldn’t anticipate the next event, so she stopped trying. That kind of freedom came with a certain sadness.

Over the centuries, Artest had come to know all manner of beings that walk the earth—gods, angels, demons, fairies, Bloodsuckers, and more. They all wanted approval. He’d met pure good and pure evil, and each group wanted approval from their own kind.

In talking to Jordan at the club, he’d sensed she was a person who hadn’t been told often, or maybe hadn’t been told recently, that somebody who cares approves too. Not knowing what was going to come next in this woman’s life, because of him, was causing a pain deep inside that his rapid-repair metabolism couldn’t fix.

It took him only about twenty minutes to get back to her apartment, and the fear that it wasn’t quick enough was eating him from inside out.

He caught the Sangsue’s decaying metallic scent as soon as he entered her building. Some said they smelled of dying flowers, but he found nothing flowery in their scent. Artest knew it couldn’t be that strong if it was left over from their earlier encounter. They were there now—and the elevator or stairs would have taken too long. He left her building’s entranceway and materialized in her living room, not considering whether anybody could see him.

The room was empty, but the only scent in the air was hers. He stood still and concentrated on the scents. Nothing unusual, just her sweet, fresh floral essence.

“Jordan,” he called out. There was no answer. He looked in her kitchen first and then the bathroom. Her bedroom door was closed. He was afraid to open it. Since she hadn’t answered him, he didn’t know if he wanted to find her behind the door or not.

He slowly edged it open. She was on the bed. It wasn't until he got closer that he could see she was wearing ear buds and listening to music with her eyes were closed. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Sensing his presence, she opened her eyes. He waited for the scream, but once again she surprised him.

"You're back. That was quick," she said, smiling.

He didn't want to alarm her, but he had to know what had happened. Sitting on the bed, he tried to smile back at her. He tried to stop the pounding in his head.

"Tell me what happened while I was gone," he said in a slow, measured, single breath.

She sat up. He could tell by the look on her face that he hadn't been successful in not alarming her.

"You were right—they came. Well, one of them came, the one who stuck his face through my door."

"What happened?"

"He left."

"Tell me everything."

He sat patiently and listened to every word. She'd handled herself well. He wondered if she knew she had the instincts of a warrior.

As she finished her recounting of the encounter, he found himself becoming more aware of the thin robe separating him from her body. They needed to get out of there, and that wasn't going to happen if he continued to sit next to her. He rose.

"Jordan, I need you to get dressed and come with me."

"Where?"

"Somewhere safe until we can figure this out."

"Figure what out?"

There was a playfulness in her voice that he didn't want to see her lose, but she had to know the situation was serious. "You're in danger. I'm afraid I've put you at risk."

"Are you talking about a health risk?"

“Yes,” he said, but he couldn’t help but wonder what other kind of risk was possible or noteworthy.

“We used condoms, Artest. What are you saying?”

Her question threw him. It wasn’t often that he was so involved in what a person was saying that he didn’t have a clue what she was thinking. The two were often quite different. He stilled himself and felt her fear. The word “AIDS” was screaming through in her thoughts. He rewound the words he’d used; “at risk” was a catch phrase. Humans tended to think and interpret in sound bites.

He looked at her and willed her to feel his sincerity. “I want you to listen carefully.”

She nodded, her already large, luminous eyes like saucers with fear.

“You have never met a person healthier than me. The last time I was ill was centuries ago, when I was a child. I could cut myself right now, and before the next hour passes, you would see signs that I am repairing. Do you understand?”

She nodded again.

“The kind of danger you are in is much more serious than a sexually transmitted disease. Hold your questions for now and, I promise you, we will talk later.”

## Chapter Ten

His seriousness was scaring her. Over the years, Jordan had learned to let music take her away. When she was twelve, a foster father who was priming her for seduction bought her a walkman. With that gift she was able to escape through music without disturbing others, which is always a foster child's concern.

Even though she ran away from that home when the father tried to kiss her, she never lost her love for music.

At first she thought Artest was reacting to her limited covering. Her life had taught her that horniness was something men took seriously. She figured that was all his grim expression indicated. She made sure nothing was hanging out and pulled the robe tighter. She tried to concentrate on what he was saying and not his presence. Jordan was not usually so scattered—she'd been accused of the opposite—but being around Artest made her mind wander. She wondered if he might have taken a shower too, because he smelled so fresh and newly sprayed with that wonderful scent.

“Tell me what happened while I was gone,” he said, and she heard the words in the normal way, but she heard them in her mind too. It was stereo, loud stereo. It reminded her of the time she'd had her tonsils out as a seven-year-old and the anesthesia caused her to hallucinate. Her heart skipped, and she panicked.

He reached out and caught her by her shoulders with both of his hands. There was something about the way he held her still that made her look into his eyes. She immediately calmed down. She heard the words, “*it's okay, it's okay*,” inside her head, but it wasn't her voice. Again, it was something that should have freaked her out, but she felt fine, and she thought she would continue to feel fine as long as she looked at him.

She told him exactly what had happened. Jordan expected him to be pleased, and he was, but her story had done nothing to eliminate his deer-in-the-headlights expression. He told her she needed to come with him to a safe place, but he didn't explain what was unsafe about her apartment.

As she'd told Leeana's machine, she fully expected to spend the day with him, but she wasn't quite getting his urgency.

Jordan chose a pair of jeans that made her butt look great and a long man's style shirt in a pale lilac that she'd been told was a good color for her. She wanted to look like she hadn't tried too hard but looked great nonetheless. She started to put on a pair of pumps but decided on sneakers at the last minute. “Are we going to be out long?” she asked, wondering if she should take a jacket. She was trying to picture one that wouldn't look stupid with the extra-length shirt.

He stared at her a moment before he answered. “Yes, take a jacket.”

Jordan started toward her closet when it dawned on her that she hadn't said anything about a jacket.

“Who said anything about a jacket?” she asked.

He smiled. “Why else would you ask?”

That was how he wanted to play it. *You’re going to give me a straight answer about this mindreading stuff before you dip into the honeypot again, my friend.* She thought it with her eyes locked on his.

“What?” he asked.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No reason.”

He sounded the laugh he was trying to hold back.

“Wait for me out there,” she told him, pointing to the living room.

When she was dressed, with her jacket in hand and her toothbrush in her purse, she came in and announced that she was ready.

He stood and looked at her. His expression said he approved, and she liked the way that felt.

“I guess we’re taking my car?”

“Let’s talk about that,” he said as he walked toward her. He opened his arms like he wanted to give her a hug. Of course she opened her arms too. He kissed her.

When she opened her eyes from the kiss, they were standing in a large, empty room.

She screamed.

He caught her in a bear hug. She didn’t know what he was planning to do, but *run* was her first instinct. “Jordan, Jordan, let me explain!”

She stopped fighting his hug and waited. “Okay, explain.”

“We couldn’t afford to be seen together outside your apartment.”

“Couldn’t you have just told me that?”

“Let me apologize for my friend.”

The speaker was a tall black man standing close enough to her that she should have heard his approach. Jordan looked down at his feet. He was barefooted, but she still thought she should have heard something. He was wearing a green and gold robe that almost reached the floor. His thick salt and pepper hair was in shoulder-length dreadlocks, and there was a regal tilt to his chin.

“One would think Artest is old enough to have learned some patience.”

His accent was that perfect Queen’s English that educated Africans use. It had the same soothing cadence of Artest’s voice. He held out his long hand.

“I’m Tyler. Welcome. Your beauty provides my home with some much needed art.”

His hand was one of the softest she’d ever felt. She found that interesting because there was a story on his face that wasn’t one of luxury.

“Jordan Greene, pleased to meet you.”

“I can certainly see his attraction to you, but you, my dear, can do so much better than this old goat herder.”

He winked at her before he turned to Artest. The two men hugged.

“Don’t you dare start with your charm, Tyler. That’s not why we’re here.” Artest said, but she could tell he was teasing and was pleased to have his friend’s approval. “And you know I’ve never in my life herded or otherwise engaged a goat!”

They both laughed, a little more than she thought warranted.

“Miss Greene, are you a tea drinker?”

She really wasn’t crazy about the stuff, but he seemed so pleased to ask she couldn’t disappoint him. “Sure,” she answered.

“Then why don’t you allow me to show you to my parlor, and Jahia will serve you. I need to steal Artest away for a while.”

They walked as he spoke. The room he called a parlor was in the front of the house, and Jordan would have called it a living room, but the furniture was old enough to have once stood in a room when the word “parlor” was contemporary. A tall, beautiful older woman was standing in the archway that led to the dining room. She bobbed her head in a slight bow as Tyler represented his serpentine-back sofa with an outstretched hand. It wasn’t often that Jordan saw such a tall woman over the age of fifty.

“I hope you don’t think I’m going to be satisfied with a nod,” Artest said as he hugged the woman.

She melted into his arms like a mother might with a long-lost son. “You stay away so long,” she said. When they parted, Jordan saw tears in her eyes.

“I’m afraid Jahia has become a bit sentimental in her advanced years.”

“Advanced, yes, but still younger than you, my husband.”

He wrapped his long, thin arms around Jahia’s shoulders. “Jordan, this is my better half, Jahia.”

“Better half indeed,” Artest said. “And the best teacher I ever had.”

That was when Jordan saw her smile. Jordan wondered what Jahia looked like when she was Jordan’s age. Everything about her was long, thin elegance. She reminded Jordan of the model Iman. Her skin color was very close to Artest’s—a little darker, with a red undertone. A thick gold choker circled her long, thin neck. She also wore a long robe, plainer than the shiny silk Tyler was wearing, but the same shade of green. The fabric in her robe appeared to be cotton. Her hair was locked too and down past her shoulders. Her eyes were captivating, perfect almonds with the whitest of whites and very dark pupils.

“Darling, our guests will honor us with their presence during tea.”

She nodded and left the room. Jordan noticed she moved like she was floating.

“Since we talked, I’ve become aware of a matter of some urgency,” Tyler said to Artest while they waited.

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“You won’t.”

Jahia returned with a tray that must have been ready beforehand. She placed it on the old, though highly polished, Victorian table. Jordan noticed there were only two cups.

“Why don’t we go to the back?” Tyler said to Artest.

Artest stood. Tyler began talking immediately, but she didn’t recognize the language. At one point, whatever he said was so shocking, Artest stopped walking and they stood in the dining room having a rapid fire exchange. Artest said something that caused Tyler to look at his wife, like he hadn’t wanted her to hear. Both men glanced at Jahia with an apologetic look. They didn’t say anything else until the women could no longer see them, but could still faintly hear them.

Jahia looked at the spot where they had stood for a moment or two after they left, and then Jordan saw her swallow with some difficulty. She was very curious as to what was said but thought it best to wait and ask Artest. Jahia finally snapped out of it; she looked at Jordan and



tried to smile.

“What language was that?” Jordan asked her as she poured the tea from a lovely ceramic pot.

“Which one? Of course there was Dogon, but I heard some Bamanakan, Maninkakan, French, and even some Fulbe thrown in. When they’re excited like this, they tend to use the language that has a word that best describes what they want to say. It can be very confusing.”

“Tell me about it—you’re talking to a woman who only speaks English.” she said. Although she could read a little Spanish, she didn’t feel it was enough to mention.

“English is a good enough language. Difficult, but certainly utilitarian.”

That struck Jordan as funny, but she didn’t laugh. “How long have you known Artest?”

Whatever upsetting thing they’d discussed seemed to be on Jahia’s mind. She looked at Jordan, and she could tell Jahia was trying to figure out how to talk about the passage of time in a way that Jordan could understand.

“We come from the same village. I knew his sister when we were girls.”

“Oh,” Jordan said. “Did you know Tyler back then too?”

“No, but I should have. Have you ever met a person who was on the periphery of most of your early life events, yet you somehow just missed him?” Her whole face lit up as she spoke.

“No, I moved around a lot when I was younger, but I can see how that would happen.”

“We knew all the same people, but not each other. I met him here in the States.”

“How long have the two of you been married?”

“A long time.”

“My long time or Artest’s long time?”

“I see; then you know?”

“Yes, I guess it’s safe to say anything to me—Artest said he’s going to take my memories.”

That seemed to confuse her; Jordan guessed she wasn’t using the right terminology. “It must be wonderful to be with the same person for so long.”

“It truly is. I hope it never changes,” she said, with what Jordan thought was a certain sadness.

After they finished their tea, Jahia took her on a tour of her large home and the room they used as

a temple. Since Jordan hadn't arrived the usual way, Jahia started at the front door, pointing to a small, low wooden stool that held a strange little horse-shaped container carved from a light-colored wood. She said it was an ark, and it represented the one by which her Dogon ancestors descended from heaven to earth. There were tiny figures carved into it that she called her Nommo, or ancestors.

Jordan had always liked African art, and Tyler and Jahia had enough to rival a museum. Tyler was definitely flattering her when he spoke of "much needed art."

There were masks in every room that were unbelievable in their detail. Jahia told her what each one meant and in what kind of ceremony it was used. Jordan was surprised to see so many small cast-metal figures and objects. She thought of wood as the medium for African art.

They didn't go into the room Jahia called the temple—the door was closed. But it wasn't like the rest of the doors in her home. It was made of carved wood, and it looked like it was very old. When Jordan admired it, Jahia said, "we're well known for our doors."

*That makes sense, considering how fast you all tend to come and go.*

When they reached a bedroom on the second floor, she opened the door and said, "This is your room for as long as you need it."

She saw Jordan's confusion.

"Artest will explain everything. He is a good man who's been through a lot. He might not always be as open as you will want, but he'll always be honest."

Jordan remembered Mama May telling her she should thank a person who gives her the truth, even if it was something she didn't want to hear. "Thank you," she said

It was a bright room, with windows on two sides, the shades open. The walls were painted a very faint yellow that made it look even brighter.

"I apologize if it's too bright in here. We are from the southern side of the Sahara desert, and we're always seeking the sun when we find ourselves elsewhere," she said, smiling. Like Artest's and Tyler's, her accent made the simplest statement sing like poetry.

"Sacramento isn't hot enough for you?" Jordan asked. "We have very hot summers."

"I love the summers here. You won't hear me complaining about the one-hundred degree days."

The room was colorful, but Jordan thought it added to the warmth she felt from Jahia and her husband.

"I laid out something on the bed that you might want to wear tonight."

“Tonight?”

“There’s going to be a special meeting, and we always have a little party afterwards. There might be Tuareg musicians. You’ll meet Artest’s friends, and for us, friends are like the family we no longer have. Attending one of our gatherings is a rare treat for the Ketier.”

“Who’s the Ketier?”

Jahia was smoothing out the bedspread where she had been sitting. She looked at Jordan, puzzled, tilting her head and looking up as if she was repeating her words to herself. “I’ve been using the word so long, I can’t remember the exact translation. But to answer your question, you and other humans are the Ketier. If I’m not mistaken, I believe the word is Arabic and it means something like masses or many.”

Jordan nodded—it made sense. *To a handful of old Dogons, I guess we could all be lumped into a common pot called “the many.”*

Jordan looked at the robe laid out on the bed. It was a beautiful multi-colored pattern with bright yellow, orange and red. “It’s beautiful,” she said.

“No dear, it’s clothing—you’ll make it beautiful.”

Her answer remained her of something Mama May would have said. It made Jordan want to hug her. She began looking around the room to find something to focus on to fight that urge. She noticed that the queen-size bed had a single sculpture on the headboard: a couple carved from a single piece of wood and connected by his arm around her shoulders, as well as being fused side to side. She didn’t know if she was permitted to touch the pieces, so she had avoided them during the tour, but this one was so lovely she had it in her hands before she had a chance to over-think it. “Who are these love birds?”

“They are the mother and father, the first couple. Maybe you would call them Adam and Eve. I have many in both wood and metal.”

Jordan held the sculpture to her nose, but the scent she detected wasn’t coming from it. “Jahia, what is that cinnamon-like scent?”

She smiled. “Cinnamon is our spice. I am cooking and using some, but I’m told that all of us smell of cinnamon. I don’t smell it myself, but I’ve heard it enough to know of what you’re speaking.”

“It’s definitely in the air, but all of you don’t have that scent. Artest smells like lavender to me.”

Jahia had been moving toward the door, but she stopped in her tracks. Jordan thought somebody must have been coming through the doorway that was at her back. She turned around; it was empty. She looked at Jahia again, and this time, her expression made Jordan think heart attack.

“Jahia, are you all right?”

“Will you say that again? What does he smell like?”

“Lavender—it’s a flowering plant.” She didn’t know what else to say about it. “It’s a smell I like. I buy lavender candles sometimes.” She felt like she was pleading.

Finally Jahia spoke again. “Have you told Artest?”

“Have I told him he smells like lavender?”

“Yes, have you told him?”

“I’m sure he knows. It must be something he’s buying and applying.” Jordan thought the conversation had turned weird.

The older woman sat down on the bed and patted the bedspread beside her. “Join me.”

Jordan sat next to her. “Something is wrong, isn’t it?” she asked.

“No, not wrong. It’s not wrong for you to smell lavender when you’re with him, but it is significant. We are Dogon, Jordan. To you and everybody else, unless we add a scent, and most of us don’t, you should detect a faint whiff of cinnamon. There are circumstances when one of us will smell of lavender. The timing isn’t right for you to tell Artest, understand?”

“Not really.”

“You will understand, but for now you wait, please. You must not distract him right now. It could be very dangerous for him to be distracted.”

“I won’t say anything.”

“No, you must tell him! But you should wait. Until after everything is normal again.”

Jordan wondered when things would be normal again.

“Soon, my dear. I’ll let you know when it’s time if you’re not sure.”

*Great, she said to herself. After my brain has been washed and I don’t remember any of this!*

Jahia looked at her with eyes so kind they made Jordan smile. Then she cracked up laughing, as if she’d heard Jordan’s thought.

## Chapter Eleven

In spite of the seriousness of their conversation, Artest found it difficult to concentrate on what Tyler was telling him. He was still feeling pangs of guilt about the way he'd transported Jordan from her apartment. Her trusting expression as she walked into his arms, the sincerity and heat of her kiss haunted him. He didn't know a lot about her, but within the first two hours of their meeting, he'd surmised that she had trust issues. He hoped he hadn't made them worse.

He noted that Tyler made her welcome with his usual charm, and by the time Jahia arrived, Jordan seemed relaxed.

He wondered about all the after thoughts; it wasn't his usual style. What would Tyler, his long time friend, say if he knew? They often laughed about the chronically reflexive American men.

He found it odd to see how much Tyler and Jahia had aged. He envied them. There were less than five to seven years between himself and Jahia, and Tyler was only a few years older than his wife. Clearly the time they'd spent in temple and on Mali soil has been good for them. Visual aging was a mark of honor with their kind. It only happened to those who no longer hunted, and only if they'd settled with a partner or were at least content with their inactive lives. Each situation would cause some aging; put the three together, and it sped up considerably. The two partners would age in tandem until it was time to pass on to Amma, the ultimate heavenly peace.

Most Hunters died alone in battle, with their faces and bodies still appearing young. There was honor in a Service death, but the greater honor came in surviving it long enough to become old. Artest longed to see lines and wrinkles on his face, but he doubted if that would ever happen.

*For me, there is a disadvantage to their aging—now they both want to treat me like their child.*

While the women drank tea and, later, toured the house, Tyler was informing Artest that "he was going out." Artest immediately asked him if he was crazy. Jahia didn't hear his comment, but she heard Artest's response, and he regretted that. It was not his intention to upset her or to create strife in their union. When they got outside on the deck, Artest told Tyler how foolish it was for him to even consider such a thing. His body had changed, and those changes could cost Tyler his life or cause one of them harm if they tried to protect him.

"We've got problems, and there aren't enough of us to hold them off until reinforcement gets here," Tyler said.

That told Artest that the situation was serious. Hunters could transport within one hundred miles without any problem, maybe one hundred and fifty with some strain. In Artest's case, he always got a headache when he attempted that kind of distance, but he made it. Some of the less disciplined Hunters wouldn't make it and ended up somewhere short of the goal.

Artest estimated that there were easily ten to twelve Hunters within a transportable range. If Tyler was saying that wasn't enough, Artest didn't want to hear what was going down.

“Have you been keeping up with local news?” Tyler asked.

Artest just looked at him and smiled. Tyler knew from past conversations that Artest had very little interest in politics or whatever other little issues a community might be experiencing. He’d lived too long to pretend any of it was important any longer. Most of the time he couldn’t remember who was president because he saw so little difference in any of them.

Something had caught Tyler’s attention behind Artest, and he turned to see. It was a hummingbird. Both men watched it until it flew away. Artest looked around Tyler’s yard. He’d been gardening, or maybe Jahia was the gardener. *How settled they’d become.*

“As I recall, and you know I have an excellent memory, you weren’t living here in 2000, and you were on special assignment with Daouda in Rome in the spring and summer of 2004. Am I correct?”

“That’s true,” Artest said. “Why do you ask?”

“Sacramento hosted the Olympic trials those years. Jahia and I attended both times. It looked like it was a lot of fun, but we were working, so we didn’t get to spend too much time watching the events. There were some minor problems with Sangsue, but we didn’t lose any the Ketier.”

“Why are you mentioning this now?” Artest asked, but he suspected he knew the answer.

“The city is hosting the trials again. We have reason to believe the Sangsue have something in mind this time.”

“Something like what?”

“God only knows. There are at least three times as many more in the city that we know about. One of our informers has indicated that she heard one of them say it will rival 9/11.”

They both sat silently and thought about his words. Finally Artest asked, “Why now, why here?”

“I have a theory about that. I think they’re going to snatch some of the athletes.”

“Snatch, meaning they’ll take them somewhere?”

Tyler nodded. “They’re a greedy lot, and I imagine they won’t be able to stop themselves from feeding on bodies that young and fit, but I don’t think that’s the main purpose. I think they’ve decided it would be a chance for a mass recruitment. The ones who won’t go along with the plan will become a future meal. And since the Ketier know nothing of their existence, it will all be blamed on terrorists.”

Artest thought about what he was saying. It sounded crazy but not at all implausible. Over the past ten or so years, whenever two or three Hunters got together, they would boast about how easy their work had become—because they’d done it so well. The Sangsue numbers had always

been greater than theirs, but the Hunters had come close to catching up in recent years. They trained to fight the Bloodsuckers, and, except for errant bands here and there, Sangsue were not good fighters. They tended to direct their activities to hitting a location, feeding, and running away. As a rule, they only fought back when confronted. The exception was the newcomers to an area, who would seek out the resident Hunter to gauge his or her resourcefulness, but that attack often cost both Sangsue their lives.

It made sense now why two of them showed up in Artest's home. The team who could eliminate a resident Hunter before the event would have power and bragging rights in the pack.

"So I can expect to see them initiate more attacks like they did this morning in my home?"

"I'm afraid so," Tyler said. "But you'll hear all about it tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Everybody in the city and surrounding will be here. Jahia is upstairs showing your lady friend to her room. We expect you to stay here too. Where you sleep is your business, but I don't know how many will be staying over tonight, so bed space is at a premium. I assure you, as much as I love you all, none of you will be invited to our room."

They both laughed. Artest was pleased to see the situation hadn't robbed Tyler of his humor.

While Tyler went to the kitchen to prepare food for the grill, Artest called a company that delivered attack dogs to his property when he worked out of town. Then he called Randall, a Ketier who worked for him. There were some humans who know about the Service. Randall's father had worked for the Service, and when he retired, Randall took over.

"I need you stay at my house tonight, Randall. You'll need to arm yourself and be there within the hour to meet the dog people."

"Armed and the dogs. Should I be scared?"

"As I've told you before, whenever you're in my house, you should sleep with one eye open."

"I thought you paid me like that to watch your DVDs and eat your food."

Artest laughed because he always did when Randall said that, but at the same time, Artest felt he needed to warn him beyond the usual. "Be especially careful, my friend. I had two visitors this morning."

"I've got it."

When he hung up his phone, he could hear Jahia on the stairs. He met her there. "Is my friend all settled in?"

“She is, my dear. I think she’s a lovely girl.”

“Oh gee, you approve, Mom?”

Artest saw her looking around for something to throw at him. He took the three steps up and caught her in a hug. “You’re looking so beautiful lately, Tyler’d better be careful.”

“What is this ‘lately’ stuff? I’ve always been too beautiful for both of you. Now you go upstairs and stop that child from worrying about things that go bump.”

“If I can stop her from attacking me for whisking her away, I’ll be doing my best.”

She got serious and said, “go do your best, Artest. She might be just what you need.”



## Chapter Twelve

He knocked on the door so soon after Jahia left, Jordan thought it was Jahia returning. When he entered, she felt both relief and anger. Relief because even though she was frightened and she didn't understand enough about her source of fear, she felt he would do anything within his power to protect her. But she felt angry because she hadn't signed on for any of this, and suppose "within his power" wasn't good enough?

Jordan had been on her own long enough to know when she was in deep stuff, and, judging by the way these three were acting, she suspected she needed to be out shopping for hip boots.

"Is it safe to come in?" he asked.

"Looks to me like you're already in."

"I'm sorry, Jordan. I had no idea until five minutes ago that things are as crazy as they are. I never would have. . ." Then he trailed off.

"Why did you stop yourself?" she asked.

"I had to stop myself. I couldn't lie. Nothing Tyler said, or anything that happened today, would stop me from meeting you all over again if presented with the same opportunity."

Since that was just about the nicest thing a man had ever said to her, she tried to smile. Not trusting herself with him on the bed, Jordan pointed to the only chair in the room to let him know he could sit. She sat on the foot of the bed.

"I'm not going to leave your side tonight. I'll even sleep in here."

"Oh will you?"

"I'll sleep on the floor, but I'm not going to leave you unprotected."

"I thought you said they couldn't come in here."

"They're not supposed to, but strange things have been happening. Maybe rules are being broken too."

Her temples had begun to throb. She rubbed them as she asked, "you mean it's just a rule? I thought it was like kryptonite or something!"

He laughed. "Why would you think that?"

"Well, Artest, let's review. You been transporting me all over town without a Starship or Mr. Spock anywhere around. Some guy stuck his face through my back door, and then he had the gall to show up later claiming he was collecting for the blood bank . . ."

“He said that?”

“Yes.”

“The nerve. I promise you, he will pay for his arrogance.”

She saw a look cross his eyes that could have cut glass. “Maybe I have a sick sense of humor, but I wasn’t offended by what the Bloodsucker asked. Or maybe I should say I wasn’t nearly as offended as I would have been had he drained me of my blood.”

“I interrupted you. Please continue.”

Suddenly she felt foolish recounting all that had happened. “Suffice it to say, things have been very unusual since I met you.”

As she spoke to him, she remembered a conversation she’d had with Leeana not a month earlier. They were leaving a movie that Leeana loved and Jordan hated. The main thing that she’d hated so much was that the heroine seemed unnecessarily stupid. “I just don’t understand why she was so surprised by every little thing that happened,” Jordan had said. “She knew she was with aliens; why was she so surprised by every new thing she saw?”

Leeana had accused her of taking it too seriously or something like that. But the kryptonite thing and recounting the movie had her thinking, *am I being just like the heroine? If he can transport me, why wouldn’t he be able to read my thoughts? You can, can’t you, Artest?*

“Okay, let me explain that,” he said, to her unasked question. “I can’t read all of your thoughts. But if it’s about me, I can sometimes hear bits and pieces. And I can hear just about everything that is said to me.”

“Well, so can I. Only a deaf person or one hard of hearing would have a problem with that!”

He looked at her like he couldn’t tell if she was pulling his leg or not.

“I mean things said to me mentally. We used to travel in pairs too. We believe it was something Hunters developed centuries ago to help them in fights.”

“Thank you for telling me that.”

He smiled that beautiful smile of his. She wondered how his teeth could look so good and be so old. *I have a hard enough time keeping mine white. Okay, Artest, what did I just think?*

“You’re not serious, are you?”

“Yes. I want to know the extent of this, or I’m not having another thought. Answer me or be prepared to hear my sorority sweetheart song over and over.”

“You were thinking something about my teeth. I figure either I have something in them or you like the way they look. Whatever your thought was, it wasn’t sad. I can usually feel an emotion like that.”

“I was thinking they look nice.”

“Thank you. Now, about this song, did you call it a sweetheart song?”

“It is, but don’t read anything into that. It just happens to be a song I know all the words to.”

He laughed but stopped when she didn’t join him. She smiled, and he laughed again.

“My friends like you, Jordan.”

“I like them too, but I like a lot of people and yet I never move in with them.”

“Just give me a little time to make sure you’re safe, okay?”

“You want to tell me what’s going on, don’t you?” she asked.

“I do. Are you ready to hear it?”

She really wasn’t. She didn’t want to feel any more fearful than she already did, and that was considerable.

“Your face tells me no,” he said. “I don’t want to frighten you.”

There was a time before she was placed with Mama May that she had decided to kill herself. She just couldn’t take any more placements. She decided she wasn’t going to fight off any more foster fathers or brothers, she wasn’t going to clean another house that she couldn’t enjoy, and she wasn’t going to sleep on any more floors. Jordan wasn’t sure if there was a heaven, but she knew she didn’t do anything to deserve the hell that was her life. After she made that decision, she found herself becoming free and nearly fearless.

It was just a matter of choosing the time, place, and whether or not she wanted to take anybody out with her. Every day she decided to live, and knowing that she wasn’t forced to do the same the next day made her strong.

Then Jordan was placed with Mama May, and her life took a one-eighty. But by the time she was away at college, the fear slowly crept back. She came home on the occasional weekend and holidays, and each time, her chosen mother was smaller and weaker. By the time Mama May came to her graduation, Jordan knew for sure that she wasn’t well, and all the little aches and pains about which she occasionally complained would eventually take her. Her only regret was the time wasted in a relationship with Len when she could have been living with her mother and making her life easier. Jordan did move in with Mama May during her last eight months, which

allowed her to die at home, but she still felt the guilt.

“I guess I should say yes. They do say the truth will set you free. What’s going on? Why do I need to stay here?”

She didn’t interrupt while he gave her the digest version of his conversation with Tyler. It was serious, and she understood that innocent young people were in danger, but there was a part of her that couldn’t feel anything about his words.

It was just too much. Her mind had snapped into overload, and all she wanted to do was take something for the headache that had been building but was now pulsating in three different and distinct spots in her head.

“I’ve upset you,” he said at some point that she was fairly certain was not the end as he listed the havoc the Sangsue might mount against the city. It was just too much too soon. She was reminded of a movie where a character kept saying, “I’m just the cook,” as people around him expected him to save the world. *I’m just the teacher, and I’m ready to go home.*

“Hearing about creatures that want to dine on me and young people like the ones I teach is likely to have an upsetting effect on an individual.” She didn’t mean to sound so cold, but she feared that was how it came out.

He squinted like whatever he was thinking caused his head to hurt too. “I’m sorry. This must be awful for you.”

“Yes, but I understand that it’s your everyday life. I’m not blaming you.”

“You should. I brought these creatures, as you call them, into your life. And, Jordan, it’s not my everyday life. Most of the time, my life is fairly normal. I have a job that I do, and then I go about my normal existence until the next time I have to do that job. It’s not consistent like teaching, but it’s not unlike being a soldier or maybe a freelance agent of some kind.”

She nodded, and the movement caused her to grimace. “Will you check to see if your friends have something I can take for a headache?”

“I thought that might be the case. They won’t have any drugs, but I’ll go get something if you insist—but I’d rather try another method.”

“Like what?” She was seriously hoping he wasn’t going to suggest anything sexual. She wasn’t in the mood to be taken lightly.

“Jordan, actually the saying is the knowledge of truth will set you free. The truth I know is that there are many natural substances that will offer you some relief, and I’m sure Jahia can give you a cup of tea that will work. She’ll bring it up shortly. . . ”

“Should I go ask her?”

“I just did.”

“Are we being observed?”

As an adult, she had vowed not to allow herself to remain in a situation where she didn’t have privacy. That had been her fate at two foster homes.

“No, we respect each other’s privacy, but I asked her as I told you she would help.”

“I guess you all can never gossip about each other?”

“We can cloak our thoughts, but that’s rarely necessary.” He stood up and started toward the bed as he said, “if you’ll allow me to massage your temples while we wait, I believe I can help.”

She nodded, and he sat down next to her. He didn’t touch her right away; he looked at her head as if he could see the pain. Maybe he could, because he touched the exact spots on her temples. He didn’t massage them, he just pressed lightly.

“Close your eyes and take a deep breath,” he said.

She did, and it hurt like hell, but as she exhaled, it seemed as if some of the pain exited with her breath. “Do that again, but exhale slowly this time.”

She did, and it too seemed to relieve some of the pressure. “Come in,” he said softly to a door that hadn’t been knocked. Jahia entered with a steaming cup. “What took you so long?” Artest teased.

“As my darling mother used to say, ‘Don’t insult the crocodile until you cross the water,’” she said with a smile.

She placed the cup and saucer on the nightstand. “I did what I could to sweeten it, my dear, but I’m afraid it tastes like Seydou’s sandals. Drank it fast, when it cools.”

“Thank you,” Jordan said.

“Yes, thank you, Mother Crocodile,” Artest said, and as she passed him, she swatted and just missed hitting him.

“She’s very beautiful.”

“More so every day,” he said. As he massaged Jordan’s neck and shoulders, he told her a little about the aging process of content couples.

“Wow. Wouldn’t it be great if the rest of us found beauty in aging?”

“Yes. Our attitude can make being in the human world quite confusing. I’ll hear something on the television about a beauty, and I’ll look up to find a child just barely out of her teens. What baby isn’t beautiful?”

She loved what he said. *A man who believed in “too young;” how refreshing!*

“How’s that head?”

She had to think about it, but the pain was gone. There was still a slight soreness from where it had been, but the throbbing had stopped. She downed the tea to make sure it stayed gone. It might not have tasted like a shoe, but Jordan wouldn’t have been surprised if somebody told her feet were used in the preparation. That reminded her. “Who’s Seydou?”

“That’s Tyler’s given name.”

“Do you all use other names?”

“Jahia is using her own name now that African names are popular again, but yes, at one time or other, we have all used names more contemporary for the times.”

“What did your mother call you?”

She expected him to smile since he did so easily, but he looked sad when he answered. “That’s something to tell you another day. Today we will enjoy the company of my friends.” He frowned. “I should apologize now for the meeting I will ask you to attend downstairs. Even if we start out in English, before long I expect the languages to shift to those that are easier for us.”

“I’ll just wait up here until it’s over.”

He looked at her and studied her face again. “I’d feel better with you in my sight.”

“Can’t you just do the wash now?”

He grimaced again. “No, I think it’ll be better to wait. I want you to enjoy tonight, and for that you’ll need your memories. You’ll need to know why you’re here.”

“What is it about that African accent that makes everything sound so intelligent?”

He laughed. “I am an educated man, Jordan. I have many degrees—we all do. Going to university is a good use of time while we wait for the next attack.”

“Most people would have just said thank you.”

“Oh my, did that sound arrogant? I’m very sorry, thank you, my dear. I know Americans say they like accents.”

“Why do you say it like that? We *do* like accents.”

“I find that Americans like certain accents more than others. If I speak with a French accent, I’m treated better than when I use a Spanish accent. If I use a southern accent, I get no respect.”

“Why would you ever use it, or any other for that matter?”

“It depends on what I want the person to think about me. When I’m on the telephone and I want someone to underestimate my intelligence, I speak with an urban home boy dialect.”

“Hmm, you’re right., I never thought of ghetto as being an accent, just like the rest.” She tried to picture him with his pants hanging off his butt but couldn’t. “Do it—do a home boy accent. I’ve got to hear this!”

He crossed his arms across his chest and leaned back. He looked at her as if he was adjusting his head for farsightedness. “Yo, yo, yo, Mama, listen up. Let me get the digits.”

She couldn’t stop laughing. He stopped her with a kiss.

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

“Because seeing you laugh makes me happy. I haven’t been happy in a long time, and for that, I thank you with a kiss.”

Jordan didn’t know how to respond to that. If a girlfriend had been telling her all of this, she would tell her friend she was being played—no man is so open. At least no man in her history. She looked at him, and his smile had dropped; he seemed hurt.

“Jordan, when a person has lived as long as I have. . . okay, let me start over because nobody lives as long, but what I’m trying to say is I’ve found it makes more sense to just tell the truth, because it’s impossible to remember all the stories if I lie.”

“Okay,” she said, not really knowing where he was going with this.

“In other words, I don’t even know what it means to *play* a person.”

*He’d done it again!* She was furious. *How dare he?* She wanted to scream out every curse word she knew, and she knew them all. She balled up her fist and planned to hit the bed, but something caused a detour. She ended up hitting his arm as hard as she could. “I don’t care if you smell like cinnamon, nutmeg, or ninety dollars a dozen roses! You-will-not-read-my-thoughts!” She punctuated each word with another blow to the arm.

He grabbed his arm, and when that didn’t stop her, he grabbed her hands. “What is wrong with you?”

She struggled to break his grip, an effort which, of course, was useless.

“Hey, calm down.”

“Let go of me!”

“I will if you promise not to hit me.”

“Let go of me!”

“Jordan, I’m a Hunter. When you attack me, I can react from instinct and hurt you before I’ve had time to think about it.”

That made sense, and she stopped struggling. He looked her in the eyes as he let go of her wrists.

“Okay,” he said. “Did I hear right? Does your anger have something to do with my scent?”

“Of course not. I like the way you smell. What I don’t like is you reading my thoughts and then commenting on things before I say them aloud.”

He studied her like he expected more. Finally he spoke, again looking down at his feet. “I’m sorry. I guess I just assumed that I didn’t have to pretend with you since you know it exists. I won’t let that happen again.”

“You can stop it?”

“Yes, I do it all the time.”

She thought about it and realized they had to be talking about different things. “I mean, will you stop reading my thoughts?”

“I can’t do that if they involve me. I’m sorry, but I will stop commenting on what I hear.”

His tone was so apologetic it made her feel petty for bringing it up. “Artest, I grew up in situations where I had no privacy from the strangers that were paid to board me. All I had were my thoughts, and there was one place where the lady of the house kept asking me what was I thinking. I always lied to her because my thoughts were none of her business. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes, your thoughts are important to you. Again, I apologize.”

She felt even worse. She decided to leave it alone. “I’m going to change into the dress now.”

“Okay,” he said, but he didn’t leave.

“Will you wait in the hall?”



He smiled. "I've seen every inch of your luscious, beautiful body. Is that really necessary?"

"It is," Jordan answered, *but thanks for calling my body beautiful*, she said to herself. But then she wondered if luscious meant fat. She saw him struggling at not saying "you're welcome," or whatever crossed his mind. He smiled at her again, and she realized he was still "hearing" her. She felt like such a jerk for putting such restrictions on him when all it meant was he trusted her.

"I feel like I shouldn't let you out of my presence, but I'll close my eyes while you change if it's important to you."

Jordan stood up and unzipped her jeans. "I guess you're right. You've already seen all there is to see." She sat back down on the bed and pulled off the jeans. *At least my panties and bra are a matching set*. It was the nicest set she'd had before she bought the new set he'd already seen.

When she got down to her bra and panties, he stopped trying to appear disinterested. The look of appreciation on his face made her want to strip all the way and test his friend's bed. She knew he'd heard when she saw him cross his legs in an attempt to prevent her from seeing the level of his interest. "Can you help me with this?" she asked as she stood and handed him the robe. "I don't want to mess up my hair."

He held the garment in front of his body when he stood, yet she could still see what he was trying to hide. She stepped as close as possible before turning her back to him and giving his erection the full butt rub. She was teasing him, but considering what he'd put her through, she believed he deserved it.

As she put her hands up in the air and let him arrange the robe over each arm, she made sure she pushed her ample behind into him as much as possible. The robe was a bit too large, and it dropped over her hips with room to spare, but instead of feeling sloppy, it felt luxurious. The feeling was enhanced by the extremely soft silk material.

He tried to hide it, but she saw him catch his breath in a slight gasp when she turned and faced him. "You look like home," he said.

Before she could think of some witty repartee, he embraced her. "Why are you trying to torture me?" he asked as he kissed her neck. His hands seemed to be everywhere at once.

"I'm not that kind of girl."

"You're not any kind of girl, my dear—you are a woman." He kissed her like they had all the time in the world. She felt his tongue seek out hers and then relax as it coaxed hers into a sensual dance that made her toes curl.

"We'd better get downstairs," she said when they came up for air. A part of her was hoping he would offer an alternative suggestion.

He paused when he heard her thought, but their new arrangement didn't allow him to respond.



## Chapter Thirteen

She was not the most traditionally beautiful woman he'd ever dated and, in spite of her intelligence, possibly not the smartest, but he was beginning to see her as the most perfect. Artest found her, the complete package, intoxicating. He wondered if it was even correct to say "dated," because he had yet to pick her up at her apartment and take her somewhere, except against her will.

The thing that most intrigued him about her was that her emotions seemed to be the opposite of most twenty-first-century humans'. Even if she didn't show it outside, things that would have upset most women tickled her, and yet things that he would have considered unimportant greatly annoyed her. And most importantly, things that should have scared her did scare her, but she found them more interesting than upsetting—thus making her flexible while terrified and spurring her to action. That was what he meant when he told Tyler she had the heart of a warrior.

"What warrior, you?" Tyler asked, trying to be funny.

He hadn't expected Artest to answer, but he did. "She's well on her way. As you know, it doesn't take me long to figure out a person. I like what I see."

"That's just that little Dogon in your pants talking," he said.

Artest almost quipped *not so little, check around*, but Tyler had always been aware of his attraction to Jahia, and he didn't want him to think he was implying anything. Jahia had turned him down before they were married and he her after. That was a long time ago, when the couple was having problems. Since then, she'd thanked Artest more than once for not taking advantage of a bad time.

"But regardless of who's doing the thinking these days, you are my brother, and I wish you the best."

"I assure you, I'm thinking with the head on my shoulders, but I thank you for your concern."

But that wasn't the head in charge when she asked him to help her dress. He thought she shouldn't have been particularly worried about her hair. It was relaxed and hanging to her shoulders in a slight bob. He figured it would take all of few minutes to brush it back into order if dressing warranted it. He knew she was teasing him, but there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He was a willing fly in her web.

As much as he enjoyed spending time with his countrymen and women, he was already looking forward more to returning to the bedroom when the evening was over.

He waited until she took a few moments to go into the bathroom attached to the bedroom their host had provided before he returned to his home. Artest could move twice as fast a human, but the skill was something the Hunters never showed. Many believed that their speed was more frightening than their ability to transport or jump, although Artest had never been able to figure

out why, and he was not sure that he believed it.

When hanging out together, his brethren liked to talk about certain abilities evolving over time, and Artest had been known to say similar things too, but he didn't truly believe that was how it happened.

Artest believed the visitors came to the Dogon long ago because the Dogon were there where they landed. Dogons believed it was because they were the only ones intelligent enough to communicate with the visitors.

He couldn't imagine that his small country, and his small country alone, was the only group on earth with the basic skills necessary to make superior beings feel welcome. Any species that could travel light years away from their home were going to be treated like gods wherever they landed. It might have taken some advanced thinking to realize that they would need a combination of the Dogon and the Visitors to fight the Sangsue, but maybe they were mating anyway—who really knows? The fact that the Sangsue would never have come to Earth if they hadn't been in pursuit of the Visitors wasn't lost on him either.

Considering how doubtful he was about so much of their early history, Artest really did believe that the Visitors were godly—not gods, but evolved beings who had learned some of God's most valuable lessons. Artest had had conversations with humans who believed long lives and control over space and time was possible for them too, but it wouldn't happen until the currently closed off ninety percent of the human brain was open for use.

All of this was running through his mind as he watched Jordan strip. He had to think about how much or how little he wanted to tell her after the meeting. Tyler had already told him they were going to group wash her in the morning. He was actually looking forward to being completely honest with her before he made love to her for the last time before the wash.

When she returned to the bedroom, she took one look at him, grunted, and then threw a pillow at him.

"Why did you do that?" he asked. "What kind of violent mad woman are you?"

"Where did those clothes come from?"

"You don't like my clothes?"

She started looking around, and he sensed she was searching for something else to throw.

He rushed her and held her hands. "Jordan, let's talk. Use-your-words, Jordan."

She stopped struggling. "Use your words, Jordan?" she asked.

He nodded, afraid of even his own *words* when it came to her.

“Now you’re talking to me like I’m a five-year-old?”

“That’s how you’re acting. Why would my clothes upset you? If you don’t like what I’m wearing, I’ll change.”

“That’s not the problem. Where did those clothes come from?”

He looked down at his shoes. “I bought the shoes in Italy.” She stopped him before he moved up his body with a brief fashion critique.

“When?” she asked.

“Months ago, why?”

“I thought you were going to say while I was in the bathroom.”

“You thought I went to *Italy* while you were in the bathroom?”

She looked at him for what seemed like a minute or two before she answered with a tear running down her cheek, closely followed by several more. This too reminded him of his sister, another woman who cried when she was angry and fought back when she was hurt. “Why is that any stranger than the fact that you went anywhere and back the short time I was gone? This is too much for me, Artest. Maybe another kind of woman could cope, but I can’t take it. I hate surprises. Surprises have never been good for me or to me!”

He loosened the grip on her hands and took her in his arms. “I’m beginning to understand. I really do know what it’s like to want stability. There was a time when I craved it too. I couldn’t have it and work too, so I had to get over it, but I swear I understand.”

She stopped struggling. “Tell me when you’re going to do something, even if it seems like a minor thing to you—tell me, okay? Artest, if you can’t do that, don’t contact me after the wash.”

He took her face in my hands. “Are you serious? It means that much to you?”

“It really does. *I don’t like surprises.*”

“I promise, I’ll tell you when I’m going to do something. . .”

“Even if it seems like nothing,” she added.

“Even if it seems like nothing.”

“Now tell me what you did while I was gone.”

“I went to my house to change clothes. I can’t transport from here to Italy.”

“That still doesn’t seem like enough time to get there and back.”

“And I can move faster than humans.”

“Artest, that’s one of those things you’ll need to tell me *before* we casually talk about them.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Do you have any other superpowers?”

*Superpowers? Is that what they look like to her? It’s not like I can fly. But then again, how important is flying when you can transport?* “No, there’s nothing else,” he finally said, but then he wondered if he should have told her about the stopping time thing.

## Chapter Fourteen

When they returned downstairs, the room that had been empty when they'd materialized in it earlier had billowy white fabric hanging from a ring in the center of the ceiling. The effect created a false ceiling that was inches shorter than the real one, making it necessary to bend to keep from touching the fabric. Jordan thought it was a pretty effect that made her feel as if she were floating inside a cloud. But she couldn't imagine the purpose of it.

If the fabric pieces had been falling from the ring, it might have had a Maypole effect, but the pieces were draped out to where the walls met the ceiling. All it seemed to be doing was lowering the ceiling with fabric. *Strange*. She also noticed that there were mats piled up in one corner and a low table with glasses full of an amber liquid.

"This room represents the Togu Na we have in each village. The name translates as 'House of Words,' and it's a sort of combination meeting place and social center. The low ceiling makes it impossible for anybody to stand up and begin fighting during a lively discussion," Artest said.

*What have I gotten myself into?*

There was quite a bit of noise that seemed to be coming from the living room/ dining room area. Jordan learned why when they entered and she saw that at least twenty-five people had arrived during their absence. They were all shapes, sizes, and races, but there were two things most of them had in common with Artest, Jahia and Tyler. Most of them were taller than normal, ranging from the shortest woman, who was about five-six, to a man who was at least six-seven, and they were all attractive.

At a glance, she didn't think any of them would have had a hard time at a singles bar, but their beauty was race appropriate—nothing that would stand out as unusual or breathtaking. The tall blond man had blue eyes, but the one who appeared Hispanic had dark, smoky brown eyes, and the other Mediterranean type had Artest's skin color, but green eyes and blond-streaked hair. She thought the group of them looked like a Hollywood cattle call for pretty people or a United Colors of Benetton ad. Jordan remembered what Artest said about their ability to blend in with their environment. These people would stand out anywhere, she thought.

All conversation stopped when they entered the rooms. She'd never been so sure she was being discussed.

"Here they are now," Jahia announced when the conversations hadn't started back after two or three beats.

"Apparently our arrival was well heralded," Artest said with a voice louder than he normally used.

The comment had his desired effect—he shamed the ones who could be shamed. Jordan saw a few apologetic looks. Several women and a man laughed openly; she figured they were the types who couldn't be insulted. The bulk of them just looked around the room expectantly, wondering

what would happen next.

She looked around for the women who had had or wanted to have a relationship with Artest. She assumed these people were his regular homies. There was no doubt in her mind that a man with such an obvious, healthy sexual appetite and the looks to support it would have sampled the goods close to home.

It wasn't that she was the jealous type; it was more that she enjoyed observing the games people play when it comes to the sexes.

She saw three women in three different locations looking at Artest in a manner she would describe as lustful, but it was a fourth woman, standing near Tyler, who caught her interest. She was the one giving Jordan the critical once-over, as only a former lover would.

She was tall for an Asian woman, at least five seven or eight. The most noticeable thing about her after her height was her hair. It was parted in the middle and hung straight down past her shoulders, just short of her perky-to-the-extreme, braless full breasts. She was wearing a skintight body shirt, an abundant knee-length skirt and skin tight black leggings. Her legs were long and shapely. Jordan wasn't crazy about super-straight hair, but there was no denying her total look was striking.

She wondered about the woman's assessment of her. After her once-over, the Asian woman just smiled and then took a drink from the straw in her glass. Jordan noticed that she was the only person in the room drinking from a straw, but she didn't know what, if anything, that meant.

Artest was rushed by people he apparently hadn't seen in a while. He introduced Jordan to each one, but the names blurred, as did the faces. The first one she took special notice of was an African whom Artest introduced as Sam. Most of them were Africans, according to Artest—he said all Dogons were Africans because Mali is in Africa. He kept repeating that the skin was just dressing, necessary for their various environments, but Sam looked like Jordan's image of a black African. He was with a woman named Roberta.

"They're married," Artest explained when they walked away. "She's the Hunter, and he's a Demon."

"Pretty bad, huh?" Jordan asked.

"No, he seems to be a nice enough guy."

"Fast driver?" she asked.

Artest laughed. "How would I know that, and why would you ask?"

"A demon what?" Jordan asked sarcastically "A demon baker?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "A Demon who lives topside with a Dogon-Hunter?" he said as a



question, apparently thinking they were playing some kind of word game.

Jordan pulled him to a corner, out of earshot of the others. “Are you saying he’s a real demon?”

Artest nodded.

“Like Old Testament evil?”

“No, more like the Greek interpretation, no absolute evil connotations—Daemon. Their personality depends on the individual’s values, just like humans and Hunters.” Artest’s delivery was casual, and his attention had already shifted to his discovery of the Asian girl with whom he was sharing a smile. “Kit’s here,” he mumbled as he led Jordan by the hand in her direction.

She looked back at the “demon.” There was no way she could think about him without actually visualizing the quotation marks around the word demon. He and the Mrs. were sharing a laugh with Tyler. *There’s demons, real demons in the world. I’m at a party with a demon. No, this isn’t a party. This is a meeting of otherworldly beings to discuss Sangsue. And Sangsue are what the rest of the world calls Vampires!*

She stopped walking. She didn’t plan to stop, but her feet stopped working. They were still a few feet from the Asian woman.

“What’s wrong?” Artest asked.

“You didn’t hear?”

“Were you talking to me? It is a little loud in . . .”

”No,” she interrupted. “Did you hear my thoughts?”

“Were they about me?”

“No, I guess not. I don’t think I can do this, Artest. I’ll just wait upstairs. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“What happened? Did somebody say something to you?” He glanced around the room like he was trying to figure out who could have approached her and resettled so quickly. He was thoroughly confused.

“No, I’m just. . .” *What is it?* she asked herself. *It’s fear, immobilizing fear,* was the answer. “Artest,” she whispered. “I’ve always had to take care of myself, and I’ve been good at it. The part of me that knows stuff is telling me to get the hell out of here!”

He looked around the room again. She thought she had embarrassed him, but when she looked, nobody really seemed to be paying any attention to them.

“Let’s go back to the Togu Nu.” He started walking toward the room while she was still trying to

make sense out of the words “Togu Nu.” She’d already forgotten the name and what he’d said about that room. Once they returned to the room with its billowy white fabric, he wrapped his arms around her and told her to close her eyes. Jordan did as he asked, and when she opened them, they were back in the bedroom.

She sat on the bed. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“There’s no need to apologize. I can imagine how difficult all of this is for you.”

“I’m not a weak person. . .”

“Nobody said you were. I told Tyler that you have the soul of a warrior.”

“Did you really?”

“I did.” He sat next to her. “What was it? All the strangers?”

“No, the demon. I was raised in the church . . .”

He started nodding before she said the words.

“No, Artest. You couldn’t possibly understand. Demons are . . . I don’t know what demons are, but they are not supposed to be described as *nice enough guys*. They are . . . demons!”

“I really don’t know that much about him. . .”

“You don’t have to know anything about him! It’s the fact that he exists!”

He jerked like my words hit him. “Oh,” he finally said.

They sat in silence for a moment or two. “I should probably tell you there was a Fairy and a couple of Witches down there too,” he said in a voice so small it didn’t sound like it came from him.

“Oh my God.” She allowed herself to collapse backwards, and then she brought her legs up. She wanted to crawl into the fetal position, but she was afraid that that would be overkill.

He sat where he was until he heard the laughter. She couldn’t help it as she laid there thinking about everything. She rewound the scene where they entered the living room and kept going until she stretched out. When she repeated the words, “I really don’t know that much about him,” for the second time, it struck her as funny. It was such a male thing to say about a demon. To her it was like saying *he’s a serial killer, but I really don’t know that much about him*.

Artest lay down next to her and tentatively took her into his arms. “Jordan, you’re laughing,” he said, which, of course, made her laugh harder. “I just asked Jahia to come up.”

“No, stop her, I’m okay.” She sat up and starting telling him what she was thinking. Before she finished, there was a knock on the door.

Jahia stuck her head in before he could reach the door. “You, out,” she said to Artest. “There’s somebody who’s come a long way to see you.”

“Who?”

“Go downstairs and find out or don’t, but get the hell out of here! Mother Crocodile has spoken.”

He looked at Jordan, and she nodded. She wished she could say he seemed reluctant to leave, but he darn near ran out of the room.

“Okay, which one of us freaked you out?” she asked, her voice firm but loving.

“The demon.”

“Really? Sam? He’s such a quiet, refined kind of guy. Maybe a little brooding, but most demons are. I thought for sure it was one of the women.”

All of that tickled Jordan, especially the fact that the demon’s name was Sam. She told Jahia what she was thinking, and they both ended up laughing. She wanted to find something bizarre to use as an example to explain her feelings. “Is Santa Claus real?” Jordan asked her.

“Real, like an actual person?”

Jordan nodded.

“If he is, I’ve never heard anything about it.”

“Suppose you ended up at a party and met the real Santa and three or four of his favorite elves?”

“I get it, sweetie, we all do. Your reaction is perfectly natural, one we’ve all seen before.”

It helped to hear that. She really cared what Jahia and Tyler thought.

“Come on, baby girl. There’s some women down there you don’t want to leave him with.”

“No, we’re not. . .” She couldn’t make herself lie to Jahia. She and Artest were *not* a lot of things, but if she had her way, they would be. “Which ones?” she asked, standing.

“I’m not telling. As charming as he is, he’s not safe with any of us, and I’m including myself!”

Instead of taking her back to the living room, Jahia led her to the kitchen, where she found Artest and a very attractive young woman sitting on his lap. A hot wave of jealousy shot through her with so much force it almost knocked her down. She mentally screamed his name before she

realized what she was doing. His head jerked up like he'd been thumped in the back of his head. He looked at her, shocked, but he didn't try to stand or toss off the cutie or anything like that!

“Jordan, come meet my niece, Dacia.”

## Chapter Fifteen

He'd been torn about leaving her. It wasn't hard to understand Jordan being overwhelmed by them. He'd never met a human who wasn't at least a little bothered upon learning that a lot of the beings they thought were products of writers' creativity were real. Actually, he considered her reaction one of the milder ones. But it wasn't often that so many of his countrymen and women were in one place, and he wanted to be a part of it.

He was headed back to the gathering until he heard Tyler mentally calling him. He asked Artest to join him in the kitchen.

Tyler was standing next to a lovely young woman. Artest knew at once that she was Dogon—they always knew their own—but from the side, he didn't recognize her. She turned slightly, and he saw his sister's profile, young and beautiful as she'd been when she'd entered the Service centuries ago. How is this possible? he asked himself, and then the woman turned, facing Artest, and she smiled.

"Dacia?"

"Yes, Uncle," she said.

He embraced her, lifting her off her feet. In his arms she felt like the twelve-year-old she'd been the first time he hugged her, but he inhaled deeply and found she smelled like his mother. The shock almost made him drop her. Scientists say scent memory is by far the strongest. Standing in Tyler's kitchen with nearly forgotten memories rushing through his mind, Artest realized he'd just proved it. *There was the faint cinnamon, some kind of talc mixed with a recently bathed body, and Tyler's food cooked over an open flame—who would have guessed that, combined, those odors would take me back so far to the first person I ever loved?*

"Are you alright?" his niece asked him when she sensed his strong emotion.

"I'm good, and now I'm happy as well." He sat in one of the kitchen table chairs, and she surprised him by sitting on his lap.

"Tell me everything," he told her. "Start by telling me how long you'll be here."

"I'm returning to San Francisco tonight, but I'll be there until I'm reassigned."

"You've been assigned to San Francisco?"

"Yes, we'll get to see a lot of each other."

Artest didn't say anything, but his next thought was that Fox must be getting ready to reassign him. Blood relatives who were still active Hunters were never allowed to live so close. When two Hunters married, one of them was immediately put on inactive status. Since they were all called eventually to help other Hunters within transporting range, the theory was that two people

so connected could be manipulated by their enemies.

His niece was the daughter of his sister and another Hunter who'd been his friend. Her father was killed in Service before they could be married and before Dacia was born. His sister returned to Mali and raised Dacia around distant members of their original family. Adama was probably about one hundred and ten or fifteen real years old when Dacia was born.

"How's your mother?" he asked because he knew he should.

"She is well. We speak often. Maybe my move here will bring the two of you together."

"Anything is possible." But it didn't seem likely that his sister would be interested in reconciling with the person who'd killed her husband.

Luckily, it wasn't necessary to say more, because he heard Jordan call out his name. When the others didn't react, he realized he was the only one who'd heard it.

Her reaction to seeing Dacia on his knee wasn't what he'd expected, and her very next thought denied it was jealousy, but he was pleased.

"Jordan, come meet my niece, Dacia,.." he told her.

*Your niece?* she asked mentally. He nodded as Jordan walked toward him.

*Is she the human lover everybody is talking about?* Dacia mentally asked.

*I won't engage in gossip, especially not about me,* he told her. He knew she was teasing him, but he didn't feel comfortable talking to his niece about his "lover."

"Jordan is my charge," he said when the two women were face to face.

He could see that the statement puzzled Jordan, but being a Hunter, Dacia knew Hunters call the Ketier they are actively protecting their charges.

Jordan extended her hand to Dacia. "Pleased to meet you. I was under the impression Artest didn't have any living relatives."

"It's just me and my mother, but we are many not connected by blood, but by the heart."

"You all make everything sound so beautiful and so profound with your accents."

Dacia laughed. "In this gathering, you are the one with the accent."

Jordan smiled, and he knew things would be fine between them.

"Come let me prepare a plate for you," Jahia said as she led Dacia away. Artest noticed she gave

Jordan a wink when they passed. “You’ll have plenty of time to visit with your uncle.”

Jordan had a playful smile that reminded Artest of a mischievous child. She kept the coltish look on her face as the others vacated the kitchen and she moved closer to him.

“Before I go out there and make a bigger fool of myself, tell me which ones are your lovers,” she said as she stepped so close to him he thought she was going to take Dacia’s spot on his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck as she waited for his answer. Her behavior was very playful and relaxed. He had no idea of what Jahia had said to her, but she had his gratitude for it.

“They’re my friends, not my lovers.”

“Come on, Artest, give it up.”

“Dogons are natural flirts. I’ve flirted with all of the women present, except for my niece, but I’ve never slept with any of them.” It was the truth, but just barely.

“Okay, one more question. Which one did you make out with?”

He laughed. “Jordan, I’m a grown man. What kind of question is that? Made out? What are we, high school students?”

“Answer the question, grown ass man!”

He grinned. “All right. One time, years ago, things got kind of hot and heavy with Kit. And I have a vague memory of kissing Marabella one time, but I believe I was bewitched. We were interrupted before anything happened.”

“Which one is Marabella?”

“The witch.”

“Ah, hence the bewitched disclaimer?”

She really amused him, and he couldn’t hold back the laugh. “It wasn’t a disclaimer. I really believe she slipped something in my drink.”

“Why would she have to do that?”

“Because I’ve seen what she really looks like!”

He couldn’t tell what she started to say, but she looked shocked and then laughed with her head thrown back until her joy forced him to pull her to his lap.

“You make me smile,” he told her. *Among other things that you make me feel.* She would have no way of knowing it, but in his long lifetime, he’d met or been in the company of courtesans,

geishas, and sex slaves, but none of them exuded pure sensuality as much as Jordan. He thought about how distracting it had to be for her male students. He couldn't imagine himself sitting still through one of her lectures and remaining focused on American history.

"What does she look like?" she whispered in his ear.

His mind was wandering, and her question threw him. "Who?" he asked.

"The witch. What does she really look like? The woman I think you're talking about is quite beautiful."

He laughed. "Some things are common images and clichés because they occur often. When you think of the common Halloween witch's mask, you're thinking of a generous rendering of Marabella's face. I'm not saying they all look like that, because they don't. Some of them are naturally lovely, but Marabella hasn't aged well."

"How old is she?"

"I would guess one fifty, maybe one seventy-five."

"Oh my goodness. Is anybody out there younger than fifty real years?"

He didn't have to think about that one. "No, you are by far the youngest person in the house."

"I still think I'm going to wake up and learn that I've dreamed all of this."

Before he could respond to her, he heard something that forced him to stand abruptly, but he held her so she wouldn't fall.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. Stay. No, come with me," he said while pulling her with him towards the source of his concern.

Tyler was standing near the temple door.

"What is it?" Artest asked in English.

"Maybe nothing, but I'd planned to light the candles in the temple. Twice I tried to open the door, and twice it stuck."

"It is a very old door," Artest said, but the words were spoken for her benefit. Both Tyler and Artest knew something was wrong. It was a sign, and Dogon-Hunters heed signs.

He placed his hands against the door and *listened*.



“It’s not inside,” he said, and Tyler nodded. Artest knew Tyler had already checked, but he had to satisfy himself.

“One of my guests was not invited,.” Tyler said in Bamanakan.

Artest responded in Bamanakan when he answered. “Should I take her upstairs or away from the house?”

Tyler thought for a moment. “Thunder is not yet rain. Keep her close for now. I’ll announce that it’s almost time to enter the Togu Na, but the temple will be available for the next few minutes if anybody is interested in visiting.”

Artest nodded. “Then they’ll know to expect the test.”

“Exactly,” Tyler agreed.

## Chapter Sixteen

When Jordan was in high school, she envied the girls who had boyfriends. She'd never been the boy crazy type, and her sex drive was finally getting stronger as she got older, but she wanted somebody looking at her the way the attached girls' guys looked at them. She figured there must have been somebody in the school who had a crush on her, but she never had a real boyfriend until college, and even then she didn't believe he was crazy about her—just crazy in general.

In her high school, it was the Hispanics and a few white boys who seemed to have great love written on their faces. The black guys considered that kind of declaration weak. Artest looked at her the way she'd wanted somebody to look at her in high school. He looked at her like she was beautiful and he believed it to the bone; if everybody else couldn't see it, that was their problem.

In high school and college, all of them would declare their great love when it was just the two of them and it was dark and they were alone, but that didn't count. First of all, it was a lie. Mama May used to tell her that tight pants will make a liar out of any guy, and time taught her the truth of the saying—even if it did keep her confused when she was young and the slim-fit jeans were popular, and she thought Mama May was talking about the actual pants' cut.

Secondly, and this was the important thing, back then she didn't know that it was close to impossible to get a guy to look at you and feel that all-consuming love without having sex with him. Until a girl ended up pregnant and leaving school for the Continuation School, Jordan never believed the rumors about who did and who didn't. She just assumed that, like her, everybody "didn't." She wanted to play the game, but she didn't know the rules.

*Finally, somebody's giving me the look. If only he was a normal guy.* She still wasn't sure she was buying all of this Dogon-Hunter bull, but it was making for an interesting weekend. But if it turned out that just half of it was true, where did that leave them?

She didn't have to know their language to know something was wrong. She felt his body tense up, and then Artest almost dropped her from his lap. He tilted his head and seemed to be listening to something. He didn't tell her that, but the next thing she knew, they were walking through the big house looking for someone. He held her hand as he had before, but she felt like it was out of necessity rather than comfort.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"There could be a security breach," was all he said, suddenly more serious than she'd seen him before.

She didn't know what that meant, considering they were in a couple's house and not an embassy, airport, or some such place.

"What will you do?" she asked. She'd really had to think of what to say, and that was all she could come up with.

“We will find it and kill it.”

A chill ran through her. She looked at him to see if she could find some indication that she’d misunderstood. His expression was hard, and she could almost see, cut in his handsome face, some of the many years he claimed.

They reached Tyler, who was standing next to the exquisite door she’d seen earlier. Tyler told Artest he’d experienced some difficulty in trying to open it. It didn’t seem like an orange alert to her—it was a very old door, and it looked a little larger than the cut of the frame that held it.

But what do I know about it, she asked herself?

Then they talked about performing a test.

“What kind of test?” she asked Artest while Tyler was explaining the situation to Jahia, who had joined them.

“A test that a Dogon-Hunter could pass.”

That was all he said about it, so Jordan assumed a Dogon-Hunter’s *squeeze* either didn’t have to take it or wasn’t expected to pass it, since he didn’t give her a blue exam book or any oral questions.

He rejoined the room of visitors, and each of them set about talking to the ones identified earlier as Hunters. Jordan found the conversations very strange, but she was fairly certain they had little to do with the tests.

They all seemed to talk in parables. One woman told Artest that her husband no longer hunted because, “‘He’s just about finished growing now. Like Sundiata, he has no more anger in him. As I’m sure you can imagine, it’s just about impossible to kill without anger. It should be, anyway. It makes it difficult to save one’s own life without anger.’”

Artest said, “so true, my sister,” and then he moved on to the next person.

That might not sound like such a strange thing to say if she’d said something like, *he no longer works as an accountant because he’s lost his head for numbers*, but she was talking about killing. They were both talking about killing other two-legged beings! And Jordan couldn’t tell if they envied or pitied the husband who was no longer angry.

“How did you hear of the problem?” Artest asked one of the men. Jordan hadn’t heard what the man had said to him prior to this question because, even though the other guy had been speaking in a language she didn’t understand, he kept looking at her with suspicion and whispering. Apparently Artest’s question signaled that he should speak English.

“I got my information from Loki months ago, so I took it with a grain of salt. Loki said it wasn’t one of their concerns, but they’d noticed the increased numbers moving west. I didn’t put any

stock in it until the Pale Fox told me himself.”

“No, one should never trust Loki’s word alone. I know he is your friend, but you know it’s the truth.”

The Hunter nodded; both of them smiled.

Artest chuckled a little. “When was he in town?”

“He wasn’t. I ran into him in Vegas. He loves that town.”

“Where else would such a scoundrel hang out? Give him my best when next you see him.”

When they walked away, Jordan asked, “Who’s Loki? I’ve heard that name somewhere before.”

“You’ve studied Norse mythology?” Artest asked. His question seemed apropos of nothing, but she was trying to roll with the strangeness.

“I wrote a paper about it in undergrad, but that’s about it. Why?”

“The Hunter I just spoke with is one of the oldest active Hunters. He knows many of the gods and immortals. Loki is listed as the Norse god of mischief. There is a lot more to him than that, but that’s good enough for now.”

Jordan’s legs buckled. Artest caught her before she hit the floor. He led her to a seat. “What is it?” he asked, his face tight with concern.

“Norse gods, Artest,” she whispered. “Are you saying all of that mythology is true?”

“No, of course not.”

“But Loki is real?”

He bit his bottom lip. She could see he was really struggling with whatever it was he wanted to say to her.

“The myths are stories. There are a lot of stories in the world, but most of the people and gods they are based on did or do exist.”

“Even the Greeks?” she asked.

Artest looked around. He spoke in a deep, hissing whisper. “Please, Jordan, whatever you do, don’t conjure up those worrisome, prima donna Olympians! We have enough to deal with!”

She would have apologized had she been able to speak. *Is he trying to tell me that all of that unbelievable stuff we had to learn about the Greek gods is true?*

“I’m sorry if I sounded angry just then. It’s not you,” he said. He gave the hand he was already holding a squeeze. “And, for the record, the myths are just that. Okay?”

She knew he’d been reading her thoughts and he was commenting on them, but she let it slide. Clearly he had other things on his mind.

He bent down and kissed her forehead. She wasn’t sure why.

“Ready?” he asked.

At first she didn’t know what he was asking, but then she figured out that he was asking her if she was ready to stand and continue with whatever came next. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* She was ready.

## Chapter Seventeen

A real Dogon-Hunter would *expect* to visit the temple before a meeting. When Tyler announced that the temple would be available for the next few minutes if anybody was interested in visiting, he was telling those Hunters among them that something was wrong. There would never be such a casual offer—Dogons take their temple time seriously. To the outside eye, nothing changed, but there was so much mental talking going around the room that it set Artest's head spinning. "What's going on?" and "What's happening?" were the two phrases he heard repeatedly.

The two witches announced that they had another engagement and they had just stopped by to say hello. Soon, after a few pleasantries, they were gone. They couldn't hear the mental conversations, but they were very intuitive—they knew something wasn't right, and they didn't want to get caught in the crossfire.

Before she left, Marabella found him and said, "you know how to reach us if you need us."

Artest appreciated her offer and told her so as he hugged her goodbye, even though he knew it was mostly political. He thought about it—she was a member of the regulating council that *governed* all of the other worldly types (GAN, the Global Association of Nonhumans), and it was good to have friends in high places.

The council was pushing hard for a policing division to force compliance of the rules and decisions. As it stood, they all policed their own. As Artest understood the proposal, that wouldn't change, but, if there was a dispute and GAN had to get involved, the policing division would be in place to guarantee compliance. It was, of course, the gods and other immortals putting up the greatest fuss about a police force, especially the Greeks. *There are always those beings who can't be told anything!*

Tyler sent Artest a mental message to join him. He was less than five feet away, talking to Katherine. She was a relatively new Dogon-Hunter. Artest didn't know her very well, but he knew her uncle, Cyrus, who was retired.

"Katherine, have you met my charge, Jordan?" Artest asked.

"No, pleased to meet you," she said. She barely glanced at Jordan, as if she was afraid to look at her. Artest found that strange.

"Katherine was just telling me that her aunt and uncle recently bought a villa in South Africa," Tyler said.

"I'm so happy for them," Artest said. "They've earned their retirement." He looked at Tyler. "Do you mind if I close that shade? It's getting a little warm in here." The window was directly behind Katherine, and he was facing it as he talked to her.

"My home is your home."

He pulled Jordan with him, behind Katherine, and immediately pushed her aside. He grabbed his dagger and a handful of Katherine's hair. Before she knew what was happening, he had the blade under her throat, which meant she could not transport. When Artest looked at him, Artest wasn't surprised to see Tyler's sword out and pointed toward her.

"Not on that rug," Jahia shouted. "She might have fed recently."

They all looked down at Jahia's Persian rug. Tyler rolled his eyes, but Artest pulled the woman to the hardwood floor in the center of the room. Jahia scared him much more than Tyler.

"Start talking, Bloodsucker," he said to her.

"Please, don't make me die with the face of a killer. Let me change."

"If you can do it without me letting go, be my guest." He knew she wouldn't be able to change completely with him touching her, but that wasn't his problem. If he let go, she could transport.

Everything changed except her hair. Like most Sangsue she was tall, about two inches taller than Katherine. And she was about twenty pounds lighter than the model-thin Katherine. Her tan skin became a pale, chalky white, and her brown eyes turned blue. Artest figured she was blonde, like many of the Sangsue in the U.S. are, but he was holding on to her hair and it remained brown.

"I've got Katherine on the cell," Roberta shouted, which really wasn't necessary since the room was dead silent. "She's fine."

"Somebody call Cyrus," Tyler said.

Artest looked up and saw the demon, Sam, frantically pushing the buttons on one of the tiniest phones he'd ever seen. He'd never met a Demon who wasn't a technophile. Most of them were wizards with computers.

"I'm not getting an answer," Sam said.

"Call his Aide. Does anybody know Cyrus's Aide's name?" Artest didn't know who said that.

Nobody answered.

"I'll go look it up," Jahia said. "The rug, Tyler," she said before leaving the room.

Artest had somehow managed to pull the Bloodsucker back near her rug, but they weren't on it. He pulled her farther away again. He wasn't sure if Jahia was serious or if she was messing with the woman's head. As a team, she and Tyler were considered some of their best interrogators, with Tyler playing good cop and Jahia playing "*I'd rather kill you than look at you*" cop.

"His name is Montag, and he's answering," Jahia said from another room.

He looked over at Jordan. With him no longer holding her hand, she had moved away from the action as far as possible while still being able to see what was happening. He tried to give her a look to convey confidence, but he wasn't feeling especially confident. *A Bloodsucker has boldly fouled our sanctuary.* Even with his blade under her chin and his hand yanking her hair, Artest wasn't feeling a lot of fear from the creature. *Why?* Then it came to him.

*She's not alone,* Artest told Tyler.

*I was beginning to sense that too,* he replied.

Jahia screamed. The Bloodsucker poised herself to jerk away, but Artest held tighter. Nobody, not even Tyler, knew as well as Artest that Jahia could take care of herself.

Tyler retracted his sword and rushed to his wife.

"Who's working with you?" he asked her.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't."

Some of the guests followed Tyler, but the majority stayed where they were standing. He tried to think about who was missing. He pictured the room the second before he'd grabbed the Katherine lookalike. *Bree, the fairy.* He hadn't seen her since before he went upstairs with Jordan.

He smelled an odor that reminded most people of burned rubber, and he knew the Sangsue was gone. The one he was still holding shuddered. She had to be thinking that she would be the next to implode into a pile of putrid dust.

Tyler returned. "It had shape shifted into Bree. Can one of you contact her to see if she's alive?"

Again it was Sam on his little phone.

"What happened?" Artest asked Tyler.

"Before I got there, it had shifted back to itself. Jahia saw it, and that must have been when she screamed. By the time I reached the doorway, Jahia had cut its throat."

"Any blood on her floor?"

"I didn't notice."

Jahia never had been one to ask a lot of question during an encounter. When she was Artest's teacher, she used to say, *"Talking doesn't fill the basket in the farm."* She used the expression for so many different occasions he wasn't always sure what she meant, but he did gather that she



didn't have a lot to say to the enemy.

She returned to the room looking drained. A kill was always very difficult, even for somebody as good at it as Jahia was.

"What did you learn?" he asked.

Jahia looked at him as if she was surprised to see him there. He wondered how long it had been since her last kill.

"I learned that a Bloodsucker was in my house, posing as one of my friends."

Tyler, standing behind and to the right of her, shook his head, but he need not have bothered. Artest wasn't going to ask her anything else.

"Bree is in Canada. And she's fine," Sam announced.

Artest saw Tyler give Roberta a look; he imagined they were speaking. Next he saw Roberta wrap her arms around Jahia. Soon Roberta was on one side of her and Sam was on the other as they led her to the temple. Artest always thought of Roberta as the earth mother type.

Sam, of course, would have only have gone as far as the door. It wasn't that he had anything against their temples, but Dogon temples were for Dogons. Being with Roberta, Artest suspected Sam was spiritual, but he didn't know what religion, if any, he practiced.

"Clare, why don't you and Ian take this one into the kitchen and see what you can learn?" Tyler said. "I'll be in there after I check on my wife."

Artest looked at Tyler, mentally demanding an explanation. It was his dagger on the Bloodsucker's throat! Tyler simply glanced over at Jordan, who was literally sitting on a corner chair, shaking. Artest nodded.

Tyler was right—his charge should have been and was his first concern.

## Chapter Eighteen

She saw it happen. Artest didn't know it, but Jordan could see Jahia and the "fairy" talking in the kitchen as Jahia frantically searched through what looked like a day planner. Jahia must have found the number because she set down the book and started dialing. The Fairy was standing behind her while Jahia was on the telephone. It was a wall phone, and Jahia was leaning against the kitchen counter as she talked.

Jordan saw the Fairy change into a much taller man, but she had no reason to believe that was strange, considering all that she'd already seen and heard. She didn't know if Jahia sensed what happened or if she saw the reflection in one of the appliances, but when she turned around she had a dagger, very similar to Artest's, in her hand—but only for as long as it took to plunge it into the man's throat. She cut him from one ear almost to the other. The man spit on Jahia seconds before he imploded into a million black pixels that vanished into thin air.

Jordan noticed then that Jahia looked down at her kitchen floor. She couldn't see what Jahia saw, but there must have been some blood left on the tile. She then took a few paper towels, opened a cabinet and grabbed some Windex spray and cleaned the spot. She was throwing away the paper towel when Tyler came in and embraced her. All of this happened so fast Jordan was prepared to not believe it until she smelled the horrid stench of inhuman death.

Jordan felt she'd seen enough—she was ready to leave. Maybe the pretty girls grew up ready to handle the drama that comes with dating the pretty boys, but that wasn't her experience. *I'm a simple girl with simple requirements, and none of my needs require a dagger or an automatic sword hidden or in plain view.*

She couldn't stop shaking. It was like the chair she was sitting on had been fashioned from a cube of ice. At one point she saw Tyler looking at her, but she still couldn't stop. If somebody had shouted fire at that moment, she would've had to burn. She stopped being able to hear soon after she saw the man implode, but she did see two Hunters leading the woman away. This struck her as odd, but she couldn't have said why at that moment. A few beats later, she realized it was odd because neither of the Hunters were Artest. She'd assumed he would handle his capture.

"Stand up and let me hold you," he said, while the rest of the guests crowded around the kitchen.

She did exactly what he'd said, and she was thankful that he hadn't made the directions difficult.

"Close your eyes, my dear—you are safe."

Again, she obeyed. When she opened her eyes, they were in the upstairs bedroom. Jordan had known he was going to transport her somewhere, but she had hoped it would be back to her apartment or his house.

"This is still the safest place in town. Most of the people downstairs are spending the night."

"But they got in here!"

“But they’re not leaving, Jordan. They can’t hurt you.”

“Do you think they communicated with the others while they were here?”

She was sitting on the bed, and he was pacing. He stopped when she asked that question and sat next to her. He looked at her with those eyes, unlike any she’d ever seen. His dark pupils seemed to move like the fluid in a magic eight ball. *How can this man, whom I’ve only known for hours, feel so important to my future?* When she looked into his licorice pools, she felt that he and he alone knew what was best for her.

“I’m not going to lie to you. Yes, I believe they were communicating back to the others. I’m just glad we found out before the real meeting.”

“But they know I’m still with you.”

He wrapped his arm around me. “Yes, they do, but they know I’m keeping you close, and they have to come through me to get to you.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “What’s next?”

“Everybody is just turning in for the night. We’ll work through this mess in the morning.”

“Everybody is staying over?”

“Most of them, even the ones from Oakland, San Francisco, and the rest of the Bay Area. Our sanctuary has been violated—they can’t leave.”

“Where will they all sleep?”

He held my face in his hands and stared at me. “I don’t know, Jordan, but I’m sure they’ll be fine. As long as they don’t interfere with me holding you in my arms until the sun comes up again.”

He leaned down and rubbed his lips against hers. She thought he was going to kiss her, but then he just rubbed his cheek against her. “Did it scare you?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You handled it well. You seem to handle everything well. Why is that, Jordan? If this were a story, I would learn that you’re a goddess or maybe some other kind of immortal.”

“Some other kind of immortal? Artest, until today I never knew there was any kind of immortal!”

“But you’re not going to cry or anything, right?”

“Since that sounds more like a request than a question, I guess I won’t.” She didn’t mean to have an edge to her voice, but she didn’t mean to see a person implode either.

She wanted to sleep and she wanted to wake and learn it was all a nightmare, *the kind I tend to get when I eat too heavily before bed. But that would leave me in a life without him.*

She looked at him. She could tell he was “talking” to someone. His head was tilted like he might have been listening for a sound in the distance. He nodded as if his conversation partner could see him as well. *Am I in a life with him; is that even possible?*

“Before they kill—” He stopped himself; he seemed to be searching for the right phrasing. “The Bloodsucker that had shape shifted to become Katherine said something about some in-fighting between two fractions. They would have had the edge, had they been successful.”

She nodded. “How did you all know that she was an imposter?”

“Katherine’s aunt and uncle did buy a villa in South Africa, we all knew that, but her aunt was killed before they had a chance to move in.”

“Was she a Dogon-Hunter?”

“Yes, she died in Service.”

She hated how he said those words with such pride. Dead was dead, and, as far as she was concerned, how it happened didn’t make it any less so.

“Is that how you want to die?”

He laughed. “No, I want to retire and die in the arms of the mother of my children, but that won’t happen. So I guess it’s safe to say, if I have to die before I get to hold a child of my own, then let it be in Service.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’m not sure it’ll be in Service.”

“No, how can you be so sure it won’t be with the mother of your children?”

That sadness that never seemed too far from the surface returned. He was still smiling, but she didn’t feel any joy coming from him. “Because I’m not exactly what’s been described as lovable.”

*How can he not know?* “Is that your way of fishing for compliments?”

He grinned. “No, I’m not fishing. I know that Hunters have adapted to appeal to the visual, but

that's never made anybody pledge her undying love to me."

"I find that hard to believe."

She saw that sadness wash over his face again. "You're right, I have heard the words before, and I believe they were true, but it's that *until death* provision that keeps queering the deal. Maybe some beings are supposed to be alone."

She wanted to know more, but she couldn't be the one to cause the sadness in his eyes. Then she remembered something else she wanted to ask about. "Artest, who's the Pale Fox?"

He smiled. "Who mentioned the Pale Fox to you?"

"It wasn't really to me, but somebody said he got an answer from the Pale Fox."

He rubbed his eyes and said, "it's a long story. I can think of a much better use of our time."

"It's upsetting?"

"Not at all," he said, but she could tell his mind was elsewhere. She wanted to follow him to a happier place, but she was having a difficult time letting go of the image of that *person* disappearing before her eyes.

"Let me help you relax."

"Let me get this straight—there's something you want to do *for me*?" she teased.

"Absolutely, my dear, all for you."

He pulled her down across the width of the bed.

She wasn't nearly as easygoing as she'd like to be. She thought about the fact that they were both still fully dressed, they were on top of Jahia's nice bedspread, and she hadn't done her usual pre-bedtime stuff, like washing off the makeup that would definitely ruin the before mentioned bedspread.

As difficult as it was, she broke away from his embrace. "Artest, give me a minute to go to the bathroom and, as they say, slip into something more comfortable."

He looked confused. "Did you bring extra clothes?"

"No, but I do have my birthday suit with me."

He grinned. "Take all the time you need. In fact, if it's alright with you, I'll go and check on my friends while you're gone."

“Your friends downstairs, right? Not in Mali or somewhere?”

“My friends downstairs. I promise. If you need me, just call out my name.”

## Chapter Nineteen

He found the Hunters in the temple. There was no group activity; they were all were quietly communing and reflecting. He sat on the floor like the rest of them. Silently he asked Amma for the knowledge and strength to protect his charge. He thanked him for allowing them to prevail against the Suckers who violated their sanctuary. And he thanked him for bringing Jordan into his life. Then he called on his ancestors to walk with him into her arms if that was where they would have him.

As he stood to check on the others, he realized it was the first time he'd ever felt compelled to ask his ancestors for help in matters related to the heart. *Next I'll be asking the Pale Fox for a sign.*

He walked around the house checking on the others, but his mind was upstairs.

*What is it about her?* he asked himself. *Surely I've known her before, during another journey? How else could she feel so special so soon?*

He found Jahia in the kitchen, sitting and drinking tea. It wouldn't have been especially unusual, except that she was sitting in the dark and her dagger was on the table next to her tea cup.

"How are you, my sister friend?"

"Old and getting older."

"That can be said of all of us."

"Yes, but some more than others. Sit down for a moment, Artest. I know you'll want to get back to Jordan, and I won't delay you for long."

He sat down next to her. "Where is Tyler?"

"On the telephone with the Priest."

He nodded. Of course Tyler would want to let the Priest know what happened—not that he would offer any words of encouragement or insight. Their presence was always a comfort, but in Artest's opinion, the Priests tended to offer advice that required so much interpretation as to render it useless.

"I've been thinking about what happened, Artest. Something is very wrong. Those two Bloodsuckers were sacrificed."

"What do you mean?"

"Rats don't dance in the cat's doorway. They were sent here to die. Why?"

He shook his head; he didn't know. He hadn't had a chance to really think it out, but it was one of the oddest things he'd ever seen. She was right, and that scared him.

"I've seen this before, centuries ago. There was a turf war going on then too. I think I'll go online and see if I can find out anything about who they were and what the other Hunters know."

He stood and offered her his hand. She took it as she rose from the chair, but she said something about being stronger than she looked.

"You know you're strong and beautiful, but if you need to hear it, that was it."

She smiled and nudged him. "I'm not the one who needs to hear your bull. Get back upstairs."

"I can't believe you're encouraging this. She is Ketier, Jahia."

"That might be true, but I believe this one is special."

"So do I." *Yes, so do I.*

\* \* \* \*

The drapes were drawn and she was under the blankets when he returned. He disposed of his clothes as he walked to the bed.

"I was counting to one hundred," she said as soon as he drew her to him. "I was putting my clothes back on after that."

"What number were you on?" he asked as he ran his tongue along the rim of her ear.

"I was on ninety-nine point three out of one hundred."

He laughed. "God, I love the American school system."

"That better not be a dig!"

"No, darling, the digging comes later." He kissed his way from her ear to her graceful neck. He let his tongue rest on her pulse and imagined that he could feel her blood beating in his veins, making its way through his body and making him strong and harder with each beat. He sucked the spot until he was sure he'd left his mark, something he hadn't purposely done in many lifetimes. He knew it was a childish thing to do, but, if he could have written his name across her forehead, he would have if it would've assured that no other man would ever touch her.

He couldn't decide which nipple he wanted first. Her breasts were unlike any he'd ever seen in that the areola was puffy and the nipples were long. He didn't think the two turn-ons could exist on the same woman. Gently he pressed her breasts together and attempted to feed them both into his waiting mouth. Her full, luscious breasts were willing, but still the distance between her



nipples forced him to choose. He took the right one in his mouth. It was hot and rigid and growing with each mouth-suctioning pull. He sucked and imagined how sweet her milk would taste. Even the thought of their own child feeding from it made the feral Dogon-Hunter in him feel jealous, and he latched on harder.

She moaned, and a wave of intense arousal surged through him. She stroked his cheek, and he opened his eyes. With both hands, she was offering him her left nipple. Still he wanted them both in his mouth, but he let go of the right, then immediately took the left.

“Suck it hard like you did the other one,” she whispered.

He sensed some embarrassment in her request, and it charged his senses to know she was operating on raw instinct. He’d heard pillow talk in many different languages, but never before had words so ignited him. Had she chosen that moment to touch his hardness, it would have been his release.

“Yes, like that,” she said, moaning.

As if she’d heard his thought, her hand sought him. *Not yet.* He closed the millimeters between them and took her greedy fingers into his mouth. Then he used her wet fingers to rub the nipple that he’d already tasted. He grinded his pelvis into hers, and again she moaned.

“You’ve got to teach me your clothes removal trick,” she said.

“If I had my way you would never wear them.”

She said something, or perhaps it was another moan—his ears had inched between her thighs, and taste and smell were the only senses working. Her scent was concentrated Jordan, and he couldn’t get enough of it. As much as he valued their first time together, her excitement was nowhere near as obvious as it was then. Her juices ran like nectar, and he slurped like a man in need of nourishment. He teased her clitoris with his tongue, and she quaked, a warning of things to come.

“I want you now,” she said.

*I want you now and forever,* he thought, thoroughly surprising himself. It made him momentarily pause. *No.* He wouldn’t allow himself to think about what came next, after the crisis—when it was time for them to part ways.

He didn’t want to stop, but he knew it would only get better. He licked and nibbled his way back up her body. With his right leg, he parted her legs, but she stopped him. “Wait,” she said, “why should your mouth have all the fun?”

She mirrored his tongue, moving down his body until she reached the crease that joined his lower body to his torso. She sampled his taste across one side and then the other. He felt like he would explode if she didn’t hurry up and touch his erection. Again, as if she’d heard, she cupped

his sac with just her fingertips and hefted as if she was gauging their weight. He expected her to take him into her mouth, but he was wrong. She opened wide and enclosed his pouch in the warm wetness, allowing her tongue to play with his glands.

“Damn, girl,” was all he could say.

She let his sac slide from her mouth as she licked his hardness from the base to the tip and back down again. Then she took as much as she could into her mouth. Not wanting to make her gag, he moved back, but she cupped his ass and pulled him forward. While her mouth, tongue and throat engulfed him, she carefully avoided scratching him with her fingernails while her index finger forged its own entrance.

Artest fingered her thick hair, made full by twice as many thin, fine strands as usual. It was too much—he knew he couldn’t hold out much longer. He ran his hands through her hair and gently lifted her face. “Get up here,” he said.

She let him drop from her mouth and mounted him without another moment’s hesitation. They hit their rhythm like they’d been together forever. The thought that he would one day have to let her go crossed his mind again, and he plunged deeper.

“Yes, yes,” she moaned.

Again, her voice ignited him.

Artest spoke out in what he believed was French or Arabic, but he didn’t know what he said.

The beginning of a scream escaped before she bit his shoulder to stop herself. He exploded the moment he felt her teeth clamp down.

## Chapter Twenty

Had somebody asked, Jordan would've predicted a sleepless night. Since she grew up in environments that required sleeping with one eye open, she wasn't a good sleeper, and seeing a person die is likely to have an adverse effect on the best sleeper's nod time. But she slept so soundly in Artest's arms she awoke startled and confused.

Her eyes popped open like an alarm had sounded. She didn't recognize anything she saw in the shadowy room. *Where am I?* He had her spooned in a bear hug. *Who is he?* That lavender smell made her think about a funeral. She couldn't move. *It must be my funeral.*

It was at that point that she screamed. There was inhumanly fast movement, and she felt his cheek against hers as he held her in a forward bear hug. That was when she really opened her eyes and realized the first awakening was a dream.

"Jordan, Jordan, it's all right."

She pulled back and looked into his eyes, and, at that moment, she too believed it was all right. "Artest?"

"It better be. Good morning."

"What time is it?"

He looked at the closed drapes. "I would say about eight thirty-six."

"That's not an *about* number," she told him. She picked up his watch from the night stand. It was eight thirty-six.

When she looked at him, his eyes were closed, but he was smiling. He knew the time by looking at a closed curtain. *Another one of your superpowers, old man?* She said it mentally, but he didn't answer.

"I'm talking to you," she said aloud.

"I did hear you saying something, but then I heard you say old man, and you said I looked younger than you. I just knew you couldn't be talking to me."

She jabbed him in the ribs.

"Hey, what's wrong with you? Not a morning person, dear?"

Jordan was feeling a bit feisty, but until he asked, she hadn't come to that conclusion. She was feeling like a caged animal, but she wasn't sure what to do about that feeling.

"If you need to burn off some energy, I'm your man."

Were that only true, she thought, but then realized he might have heard her. She looked at him. His eyes were closed again, and he was giving the impression of a man who wanted to go back to sleep.

“Artest, what time do you usually get up?”

“It depends on how long I’ve worked the night before. If it’s been a quiet night, around ten or eleven. Why?”

“My first class is at eight twelve—my body clock is set, even on weekends. I’ve got to get up early.”

He opened his eyes and rolled toward her. “Darling, I can be *up* for you right now. Let me help you to relax.” He reached for her, but she wiggled away.

“No, I need to go find a cup of coffee.”

He sat all the way up. “I’ll go down and get it for you.”

She could tell his heart wasn’t in it. “No, stay where you are. I’m going to wash up and go downstairs.”

“You won’t leave the house?”

“Not if there’s coffee here.”

“Jordan, no matter what, come back up here before you leave, or think of me and call my name! It might not be safe outside.”

“I hear you. Do you want me to bring you something?”

“Yes, I want you to bring your beautiful body back to me as soon as possible.”

She looked at him, and he was looking at her like she was something special. She didn’t get it, but she sure liked it.

“Okay, go back to sleep.”

\* \* \* \*

The house downstairs was quiet. People were sleeping on sofas, chairs, and floors in every room she passed en route to the kitchen.

She smelled the coffee before she entered the kitchen and found Jahia sitting at her kitchen table.

“Good morning, my dear.”

“Good morning, Jahia. Were you able to get any sleep?”

“Sleep is a luxury I don’t get to enjoy often; last night was no exception. Sit; let me pour you a cup of coffee.” She looked at Jordan with a serious expression and then said, “One artificial sweetener, no cream.”

“I won’t ask how you did that,” Jordan said.

“I’m sorry. I should have asked. I’m so used to being around other Hunters these days. I know humans hate to be scanned like that, but I meant no harm.”

“It’s okay, really.”

She prepared the coffee in silence. Jordan could tell she was bothered by something, but she suspected it wasn’t anything she could help or advise her about.

Jahia sat the steaming mug in front of her guest and sat back down to her tea. “For many centuries I worked the nights just like the rest of them. Humans would be so surprised to know who and what walks the streets of our cities at night...”

“Like Demons?” Jordan asked, interrupting.

Jahia threw back her head when she laughed. “Yes, like Demons. Most of them are the nicest beings you ever want to meet, but when they go bad, it’s very serious. But like all of us out there, they have their own to rectify their problems. Dogon-Hunters aren’t the only Hunters, and we aren’t even the only ones hunting vampire-like animals. We all share a lot of information with each other.”

“How? I wouldn’t think you would have a common language.”

“Oh yes, we do. It’s called the internet. Have you heard of it?” she teased.

“I might have heard a little something about it.” Jordan answered, grinning.

“Seriously, we speak the languages associated with the countries in which we live. Some of us have been around long enough to speak some of the ancient languages as well.”

“Wow.”

“I know a few Ancients who can still speak Latin, which sounds very little like what you learned in school.”

“I just barely learned English.”

“Whatever language you’re speaking, Jordan, my friend is hearing it loud and clear. You like him, don’t you?”

“I do, but I know it can’t last or develop into anything permanent.”

“And how did you come by that information?”

“He told me and my friend the night we met.”

“He’s old, Jordan, but not so old that he knows everything! God is not finished with him.”

Jordan wouldn’t allow herself to ask any more about it. She’d been disappointed in love matters, and she wasn’t ready to think about the disappointment that would come when they had to say goodbye to each other. *How has he managed to squeeze into such a tight spot in my heart so soon?*

“All right, my dear, I can understand you wanting to keep your own counsel. Just remember he’s a very honest person. If you don’t want to hear the truth, don’t ask him.”

Jordan nodded.

“But, little by little grow the bananas.”

She thought about it, but she wasn’t quite sure what Jahia meant by that. “I don’t understand.”

Jahia stood and started walking away from her. The telephone rang, and Jordan realized Jahia had been on her way to answer it before it rang.

Jahia laughed. “I just say them—you’ll have to get somebody else to interpret them.” Jordan left while Jahia spoke to someone in a language she didn’t recognize.

Artest was still asleep when she returned to the bedroom. She thought she was being quiet, but she saw him turn his head in her direction even though he didn’t open his eyes.

“How was your coffee?” he mumbled.

“How do you know I didn’t have tea?”

He opened his eyes. “Did you have tea?”

“No, my coffee was fine.”

“Come here,” he said softly.

He was smiling at her again, as if he could see through her clothes.

“No, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t be afraid, little girl, come here. I’ll take care of you.”

“I don’t want to be in bed, Artest. I was raised around old people, and old people believe you’re trifling if you don’t get up and get out of bed at the crack of dawn.”

He sat up, revealing that taut, muscular chest. “I guarantee you I am older than any of those people you were raised around. And I say, come to bed, little girl.”

She didn’t want to appear too easy, but she really wanted to be with him again. And yet a part of her really didn’t feel good about joining him in a bed that hadn’t been made since the night before. She wasn’t lying about Mama May’s opinion of laziness in folks who spent leisure time in bed. She used to say, “get up, girl, I’m not running no flop house!”

Jordan the child had no idea what a flop house was or is, but she knew it wasn’t a good place to sleep or run. She used to have to lie about having the cramps or a headache just to take a nap should the mood hit. All of this would be going on while Mama May sat up in her overstuffed, comfortable chair, sleeping away half the day and through most television shows.

She saw Artest get that look he got when communicating with one of the other Hunters.

“Damn,” he said as he threw back the covers and stood.

His body was so pretty she wished she could paint. Jordan knew pretty was an odd word to describe a man’s body, but it was the best one for Artest. From what she could see in their clothes, it was a good word for every one of the Hunters—male and female.

“What?” she asked when she could finally catch her breath after seeing him like that.

“Tyler is calling a meeting.”

“For when?”

“Now—I barely have time to shower.”

“I saw a computer in one of the rooms. Do you think it’ll be all right if I check my email?”

“The house has wireless. I’ll bring you a laptop before I go down. I would prefer for you to stay in here, with the door locked, until I come back.”

She thought that was a bit much, but she agreed.

She heard the shower, and then, less than ten minutes later, he emerged looking like he’d stepped off the pages of GQ. She hadn’t seen him take any clothes in there with him.

“You took another quick trip to your house, didn’t you?”

He smiled. “I did. Was that one of those things I should have mentioned first?”

She waved her hand at him. “If it means you coming from a shower looking like that, carry on.”

“What, this old thing?”

She started looking around to find a pillow to hit him.

He laughed. “You seem like such a nice person, but you’re violent, girl!”

The pillow hit the door just as he closed it.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. Before she could respond, the door cracked open, and his hand appeared holding a laptop.

She took the laptop, but before he could snatch his hand back, she grabbed it and kissed and then licked his palm.

He moaned. “You’re killing me, Jordan,” he said as he walked away.



## Chapter Twenty-One

The Togu Na was crowded but quiet. Artest still considered it strange to see women in the Togu Na, even a facsimile of one. When he was a young boy living in the village, it was an all-male social center. Some of the male Dogon-Hunters still grumbled about what they called the female intrusion, but Artest figured if they could fight and die together, they could certainly sit together.

Tyler entered the room looking regal in a long, deep blue dashiki.

“Let’s get started,” he said.

It was the oddest thing—where they had been sitting quietly, everybody started talking at once.

“Okay, a lot of you are asking the same question—how? How did they enter this house with the Ark at the door. Am I right?” Tyler asked.

“Damn right!” Ian said.

Tyler grimaced, but he didn’t say anything to Ian about the cursing.

Tyler was tolerant, but in his presence, most of them avoided such words. The Tyler Artest knew as a young man wouldn’t have minded the expletives, but the Hunter before them was studying to perfect his life and his relationship with God.

Compared to Artest, Ian was a young Hunter. He was considered a bit of a hothead. Artest didn’t know him well, but he was impressed with some of the things he’d heard about his fighting abilities. He and Dacia and a few others, whom he’d yet to meet, had been trained by multiple Masters.

Artest himself had had two teachers, Abdula and Jahia. Abdula had joined the ancestors in heaven, but there wasn’t a prayer that passed Artest’s lips that didn’t thank him for his patience.

“Please listen carefully. We all love and respect the Ark, but it is not a religious icon. It is a historical icon. Some would even say a mythological symbol.”

The din increased.

“I didn’t say I believe that—some believe it!”

“If those people aren’t Dogons, they don’t matter,” somebody said, and there was general agreement.

“If you all feel that way, why do we risk our lives for the humans?” Jahia asked.

Artest imagined there were some smart answers to that, but nobody would venture to say them to Jahia. Most of them had had her as a teacher and knew her temper. She was fair but brutal.

“That’s what I thought. We do it because we care, and we will continue to do the job that is our life work. Let’s forget about how they came in and ask ourselves why they were here,” Jahia continued.

“My wife has an interesting theory about that,” Tyler continued. “Do you want to present it?”

Jahia shook her head and offered her hand to him as if saying, ‘be my guest.’

“We’ve all heard that there is an internal war going on. Jahia and a few others have suggested that the two Sangsue who had the misfortune to end up here were sacrificed.”

There was silence.

“To what end?” Roberta asked.

“To their end,” Jahia answered, and most of them laughed.

Artest noticed that Jahia leaned over and squeezed Roberta’s hand. Tyler was Jahia’s best friend, but Roberta was a close second.

“So now they’re using us to execute each other?” Ian asked.

“It does appear that way. We’ve talked to some other Hunters in GAN. It’s not the first time one race used another as their executioners. We’ve filed a complaint with the council. . .”

“Not that that will make a difference,.” Ian interrupted. “The Sangsue aren’t members!”

“That might be true today, Ian, but one day it will make a difference if we keep using it. I’m old enough to remember how things were before GAN. Trust me, my dear, things are better now. At least all of the good guys are talking to each other.”

Ian nodded. How could he not agree? They all remembered what it was like before they started talking to each other.

The next ten or fifteen minutes were spent discussing GAN. Artest was getting restless to get back upstairs. He told himself it was because Jordan was his charge and he took his job seriously, but he couldn’t think about her and not smile. He couldn’t think about her and not imagine making love to her. Only the first time had been about sex. He felt every subsequent touch had been rooted in love. Artest hoped nobody would ask him to explain it, at least not until he could figure it out for himself.

“It’s estimated that we have two, maybe three times as many Bloodsuckers in the city right now,” Artest heard Tyler say. He hadn’t heard what was said before that—his thoughts had been upstairs.

“What are we going to do about it?” somebody asked.

“We’re going to do an old-fashioned sweep. As you know, Artest’s charge has had an encounter, and by now they probably know she’s still connected with us.”

“Connected indeed,” Jahia teased.

Everybody laughed.

Artest didn’t embarrass easily, but he felt his ears burning over that one.

“We should make it our first priority to find those two so Artest’s charge can get back to her life,” Tyler said. Then he looked at him. “Assuming that is what she wants to do.”

He refused to smile. *I’ll get you for that one*, he told Tyler mentally. Tyler didn’t even try to hide his smirk.

The meeting broke up soon after that. Three different Hunters delivered the message that Dacia said she’d be back on the weekend and they would get together then. Artest spent the bulk of the next hour visiting with his friends as they exited Tyler’s home.

It embarrassed him that he hadn’t thought about his niece again since discovering that she had returned to the Bay Area.

How can that be, he questioned himself? Nothing is more important to a Dogon than his family, and he’d been too many years without a true blood connection. He loved his friends, but there’d been low times across the centuries when the simple act of watching loving parents interact with their children had caused a knot in his throat.

*Have I been bewitched?*

He decided to seek out Jahia before returning upstairs. He found her sitting at her kitchen table with her laptop open.

“I thought I would find you here.”

“Goodbyes have always been difficult for me, especially so now.”

“Why now?”

“Were you not listening? There’s going to be a sweep. It’s possible that I’ve seen some of our friends for the last time.”

He sat and took her left hand. “We’ve had a good teacher, the best—we’ll be fine.”

“I want you to go out with Tyler if at all possible. Promise me you’ll watch his back.”

“You have my word on that in times of war *and* peace. But why all the concern, Jahia? The Sangsue have never been formidable foes. They’re trained to strike and retreat.”

The look in the eyes of the woman sitting across from him broke his heart. *Fear*. The most fearless person he’d ever known was afraid.

“What am I missing, Jahia? There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“No, it’s nothing concrete. Just a feeling.”

“You taught me to trust my instincts. What are your instincts telling you?”

“That my husband should never go out again.”

He didn’t know how to respond to that. “Jahia, there are enough of us that Tyler shouldn’t have to go out.”

“Try telling him that! Anyway, let’s change the subject to something more pleasant. Why are you down here when you have a human crazy about you upstairs?”

Artest smiled before he caught himself. “It’s unlike you to encourage a relationship with a human. I know why I like her; what did she do to impress you?”

“I think she’s capable of loving my brother, and he thinks he’s an old fuddy duddy who doesn’t need love anymore—but I know he’s not, and that’s good enough for me.”

“I came in here to ask you if I’ve been bewitched.”

She stirred her tea, and then she took a long sip. “Maybe you have been bewitched, but I don’t think she’s using magic. Not a magic that any woman with the right guy doesn’t have. ”

Artest laughed. “Come on, Jahia, this is not the time for your double-talk. You saw me with every woman I’ve ever cared even a little about; have you ever seen me like this before?”

“Maybe with Halla.”

“I forgot about Dacia being here.”

Her left eyebrow shot up. “Did you really?”

“I did.”

“Artest, go upstairs—your life awaits.”

“I’m not sure if I’m ready for all of that.”

She laughed. “But it’s ready for you.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Jordan didn't expect to be able to concentrate on her email or anything else. Things were happening fast. No, not just things—weird things were happening fast.

For as long as she'd been back in Sacramento, the high point of her life had been a movie on Saturday night with one of her girlfriends. On a good night, her friend might be dateless too and available for dinner after the movie.

Then she'd accepted a night out with Leeana.

There were twenty new messages, which wasn't usual. Her students were very computer savvy. She supposed most of them preferred to communicate via email. The bulk of the messages were the students returning the evaluation forms she had emailed to them after the last class. Jordan didn't take the time to read any of them. She was expecting the evaluations to be good. Her classes were relatively easy core requirements for underclassmen. She had one advanced history class for history majors, but she hadn't sent them evaluation forms yet.

There was one email that puzzled her. It was from the head of her department. He said that there was a problem with her final grades for two of her classes and she needed to meet him in his office Monday morning at eight. Jordan found that puzzling because she'd done the exact same thing with all her grades, and if two classes were wrong, they all should have been. But even more puzzling was the fact that she'd thought Dr. Grant was in Spain. It was her understanding that he and his family were scheduled to travel two days before her last class. He was supposed to be teaching a class there during the break.

There was a funny email from Leeana. She sent her a list, "ten ways to spot a hussy." They were in descending order, and number one was, "she leaves the club with some guy named Artest."

Before her signature, she wrote, "I want details!"

Jordan was laughing when Artest entered the room.

He had some papers in his hand that he put on the nightstand. He stood by the side of the bed, looking at her and doing some strange stepping in place that she couldn't interpret. She was just about to ask him what he was doing when she realized that he was kicking off his shoes.

"I don't like this," he said.

"What?" His expression was frightening, and she responded as such.

"You having fun without me."

Before she had a chance to react, he was across the room and kissing her lightly on the lips.

"You've got to stop teasing me like that!"

He moved the laptop from the bed to the floor. Then he threw himself on top of her. “How would you like me to tease you? I’m your servant.”

“Mmm, you smell so good. What is that scent called?” she asked as she ran her hands through his soft, silky hair.

“Hot, horny, Dogon-Hunter Number 5.”

“Does that mean I should be able to find four hotter, hornier Dogon-Hunters who smell better than you?”

He stopped nuzzling her neck and pulled her back to face him. They were both laying on their sides, fully dressed. “Please, don’t even kid about that. I can’t stand to think about anybody else touching you.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am, but I got in honestly. Dogon-Hunters are incredibly territorial. We love each other fiercely, but we keep our distance from each other. When we mate, we mate for life. Sooner or later our mates become friends with our friends and we become jealous. I’ve seen it happen over and over again.”

She found that interesting. Her university minor was sociology; she found all studies of human behavior extremely compelling. “Artest, there’s no way you’ll ever convince me that you’ve become emotionally territorial with all the women you must have had in your past. You would be an emotional basketcase.”

He pulled her closer, and she allowed her head to rest on his chest. “It’s not that many, Jordan. You’d be surprised how much time I’ve spent alone.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know how to answer that. Sometimes it’s just easier to be alone. My work makes it difficult for me to lead the normal human life. The one time I met another Hunter and fell in love, she was killed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. I was too. I went over fifty years after that before I allowed myself to care enough to date again.”

“Wow. I still find it hard to imagine all that you must have seen and done. I must appear very young and ignorant to you.”

He kissed her again, this time longer, landing on her lips as he drew out her tongue. He gently

petted her tongue with his. It was a young person's kiss, the kiss of someone newly exploring the possibilities. She wondered if he was trying to show her that he could be fresh and new with her.

"I find you fascinating. There is no other word for what I feel when I'm with you."

"Why, Artest?"

He smiled that beautiful smile that made her again wonder what he could possibly see in her.

"How can you ask me that? You're fetching, smart, and you make me laugh. What part of you don't *you* get? I feel alive again, and that's not something I've felt for a while."

He kissed her neck before she could answer. "And you've awakened sexual feelings that I haven't felt since I was a teenager. That alone has been time well spent." His kisses trailed down her neck and settled on her collarbone. "Weren't we interrupted before I left?"

"Yes, I was telling you I can't, I will not, spend my day in bed. In fact, I got an email that tells me I need to check something on campus." She broke away from him and sat up.

"What? I thought you were on a break?"

She told him about the email from her supervisor.

The concern on his face surprised her. "He never said anything about the trip being cancelled?"

"No, the last thing he said to me about it was how excited his wife was. Their baby is seven months old. They've hired a woman to live with them in Madrid and, if she works out, they're going to take a few overnight trips as a kind of delayed honeymoon."

"Hmm."

"Why are you asking me all of this?"

"Your safety is important to me. Promise me you won't go anywhere near that appointment until you can confirm he really is in town."

"Okay, but I think you're worrying unnecessarily."

"I hope you're right."



## Chapter Twenty-Three

They decided to get out of the house for a while. That time of year was beautiful in Sacramento—she told him she liked it because it wasn't too hot yet. Personally, he preferred the hot summers, but then he grew up in sub-Saharan Africa.

While she was in the bathroom doing whatever it is women have to do in there when men announce that it's time to go, he communicated with Tyler. He told him about her email and asked him to contact their person at Sacramento State University. He didn't know who that person was or even for sure that there was such a person, but Tyler said he would—thus confirming that they had people where they needed them.

When they got downstairs, Tyler pulled Artest aside and told him that Dr. Grant and his family were indeed in Spain. Grant was asked if he sent Jordan an email, and he answered in the negative.

Tyler thought he should not tell Jordan anything until they had more to tell. He even suggested that they let Jordan go to the appointment on Monday so they could see who they were dealing with. Artest told Tyler absolutely not.

"We'll talk about it later," Tyler said with a pat on Artest's back.

Artest knew what that meant. Tyler was going to tell Jahia to talk to him. He knew they were all are a little afraid and a lot in love with his wife. Tyler used it to his advantage when the love part was not eating him up inside.

"Okay," Artest told him. "But I'm not going to change my mind. I won't put Jordan in danger."

Tyler just smiled and said, "May you have wings on your feet while the hands of Amma hold tightly." It was the kind of thing Jahia would say, and Artest didn't know if Tyler meant it as a joke or not. Sometimes both husband and wife had senses of humor that could meander on the edge of bizarre.

"What was that all about?" Jordan asked once they were headed toward the K Street mall in the car Artest borrowed.

"Nothing important," he told her.

"Oh, I thought I heard Tyler say my name."

"He wants me to bring you back to his house. We all think it's best that you stay there until we get the two Suckers who came to your apartment."

"I guess that would be all right for a few days, but I'll have to go home and pack a bag."

"I'm taking you shopping now so you won't have to go back."

“Artest, that’s not necessary. I have everything I need at home.”

“They know they can get to us by hurting humans. That’s the one thing they do very well. If there’s something special that you need from your apartment, let me send somebody for it.”

He could tell the idea of shopping for a few days’ necessities still didn’t appeal to her. Then he realized that she was thinking about the amount of money she had on her and available on her credit cards.

Money, or more accurately the lack of money, was never one of his considerations. He could have kicked himself for leaving out the most vital part of his shopping announcement. At the next stoplight he took two cards from his wallet, both platinum. He slipped them in his shirt pocket while he thought about how he needed to present them.

By the next light, he thought he had an approach. “Jordan, we want you to charge anything you need to us. We recognize you wouldn’t be in this mess except by association with our organization.” He handed her the two cards.

“Nice try, Artest. These cards both say Artest Dramé, not Dogon-Hunters International or whatever you all call yourselves. I can’t let you buy me clothes.”

He’d been afraid she would say that—that was why he’d presented the cards as if the group was paying for her inconvenience. Money and other favors were always difficult with new lovers if they were the type of women he found appealing.

“Okay, so we don’t have to get into a big argument and you don’t have to look around for something to throw at me, I’m going to say this. Take the cards, drag me around from store to store until you have what you need and want for the next few days, or I’ll have to call one of my female assistants and ask her to shop for you. But either way, I’m not going to allow you to absorb the cost for this. It’s your choice.”

“Wow, that didn’t sound like the polite guy I woke up with.”

He “listened” to her thoughts and learned that she wasn’t teasing him—he had offended her by what she was mentally calling “strong-arm tactics.”

He pulled the car into an elementary school parking lot. “Jordan, I’m sorry if that sounded mean-spirited. It’s just that I know a quality woman like yourself would never accept a couple of thousand dollars worth of clothes from me so soon, maybe never, in our relationship. I was trying to present the idea to you in a way that I thought would make it work. I wasn’t trying to bully you. Please forgive me if that’s how it sounded.”

A boy and girl appeared on the school’s basketball court. They both looked to be in their early teens. Both were thin and tallish for their young faces, all arms and legs.” They appeared toned, and both athletic. Each of them was wearing serious sneakers.

The boy was bouncing a basketball between what Artest imagined was serious puppy love flirting. Artest and Jordan expected to see him shooting bold baskets while she watched; they couldn't have been more wrong. The kids began a very vigorous, well-matched game of one-on-one. They both seemed to be taking the game quite seriously.

Before too long, Jordan and Artest had stopped talking and were totally engrossed in the game. Artest had been a big fan of American sports. Over time, he'd become so jaded that music and books were the only pleasures that he considered pure enough to enjoy—most nights they were his only comforts.

“Will-you-look-at-this-girl?” she screamed as she slapped Artest hard on his thigh.

Jordan had no way of knowing that her outburst triggered Artest's attack response. He smiled. *You'll keep me on my toes.*

The girl had jumped up and popped the ball out of its path to the basket, recovered it on the bounce and dribbled it to her basket. She then shot and made the basket.

“Yes, I will,” he told her while getting as far away from her as possible.

Jordan was moving and jerking with each step, jump, and shot the kids took. Artest figured by the time he put the car in gear again she would be exhausted. Watching her was more fascinating than watching the actual game. He no longer questioned his attraction—he knew exactly why he was so smitten.

She was alive.

Even while she was out with her friend and using words that claimed no interest in a relationship, every pore in her body was proclaiming life.

He remembered the way she looked at him when he approached their table. Her eyes sparkled like those of a child watching a magic show. She made multiple assessments about who he could be, and yet she waited to evaluate him based on what he showed her.

She caught him smiling at her.

“What?” she asked.

“What, what?”

“Why are you looking at me like that? The action is out there.”

“No, the important action is in here. You make me understand why those old decrepit millionaires can be intelligent enough to amass a fortune and still foolish enough to want to believe that some sweet young thing has fallen in love with them. Looking at you makes me

want to believe.”

“Believe what? What are you talking about, Artest?”

“Believe everything. Even the stuff I know is not true.”

“I never know if you’re making fun of me or not.”

He took her hand and rubbed the back of it against his cheek. “I’m never making fun of you.”

“You’re a super rich man with more education than a person can get in one lifetime, but you find me interesting. How can I not interpret that as a joke?”

“Your students are never able to teach you anything?”

She smiled at him, and another level of lights lit her eyes. “Wow, you’re right. They teach me something every day.”

“If you really want to learn something, spend time with a toddler.”

She laughed. “I know. One who is about three and a half and able to express herself well. They see a whole different, wonderful world.”

The kids reached the end of their game. The boy won, apparently, but it hadn’t been easy. He did a little victory dance before he stole a kiss from the girl’s sweaty cheek.

“That’s what I like about this new generation. Even at my age, a boy wouldn’t have played me that hard,” she said as they watched them walk away.

“And you would have wanted him too?”

“Yes, a woman wants to be taken seriously.”

With the kids no longer visible, there was a silence in the car that needed to be addressed.

“So, are we going shopping?” he asked.

“Do you enjoy shopping?”

“No, not really.”

“Guess what? Contrary to popular assumption, all women aren’t shoppers. I don’t like it either.”

“A woman who doesn’t like to shop. I knew there was something I liked about you.”

“I’ll tell you what, I don’t want to be stubborn about this, but I take care of my financial needs—

that's what that whole college thing was about!"

"I've heard it before, and I got it," he interrupted. Her discomfort was incredibly cute, but something was causing the hair on his arms to stand up, and he couldn't figure out what. He felt like it was time to leave.

"But I'm not stupid. I need clothes and toiletries. I don't know that I believe I'm in the kind of danger you think, but I'm willing to err on the side of caution and spend your money."

He was able to hold back the laugh, but she caught him smiling.

"Don't laugh at me, Artest. I know I've got hang-ups. Growing up, not being ghetto meant taking care of my own needs until the day that I shared a hyphenated name with somebody. It's the way I was raised."

"I understand, and if it was any different, then you wouldn't be who I believe you are."

He leaned over and gave her a hug. He was turning the key in the ignition when they both heard the scream. Intuitively, he knew immediately what had had his arm hair standing on end.

"Keep the doors locked until I return and give you the word 'shopping.' If anybody else comes near the car, run over him!"

He let her see him moving at his fastest. He had to—they couldn't afford to waste a second.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

She couldn't believe the scream they'd heard had anything to do with them. In the seconds after he left running, she reviewed what had happened up to that point. *Surely there's something there to explain whatever I'm missing*, she told herself.

She'd known there was something Artest wasn't telling her as they left Tyler's home. She'd overheard Artest and Tyler talking. She hadn't tried to make out what they were saying until she'd actually heard Artest say, "absolutely not." Jordan hadn't heard what was said before that, but she was interested in what could have made him so adamant.

"I won't put her in danger!" he said next.

"Nobody is asking that of you,," Tyler said. Then he put his hand on Artest's shoulder and said, "We'll talk about it later."

The two men looked at each other in what looked like the beginning of a stare-down, and then they both smiled. Then she heard Artest mumbling something as he walked away from a laughing Tyler. That was when she knew they weren't just friends; they loved each other. Just as Jahia and Artest had implied, they were family.

Artest borrowed one of Tyler's cars—that was how he said it: "Let's get out of here, I borrowed one of Tyler's cars."

Jordan had no expectations. She knew they were in a house that was in a part of the city known as the Fab 40s. The homes in that part of town could run into the millions. Sacramento was a well-integrated city, but Jordan doubted if many of their neighbors were as dark as her new friends. She wondered, what did Tyler and Jahia's neighbors *think* they did for a living?

She wasn't prepared to see Artest opening the door to a brand new Jaguar.

"One of Tyler's cars?" she asked when he was seated and belted.

"He's into cars. They rent a garage to house all but two of them. I wasn't trying to be glib, really."

"Whatever," she said as she sucked in the wonderful new car smell.

When she was in college, there was a girl on her floor, her hall mate actually, who came from a rich family. Jordan had never been around black people who didn't have to think about "how much?" It probably took her at least six months to finally realize rich-roommate-girl wasn't *showing off* or *putting on* when she said things like, "I left my book at the other house," or "we're spending the holidays on the island." Over time, after overhearing her on the phone with her family and old friends, Jordan came to realize her hall mate worked at *not* saying those kinds of things around the rest of them.

Similarly, she knew Artest wasn't putting on—she was just giving him a hard time because she could.

If there was one thing Jordan knew at thirty-two that she didn't know at twenty-two, it was that a girl doesn't do herself a favor to make life too easy for a guy. The woman who did Mama May's hair used to say, give them (men) conflict and they rise to the occasion; make life too easy and they rise to go look for conflict. The test came when she got to high school and saw that the bitchiest girls had the nicest boyfriends.

Jordan thought it was ridiculous to advocate stress. From what she could see that was the problem with relationships. She used to say “too much game playing.” But having her fiancé cheat on her while she was working like crazy to make his life easier made a believer out of Jordan Greene.

She loved the solid, firm way the car rode. The first few minutes in it, she thought she could have spent the day just riding around the city—and it sure didn't hurt to have Artest a glance away. Artest had the radio on a jazz station with the volume turned on to a level just barely loud enough to hear. The luxurious feel of the ride, his love scent and the clean smell of the car mixed with the music, which seemed to be originating in her soul, made the whole experience feel surreal.

Then he made the mistake of telling her he was taking her shopping. *How do I tell him that now that I'm an adult, I consider it a necessary evil?* She believed it was probably a reaction to not having parents and no personal money growing up. The foster parents got money that was supposed to be spent on clothes for her, but that rarely happened. At the time when she was starting to care about fashion the most and starting to look like a person men might want to buy for, she ended up with Mama May.

Mama May had very old-fashioned ideas about taking gifts from men. She said whores were paid for their time. Jordan loved her dearly, but she was a typical old woman—everything she believed she repeated ad-nauseam.

Jordan wasn't being arbitrarily difficult when she made Artest talk her into shopping, but he did talk her into it. She promised herself she would be gracious, even if he had lousy taste in women's clothes. At that point, she looked at what he was wearing, right down to his shoes. *Bad taste—not a chance.*

That brought them to the school's parking lot, to talk and where they ended up watching the two kids playing. Jordan was a fan of basketball anywhere she could find it. She got carried away, as she often did during a brisk game. She expected Artest to tease her, but he didn't. *He's giving me that look again.* The look pleased her at first, but then she worried that if that kind of passion could last in an average man, there was no way a man with his kind of history could stay interested. She felt a wave of sadness flow through her body. *This can't last.*

“What's wrong?” he had asked.

“Nothing.”

“We don’t have to shop. I’m open to whatever you might want to do today.”

Today? He was right. *I need to stop thinking about later and deal with today. Apparently today was all he had in mind.*

They talked some more, and he gave her a hug. It should have cheered her up a little, but she found herself wondering how many lifetimes it took for a man to know the exact right thing to do with a woman. He had it down pat, much better than any guy she’d ever observed.

“I’ve had a funny feeling since we left the temple,.” he said during a lull.

She was focused on the one-on-one game, and it took her a moment to translate what he meant by “the temple.”

She patted him on the thigh. “I know, honey, it’s called horniness.” She was trying to be funny, so she said it with a straight face and then went back to watching the game.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he stared at her. His expression was priceless. She couldn’t tell if he was more embarrassed, incredulous, or just upset because she was dismissing him like a horn-dog teenager. She saw him take a deep breath.

“I do find you attractive, Jordan, but I am able to function beyond my libido. Even in your presence.” There was just the slightest hint of sarcasm in his tone.

She had held back the laughter as long as she could. Leaning into him, she laughed so hard she was afraid she would wet herself. “Artest, I’m just messing with you. I guess sitting in this school parking lot has transported me back to elementary school.”

“Messing?” he asked, like he’d never before heard the expression.

“What guys called fucking with each other, but I try not to curse.”

“All right, Jordan.”

“Tell me more about this funny feeling,” she said, feeling like a chastised child.

“I can’t verbalize it. Just mentioning it has the hair on my arms standing up.”

The kids had finished their game, and the boy was strutting around the court.

“What usually happens when you feel like this?” she had asked.

“Most of the time it’s not good.”



On the basketball court, the boy kissed tried to kiss the girl, but she turned away and offered her cheek. The kids were holding hands when they walked away.

Artest started the car, and then they heard a scream. She saw Artest move so fast he would have put the Road Runner to shame.

“If anybody else comes near this car, run over him!” was the last thing she heard him say before all hell broke loose.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

When he heard the scream, he knew immediately what his instincts had been trying to tell him. They'd been followed. Knowing the appetite of the Sangsue, he knew that, if, like he and Jordan, they had watched those kids playing, it wasn't the game that would have excited them. Athleticism, enthusiasm, and youthful energy called to them like a drug.

Artest didn't know exactly how the Sangsue worked, but over the years, it had become obvious that they preferred to feed on young people in their energetic prime.

When Artest rounded the school's main building, he got a shock. There were four of them hovering over the girl. It wasn't often that he'd seen so many together. He hid behind a hedge lining the walkway to assess what was happening before making his presence known. The Bloodsuckers weren't fighters, but even cowards could find strength in numbers. Artest knew he had to make his first strike count—he might not get a second one. He hoped Jordan would heed his warning and stay put.

The kids hadn't gotten very far from the court. They were in a walkway between the school and a group of temporary units, well hidden from the main street. The boy was prone on the ground, but knowing how the Sangsue worked, Artest doubted if he was dead. More than likely they'd knocked him out so they could concentrate on her first.

About four feet from her friend, the girl was fighting and kicking the three who were trying to restrain her. She was stripped down to her panties, and one of them was working on ripping them off. Artest noted that the panties appeared to be the usual delicate fair—it was the girl's struggle that prevented the creature at her feet from pulling them off. She wasn't making it easy for any of them. He was impressed with her defensive moves, but she was failing. The biggest was trying to hold her head, but she was biting him between curses. His fangs were out, and he was damn near salivating as he sniffed and licked her neck.

"Hurry up and get in her," he told the one who was unzipping his pants.

Artest didn't know which one he should take on first—the one who wanted to drain her of her life or the one who was betting on the blood that his penis would find between her legs. He'd heard many stories about the Sangsue's passion for virgin kills, but this was only his second time encountering it. The first time he'd been too late to save the girl.

The third Bloodsucker was holding one of her arms and licking it every chance he got, and the fourth one was standing over the boy, but rubbing his crotch like he wanted to be between her legs.

Artest decided the one at her throat had to be his first target. He moved a little closer. Just before he pounced, his spine tingled, and he felt pure joy. He turned and looked for him. There was a light about two feet behind him, and Artest saw his rescuer walk out of it.

“Fox, I’ve never been happier to see you,”

The Pale Fox held his finger to his lips, and then he touched his throat. He agreed— Artest should take the one at her throat. They circled a little so they could approach them from behind.

As they passed the fourth Sucker standing over the boy but focused on the rape, the Pale Fox held up his right hand behind the back of the Sangsue’s head without actually touching him. Artest saw blood gush from the Sucker’s nose, mouth and ears. He stood lifeless a second or two before he fell, and it was the noise his fall made that caused his companions to look in Artest’s direction. Seconds later, the Sucker pixilated and was gone.

Artest knew Fox—he’d staged the death for the others to see. Fox had the power to make a Sangsue disappear with just a thought.

When Artest’s movement to the creature on her neck was still a thought, The Pale Fox was already choking the one who was trying to rape the kicking girl. He pulled the limp body away from her. Artest’s blade was out. He jabbed it into the Sucker’s neck near his left ear and pulled it across his throat to his right ear.

When he looked up, Fox was helping the girl piece together enough clothing to cover herself. There was no sign of the remaining Sucker.

“He ran off,” Fox told Artest before he could ask.

With her pants and torn blouse back on, the girl had become conscious of Fox. His presence was never neutral. From her expression, he terrified her. She started shaking and crying and pulling away from him while reaching toward her still prone boyfriend.

“A little help?” Fox asked.

Artest put away his dagger and came to Fox’s side.

“I need to talk to her,” Fox told him.

Artest knew what that meant. He held the girl still from behind while Fox faced her.

“What your name?” he asked her.

“Sharetha Elliott.”

Fox took off his sunglasses. The girl looked away, as most people did when first faced with the nearly colorless eyes. “Sharetha. Look at me, please,.” he said in his soft, gentle, whispery voice. I’m very sorry these gang members attacked you and your boyfriend.”

“Gang members?” she said, the confusion already setting into her voice.

“Yes, gang members. How lucky the two of you are that the off-duty policeman came to your aid.”

“We were very lucky.”

“It’s a shame you can’t remember anything about what the policeman looked like and there were no other witnesses.”

“It all happened too fast,” she said.

“Yes, it did, but you’re both are safe now, and you want to put it all behind you.”

Fox walked over to the boy and touched his forehead. The boy’s eyes popped open. He scrambled to the girl without so much as a glance at the two tall men.

“Sharetha, are you okay?”

“Yes. I think we should just try to put it all behind us.”

The boy nodded, and he slowly led her away. Artest called to him to tell him he was leaving his ball, but he didn’t hear him. They were less than ten feet away. Fox kicked the ball so that it landed in front of them. The boy picked it up, but neither he nor the girl looked back.

Fox nodded at Artest, and they walked away. There was no hurry. Artest had seen Fox wash before, and not only would those kids not remember them, they wouldn’t have appeared on video had the whole thing been recorded.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

With the motor running and the radio playing, the first ten minutes Artest was away passed quickly for Jordan. She kept telling herself that he had lived for centuries without her help; whatever was happening on the other side of the school, he could handle it. Jordan didn't consider herself an impatient person, but she would readily admit to being nosy as hell. By the time she heard a second commercial for the same used car dealer, she was bouncing in place in her eagerness to know what was happening.

Hoping to get her mind off his absence, she started rummaging around in her purse. At first she decided to clean it out, but she found some tweezers and decided to take advantage of the exceptional sunlight to clean up her eyebrows.

Jordan's left eyebrow was in the best shape ever and she was just starting the right one when she saw a guy running toward the car. She was already in the driver's seat. Taking a deep breath, she put her hand on the gear shift. *Can I really do this?* she asked herself.

The man stopped running and looked directly at her, as if he heard her mental question. He looked back in the direction from which he came.

*I really do believe I can do this.*

They stared at each other as he just stood there. He was tall and skinny. There was no doubt in her mind that he was one of the Bloodsuckers. He was dressed in a dark suit like the other two she'd seen, and he was pale. He reminded her of the actors she'd seen in a SNL skit about 'Eurotrash' dance club boys.

She couldn't figure out why he was just standing there. She saw him put his hands to his sides as if he was about to do something, maybe shoot straight up into the sky or burrow down into the ground like a jackhammer.

At the last moment, he looked around as if he'd heard something that told him it was time to choose a direction. With one final look at her that included a menacing display of his fangs, he started toward the car, walking slowly but with unmistakable determination.

She put the car in gear. It lunged forward a little as it moved from park to drive.

He stopped moving. His eyes bored into her as if he was trying to decide if she would hit him.

He must have been a good judge of character, because the next thing she knew, he was squatting on the hood of the car, seriously baring his fangs.

Jordan floored the gas pedal as she screamed—and then she hit the brakes.

She expected to see him flying off the hood and landing on the basketball court. The stop didn't throw him, it barely jarred him, but it made him angry enough to hit the front window with his

fist. The window broke. She hit the gas again. From the corner of her eye, she saw two figures coming toward her. She turned the wheel slightly in the direction of the two people she thought were his companions. She figured before he got to her with the next hit of the window, she could at least mow down his buddies.

She recognized Artest's clothes seconds before she floored the gas. She saw the man who was with him, but then a blink later, she saw the strangest thing she'd ever seen.

The man who'd been by Artest's side was in front of the car. He was hovering in mid-air over the Sucker. It looked like something out of one of those flying ninjas movies. Though the guy wasn't even touching the Sucker, she saw blood running out of every visible orifice on the Sucker's body.

The Sucker fell off the car.

By that time, Artest was standing on the driver's side of the jag. She was so transfixed by the man, who was now standing in front of the car, that Artest had to knock on the window for her to unlock the door.

\* \* \* \*

"Jordan, this is Fox, Fox, Jordan."

He took off his sunglasses, and she had to hold back her scream. As if he knew, he bent his head to take her hand. He kissed it. He had replaced his glasses before he looked up again.

The three of them were standing on the driver's side of the car. After Artest tapped on the window, she had gotten out of the car so she could give—actually so she could *get* a full body hug. "I'm also called Ogo, but Fox is fine," the man said with a strange voice.

"Ogo., I like that—it sounds like a character's name on a sci-fi show," Jordan said.

The two men exchanged looks before they laughed. "See why I like her?" Artest said.

"That, my friend, was clear even before she opened her mouth."

His voice was weird, like he might have been recovering from a very sore throat or even surgery. It was a whisper but loud enough to hear. Somehow forceful and yet quiet. The accent was more pronounced than Artest's and Tyler's, but African nonetheless.

"Hmm., I guess we need to find a car wash," Artest said.

Jordan looked in the same direction as Artest. The hood of the car was covered with blood.

"Why don't you just ask?" Fox said, smiling.

“Will you be so kind?”

Fox nodded his head once.

She didn’t know what they were talking about.

Fox moved about ten feet from the car. She couldn’t say he walked ten feet, because from what she saw, he looked like he was floating. She looked down at his feet; they were touching the ground, but they didn’t seem to be impacting it. Featherlike was the word that came to her mind.

Artest took her arm and led her to the passenger side. She wanted to see what Fox was about to do, but Artest opened the door, and she got in.

Artest walked over to where Fox was standing, and the two men talked. She couldn’t hear what they were saying, so she used the opportunity to really check him out.

With his sunglasses on, he was the most beautiful black man she’d ever seen. The thought crossed her mind without prompting, but the word *but* came to her immediately as well. There was something “off” about him. She studied his skin; it was flawless, not even a mole in sight. His skin color was rich. It was the creamy brown of expensive milk chocolate, so much so that she would have expected him to smell and taste like candy. She imagined his was a face that babies, in their mother’s arms, would’ve reached out to touch.

The hair atop his head was long and blue-black. His dreads were so shiny and loose they could have belonged to an expensive Shirley Temple doll.

If Artest was drop-dead gorgeous, and he was, there was no description for Fox’s features except beautiful. They weren’t thick, flat, sharp or pointed—just perfect for his face.

His body was an inch or two taller than Artest’s and about twenty extra pounds of solid muscle.

But then there were his eyes.

His eyes were tight and slanted. Their shape and size reminded her of the Creoles she’d seen in Louisiana. It was the color that made them so odd. His eyes were gray with flecks of yellow and pale blue. They were so luminous they were like light beams or beacons. She couldn’t imagine a human looking at him and not thinking Fox was blind or about to focus on them and cause their blindness.

She saw Fox wave his hand in the direction of where the Sucker’s body had fallen. From where she sat she couldn’t see the ground, so she got up on her knees. It was gone; the body was gone, and so was the blood.

Then he waved his hand at the car. She looked at the hood. The blood was gone. There was the hardest shine she’d ever seen on the clean car. During all of this, Fox never stopped talking or looking at Artest. His manner was that of a person waving away flies. He waved again and the

window was repaired.

Artest got back in the car, but Fox stood there for a moment or two.

“What’s he doing?” Jordan asked.

“I don’t know. He prays a lot. He could be praying. Did you do something to your eyes while I was gone?”

“I plucked my eyebrow.”

“You plucked your eyebrows?”

“Well, actually I only got to pluck one before the Sucker showed up. I had to do something to take my mind off of worrying about you.”

He’d been smiling when he asked about her eyebrow, but his expression changed when he heard her answer. Jordan got the impression it touched him that she would care. The thought that he wasn’t used to having anyone care affected her deeply—it was a feeling she knew well.

“Who is this guy?” she asked.

“He’s the Pale Fox. I guess you could call him our fearless leader.” He laughed when he said it.

“Okay, does that laugh mean he’s really not fearless or he’s not your leader?”

His face became serious again. “Oh no, he’s fearless, and he’s definitely our leader. Some would say fearful leader. I laughed because he would never claim either.”

“He’s a Dogon-Hunter too?”

“No, I’m not sure what he is, but most of us believe he is a god.”

She just looked at him. He smiled, his expression sheepish. When she didn’t return his smile, he took her hand. “You’re going to leave me, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I know I should get out right here and catch a bus home. But I don’t know what’s going to happen. Maybe you should just wash me. In a few weeks we’ll start over.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. But when we meet again, don’t tell me what you do for a . . . I guess for a living.”

“Never? Even if you ask?”

“Of course I’ll ask. Spend the interim time working on a back story. Make it believable or I’ll



pick it apart until I end up back here again.”

“Yeah, you probably would.”

“Not would, will, Artest. I’m serious—wash me. I can’t deal with lowercase gods!”

“Who’s a lowercase god?” The question came from the backseat.

Since the voice that asked the question wasn’t Artest’s or hers, the next sound they heard was her scream.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Why did you do that?” Artest asked Fox

“You were going to tell her that you couldn’t wash her.”

“And that would have been a problem because. . .?”

Artest didn’t expect Fox to answer, and he didn’t surprise him. He looked in the rearview mirror and found him text messaging somebody. Fox was finally embracing technology, and, like everything he touched, he was taking it to the extreme.

“Fox, I really like this woman.” Even still locked with her mouth open in a frozen scream, she was so cute he wanted to kiss her.

“Have you talked to the Priest about her or should I?”

“Come on, don’t give me that! You couldn’t care less about whom we sleep with.”

“Not true—I care about everything in my crews’ lives. As much as I can care.” He laughed and switched places with Jordan.

“Will you close her mouth?”

Fox gave him a look, and Artest added, “please.”

The thought that he would call the Hunters his crew let Artest know he’d been in the States for a while. One of the other Hunters had told him that Fox had developed a fondness for hip hop music, which was actually an improvement over some of the fourteenth-century sounding stuff Artest once heard coming out of his MP3 player.

“Certainly, I meant no offense, my friend,” Fox said.

Artest knew there were not many active Hunters Fox referred to as “friend.” He always appreciated hearing it. He never took his eyes off of Jordan, but he somehow missed the closing of her mouth. It was just closed, as if that was how it had always been. In the hundreds of years that Artest had been trying to catch Fox’s handiwork in action, he’d never been able.

They heard sirens, and Artest pulled out of the school’s parking lot. They passed a police car about a block and a half away.

“Fox. What’s happening here? Why are all these Suckers in town, and since when did they start traveling in double pairs?”

“I believe Tyler’s theory is correct.”

“You’ve talked to Tyler?”

He laughed. Of course he hadn’t talked to Tyler. It never ceased to amaze Artest how Fox always seemed to know what was happening and being said.

“I’m not sure why they’re traveling in fours, but I’m not worried about it.”

“Because you’re not the one fighting them?”

“I would have called what just happened *me* fighting them.”

“You’re right—sorry.”

“No problem. I’m not worried because they’re still the same Sangsue, even in fours. Take her back to Tyler’s. Your assistant is shopping for her even as we speak. I’ll see you later.”

“Tonight?”

He didn’t answer. He rarely answered a direct question. When Artest blinked again, Jordan was back in the front seat, and Fox was gone.

“What happened? When did we leave the school, and where’s your homie?” she asked.

Smiling, Artest pulled the car over to the side of the road. Any person who could refer to the Pale Fox as his “homie” deserved his undivided attention.

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

“The sweet, fragrant curves of your body, the soft, spiced contours of your flesh invite me, and I come.”

“Oh my God! That’s from the Song of Solomon. I love the Song of Solomon!”

He scooted toward her and took her in his arms. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*Something weird happened with the time.* Jordan tried to piece the events together, and they wouldn't fit. She knew they had been parked in the school parking lot, and she'd been watching the handsome stranger who was standing in front of the car, doing his own weird thing. The next thing she remembered was screaming because she heard a whispery, evil voice from the backseat. After that, the next remembrance was riding in the car, headed in the wrong direction on Folsom Boulevard.

"You did something with the time!" She wasn't even trying to disguise her fear.

"No, I didn't, it was the Pale Fox."

"He can manipulate time?"

"Well, actually. . . yes, he can."

She sensed he wanted to say more, but she also sensed he knew she didn't want to hear it. "Okay then. I'll tell you what. Take me back to my apartment. If the Suckers show up again, I'll pretend that I've been washed. Or better yet, just wash me!"

"It would be that easy to say goodbye to me?"

She looked at him. He was driving and looking as good as usual, but she could see the hurt. It had settled around his mouth. Jordan didn't want to hurt him, she wanted to love him, but it was becoming increasingly clear that that was impossible. "No, Artest, it wouldn't be easy, but little in my life has been easy. It would be necessary."

"Why?"

"Because the playing field is even more unbalanced than usual for my life. I can't play this game, Artest. I can't transport, I can't move at warp speed, and I damn sure can't stop time. . ."

"Not stop time, bend time. The time has been made up somewhere along the way."

"Well by all means, excuse me. I can't *bend* time!"

He didn't say anything, but she got the impression he was rehearsing stuff in his mind. She didn't know where they were going, but it was clear they weren't heading to the nearest mall or to her place. "Where are we going?" she finally asked.

"Back to Tyler's."

"No, take me home. I mean it, Artest. Take me home!"

"I can't. Fox told me to take you back to Tyler's."

“Yeah, well now I’m telling you something different.”

“Jordan, you just listed all those things that you’ve seen Fox do. Well that’s just a fraction of it. What can you do? Convince me that you can hurt us more than Fox and I’ll listen to you.”

She was through with him. She turned to face the window. He tried to talk, but she ignored him. She’d already decided she wasn’t getting out of the car when it stopped. An image of him pulling her out and carrying her in flashed in her mind. *There were some advantages to not being a skinny bitch.*

“Have you ever been out to the Folsom Dam?” he asked.

She ignored him, but she was really hoping he would continue because his question came out of the blue and she wanted to see where he was taking it.

“Okay, you’re not talking to me. I understand. I hope you’re willing to listen. Before Fox became someone I would call a friend again, I used to visit natural wonders after dealing with him. I know the dam is human made, but it’s the closest big, scary wonder unless I want to visit the mountains. Fox and I have been cool since I’ve been in Sacramento, but one time he really made me angry. Angry enough to retire my commission. After he left, I drove out to the dam. It was before 9/11, and you could drive across the dam road. I needed to see and be around something more powerful than him.”

She still didn’t say anything, but she suspected he could tell she was listening.

“I’m not sure if he is the Pale Fox of our legends, but I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that he is. That would make him older than anything we know. Jordan, in our legend the Pale Fox was an unnatural and socially troubled creature born without a physical female parallel. Based on the stories I’ve heard, Fox has grown a lot since the beginning, but he’s still the only being walking the earth who is one hundred percent male. I’m not saying that that makes him a terrible person, not at all, but it does make him an aggressive person who’s very difficult to understand sometimes. Women are always attracted to him, but they’re unable to communicate well together. He supports us Hunters having lovers, but he’s usually very upset and confused when one of us falls in love. That usually means the Hunter’s retirement, but I don’t think that’s his problem with love. And sometimes he doesn’t express his anger appropriately.”

Jordan grunted.

“I’m telling you all this to say, he wouldn’t understand why you want to go home. He wouldn’t understand your fear or my desire to do whatever makes you happy even though I know it’s best that you stay with us a little longer. He’s not cruel by nature, but he is very male. It worries me to think about his reaction if he disagrees.”

“Is that a fancy way of saying he’ll hurt us?”

He smiled, probably because he got her to speak, and then he took her hand. He locked his fingers between hers. "That's me saying I fear for both of us if we don't go to Tyler's and it turns out to be something that displeases Fox."

"Fine, but I don't have to like it."

"Neither of us do."

\* \* \* \*

She'd expected there'd still be a lot of people at Tyler's, but there weren't a lot of cars on the street. "Before we go back in there, Artest, will you answer a question about your boss?"

He parked in the driveway and turned off the motor. "If I can. He's not the most forthcoming person. He knows much more about us than we know about him."

"What did you mean when you said he doesn't always respond to anger appropriately?"

She saw him thinking about it.

"Okay, you heard his whispering voice?"

She nodded.

"I don't know if this is true or not, but one of the Hunters swears he saw it. Fox was visiting a Hunter, and as often happens when he's in town, other nearby Hunters came to hang out too. The guys were all playing cards or some other game when Fox sent an Aide out to pick up something. The Aide came back with the wrong thing. That might not have been such a big deal, but Fox was losing the card game too. He screamed at the Aide, and his voice caused the man to drop dead."

"Wow."

"No, there's more. Every blood member of this man's family, wherever they were, dropped dead too."

She looked at him closely. "Come on, I was born at night, but not last night."

"Jordan, that is the story as I heard it. I don't know if it's true, but I do know that there was a two-year period where we couldn't reach him. I heard he had no human contact during this time; it was his self-imposed penalty. The rumor was that he was in the underworld, suffering as would a lost soul. Since his return, I've never heard him speak above a whisper."

"When was that?"

"About the turn of the nineteenth century."

The words *turn of the nineteenth century* seem to hang in the air between them, mocking her. She felt tears somewhere closed to the surface, but she refused to let them fall. She just wanted to return to her apartment, where she could call her friend and tell her about the one who got away. The man who could've been the one, had he been human.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Artest knew he hadn't presented a fair image of the Pale Fox. Everything he'd told her was true—Fox was all male, and Artest had heard the story about his voice repeatedly—but Fox was so much more.

There were a lot of tales in Mali about the Pale Fox being a trickster god, even evil in some of his actions. But the Fox he'd known almost since birth was a highly evolved individual who cared a great deal about his Hunters. Artest was sure the only beings he loved more were mankind.

*As far as anger goes, he's more inclined to respond to a situation like a happy-go-lucky college fraternity boy than with the hubris of a god.*

But he couldn't take any chances with Jordan. Although he hadn't been around her a long time, he could see that she was as likely as Fox to react to something in an unpredictable way. Being a jaded man, surprised by her reactions, he decided she must be the epitome of the twenty-first-century, educated, foxy lady. He was loving everything about her, but couldn't those very actions be in conflict with a beginning-of-time all-male god?

Artest expected Jordan and Fox to find each other attractive, but with the kind of stress they would be facing, he felt he needed to prepare her. Expecting Fox to adjust was foolish. He'd spent a very long time, maybe time itself, becoming who he was. Artest had seen his impatience under stress. He didn't tell Jordan, but one time he'd seen Fox slap a Hunter in a way that one of the young Aides called a bitch slap.

The Dogon pantheon was very sexual, not lustful like the Greeks with everybody sleeping with everybody else, but in terms of strongly defined male and female traits. The Hunter Fox slapped was stout and strong, even among a group as physically intimidating as theirs. Fox would never have hit him like that except to remind him who was in charge.

Artest didn't believe he could continue to serve if. . . something like that happened to Jordan. Artest's reaction would probably cost him his life, and maybe hers as well.

The house appeared empty when they entered. Since Hunters worked at night and many of them relished visiting the temple after a particularly trying evening, Tyler outfitted his door with a touchpad lock—that way, Hunters didn't have to disturb the household when they visited. Jahia still complained about the need to get dressed whenever she left their bedroom, but beyond that, the pad had worked out well.

Jordan and Artest found the couple sitting out back on their deck. Both of them were stretched out on heavy-duty lounge lawn chairs.

"That was fast," Tyler said. "Jordan, maybe you can give my wife some pointers about efficient shopping."



“We never made it to the mall,.” Artest told them

Jahia was reading, but she looked up. She pointed to a stack of lawn chairs in the corner. “Go ahead and get comfortable. I’ve got a feeling this is going to be a long story. That’s lemonade in the pitcher, and I’ll go get some glasses.”

Artest stopped her with a hand signal. “No, don’t bother. I need to spend a few minutes in the temple. Visit with Jordan and I’ll get the glasses before I return.”

Jahia seemed relieved by his suggestion. He thought again about how fast they were aging. Active Dogon-Hunters appear to be between twenty-five and thirty-five real years. Artest would put Tyler and Jahia’s appearance between forty and forty-five. If they were like others who retired, Artest knew the fast aging would stop soon, and they’d begin to age at what would appear to be a natural pace.

He sensed that someone was in the temple before he opened the door, but that didn’t concern him. Dogons loved their temple time. It wasn’t that they were freakishly religious, it was more that they craved the temple’s peace and quiet—at least that was Artest’s reasoning.

The Pale Fox was the visitor. *I should have known.* Normally Artest could sense the presence of his brethren more keenly than he could sense the presence of the Suckers. In fact, the only beings he couldn’t distinguish were Fox and humans, and humans did have a strong, distinct smell. Plus, no human would know about or be allowed in their temple.

“If you want to be alone, I’ll come back,.” Artest told him.

He was sitting on the floor in a corner with his legs stretched out in front, as if Artest had disturbed him doing his sit-ups.

“Nonsense, Artest—pull up some floor.”

He sat next to Fox.

“Has Jennie arrived with the new clothing and toiletries yet?” he asked in their native language.

“I don’t know. We just got here. But I was wondering, how will she know the sizes?”

“I popped her into Jordan’s apartment, and she looked in her closet.”

Artest thought about his friend and assistant Jennie. Months could go by without him seeing her, but they talked several times a week. She was a young grandmother at forty-seven who was raising her grandchild. Her father had been Artest’s assistant until his retirement. He’d been dead almost ten years. Jennie took over the job when she was still in her twenties. Artest couldn’t picture the mild-mannered woman he knew popping into anywhere. “Why didn’t you just tell her to get some clothes and a toothbrush while she was there?”

Fox gave him a strange look. Artest thought he might have been upset about him second guessing him, but then Fox started laughing. He doubled over in laughter, which had to be hard to do from where he'd started.

"That thought never occurred to me," he finally said.

Artest wondered if his thought had come from his female side, a sensitivity Fox didn't possess.

"Not you too?" Fox said.

"Me too what?"

"Whenever I'm in the States, my Hunters are always thinking about male and female sides when I make a mistake or overlook something. What is that? Is it something that's always on the television?" His expression was playful. He was still tickled by his oversight.

Artest knew his question was rhetorical. He'd never known Fox not to know something.

"I apologize," he said. "It was rude to focus on a mistake and unacceptable to consider it in your presence."

Fox stood. "No apology is necessary."

He walked to the door. They always walked in and out of the temple. It was considered disrespectful to transport in and out.

"I won't take long."

"Take your time. It'll give me an opportunity to get to know Ms. Greene."

Artest waited until he left before he allowed himself to have the next thought. *I've got to get back out there.* He didn't know if he was more afraid of Fox charming or hurting her.

Artest couldn't insult Fox by returning immediately. He sat for about ten minutes, said a few prayers and returned to the back door. It was then that he remembered he was supposed to get some glasses. He returned to the kitchen. He got a glass for the Pale Fox too, but he'd never seen him eat or drink anything except cognac.

When Artest returned to the group, they were all seated and laughing. With the others leaning toward Fox to hear better, Artest knew Fox had the floor; no doubt he was telling one of his many stories. He wouldn't talk about his own life, but he loved to tell embarrassing stories about the Hunters. Those funny stories came from that frat boy side of him they all loved. When he was in that mood, Fox was the life of a party.

"Aw, here he is now," Fox said. They all laughed.

“Do I dare ask?”

“Fox was telling us about the little crush Marabella had on you.”

All eyes were on him, but the only ones that concerned Artest were Jordans. She too was smiling at him, but there was a kindness there that told him she was going along with the silliness and she meant no harm.

Artest opened his right hand, upturned his palm, and swept it up and down the air in front of his body. “How could she resist?” he asked.

“Indeed,” Jordan agreed, and all eyes left him and focused on her.

“Sounds like an endorsement to me,” Tyler said.

“My brother!” Fox said as he held up his palm to Artest for a high five.

Jordan laughed aloud. Artest figured such childish behavior from one reputed to be a god shocked her, but it should have let her see what he meant by Fox’s very male behavior too.

“Marabella certainly saw something she couldn’t resist—she chased him all over Europe and most of the Eastern seaboard.”

Jahia got so tickled she yelped. “No she didn’t. Ogo, you’re lying on Artest?”

It did Artest’s heart good to see her so happy, if even at his expense.

“It’s true—she kept popping up with a different face and hair color and a body tighter than the one before it,” Fox continued.

“How did you know it was her?” Jahia asked Artest.

He placed the chair he had secured next to Jordan and sat. “I had to be somewhat suspicious, I’m not accustomed to beautiful women throwing themselves at me. The third time it happened in so many weeks, I trained myself to recognize her essence.”

“That was around the time she resorted to her magic, was it not?”

“Yes, Fox, that was when she bewitched me and I ended up kissing her.”

“Ew,” the husband and wife said in unison.

“Marabella has been a good friend to all of us. I’m not comfortable with this conversation,” Artest said, an obvious attempt to guilt trip them onto another topic.

“That is so true, Artest. But darling, that doesn’t negate the eww factor,” Jahia teased.

He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. They could tease all they wanted, but he was no longer participating.

“There *is* something else we should be discussing,” Tyler said.

*He’s such a good friend.*

“You’re right. Ian is coming in the front door now. You will be working with him to protect your charge, Artest.”

He sat up immediately, as did Jahia.

“Why, Fox? I work alone.”

“None of the Hunters work alone. We are a body.”

“What about Tyler?” Jahia asked. “Is he still going out?”

Fox looked at Jahia as if he was surprised to find her there. He sighed wearily before answering with words he probably suspected would cause a fight. “Tyler has made the decision to go out. I’ve made the decision for him to work with Roberta.”

Jahia slammed her book down on the glass end table next to her. Artest didn’t know why it didn’t break. She gave Fox a look that only a friend could get away with; then she stormed into the house.

“Why, Fox?” Artest asked. He tried to contain his hurt. Fox could be compassionate, but he had no sympathy for a weak male. Artest wouldn’t be surprised to find him kicking a sniveling man while he was down.

The curl of Fox’s lips told Artest he was getting annoyed. “He is a fool whose sheep runs away twice.”

Who was he talking about, Artest wondered? The Suckers always ran away. He tried to replay the weekend. *Had Jordan run away from me twice?* He felt he had to say something, but he couldn’t trust Fox to accept his anger as readily as Jahia’s. Jahia was special, even in the eyes of a god.

“Ashanti, Fox? You quote Ashanti as you shame me?”

Fox laughed, taunting him. “Even the Ashanti got it right some times. And I’m not trying to shame you. I’m trying to save you.”

They all looked up to see Ian opening the patio door. When they looked back, Fox’s chair was empty.



## Chapter Thirty

Mama May used to talk about a friend of hers as running hot and cold. Jordan thought it was another one of those silly old women expressions, but today, that was how her day was going. She'd thought things were looking up when they got back to Tyler and Jahia's. The house appeared empty, and she'd envisioned a normal, quiet afternoon getting to know Artest better, with a sizeable portion of the time spent in bed.

They heard noise coming from the back and found Jahia and Tyler on the deck. That would have been a good way to spend some time too, but then Artest said he was going to visit the temple.

Tyler asked her what had happened in their absence. She told him about everything as she saw it, and before long, he and his wife were asking questions and helping her fill in background blanks. She was really starting to enjoy herself when she heard somebody behind them opening the patio door.

Expecting Artest, she didn't turn around. She was the only one surprised by the appearance of the seriously strange Mr. Fox. When he saw her, he put on his sunglasses, and that made her feel badly about her earlier reaction to his eyes.

He swaggered around the yard, commenting on Jahia's flowers. With his eyes covered, the man could earn money on a runway. Jahia joined him in the garden when his whispering became too hard to hear. Tyler continued to talk about the school incident, but he was distracted. Jordan thought she was boring him, but then she saw that he was watching his wife interacting with Fox. Who could blame him?

When the two of them returned to the chairs, she could see that Jahia was charmed to the point of giddiness. It looked good on her.

Things remained hot for a short while after Artest returned, but then Fox announced that the Hunters were working in pairs, and the way he'd paired them wasn't what they'd expected.

Cold.

Jahia stormed off, Tyler looked like he wanted to kill somebody, and Artest wasn't readable. He sat perfectly still for about five minutes after Fox stirred the pot and popped out.

"I'm going upstairs," Artest finally said. He took a few steps and looked back at Jordan as if he was saying, 'aren't you coming?'

She sat on the bed as he paced around the bedroom.

"I don't deserve this kind of treatment. I've been loyal., Even when Fox was at his craziest, I defended him."

Jordan knew she was making a mistake, but that had never stopped her before. "Is it that you

never work in pairs?”

“No, I knew we were pairing up this time. I’d already told Jahia I would go out with Tyler.”

“You don’t like Ian?”

“I don’t know him.”

“Then what?”

“Fox implied that I haven’t been taking good care of you.”

She smiled. “He should have asked me. I think your care has been excellent.”

Hearing her tone, he stopped pacing and looked at her. When he saw the smile on her face, she thought she had embarrassed him. “Maybe that’s his problem. He thinks I’ve been thinking with the wrong head.”

“Did he say that?”

“No, he would never say that. He believes there’s always time for sex. It’s just a problem for him when it gets in his way or there’s drama connected with it. He wouldn’t understand that what I’m feeling with you is not about sex.”

For Jordan, that statement was one of those heart-skipping moments. She wanted to take him in her arms, but she figured he wasn’t feeling too huggable.

He sat next to her. “I never had a chance to apologize for today. How are you doing?”

“I’m adjusting.”

He rubbed the back of her neck. “You do that well.”

“You take good care of me.”

He stopped rubbing. “Jordan, I believe Fox saved our asses today. Don’t give me credit.”

His funk was back.

“Maybe he did, maybe he didn’t, but you’re the one about to get lucky for it.” Jordan didn’t know where that came from. *Maybe I’m channeling my inner slut*, she thought. Wherever it came from, it worked. It brought back his smile.

He got up and locked the door. “Now what was this you were saying about luck?”

He stood in front of her and held out his arms. She thought he was saying, ‘let me hug you,’ but

she was wrong. He let her see him taking off his clothes without appearing to touch them.

They disappeared in layers; it was fascinating. “That is so cool,” she said.

He laughed. “I have to admit, it really is.” Then he giggled, which was so cute.

“What?”

“Most Hunters can’t do that. It was a gift from a goddess. I’ve never let a human see me do that. It was fun.”

Since she was still sitting on the bed and he was standing, in more ways than one, her focus was elsewhere. She beckoned him closer. When she could reach him, she put her hands on his hips and pulled him to her. Jordan took his cock in her hands. She rubbed him like she was trying to find the genie. He moaned. She rubbed him against her right cheek, and his knees buckled. She stopped and looked up at him. “You can’t lie down yet,” she told him.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She rubbed him against her left cheek. Then she licked just the head quickly, and before he could react, she lifted him and ran her tongue on the underside. “Jordan,” he moaned. She didn’t think he had anything he wanted to say—he just needed to call out her name. The sound of it stirred her to her soul.

She took his manhood in her mouth and tongue-kissed it. Jordan was not a deep-throater, but she made a valiant effort. What she lacked in depth she felt she made up for in enthusiasm.

Artest ran his hands through her hair, and she sucked a little deeper. While her mouth was busy, she unfastened her blouse buttons. She stopped sucking but continued to caress him. “Would you like to join me?” she asked

“In more ways than one.” He was echoing her thoughts again, but she didn’t care.

To her reluctance, she had to let go of him long enough to remove her bra. He unbuttoned her pants and worked them over her hips. She stepped out of them and her panties while he positioned himself in bed.

Before she joined him, she glanced up and saw his smile. It still surprised and warmed her to see such a beautiful man looking so pleased to be with her.

He pulled her forward as if he couldn’t wait any longer. With the flat of his palms on either side of her neck, he dragged his hands down her body like he was trying to memorize her. Maybe he was. Maybe he was thinking about later.

He touched her between the legs. He remembered from their first night exactly where she enjoyed being touched, and she moaned in gratitude.



“Do you like that, pretty lady?” he whispered.

“Oh yeah.”

He increased the pressure. “Then you’re really going to like this.”

He worked his tongue down her body, stopping briefly at each hard nipple. When he found her clitoris, he mirrored her tongue-kiss move. “Artest,” she moaned because saying ‘oh my god’ would have reminded him of Fox.

He increased his pressure. She felt an orgasm mounting. She tried to think of something else—she didn’t want to leave him so far behind. He started a trail of kisses down her thigh. She thought he was making his way to her feet. Jordan knew feet were suddenly popular, but they didn’t turn her on. Actually, her feet were ticklish. He stopped at her knees and lifted her leg until her foot lay flat. Then he licked the back of her knee—right at the bend. She thought she was going to die. How he knew about that spot and why she didn’t know amazed her. It was too much—she had to stop him.

“I need you,” she told him.

“You have me.”

“Up here.”

Stopping briefly behind the other knee, he worked his way up the other leg. He lay on his back and pulled her on top of him. She eased up, lifting her hips, and reached for his erection. He caught her hand and stopped him, and he kissed her palm. “Wait, let me look at you.” He held her face in his hands and stared.

Every part of his face smiled.

“You’re scaring me. This is not goodbye, is it?”

He started to speak but nuzzled her neck instead. His hand found her hand. Together they guided him inside her. He held her still for a moment in a tight hug before his hips started to move. Thrusting to meet each move he made, she marveled again at their seemingly natural, innate, common rhythm—something she’d never achieved with her intended. Seconds before they exploded in a frenzied crescendo of powerful gropes and strokes, she lowered her hand between them and cupped and gently squeezed his sac—something she remembered from the first night when he had guided her hand.

He called out her name again when he came. When they stopped moving, trying to catch their breath, he kissed her ear. She found it endearing and returned the gesture with her own nip of his ear.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Artest didn't often feel the anger that he'd heard other Hunters express toward Fox. He didn't remember why he'd first had the thought, but he'd always felt like one of Fox's favorites. Maybe it was after the first time he heard Fox say his best two Hunters came from the same family.

Fox didn't move Artest around as often as the other Hunters, and he visited a few times a month. Some Hunters claimed they went years without seeing Fox—especially the ones who lived in cold places. When the Hunters hung out in one of their online chat rooms, they sometimes teasingly referred to Artest as "Precious" because of his special relationship with Fox. Artest had always considered the nickname good-natured ribbing.

He'd never expected Fox to embarrass him as he did, especially not in front of a woman he was seeing. Artest was sure Fox knew, in his way of knowing everything, that Artest cared a great deal about Jordan. *I should probably say I'm growing to care, but I've had a long time to get to know myself, and this is the real thing.*

She took his humiliation in stride, just as she had everything that had happened since their meeting. By the time they'd spent some time together upstairs and were basking in the afterglow of lovemaking, his mood had mellowed considerably. He knew he owed Ian an apology, and he was ready to return downstairs to deliver it when they heard a knock at the door.

Jordan jumped up. He thought she was going to answer the door nude, and that really surprised him. Before he could say anything to her, she ran into the bathroom. He put on his slacks and answered the door. It was Ian.

"Artest, my brother." He reached for Artest's hand, and they shook.

"Ian, I apologize for leaving without greeting you. . ."

"I understand. Fox's call came as a surprise to me too."

"Let me get dressed and we'll talk downstairs."

He was still standing in the doorway. Artest knew it was rude not to invite him in, but Jordan's clothes were in the bedroom. *He's my Dogon brother, but I'd sooner gorge out his eyes than let him see her that way.*

"Fox told me not to let her out of my sight. He said he was calling you."

Before Artest could reply, his cell phone rang.

"Hello. . . he's here now, Fox, that's not. . . I know, but. . . yes, yes, okay." He closed the phone and fought the urge to throw it against the wall. He couldn't remember a time he felt more foolish.

“Ian, I have an errand to run. Fox wants you to stay with Jordan. I know he told you not to let her out of your sight, but she isn’t dressed and . . .”

“I understand. I’ll wait out here in the hallway until you tell me it’s a good time to come in.”

That was unexpected. Artest had been expecting a wisecrack. Apparently Ian was not the cocksure *young* Hunter Artest thought he was.

“Thanks.”

He took the clothes she’d been wearing in the bathroom. “I have to leave,” he told her.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m not sure. Fox told me to meet somebody out front.” He glanced at his watch. “Now. I need to get out there. Ian is waiting in the hallway. After you’re dressed, why don’t you go downstairs?”

She smiled. “Are you saying you don’t want me entertaining my gentleman caller in my boudoir?” she asked, using a strong, albeit fake Southern accent.

He felt the blood that was already angrily rushing through his body begin to boil. He tried to smile., Artest knew she was teasing, but he imagined his smile looked more like a grimace. “I’m saying he’s *not* your gentleman caller, and I don’t even like the idea of him standing in the hallway *outside* your bedroom.”

“Artest, I was kidding.” Needing to say the words inflamed her. “I told you Friday night was my first time doing anything close to that. I’m not a whore!”

He tried to reach for her, but she pulled away.

“Don’t touch me. Just leave.”

“Jordan.”

“No, I want you to leave.”

He didn’t have time to tell her his reaction had little to do with her. He’d lost so much in his lifetimes, the mere thought, even in jest, of losing her made him want to break something or somebody. He knew it was irrational, but that had never stopped the jealousy. He took little comfort in the knowledge that all Hunters so suffered and thus understood.

Artest dressed and stepped into the hallway.

“She’ll be out in a minute, and, if you’ll indulge me, I’ll bring her downstairs.”

He didn't answer immediately. None of them liked to disobey Fox. It wasn't that they were such an obedient lot—hardly—it had more to do with it being almost impossible to hide *anything* from him.

“Okay, but tell her to hurry.”

She was dressed when he went back in there, but her expression told him he needn't bother trying to get her to talk.

“I'll get back as soon as I can. If you think of anything you want me to bring back, call my cell.”

For the next five minutes, she was silent, but he noticed she did greet Ian warmly.

“Let's sit outside and enjoy what's left of the afternoon,” he heard her saying as he was opening the front door. He wanted to scream.

There was a red sports car on the street in front of the house. Artest hesitated and tried to look in to see if he knew the driver. The windows were too dark. The window came down, and he heard a female voice call his name.

He got in, turned to the driver and got a shock.

“Artest, not Art, we meet again.”

It was Leeana, Jordan's friend from the bar.

“Fox asked me to tell you what's been happening over at the college.” She laughed. “I've been waiting to see that shock on your face.”

“What are you? I know you're not a Dogon-Hunter—I would have felt it at the club.”

She turned over the motor and put the car in gear. “No, I'm not a Hunter. Let's just say I am a friend of the Hunters and leave it at that.”

“Did you know when you met me?”

“Yes, I know the names and faces of all the Hunters.”

“Here in the Sacramento area?” he added for her.

“No, Artest, in the world—past, present, maybe future.”

A chill ran through him. He questioned if Fox knew all of them. Their own best chat room guess was that there were a little less than four hundred active Hunters, but he'd seen Fox stumble over their current names.

He tried to sense something about Leeana, something that he'd missed Friday night.

"Oh shoot," she said.

He was about to ask her what was wrong, but he noticed she was pulling the car to the side of the street. He looked at her to see that she was studying the fire station about two car lengths ahead of them on his side.

"Why. . . ?" He didn't get to finish his question before the garage door opened and two fire engines, with sirens blaring, came out and made a right turn in front of them.

"I find having those come up behind me a little unnerving," she explained.

"Who doesn't? Now, if you'll just take a moment to explain how you knew it was about to happen?"

She laughed. "Come on, Artest, you know how this stuff works. I can't tell you anything about who or what I am. I'm not a Hunter and I'm not human. Beyond that—I can't say."

"How long have you known Fox?"

"A very long time. We're not always on the same side, but we always want the best for each other."

He smiled too. Her declaration sounded like something an ex-wife would say. He wanted to ask if they were lovers, but that certainly wasn't any of his business.

"No, we were never lovers," she said. "Talk about a big fat eww."

He felt like Jordan was somewhere laughing at him. *Now I know exactly how she felt when I did that.*

"Does Jordan know?"

"No, and she can't. When this is over I'll be leaving the university for my next assignment, but I like her and want to remain friends. I hope you'll keep my confidence."

"Of course."

He could see she was driving in the direction of the university. He looked at her again. With her porcelain skin and light brown, blonde-streaked hair, she was attractive enough to be a god, but he'd never known one in this century who didn't present himself or herself as taller than average, and Leeana was shorter than Jordan.

"Okay, Artest, I'll give you this. I am human, but—and this is a big but—I was born before humans became separated from immortality."

“What?” That was the dumbest thing he’d ever heard. Artest looked at her, and she maintained her straight face until she was sure he was struggling with a way to respond.

Finally her face cracked into a smile, and then she laughed so hard he was afraid they were going to hit something.

“I’m sorry, Artest. I couldn’t resist. Please, no more questions about me. I can’t answer them, and you really don’t want to know. As our people would say, he who asks questions cannot avoid the answers.”

*Our people?*

“Leeana, did you not tell me you’re not Dogon?”

“Let me figure out what you’re asking—with all those negatives, I don’t know. Why are you so formal, Artest? You’ve been here for years.”

“Did you say you’re not a Dogon?” He knew it wasn’t necessary to shout, but he hated being toyed with.

“No, I said I’m not a Dogon-Hunter—and I’m not—but I’m Dogon to the bone!”

“How is that possible?”

“How much do you hate it when your bloodline is questioned because of something as silly as the color of your skin? This body works for this assignment.”

He nodded; she was right. If a quarter of the Dogon-Hunters in the world currently wore black skin, it was a higher figure than he knew.

Leeana pulled into a parking spot. “Parking is such a premium on this campus,” she said as she straightened the car. “I’m always thankful for this space. Although bold students will often illegally make use of it.” She didn’t tell him that with a blink of her eye, she would leave them a surprise upon their return.

He nodded. She could talk about parking if she wanted, but his mind was on her—who was she? How did she fit into the grand plan—if there was one? He smiled. *Grand plan indeed. Crap shoot made more sense.*

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Ian turned out to be a lot of fun. Jordan thought he seemed like the younger brother of a dear friend, maybe in town for the day or visiting his sister on campus. And, because his sister was a dear friend, she was keeping him company while sis was in class. That was how she decided to think so she wouldn't focus on Ian, the man candy.

He was as easy on the eyes as they all were; tall like Artest, but not as tall as Fox. Darker like Tyler, but somewhere between Tyler and Artest on the brown spectrum. His black hair was straight and pulled back in a single thick braid that was harnessed at the nape of his neck. Like the rest of the Hunters, his features fit his face perfectly, arranged for maximum attractiveness without being feminine, freakish, or too similar to his brethren. He looked like a light-skinned Ethiopian, a little bit black African, but as much Italian.

Like the rest of the Dogon-Hunter men she'd met, Ian wore a single color from his shirt to his socks and shoes. The blue he wore wasn't navy but was nearly as dark, and it surprised her that he'd been able to find shoes in such an uncommon color. His eyes were a very light brown with yellow flecks—strange eyes, just like the rest of the Hunters', but not frightening like Fox's. His shirt seemed to be strained almost to splitting from his hard upper torso muscles.

He was new to the area. He told her that almost immediately. "Where are you from?" she asked.

"Mali, originally," he said with a sheepish grin.

Somehow he knew. She doubted if she would ever get used to all these different types calling themselves Africans.

"I mean most recently."

"I've been in South America for the past one hundred and fifty odd years."

"So you speak Spanish?"

"I do, but my Portuguese is better."

"So you were in Brazil?"

"Cha-ching. Will you marry me?" he said, laughing.

"What?" she asked.

"I promised myself that I would marry the first American woman who was able to crack that *mind-boggling* riddle."

He had the silliest laugh for an adult man. She thought it was probably impossible to hear it and not at least smile.

“Come on, Ian, we’re not that bad.”

“Not bad at all, but dumb as hell.”

“Who’s dumb as hell?” Tyler asked, putting down a plate of sandwiches and joining them.

“He’s making fun of my countrywomen.”

“Trust me, dude, it’s not just the women,” Tyler said.

They spent the next twenty minutes making fun of all the not-too-intelligent things they’d heard from the mouths of Americans, mostly President Bush.

“How’s Jahia?” Ian asked when they grew tired of the subject.

“Still pissed, but she’ll be okay. She and Roberta are good friends.”

“Is it a jealousy thing?” he asked.

Tyler paused and thought about it before he answered, which surprised her. “No, she knows she has no reason to be jealous of Roberta or anybody else.”

“She is hot,” Ian said.

“Who? Roberta or Jahia?” Tyler asked. His expression wasn’t readable.

Then Ian stopped and thought. “Both of them! No, Jahia hasn’t got anything to worry about there!”

“I know you don’t know me so well, but I’m not comfortable with conversation about my wife’s hot factor.”

“Got it! So what’s the problem?”

“She worries about me, and she figures that since Artest and I are close, he won’t let anything happen to me.”

“We’ve all pledged to that.”

“Have you?” Jordan asked, finally hearing something that interested her. “What else have you pledged to do?”

“That’s confidential,” Tyler said

“What difference does it make? She has to be washed anyway.”



“That’s true, Tyler—this time next week I won’t remember any of this.”

She saw Ian turn his head the same way Artest did when he was listening to an inner voice.

“You’re one fascinating woman, Jordan Greene,” Ian said.

“I am, but what made you say so?”

“I’m a serious flirt. It comes from living among those romantic Latin men for so long.”

“Yeah, right.” She looked at Tyler and let him know she knew he’d said something. “If you can’t talk about that, can you tell me how you became Hunters?”

“It’s a training process,” they said in unison.

“Were you sent to some kind of school? And even if you were trained, how would that make a normal human being into some kind of super being? What kind of school teaches that?”

“A Dogon Hunter’s school,” Tyler said. “I’m not trying to be glib—it really is taught, most of it. Once it’s established that your family has the Traveler’s bloodline.”

She got a sandwich and took a bite. “This is really good. What is it?”

Tyler reached for his own sandwich and took a bite before answering. “This is my wife’s famous chicken salad.”

“I can taste the chicken, but I don’t recognize anything else, at least not anything that ends up in my chicken salad. This is wonderful.” She didn’t really want to talk about the sandwich, although it *was* delicious. When she was a young girl, she learned she could ask Mama May a few unrelated questions before going back to a subject she didn’t want to discuss. Usually she was more approachable during the second round.

Tyler smiled. “Be sure to tell her. It’s one of her signature dishes.”

“I will. Both of you have been wonderful hosts. I thank you both. How do you get the gifts that aren’t taught?” she asked. Her question was directed toward Ian, but she didn’t care who answered.

Both men laughed. “There is a training process for the gifts too,” Ian said. “But that would fall under the category of that stuff of which we cannot speak.”

“Ask Fox—he’s been known to speak of it.”

Both men laughed again.

“What’s so damn funny?” They were pissing her off.

Tyler’s face immediately took on a contrite expression. “Jordan, we meant no harm. No disrespect.”

“By all means, don’t tell Artest I did anything disrespectful. I’m having a hard enough time getting him to trust me,” Ian revealed

She realized then that they must have heard her formulating her plan to back them into a conversation about their training. Sorry guys, she said mentally. “I’ll leave it alone,” she said aloud.

Jahia returned wearing different clothes. She was dressed in black spandex pants and a tight black shell. Jordan was impressed with Jahia’s body. From where Jordan sat, Jahia could have been a tall teenage girl approaching them with a refilled pitcher of lemonade and a roll of paper cups.

“Sorry it took so long to get out here with this,” she said, placing the pitcher on her patio table.

“Your presence was missed; the beverage was not,” Ian said.

Tyler gave him a look. Jahia smiled as she had when Fox had charmed her. She sat down next to her husband.

“You look like you’re dressed for battle,” Tyler told her.

“It would appear that way, would it not?” she replied with a glint in her eye.

Her response made him look at her mouth. Her accent had changed—it was more British. Even the answering with a question was a British inflection.

“What do you think of that cloud over there?” Tyler asked his wife.

“What kind of craziness is that you’re asking me?” Jahia said.

Tyler stood. “Oh no, I thought there was something familiar about your choice of clothes, but now I’m sure—you’re speaking with a British accent. You-are-not-going-out-Jahia!

“Try to stop me, old man.” Her voice could have been that of the Queen of England.

Ian and Jordan exchanged glances. She gave him a questioning look, but he shrugged his shoulders.

The Pale Fox appeared. “No, Jahia. Don’t even think about it!”

“And I repeat to you, try to stop me, old man!”

Fox's body snapped back as if he'd been struck. Ian's eyes got as big as saucers. Jordan still wasn't quite sure what was happening.

"Tyler, reel in your woman. I don't have time for this foolishness."

Tyler looked from Fox to Jahia and back again. Jordan had never before seen such terror.

"Reel me in, Fox?" She moved toward him. He backed up instinctively. "Reel me in!" she shouted at him.

He threw up both his hands as stop signs. Jahia froze in her tracks. "Okay, Jahia, bad choice of words. I apologize." He slowly lowered one hand, and she was able to move everything except her feet. "We can talk about this, can't we?"

Jahia glared at him. Clearly she wanted to say something, but she couldn't. Fox lowered his other arm, and she moved her head as if cracking her neck. "Yes, Ogo, we can talk. We've always been able to talk, but when the conversation is over, I'm either going out with my husband, he's not going out, or I'll be dead. The choice is, as ever, yours." She spoke those words with her thick African accent.

"Don't threaten me, teacher." His whisper was a little louder, almost normal.

Jordan saw *something* in her eyes—a spark of remembrance?

"Yes, I-am-the-teacher. And I'm saying now to *all* my students that it might be a good time for retirement. A good time for change. If I live to see another day or two, maybe I'll change my mind!"

Jordan noticed that Tyler and Ian's' faces softened in ways that made her think they wanted to smile. She was beginning to understand what was happening, but she still wasn't quite clear as to the level of seriousness in what she was hearing.

"That kind of mass exodus would leave us vulnerable," Fox said.

"But it is our choice when we decide to leave, is it not?" The British accent was back.

"No matter how foolish, your will is still free."

"My will is to go out with my husband."

"Fine, go out with him! But you should realize how much you dishonor him by underestimating his ability to take care of himself."

"No, I'm honored that she cares so much," Tyler said. "If anybody wants to badger me about that, I can handle it."

Fox looked at both of them and scowled before he disappeared.

Ian said, “Wow, I’m going to start hanging out here more often. I can’t believe you just won in a test of will against the Pale Fox.”

“Nonsense, child, he told me how to win when he called me teacher. He practically gave me the words to use. As a god, he saw how it would end.”

Tyler nodded as Jahia spoke. Ian’s expression was one of incredulousness. “I don’t understand,” he finally said.

“I believe I know,” Jordan said, surprising them all. “It’s not Fox’s idea that you go out, and he could have stopped you if he’d wanted, but he’s on record now that it wasn’t his choice. And now nobody can blame him if things go wrong.”

“Exactly.”

“Is he saying it won’t go well?” Ian asked. “Doesn’t he see these things in advance?”

Jahia shrugged. “Maybe, who knows?”

She didn’t seem worried by the prospect.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

“Why are we here?” Artest asked Leeana when he noticed that they were entering a building marked College of Arts and Letters.

“I’m an administrative analyst in the office of the Dean. A lot of interesting stuff runs across my desk.”

“And by interesting you mean?”

“I mean that there is a fraternity that has been banned from campus for hazing.”

“Okay?”

“And their house went up for sale.”

“Bad market for that,.” he said.

“No, not really. They got their price immediately. Actually, that’s what made me look into it. My condo has been on the market for five months.”

“I’m sorry about that, but I can’t imagine what it has to do with. . .”

“I recognized the last name of the man who bought the house as one that the Sangsue use.”

“Umm.”

“Yeah, it’s an awfully big house, Artest, and as far as I know, they’re not planning to start a fraternity.”

The university was on a break, and there were very few people around. He noticed Leeana spoke, by name, to the few they passed. They came to an office door, and she looked around before getting a single key from her jacket pocket and opening the door.

“I’m guessing this is not your office?”

“No, it’s Roger Grant’s office.”

“He’s the guy who emailed Jordan?”

“He’s the guy whose computer emailed Jordan.”

It was a typical professor’s small office. There were two desks, and both held a desktop computer. She sat in his office chair and turned on the monitor. He was surprised to see a Netscape account already queued up and waiting for a password. He watched her typing something.

“How did you get his password?”

She smiled. “Let’s just say I’m a good guesser.”

“Okay, Good Guesser, what’ve you got?”

She clicked on the “sent” file, and then she clicked the last email sent. “This is it. See, it was posted Saturday morning.” She leaned to one side so he could read over her shoulder.

The note said that the writer wanted her to meet him on Saturday afternoon in his office.

“The dean left for Spain on Thursday. He might have some way to access this account, but unless there’s something about him that I don’t know, he could not have been prepared to meet her here on Saturday.”

“And if she hadn’t been with me, she probably would have been checking her email in time to read that note.” He shuddered at the thought. No wonder the Sangsue hadn’t continued to pursue her at her apartment. They were killing high tech now.

Leeana nodded. “That’s why she got a second message for the Monday meeting.” As she spoke, she clicked on the second sent message.

“So what does this all mean?” he asked.

“It means they’re here—they’ve infiltrated the campus. As you know, the true Sangsue can tolerate the daylight. I believe we have some on staff. Come on—I want to show you their house.”

By the time they got back to Leeana’s car, she was wound-up in telling him some things he didn’t know about the Sangsue.

“You guys have been doing such a good job that, a few years back, their numbers were down to less than two hundred worldwide.”

“Wow. I didn’t know that.”

“Not many do. It’s not the kind of thing they want to advertise.”

He noticed they were stopping near one of those coffee shops that had popped up all over town. “I didn’t get a chance to get my mother’s milk today,” she said.

“Interesting description; we are talking about coffee, right?”

She smiled at him, and he found himself enjoying her company. The thought immediately made him wonder if Jordan was enjoying her time with Ian, and that thought gave him a pain in his

chest.

He realized that he'd subconsciously put women in two categories—other Dogon-Hunters and their otherworldly associates, or human women— that he evaluated in terms of sexuality. There were a few who fell outside of both classes, like his assistant, Jennie, but he was guilty of some serious stereotyping.

He didn't know if Leeana was planning to get the coffee to go or if she wanted to sit in the shop and drink it.

"Let's have it inside," she said, almost as soon as the thought crossed his mind.

He felt a wave of anger hit his face. The biggest problem he had with her reading his thoughts was the fact that he wasn't getting anything, not a peep, from her. With other Hunters, they could both hear, and it seemed fairer.

The face of the guy behind the counter lit up upon seeing her. "The usual?" he asked.

Leeana nodded.

He looked at Artest. "I'll have what she's having."

She handed him a credit card before he got a chance to offer.

"Is that table all right?" she asked, nodding her head at a table by the window.

"Sure."

He waited until she sat before he took his seat. He found himself wanting to establish some balance. He was feeling like a cheap date, and he didn't like the feeling.

"Artest, I'm going to tell you some things that need to remain between the two of us. The other Hunters will eventually get this information, but not until it's time. Okay?"

"No problem."

"I know this is a sensitive area, but it's necessary for me to mention it."

He nodded.

"As you know, when the Sangsue first followed the Travelers here, they found they were sterile in this environment. They couldn't reproduce with each other or the humans."

He could see already where this was going, and the thought made him sick.

"They continued to experiment and found they could reproduce with the Hunters. I should say

we know of one case where that happened.”

One case indeed. He nodded as he pictured his sister when she was carrying that creature’s child.

“Of course they could ‘make’ others like them by exchanging blood, but those creatures, the hybrids, are sensitive to daylight, which puts them at a disadvantage in this world.”

“To say the least,” he agreed. There is a special branch of Dogon-Hunters called Trackers who hunted the hybrids, but they couldn’t pay Artest enough to make him live in the shadows like a mole.

“Hence the whole vampire legend. Apparently they were able to come up with a hybrid and Sangsue combination that wasn’t sterile.”

“My God!”

“Indeed. Sources say there are currently six children, with the oldest being twelve. In each case, their mothers have been strong, athletic women. We don’t know how many Sangsue/hybrid males they have, but considering the portability of seed, they don’t need many.”

The thought was mind boggling. He was beginning to understand the new boldness he’d seen in the Suckers. They were on the rise.

“So you see, it’s not just the usual havoc we’re looking at here. They want to disrupt the games and terrorized the public, but for them that’s only a fortunate consequence—the real goal is to snatch some of the strongest we have to offer.”

“And to blame the whole thing on terrorists? That alone could spark World War Three.”

“Tell me about it,”

He finally tasted his coffee. He’d been so interested in what she was saying he’d forgotten about it.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“Let’s just say I prefer to chew my caramel candy.”

Oddly enough, she shoved his arm while she laughed, which was a gesture he tended to associate with younger people—like prepubescent girls in plaid shirts and white blouses. He assumed she was older than she looked, just as the rest of them were, but he was beginning to wonder. He tried to block his thoughts, but he’d never remembered to test that ability when around people who could check for him.

“Can you believe what this stuff costs?”



Her expression was suddenly sad as she held her cup and looked at it. He knew there was something else bothering her, but he couldn't get a clue from her thoughts. Whatever she was, she was stronger than a Dogon-Hunter.

"Does it ever bother you how well we live?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, but he suspected he knew.

"We come from. . . Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world. Yet all of the Hunters and others like myself live so well."

"I've thought about it. I try not to, but I do. I just have to keep telling myself that we do a very dangerous job. And we didn't start off wealthy—the money came with time. The average lifespan in Mali is still less than fifty years old."

She nodded. "That makes me sad too."

"Of course. I imagine you, like the rest of us, support charities there? Maybe one day we'll be able to do something to make the world see the beauty and wisdom of our home."

She nodded as she said, "that's my prayer too."

They kept the talk to simple things for the rest of their time they were in the coffee shop. Once back in her car, he resumed trying to figure her out.

"I'm assuming you're older than you look," he finally said.

She smiled. "I'm older than anybody looks."

"You carry it well."

"Uh-huh. See this big white house on the corner?"

He saw the house. He could still see where the Greek letters had been painted over. It didn't look any different than the rest of the houses in the neighborhood except that it might have been a little bigger.

"That's the house they bought. So far it's quiet in comparison to your typical house full of college men, but they do have regular young female visitors."

"Cows?" Artest asked, using the expression they used for Ketier who, for a host of reasons, allowed the Suckers to feed from them. They were mostly young women and gay men. Hunters assumed the practice had a sexual component.

She gave him a little more background on the Sucker's experiments in fertility. Her intelligence and knowledge of the topic was fascinating. Artest felt like he was in a spy movie. She kept

saying things like “they were observed,” and “it was learned.”

When you’d lived the equivalent of six or seven lifetimes, there weren’t not a lot of kicks left. As they were driving to the next location, Artest realized that between the two women he’d met on Friday night, he’d felt more excitement than he’d thought was possible anymore.

He looked back at the house and memorized the location. He suspected he would be seeing a lot more of it.

Before he exited her car, he had one more question he needed to ask Leeana. “The night we met, you told me, and I quote, ‘I’ll hunt you down if you hurt her.’ Do you remember?”

“Sure. What’s your question?”

“Can you hurt me?”

“Still trying to figure me out, eh?”

Artest nodded.

“Yes, Artest, I was serious about what I said, and I can hurt you. And I wouldn’t even have to touch you.”

“Physically hurt me—we’re not talking a damaged reputation, hurt feelings, or some other abstract?”

“Physically,” she said.

“And you could do it with a thought?” If this was a yes, then he knew he was dealing with a god.

In place of an answer, she laughed, the exact kind of thing Fox would do.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Jordan was coming out of the downstairs bathroom when she saw Artest entering the front door. He looked so yummy. As much as she enjoyed visiting with Tyler, Jahia, and Ian, she was happy to see his return and eager to find out how he'd spent the two plus hours they were separated.

He smiled as he approached her. She decided to have some fun with him.

"Hey, pretty lady, did you miss me?" he asked as he reached for her.

She dodged his embrace. "Excuse me, sir, do I know you?"

He narrowed his eyes and stepped back. She saw him look over his head, probably searching for one of his friends. Jordan knew they were outside and unable to hear them.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you were somebody I know."

She stuck out her hand. "My name is Jordan Greene."

He took the hand and impulsively started bringing it toward his mouth before he caught himself. He gave her a look that would have broken her heart if she hadn't known how the next five minutes would play out.

"I'm Artest Drame," he said as he slowly shook her hand.

"Hi, Art, are you a friend of Tyler and Jahia?"

He recoiled at the shortening of his name, but he didn't correct her as he had Leeana. He just nodded.

"Then you probably know my new boyfriend, Ian, too?"

"Your what?"

His expression scared her. The joke had gone too far. "But now that I think about it, you're a lot cuter than Ian." She stood on her tiptoes and planted her lips on his. It took a little prodding with her tongue to get him to relax and embrace her.

"That was mean, Jordan," he said, and then immediately reconnected with her mouth.

She gently pulled away. "Just think about how much fun you'll have later while I make it up to you."

He pulled her back, even closer than before. He nuzzled her ear. "Are you beginning to tell how much I've missed you?"

“I’d have to be numb from the waist down *not* to feel your interest.”

“Do I need to get my garden hose? I would say get a room, but I know the landlord, and he’s disgusted too.”

They were Jahia’s words, but there was a big smile on her face.

Without letting go of Jordan, Artest threw Jahia a kiss. “No disrespect intended, my friend.”

“Have you not eaten, Artest? Is that why you can’t stop nibbling on that poor child’s neck?”

Jordan loved the way Jahia said his name—*Art Teese*.

“No, I haven’t. Why don’t I take us all out to dinner? Everybody knows the freaks come out at night, we still have a couple of hours, and even Fox would expect. . . .would even allow us to eat.”

“That sounds like fun, but my husband and I are going to get a few hours of sleep. It’s been a long time since we’ve prowled the streets. I’d suggest you do the same, but I’m wondering if you two need to be separated?”

“No, that’s not necessary. We’ll be good,.” Jordan said.

Artest smiled. “Very good,” he added, exaggerating his words.

“That’s what you men always say; we women will be the judges,” Jahia verbally threw back at him.

They followed Jahia down the hallway and to the back door. Just before they stepped out on the deck, Jordan pulled Artest aside.

“Ian thinks you don’t like him. He seems like a nice guy.”

“So now you’re his champion?”

This jealousy thing that they all seemed to have was really starting to annoy her. “No, I’m nobody’s champion. I’m just saying he showed me a lot of respect in deference to you.”

“Oh, okay.”

“My brother has returned,” Tyler announced when they appeared.

“Yes, greetings to you all. I trust all is well?”

“Sewa,” both Tyler and Ian said in unison.

There were some more exchanges of greetings, but Jordan was repeating the word “sewa” in her mind so she wouldn’t forget it. When they finally finished, she asked Artest what it meant.

“Sometimes Dogon are called the ‘Sewa People’ because we have elaborate greetings that we exchange all day long, and the response is usually ‘sewa,’ which translates to something like ‘it’s all good.’”

That struck her as adorable and funny, and it explained so much about these warm people who’d crashed into her life like a quiet storm.

Artest scooted a chair close to Ian. He surprised her by leaving her to fend for herself, but that was okay. She used the opportunity to help Jahia clean up the remains of their drinks and meal.

When she returned, the men had agreed to meet in two hours to hit the college club scene. She gave Artest one of Jahia’s chicken salad sandwiches.

\* \* \* \*

“I’ve been waiting all day to hold you in my arms,” he said when they returned to “their” room.

“All day, Artest? That’s a bit of an exaggeration.”

He stopped kissing her and stared.

“What?” she asked.

“I was just wondering if there was some way I could make your clothes disappear. I would save us so much time.” He flipped his hands from palms up to palms down, and he was standing in just his briefs.

“Are the hands part of the trick?”

“No, just something I do to amuse my lady.” He flipped them again, and he was naked. There was a smile in his beautiful eyes that seemed to radiate across his face. He looked young again, like he did the night she met him.

“Speaking of clothes, I didn’t bring anything to wear tonight.”

“What makes you think you’ll need clothes tonight?” He started unbuttoning her clothes.

“I can’t appear at the local clubs in the nude.”

He stopped. “You’re not going.”

“You want me to stay here by myself?”

“I hadn’t thought about who we’ll be getting to stay with you, but you’re not coming out with us. I can’t do my job and worry about you too.”

“I can take care of myself.” She realized how ridiculous that sounded and added, “anyway, these kids are my students. I’ll be able to keep myself amused while you all do whatever it is you do.”

“No.”

“I didn’t ask permission, Artest.”

“No.”

“I’ll call Leeana and see what she’s doing tonight.”

He sat on the bed. “Leeana...,that might be a good idea. You and Leeana should do something. Maybe catch a movie.”

“No, if she’s available, it’ll be to go out with us.” She pulled off the last of her clothes, then her panties. He started to say something but seemed to lose his place. His eyes traveled to the top of her head and down to her feet; he smiled and did it again. He looked at her as if he was studying fine art. It made her body tingle.

She stepped between his legs and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’ll be good. I won’t get in your way.”

“If Leeana can come. That way I don’t have to worry about you being alone.”

He kissed the valley between her breasts and dipped his head as he licked his way down; backing up, he ended by sticking his tongue in her belly button. “Ugh, that’s a weird feeling,” she told him.

“Weird good or weird bad?” he asked.

“Weird like nails on a blackboard.”

He stopped his tongue wiggling. “I repeat, good or bad? I don’t know that analogy. I’ve heard it before, but I’m not familiar with nails on blackboards. Why would that ever happen?”

“You do know they mean fingernails, not construction nails?”

“Oh, okay, I didn’t know that. So the fingernails would hit the board by accident while the person is writing?”

She pulled away. “Let’s get under the covers. We don’t have a lot of time, and I don’t want to waste it answering creepy questions.”

He laughed. “You’re delightful, Jordan Greene.”

“No, I’m just the naked woman in the bed.”

He stopped. “Don’t say that, not even in jest. You mean more to me than that.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. I’ll just put my clothes on and we’ll sleep.” She got out of bed and picked up her panties, purposely not looking at him because she knew he would make her start laughing.

He leaned over, grabbed her arm and pulled her back to the bed. “Why do you enjoy torturing me? What have I done to deserve this?”

She kissed him. “You do tortured so well, and your sincere is even cuter. I can’t help it.”

“This is not my sincere—this is my ball-breaking horny. You have that effect on me.”

She pulled the band from his hair and used her fingers to comb through the loose curls that he was trying to tame with some kind of stiff hair product.

“Why do you keep doing that?” he asked.

“Obviously I like your hair loose, at least while we’re entertaining each other.”

“I say let the entertainment begin.”

He might have still been calling himself horny, but he wasn’t frenzied. They made soft, slow, passionate love and drifted to sleep in each other’s arms.

\* \* \* \*

Jahia woke them by ringing Artest’s cell phone. The nap might have refreshed him, but it left Jordan wanting more sleep. She’d never been one for power naps.

“Why don’t you take the bathroom first? I need to call Leeana.”

“Okay, but feel free to join me when you finish.”

“If I do,” she let her hand trail down his chest, “will we become distracted?”

“Probably, but I’ll control myself. I’m more afraid of Jahia than my need, if we’re not there when she’s ready.”

“Okay, I’ll find you, but I like the water really hot.”

“Don’t you all?”

She pinched his perfect ass as he walked away

“That was sexist,” he said over his shoulder. She heard him laughing as the bathroom door closed.

She wasn’t sure why, probably just laziness, but she picked up his phone rather than looking for her purse to get her own. She dialed Leeana’s number, one of the few she knew by heart.

“Artest?” she said in place of a hello.

That threw her. She knew Leeana’s telephone had caller ID, but her response sounded like a familiar greeting, one she would give a person she’d met more than once. But how could that be? Jordan wondered if Artest’s Dogon-Hunter jealousy was rubbing off on her.

“No, it’s me. Jordan.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing. Are you all right?”

Jordan heard her exhale. “No, I’m fine. Seeing Artest’s name on my caller ID just threw me.”

“Oh, okay. I’m using his telephone while he’s in the shower.”

“Got it.”

“Are you doing anything tonight?”

“Nothing worth mentioning. Why?” she asked.

“Artest is . . .” She realized she hadn’t rehearsed how she was going to talk to her about this.

“Artest is. . .”

“Is what?”

“He’s going out with some of his friends and. . .”

“And you wanted one of your own friends there for you?” she supplied.

“Right. They’ll be preoccupied.”

“Doing what? Is it a business meeting?”

*Great, she gave me the words I’d been trying to find.* “Exactly.”



“Been there—it’s a real bust for the girlfriend. I’ll help you out. It sounds more interesting than my plans, which should tell you a lot about this dry spell I’m having.”

“Great. We’re getting dressed now, and I’ll call you with the details just before we leave.”

“See you later.”

That felt odd to Jordan. She didn’t know how to interpret it, but it almost felt like Leeana had been expecting her call. It wasn’t the first time that Leeana had given her the impression she was way ahead of things, but this felt even more so. She decided it was Artest’s otherworldly influence on her weekend and her life.

\* \* \* \*

“I was just about to give up on you,” Artest said when Jordan joined him.

“That seemed long?”

“Any time away from you seems too long.”

He did it again—his words ignited that newfound wave of wantonness and sent it flowing through her body. Jordan had always believed herself to be undersexed, so much so she’d questioned her orientation when she was in her late teens. At the time, she’d really thought about it before deciding she wasn’t in the least sexually interested in her girlfriends, but she couldn’t find that mad passion for boys that seemed to preoccupy most of the other girls.

What was it about this guy? she wondered as he soaped her back. He certainly wasn’t the first guy she’d ever known with game. Game? That wasn’t it. It was anti-game without the geek factor. It felt like sincerity. *Who would have thought I would fall for sincerity?*

She’d been trying to avoid getting her hair wet, but it was too late. Embrace the water, she told herself, and she changed places with him. “Your turn,” she said. She took the soap and washcloth and started on his back.

“I’m finished. You took too long,” he said.

“Are you sure?” She reached around his waist and cupped him.

“Maybe not. There’s no such thing as too clean.”

She felt him growing in her hand. “You’re unbelievable. Are you on some little blue pills or something?”

“No, I didn’t even know they were blue. It’s you. Well, it’s two things—I’m backed up, it really has been a long time, and you have that effect on me. I’d like to say this is the norm, but it’s not—but I’m not one to question such a gift.”

She stopped her playing around soon after that because she didn't want anyone to catch them still in the shower. Artest wasn't pleased to see her special attention stop, but she figured it gave them both something to look forward to. Jahia rang Artest's phone ten minutes after they came out and, she said they would be at the door in fifteen minutes. Artest stepped back into the bathroom and came out dressed in about three minutes; it took Jordan a little longer, but they didn't delay the group. She called Leeana while they were "waiting for the car."

She didn't exactly know what waiting for the car meant, but she stood in front of the house with the rest of them. Actually, she didn't see Ian, so she figured it meant he'd gone somewhere to get his car.

She looked at Artest, Tyler and Jahia; all three were dressed in all black. Jahia had her dreads pulled back in a very attractive bun, and both men had their long hair banded at the nape of their necks. It wouldn't take a criminalist to see they were dressed for action. Until she noted their dress, she still wasn't taking Artest's whole "working" concept very seriously. Jordan knew what she'd seen saw in her apartment was real, but it was so unusual, she was blocking it every chance she got. Looking at Artest in his black leather pants and tailored black silk shirt, she had a hard time keeping the memory at bay.

Jahia had on black jeans. Jordan wondered why she'd changed from the spandex pants she'd had on earlier. Tyler's pants looked like a heavy linen. Both husband and wife were wearing black body shirts, and neither one had an ounce of fat showing. The three of them weren't doing anything good for Jordan's body ego. She felt like the fat girl hanging out with the supermodels.

The other thing she noticed was that the Hunters were quiet, unusually so compared to their usual chatter.

Just a couple of minutes had passed when a black limousine pulled up. It was a town car, not a stretch limo, but it surprised her nonetheless. None of her associates seemed surprised to see Ian get out from the backseat. He stood to the side while the others got in.

While they greeted a young man named Rico, all she could think was, who takes a limo to kick ass?

## Chapter Thirty-Five

As he sat next to Jordan in Ian's car, Artest thought about how much the human woman was getting in his blood. He smiled, remembering how she'd greeted him at the door by tormenting him, making him think she'd been washed.

She would have no way of knowing her playful tease about Ian being her new boyfriend had sent his blood to instant boil. *Had Ian appeared at that moment, I might have killed him.* He knew how crazy that sounded.

If their Hogan, the area's priest, had any knowledge of his thoughts, he would put Artest on immediate suspension—and who could blame him?

Artest had spent a lot of time with the Hogan. The priest knew about all the loss in Artest's life—his mother had died less than six months after Artest committed to Service. He hadn't even left to join his class yet. The Priest knew about Artest's sister, Adama, and his first and only love, Halla. He knew that Artest felt cursed.

The Hogan didn't believe in mating with humans because it took the Hunters out of the service, but for years he'd been encouraging Artest to find a female Hunter.

"So I can watch another one die?" he would ask each time.

"What makes you so sure that'll happen?"

"Everybody I've ever loved has left me. Why would the next one be any different?"

"This is a very unattractive and unexpected side of you, my friend," he said with a voice old and hesitant from a lack of use. The Hogan had looked old by human standards for as long as Artest had known him, which had to be over three hundred years. They'd first met in Mali.

Inside the temple, the Hogan looked like any old man one would encounter on the streets of Bamako, the capital of Mali. But Artest had heard Hunters say he walked among humans in many different faces, ages, and skins, and even as a woman. That fascinated Artest. Except for the Hogan, if the rumors were true, the Sangsue were the only non-godly African beings—at least that Artest knew of—who could shape shift to lesser or greater body mass and to opposite sexes.

It was Artest's understanding that the Sangsue couldn't maintain the shift beyond about a hour at a time. He'd been told that the Priest had no time limit on his shape shift, but Fox once made an announcement during a party that the Hunter's Hogan was unlike any other and, even so, most of what was said about him was myth.

Over time, Artest had stopped talking to the priest about his loneliness during their private sessions, but the thought was still there every time he saw a happy couple. He'd even begun to wonder what it would have been like to have children.

Since they'd become members of the Global Association of Nonhumans, Artest had met many other Hunters. They were more similar to each other than they were different, but so far, Dogon-Hunters were the only ones he'd met who could choose not to become sterile. Just before their final initiation test, the question was posed, but they were told early in the process that it was coming. They were made to understand that any child born after the final passage was automatically pledged to Service. That didn't mean they would serve—but the decision was not theirs or their parents. Artest was always surprised and interested to learn more about the Hunters who opted out, since there was no going back. It just seemed logical to him not to eliminate options when there were so many different ways to prevent pregnancy.

He pictured Jordan's nude body and he wondered how she would look pregnant. *With my baby?* He knew he had to stop thinking like that—it would only hurt him in the long run.

Artest wondered what Tyler was thinking about, not just then, but during past hunts. *What does it feel like to go out when you know you have somebody awaiting your return?*

He rested his head against the soft seat back. He tried to relax, but he couldn't. He knew it wasn't just the limo that made him feel like he was going to a funeral.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Near the university were two popular nightclubs that shared a common driveway. At seven forty-five, when Rico pulled into the common driveway to the separate parking lots in the back, both The Silly Goose and Mackey's were full.

"I'll call you when I'm ready," Ian told the driver, who let them out in the back and passed them in the driveway as they walked to the front entrance.

Jordan was surprised to see Roberta and Leeana standing next to each other, near others waiting outside who managed to not appear together.

"Do you two know each other?" she asked as the others greeted Roberta.

"No, but we figured out we were waiting for the same people, so we decided to wait together."

Jordan was pleased to see Artest leave Roberta to greet Leeana. She considered well-mannered men a real turn-on. She did the opposite by greeting Roberta. Roberta hugged her and whispered in her ear, "hang in there, he really likes you."

Jordan wanted to ask her what she meant by that, but something about the exchange kind of freaked her out, like when your grandmother makes a reference to having sex. She looked almost as young as Artest but somehow seemed much older.

Mackey's was a steakhouse that took advantage of The Silly Goose's overflow by removing some of their tables to create a small dance floor. The atmosphere was very different from the lights and chrome next door, and the crowd tended to be a little older, along with a few impatient young people waiting for an opening on Mackey's plexiglass floor.

"Seven for dinner," Tyler told the hostess, and Jordan found herself getting excited. She hadn't been in a dining party so large since college.

With dinner being Mackey's main purpose, there was a lot of rushing around to pull together three small tables to accommodate such a large party.

"We figured it would be a while before any of them showed. We might as well eat," Artest explained.

Like I needed an explanation for eating, Jordan thought, smiling. *Food I get. Nonhumans bipedal beings, not so much.*

He held a chair for her and damn near raced Ian to the other side of the table to get to Roberta's chair. Jordan noticed Tyler seating Jahia and Leeana. *So that's where I've been going wrong. I should have been trying to find me an African man.* As soon as she had the thought, she looked at the three men in question. Only Tyler came close to looking like her image of an African, yet they had somehow convinced her to begin thinking of them in those terms.

“What’s our strategy?” Roberta asked.

“It’s just a show of strength. Reconsider messing with us—we won’t roll over,” Ian said.

Jordan noticed none of them seemed especially conscious of Leeana’s presence. But so far they’d said nothing that would indicate their true mission. Leeana was sitting next to her with her head buried in the menu. It wasn’t like her to appear so disinterested.

“Leeana, let me introduce you to everybody,” Jordan said.

She looked up and smiled.

“You’ve met Artest; this is Tyler and his wife Jahia. And this is Roberta and Ian.”

“Are you a couple?” she asked.

“A couple of what?” Ian asked.

“Oh yeah, they’re a pair all right!” That was Artest.

Everybody laughed.

“No, they are not a romantic couple,” Jordan said.

“Pleased to meet you all. I hope you don’t mind me horning in on your business meeting.”

“No problem,” Jahia said.

Everybody nodded, but Jordan noticed Ian looked a little confused. Then she saw Roberta lean over and whisper something in his ear. He nodded and then smiled at Leeana. *Maybe I’m just being paranoid again*, Jordan thought, but she had a gut feeling that she was the one on the outside—not Leeana.

“Are you having a drink?” Leeana asked her friend.

Again, she had the thought that something wasn’t right. As a rule, Leeana asked more questions than the average three-year-old. But tonight she hadn’t even asked about their accents.

“Why not? Something fruity and sweet. What about you?”

“Same here. I imagine they won’t.”

“Why do you figure that?”

“All the books say don’t drink during business meetings, and you and I are the ones not on

business. By the way, what is their business?"

*Now that sounded more like Leeana.* "Some kind of import and export thing. It didn't sound particularly interesting to me, so I didn't ask too much about it."

"I know what you mean," she said. "Importing and exporting, that explains those accents." Then she picked up the menu again.

The waitress came to take their drink orders. Leeana and Jordan ordered Mojitos. None of the Hunters ordered alcoholic drinks. Roberta and Ian ordered soft drinks, and the rest asked for water.

"I need to find the ladies' room," Leeana announced.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, Jordan, I can manage."

As soon as she walked away, Jahia said "excuse me" to Jordan and started a rapid fire conversation in what Jordan imagined was the Dogon language. The level of excitement at the table was kicked up by at least threefold.

"What's going on?" she leaned over and asked Artest.

"This place is crawling with them."

"Do you think there's just that many, or did we luck out and find their hangout?"

"There are a lot in town right now, but we had intelligence that they hung out here."

"Oh."

*That was interesting.* She would have thought the place to be was next door. But maybe there were just as many or more over there. *Or maybe this was their staging area and they went next door to snack.* She'd been thinking they'd ended up at Mackey's by chance, but maybe nothing in their world happened by chance. She looked around to see if she could spot them. None of the wait staff looked like the Sangsue she'd seen, but she did notice several tall, thin, pale men, both black and white, at the bar. Actually the black ones weren't as much pale as they were sickly looking—all of them. There was a table with two women and a man that seemed to fit the bill. The hostess had the look too.

Before Leeana came back, Ian left the table, going in the direction of the men's room.

Nobody seemed to notice how long Leeana and Ian were gone. Jordan decided to go look for her. She didn't feel Leeana was in danger, since the Suckers had no reason to know anything about her, but Jordan lived by the single girl's code—when out partying, take care of your friends.

She slid her chair out, trying not to disturb the Hunters. They were in a serious discussion.

“Where are you going?” Artest asked.

“Leeana’s been gone for quite a while.”

“Yeah, Roberta just said she thinks Ian went back there to talk to her.”

“Really? About what? They don’t know each other.”

“That’s his point, to get to know her.”

Jordan smiled, thinking how cool it would be for her friend to be with Ian and her with Artest. She looked up, and all the Hunters were looking at her.

“Ian wouldn’t let anything happen to her,” Tyler said.

“And if he happens to her, it’s a good thing,” Jahia added.

Everybody laughed. They seemed naturally interested, which she found strange, but she relaxed and pushed back her chair.

Leeana and Ian appeared just as the waitress returned to take their dinner orders. Jordan watched them as they approached the table. Both of them were laughing. When they came to a narrow opening between the tables, he let her go in front of him and held his hand in the air behind her back as if he was guiding her. He didn’t touch her, yet it seemed awfully familiar for two strangers.

Before they got to the table, Leeana stopped walking, and Ian almost ran in back of her. She looked around the room as if she’d forgotten where they were sitting. Jordan was just about to get up again when she noticed Leeana was looking at something near the kitchen. She smiled. Jordan looked to see what caught her attention. She didn’t see anything at first, and then Fox stepped from around the corner.

Now that’s really strange, she told herself. She couldn’t see if Ian was the one who’d first spotted Fox, but she was fairly certain he didn’t know why she’d stopped. He hadn’t looked in that direction until she said something.

The three of them came to the table together.

“Did you know Leeana before Friday night?” Jordan leaned over and asked Artest.

“No, Friday was the first time I laid eyes on her. Why?”

“I don’t know. She seemed as if she knew Fox from across the room.”



“I doubt it. I imagine Ian said something like here comes my boss.”

She hadn't realized the others were listening, but they all nodded.

Before Jordan could give it any more thought, the three of them were at the table. Fox said something, and they all responded with “sewa.” There were three more “sewas” while he pulled up a chair next to Roberta.

Again, Jordan found it odd that they would have a call and response in front of Leeana, and Leeana never asked her or any of the others anything about it or the word “sewa.”

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

They were going to do a sweep. That was the word of the hour. Each of them said it in Dogon at least twice, but the word they used was the same one for broom because that was as close as they could get. There were just five of them on Artest's team, and normally he wouldn't begin such a project with so few, but his partners all believed that Fox had set up Hunters in other locations throughout the city doing the exact same thing. It would be just like Fox to have multiple teams out doing the same thing and not tell them. He was definitely a need-to-know kind of person.

Artest had never known more than four or five Sangsue to be in a city at the same time. He suspected they didn't do so well in groups with each other. He *knew* there was a lot of in-fighting between the Sangsue and the hybrids. His understanding was that they couldn't live together because hybrids reveled in leaving victims dead, while the Sangsue had regular humans (cows) and they tended to develop a degree of affection for them.

Then there was the presence of Jordan and Leeana. He wasn't as worried about Jordan's safety as he would have been had Leeana not been with them, but it would've helped to know Leeana's true identity.

While she was reading her menu, Roberta asked Leeana in Dogan to tap her glass if she was able to understand. Leeana casually picked up her knife and looked at it as if she was inspecting it, and then she tapped her glass. Jordan looked at her and laughed, which really threw us for a loop. *My girl has great instincts*. Then Jordan asked Leeana if she was getting impatient.

"No, I was just wondering if the glass was crystal."

"This stuff looks like crystal to you?" Jordan asked in a teasing voice that still made Artest wonder if she understood what was being said around her.

"It sparkled like it at first glance."

Leeana's response made him wonder again if she was a god;, Fox was the only person he knew who could lie that easily and that well.

Then Ian asked Leeana in Dogon to meet him in the back by the restrooms. He told her to go first. A few minutes later, Leeana announced in English that she was going to the restroom. They all heard Jordan ask if she wanted company, and they held their breath. Again, Leeana played it off as casually as if this were a typical night out with friends.

Speaking in Dogon, Artest asked his compatriots if they knew Leeana. He called her "bathroom girl" so Jordan couldn't hear her name. Tyler and Jahia had met with her before, and Roberta had talked to her on the telephone. They didn't know if Ian knew her. They didn't have any more information on her than Artest, but the consensus was that she was a powerful being. Jahia suspected god, but like Artest, Tyler said he'd never met a god from any pantheon who wasn't drop-dead gorgeous and taller than average.

“Especially some of the African nations’ gods—they might be as vain as the Romans and the Greeks,” he said. “Their appearance is under their control, and I’ve never seen one who didn’t opt to be dark and striking. It’s a chance to show the world that black is beautiful, and they do.” Then he mentioned two, one male and one female, who worked occasionally as fashion models. Both were very dark and very lovely.

Leeana wasn’t likely to be kicked out of any man’s bed, but she certainly wasn’t the best-looking woman in the room. She wasn’t even the best-looking woman at their table, and a goddess would have been. Wearing white, black, red, or yellow skin, a goddess would have been fabulous.

Jordan was starting to make noises about going to look for Leeana.

Artest knew it wasn’t polite for them to be having so much conversation that didn’t include her, but he figured he would explain it all after everything was over—if it all worked out. If it didn’t, their rudeness would be the least of her problems.

She’d handed Artest her purse and was pushing her chair back to leave when they saw Leeana and Ian returning. Before they got back to the table, Fox appeared.

Artest’s heart jumped. Fox’s presence immediately added a layer of seriousness. *Of course, his presence has been known to make a problem where there wasn’t one too.*

Fox went around the table several times with his greetings as if he hadn’t seen them in years. He then pulled a chair from another table and said, “Don’t worry about talking around Ms. Greene’s friend. I gave her a suggestion that will make her forget anything unusual, said, heard, or seen tonight.”

He was looking right at Jordan while he spoke, and Artest knew he was lying. Artest felt he could just about always tell if Fox was lying when the conversation wasn’t directed at him. Jordan couldn’t know Leeana’s secret identity. He understood why Fox was doing it, but it bothered him nonetheless. He couldn’t help but wonder if she would blame him for all the lies when they were revealed. And he had no doubt that the truth would come out—it always does.

“What took you guys so long?” he heard Jordan ask Leeana. She was whispering, but he imagined they all heard her. The Hunters’ hearing was exceptional.

“He asked me out.”

“Which one?”

“Ian did. The other guy, the one who he introduced as his boss, wasn’t back there with us.”

“I got the impression you knew him.”

“Who?”

“Fox, the boss. You didn’t know him before tonight?”

“Where would I know him from?”

“I don’t know. I just thought you looked like you recognized him.”

“Really? That’s odd. Have you decided what you’re going to order?”

Leeana was cleverly avoiding lying to Jordan, and Artest appreciated her need for honesty such as it was, but he wondered if it would be enough. He was very conscious of her non-answers; he suspected Jordan would be too.

Artest wondered if the Sangsue knew they were there. They were usually too self-absorbed to notice the Hunters in a one-on-one situation, but in groups, the Hunters stood out. Their collective height alone was a giveaway. The one fact that might have saved them was the presence of Tyler and Jahia. They were too old in appearance to be the usual Hunters, but the creature that underestimated them would pay dearly. Both of them were as strong as Hunters come.

When Artest was training under Jahia, she had only been in Service a few years and was already an instructor. The Dogon were peaceful people, and fighting or even arguing was taboo. He had to learn aggression, and he learned it from the best. Jahia had natural killer instincts. The one thing she said often was to use what you have.

“I’m a woman, and nobody expects me to fight. I kick their asses while they’re getting used to the idea of throwing a punch at a woman,” she told him.

The food came back fast. Mackey’s wasn’t known for great food, and their fare was no exception. As usual, Fox didn’t eat or drink, but he talked more than usual, most of it directed to Roberta and too low for Artest to hear. If he didn’t know better, he would have thought Fox was trying to sweet talk her, but he wasn’t like that. Fox was friendly with Sam, and he’d told Artest several times that getting women wasn’t Fox’s problem—getting rid of them was his bane. His magnetism was one of the qualities that some of the Hunters used to argue his divinity. They said only a god could have no personality, creepy eyes, and zero game and still have to fight off beautiful women.

The two women, Leeana and Jordan, spoke softly between themselves while they ate, for the most part ignoring Fox.

“All we need to do tonight is clean up the Sangsue here,” Fox said to the group. “Then one day next week, we’ll figure out how many are left and storm their house. If all goes well, they’ll be gone before the games start.”

“You want us to confront them here?” Ian asked.

Fox nodded, giving him a look like the question was idiotic. Artest was glad Ian had asked, since he was sure they'd all had the same question.

"What about the Ketier?" Jahia asked.

"Leave them to me—they won't remember a thing."

"Are you staying?" Artest asked him.

"No, I'm already gone."

And he was as soon as the words were out.

Neither Jordan nor Leeana seemed conscious of his leaving or, for that matter, his presence before he left. He imagined Leeana was pretending, but whatever spell Fox had put on the Ketier, it was working on Jordan and the rest of the room. Earlier, when Fox was talking to Roberta, he looked around the room; nobody was staring at Fox, and he always got stares. Right after their waitress came over to ask if any of them wanted dessert, the hostess came to their table. "Mr. Fox told me I should come and introduce myself after you finished your dinner," she said. Before any of us could respond, she shook her head like she was trying to clear the cobwebs. Then her unfocused eyes looked directly at Tyler, and she smiled, her fangs visible.

Ian was sitting with his back to the woman but saw Tyler's reaction and the reaction of the other ones facing her. Before Artest could move, Ian was standing behind her. It was his first time seeing Ian's extraordinary speed and fighter's instinct of which he'd heard. Artest saw him put the gold-handled dagger to her throat. "Call out to your friends," he said to her.

"Don't play with her, Ian. Do your job," Jahia said.

"Nanateea," the hostess screamed out.

They didn't know what language she spoke or what it meant, but every movement in the room stopped for a split second.

Ian growled as he cut the woman's throat.

Artest looked at Jordan. No, Leeana will protect her, he told himself. The horrible smelling black pixel-like dots that had appeared as a twenty-something woman fell to the table and sizzled as they disappeared. Ian wiped what little blood there was left on his hand onto the tablecloth.

Then Artest jumped across the table to intercept the two Sangsue males who were rushing toward Ian's back. He and Roberta reached them at the same time. She was holding her sword—she was one of the few Hunters who still used one. One powerful swipe and a head fell. He wouldn't have thought she had that kind of strength. Artest pulled out his dagger and stabbed the Sangsue in front of him in the throat.

“Step back,” Roberta said.

Artest recovered his dagger and moved aside. He had to look away while her sword finished off the cut he’d started. Another head rolled. The smell always got to him. He stepped away. Across the room, Tyler was fighting a Sangsue with a woman on his back. He saw Roberta rushing toward him, so he came up behind the Sucker who had just kicked Jahia. Artest stabbed him in the back. He screamed out something in their language.

Artest pulled out his dagger. Jahia cut his throat, apparently hitting a jugular vein that had recently fed, and blood squirted out like a fountain.

Artest looked around the room. All the Ketier seemed to be frozen. Leeana wore a sad expression, but her gaze followed the screams and other movement around the room.

He heard a scream and looked up to find a woman running out of the kitchen with a butcher knife in her hand., She was moving at top speed toward Tyler, who was still trying to shake off the woman who was attached to his back.

“Seydou!” Artest screamed out his real name.

Tyler didn’t hear Artest, but Roberta looked up and saw what was about to happen. She flipped the man she was fighting and lunged toward the woman with the knife. He threw his dagger at the man she had flipped, who was now back on his feet. It hit him in the middle of his chest.

Another man, this one shorter and heavier than the usual Sangsue, ran out from the direction of the bathrooms, carrying a gun. Artest saw the creature look at their table and immediately knew his thoughts. *If he couldn’t stop us, he could kill our human companions.* Even a Sucker would know that, for many of the Hunters, that was a fate worse than their own death. Artest screamed as the Sucker ran toward him. The man lifted the gun and pointed it, Artest couldn’t take the time to see at which one—Leeana or Jordan. At that moment, it didn’t matter. Artest dove toward the man. He heard that wind-shearing sound he associated with an energy bolt as the shooter hit the floor—never taking his eyes off the gun. The gun dropped as the Sangsue disappeared. Artest got on his knees and peered over a table, expecting to see the Pale Fox.

Leeana was standing with her right arm still outstretched. The bullet was frozen on a path to Jordan. Artest scanned the room. None of the Hunters were looking in their direction or were close enough to know was going on. Even if they had known what was about to happen, they couldn’t have stopped a Sucker like that—Dogon-Hunters didn’t have that kind of power.

He stood and looked directly at her. There was an apologetic look in her eyes. Was it because he saw or because she killed?

Artest looked at Jordan; like the rest of the Ketier, her eyes were fixed on *nothing* in the distance.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

The last thought Jordan had before all hell broke out played on a loop.

She'd asked Leeana what she knew about the Dogon—Jordan knew she wanted to ask, so she'd waited until she was sure that the Hunters were involved in their conversation.

Leeana frowned like she'd been waiting for the question and it was a question she didn't want to answer, which Jordan knew couldn't be true. She decided it was just that frown people make when they're thinking.

"Actually, I know a lot about the Dogon," she finally said.

"You do?"

She nodded. "I've studied several African tribes. Why do you ask?"

"Jahia and Tyler are Dogon."

"Cool."

Clearly Leeana felt "cool" said it all. "So what do you know about them?" Jordan asked.

"I remember a fable. Want to hear it?"

Jordan nodded.

"Twins are very important to their religion. I guess all the gods in their pantheon were twins except Ogo. Ogo was born one hundred percent male. But the fable I remember wasn't about him, it was about the twins Andumbulu and Yeban. Together they are the Spirit of the Underworld."

When she mentioned Ogo, Jordan's heart jumped. She wondered what Leeana would say if she told her Ogo had just seated himself at their table.

"Hell?" Jordan asked, wondering if she was using underworld to mean the place she and other Christians called hell.

"No, not really 'Hell' in the Christian sense of the word. Just that part of the world that is below ground. There are parts of the underworld that are hellish, but other parts that are fairly normal."

Jordan laughed. "Except that it's the underworld."

She smiled. "Right, normal for an underworld. There are parts that are an underworld paradise-lite too. Think of it like a house having an attic, maybe two stories, and sometimes a basement—all legitimate parts of the house. Anyway, Andumbulu and Yeban ruled this world, and all was

well except they were lonely. Just because they were down there didn't mean they didn't have the same needs as men topside."

Interesting, Jordan thought, she used the word "topside." It was the same word Artest had used when they talked about Sam the demon.

"There were no women down there?"

"Not women like them. Certainly, most of the women down there were dead, and they didn't want dead women who had already lived their vital lives. I guess there were other types down there who were alive, but nobody close enough to what they wanted."

Jordan took her last sip of her drink. She noticed that Leeana waited until she knew she had her attention before she continued. "You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Yes, I love mythology."

"Well go on, girlfriend."

"Anyway, you have to remember the underworld is divided up in nations just like this world. The Dogon underworld shared a border with the Yoruba underworld."

"Of course," Jordan said sarcastically.

Leeana smiled and continued. "There was a beautiful young Yoruba goddess name Oya. Like most gods, she had many duties, but one of them was to watch over the newly dead. It was actually her job to escort them to the Yoruba underworld. She's also known as the goddess of the wind and change and even the goddess of the River Niger. Oya is said to be the mother of nine children—Egungun, who is regarded as the collective spirits of ancestors, and four sets of twins—but that's not true. Oya met and fell in love with the twins Andumbulu and Yeban, years before she had her first of the nine."

"Both of them?"

"Yes, they are a unit. She fell in love with them and had her first child with them, their daughter."

"Wow."

"Right, but she had to hide her pregnancy, and when her daughter was born, she had to leave her with her fathers."

"Why?"

"It wasn't allowed for Oya to love gods from another pantheon."



“Who could have stopped them—they’re gods?”

“Who knows what would have happened? Maybe the Yoruba pantheon would have killed her or all of them, or maybe it would have caused a war or something physically damaging to the earth.”

“What happened to the baby?”

“Her fathers raised her with a lot of love, but she didn’t get to see her mother often, and they could never let any of her Dogon or Yoruba relatives know anything about her.”

“And she has to live underground?”

“No, not after she grew up. She was free to come and go, but she was never at home anywhere.”

“So she would be Ogo’s niece, right?”

Leeana nodded. “But he doesn’t know that.”

“But she must be a supergod, right—half Dogon and half Yoruba?”

“She is, was, very powerful, but she didn’t have a real job or list of duties like most gods because nobody knew she existed.”

“That’s important?”

“Sure— every god you’ve ever read about was the god or goddess of something. Everybody needs a purpose.” She seemed sad, as if she knew the girl personally.

“Remind me not to let you tell my kids bedtime stories when the time comes.”

Leeana laughed. “It’s not a sad story. It’s just a story about a mixed relationship.”

“Oh, I get it. You told me that story because Artest and I appear to be a mixed couple.”

“Why did you say ‘appear’ to be? He’s white, isn’t he?”

Her expression was bedeviling, like she was teasing her friend. As if she knew Artest was African.

“Not in the same sense that you’re white.”

Leeana threw back her head as she laughed. When Jordan raised her eyebrow in a questioning manner, Leeana waved it away. “It’s called a tan, Jordan. Some people are good at getting them, and some people are like me.”

“I know he’s tanned, but he has African roots too.”

“Well, the scientists say we all do.”

Leeana nodded, and they began to talk about something else. Jordan didn’t know if it was the drink or not, but Leeana’s demeanor changed after her story. She seemed more relaxed, happier even. Maybe it had something to do with Ian.

“Are you going to go out with him?” Jordan asked.

“Sure, why not? A person can’t have too many friends.”

“Oh, it’s like that? He’s already relegated to the friend zone?”

She nodded, and they both laughed.

Then the oddest thing happened. Jordan remembered eating her chef’s salad, and she vaguely remembered thinking about whether or not she wanted dessert. The next thing she remembered was all of them except one watching Ian’s driver turning into the shared driveway to take them back.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

If there were more Sangsue in the restaurant, they did what Bloodsuckers do when the going gets tough: they ran. There was a moment of strange stillness, and Artest heard Jahia shout out Roberta's name, followed by a wailing that immediately signaled loss. He looked at Jordan; she hadn't moved. He slowly forced himself to look around the room. He found Ian looking at him from one corner, apparently doing his own scan. His expression acknowledged Artest's feeling, and together, they looked in the direction of Jahia's voice.

Jahia and Tyler were kneeling over a prone Roberta. Leeana reached them seconds before Artest and Ian.

When Tyler stood, there were tears in his eyes. "One of them was coming at me with a kitchen knife. I saw Roberta tackle him, and then I looked away to fight off the crazy bitch who had her talons in my back. I could tell by the smell that Roberta had dispatched him. I was getting ready to come over there to help you when I heard Jahia call her name," he said in a voice Artest hoped he'd never hear again.

"Fox, get over here right now," Jahia demanded like she was talking to someone in another part of the restaurant.

Leeana sat on the floor next to Jahia. "Let me have her," she said.

They all watched as Leeana placed her hands on Roberta's chest. Her hands begin to shake. "Allez, Roberta," she said. "Allez!" She moved one of the shaking hands to Roberta's forehead. Then she said three words three times in a strange language.

Fox appeared, already in place with his own shaking hands pressing Leeana's.

"It's too late," she told Fox. "She must have lost too much blood."

"I got here as fast as I could," Fox said.

It was as close to an explanation as any of them had ever heard him make.

"I was here, and it wasn't fast enough," Leeana told him. "She bled out before we noticed."

He nodded. "Can you take her to Sam? At least she can live again there."

Leeana nodded. Fox moved back a little, and Leeana and Roberta disappeared.

"I didn't say goodbye," Jahia sobbed. Tyler pulled her up from the floor and embraced her.

"It's not goodbye," Fox said.

She looked at Fox like she wanted to attack him. Tyler held her tighter. "You'll take me to visit

her sometimes?”

“Of course I will,” he said, softer than usual.

That was when Artest realized why Fox had assigned Roberta to Tyler. They all believed Fox could see limited aspects of the future. He must have seen Tyler’s partner dying. Or maybe he saw himself trying to save Roberta. Roberta had said many times that she was going to move to the underworld when she retired, since Sam had to spend so much of his time topside with her. As soon as he had the thought, Artest looked at Fox and found Fox looking at him. He looked away.

“Except for the loss of our sister, the Hunters all over the city are getting a lot of good work done tonight. I know it still early, but I want you all to return to the temple. You too, Ian— stay together tonight. I’m being summoned. We will talk soon.”

He was gone.

“He has such an odd way of saying things,” Ian said, and they all agreed.

## Chapter Forty

Jordan knew something terrible had happened—it was written all over Jahia’s face. The first thing she remembered Artest telling her when she became aware of things again was, “Leeana is fine.”

She thought he was talking about the way she looked, her beauty. Then she looked at Jahia, and she knew somebody was not fine.

“What happened?” Jordan whispered.

“I’ll tell you everything when we get back to Tyler’s.”

They climbed into Ian’s car, and something strange happened. They were immediately about a block from Tyler’s house.

“What was that!” Jordan screamed out.

All the Hunters sat still in stunned silence.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that,” Ian finally said.

“Which one. . .” Tyler started to say.

“It was Fox—this afternoon at the school, Fox bent time,” Artest said, interrupting. “That’s what happens when we have to catch up with time,” Artest explained to Jordan.

“Will we have to make up all that time in the restaurant?” she asked.

Even in the dark car, Jordan could see that they all looked at each other.

“No,” Tyler explained. “Time wasn’t delayed there—you and the rest of the Ketier were taken out of time.”

She thought about what he’d said. A silly rhyme ran through her mind, several times. She started laughing. *Time wasn’t delayed there—you and the rest of the Ketiers were taken out of time.* His explanation, struck her as something out of a Dr. Seuss book, and she couldn’t stop laughing. The more she tried to explain it, the funnier it sounded. Before long the rest of them had joined her in laughter, nobody louder than Ian’s driver, Rico.

Then she somehow ended up reciting from memory all of *Oh the Places You’ll Go*, one of her favorite picture books. She often gave it to new graduates in their gift packages.

When they got out of the car, Jahia hugged her and said, “thank you.”

Jordan didn’t ask her why she was thanking her; she just hugged her back. Jordan thought Ian

was getting out to let them exit, but she heard him telling Rico to come for him in the morning. As soon as he entered the house, Ian said, “I know there’s some real alcohol in here somewhere, Seydou. Unass it!”

“I’ll drink to that,” Artest said.

“You’ll drink to me having alcohol somewhere that I would have to unass?”

“At this point, I don’t care where you have to go to get it.”

“All three of you sound like you’re already drunk,” Jordan said.

“We can’t really get drunk,” Ian said to Jordan.

“They like to tell themselves that, but they can get a little buzz,” Jahia said. She left the hallway and returned with a beautiful crystal decanter.

“It’s sherry, all we have except for a couple of bottles of champagne left over from one of our celebrations. I didn’t think we should drink champagne tonight.”

“We can start with this,” Ian said, taking the bottle from Jahia. “But I think I might want to celebrate Roberta’s life before the night is over.”

Jordan heard the words and thought about what they meant. Her knees buckled. Artest caught her before she fell.

They were in the bedroom when she opened her eyes. “Is it true?” she asked. “Was Roberta killed tonight?”

He nodded his head. “She died in Service, Jordan. It’s the greatest honor a Dogon-Hunter can achieve.”

She refused to address that insanity. “Her body just broke up and disappeared like the Suckers?”

He stopped pacing and sat next to her on the bed. “We don’t break up like that—we’re mostly human. No, her body was taken to Sam.”

“Oh my God. He’ll just open his door and Fox will be standing there with his wife’s body?”

“No, that’s not how it works.” He sighed. Whatever he was trying to say, it wasn’t easy. “Roberta’s time on earth is over, but it’s just her body.”

All she could say was, “what?”

“Don’t you expect to see Mama May again, on the other side?”

“No, Artest, don’t go there. It’s not the same, and you know it!”

“It most certainly is! I haven’t been to the Christian afterlife, but I have no reason to believe it’s any different. Energy doesn’t die—it has to go somewhere. Even those Sangsue have to go somewhere when they break up, or bleed out if it’s a bad kill.”

How could she argue about it? It certainly wasn’t the first belief she’d had disproved since meeting him. “She’ll be the same person?”

“No, she’ll be retired from the Service. She won’t be able to come up here under normal circumstances, but there could be facts about that that I don’t know. Fox can take us to visit her, but it’s best that we think of her as dead. I don’t think she’ll have a corporeal body anymore.” He choked. “Jordan, I need to stop talking about it, for now, okay?”

“Let’s get some sleep,” she said.

She took off her clothes and then helped him remove his. She couldn’t believe how comfortable she’d become in such a short time in letting him see her in all her need-to-lose-a-few pounds glory. They held each other in silence for a little while. Sure he was asleep, she pulled away to find a more comfortable position and to allow his arm a chance to move. He jerked half-awake and grabbed her. “Don’t leave me,” he said in his sleep.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Jordan, are you awake?” he said, this time sounding as if he really was.

“Yes.”

“I need to tell you some things. I don’t want us to lie in each other’s arms all night until I tell you some things.”

“What?” Her mind was already reeling.

“I tried to wash you and I couldn’t.”

“What?”

He told her that he thought he had washed her when she found him leaving the apartment. “Is that why you said the Hunters were going to do it as a group?”

“That’s what I thought at first, but then Jahia told me that they wouldn’t be able to do it either.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. She said she would get back with me about that, but we haven’t had a chance to talk about it again.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. But there’s more. That email you got was not from your boss. We think one of the Sangsue sent it.”

“Why wouldn’t you all have told me that?”

“We didn’t want to upset you until we knew for sure. Don’t worry. There was no way I was going to let you meet him. I imagine that’s a non-issue now. Are we still talking?”

“I’m listening. Go on.”

“All of us can bend time. We rarely use the ability because it messes. . .well, you saw what it does. We have to make up that time within twenty-four hours, and the make-up can come at unfortunate times.”

His accent was really thick when he said “un-for-tune-it;” it made her smile.

“You already knew?” he asked.

“No.”

“Why are you smiling? I expected it to upset you?”

“I was smiling at your accent.”

He smiled, took her hand and kissed her palm. His cell phone rang before he could tell her more.

It took him a moment to locate it. “Are you feeling better? No, we were talking. Sure.” He handed Jordan the telephone. “Jahia wants to speak with you.”

“Did she leave the house?”

He shook his head.

“Hello. Yes, I do remember. Tonight? Now? Sure, okay. Sleep well.”

She handed him his phone. He looked like he wanted her to tell him what that was about, but she wanted him to finish what he was saying. She figured there was no way Jahia’s call could be as important as his confessions. A part of her was still waiting to hear about a possible wife in Mali.

“I’ll tell you what she said, but please continue what you were saying first.”

He nodded. “There was just one more thing, but I consider it the most important. I hope you feel the same. The name my mother called me was ‘Hasani’—it means ‘handsome.’ Drame is my real



last name.”

It was her exhalation that made her realize she’d been holding her breath. “Thank you,” she said.

They talked for at least another two hours. Finally he stopped talking abruptly and cupped her face. “I prefer to let our bodies do the rest of the talking. Does that work for you?”

“It does, but I forgot to tell you what Jahia wanted.”

He smiled and meshed his body into hers. She felt his growing erection smooth and hot against her belly.

“It better be good,” he said. “I’ve got other things on my mind.”

“I don’t know if it’s good or not, but she told me to tell you I smell lavender when I’m with you.” He stopped the grinding, the touching, the kissing.

“Say that again.”

She repeated what she’d said.

“Do you smell it now?”

“Yes, of course. Whenever I’m near you. I’m not saying I don’t like it. It’s a pleasant scent. I wouldn’t mind wearing some myself.” She wondered if it sounded to his ears as it did hers, as if she was begging.

“I’m not wearing a scent. We don’t do that.”

“That’s what Jahia said, but I’m not crazy. I smell lavender.”

“No, you’re not crazy—you’re my mate.” The joy on his face was alive. “You’re the only woman who ever smelled a floral scent on me. I thought it was a fable, but you smell it! Nobody told you to say that?”

She shook her head and told him what happened when Jahia asked her to wait before telling him.

“So this must mean the scent I’ve been smelling on you is lavender too?”

Jordan looked confused. “My deodorant might be scented, but I’m not wearing any perfume.” She could feel against her cheek his full face smile.

“It never occurred to me to ask somebody what lavender smells like. Praise God, from whom all blessings flow. Lavender, not roses, not ginger or cinnamon, lavender! I must sound crazy.” He looked at her, in the eyes, like he was trying to read her mind. “You’re my mate, Jordan.” His voice was a whisper like Fox’s. “From the first time I saw you at the club, I’ve smelled a faint

flowery scent too, but I figured it was your perfume. You're not wearing anything?"

She shook her head. "I might have been at the club, but not since then. Do you smell it now?"

He nodded, his brown eyes darker and dense with elation. She could almost see it flowing through his body, and again his eyes filled with tears. She was glad she'd left the nightlight on—otherwise she wouldn't have believed the warrior could tear up over anything.

He started to say something and stopped. He looked at her lips as if he expected her to speak his words. "No, I just want to kiss you. Now and forever."

## Epilogue

It wasn't a big wedding—that wasn't Jordan's style. Leeana was her maid-of-honor, and Dacia, who'd become a good friend, and Jahia were her bridesmaids. It was a warm day, especially for the coastal town of Carmel.

"Aren't you glad you didn't have this in Sacramento?" was the question asked of them repeatedly. It was one hundred and three degrees in Sacramento, but a more comfortable eighty-two in Carmel. But Jordan didn't get tired of hearing it, because each time Artest would answer, "there is no place too hot or too cold for me if it means marrying the love of my life."

The ceremony consisted of Christian and Dogon traditions, and both the assistant pastor from her church and the Hogon blessed them.

Jordan wore a simple ivory dress, and the bridesmaids wore peach. Tyler was Artest's best man, while Ian and a Hunter from Rome named Daouda were groomsmen.

For Jordan, the biggest surprise of the day was the reception that Fox threw for them. He rented out one of the largest and best restaurants in town. Even after four years of college, Jordan had never seen a person who so loved a party. And she'd never before seen a person whose partying was so contrary to his day-to-day personality. He was positively giddy.

When Artest and Jordan made their exit at around eleven, Fox was just beginning what he was calling phase two.

Her most pleasant surprise came after Artest carried her into the hotel room. "Artest. it smells wonderful in here," she said as soon as the door opened.

"Just wait," he told her.

They rounded the corner, and she saw the king-size bed. It was covered in African lavender. He placed her in the middle of the bed and stepped back to look at her.

"What are you doing?"

"I've been picturing this moment from the second you told me we were lavender mates."

"Is it what you pictured?"

"No, something's off about it."

"I think I know," she said as she sat up and then stood. She slipped off her dress and slip and then her underwear. Nude, she cleared an empty space in the center of the flowers that were not nearly as soft as rose petals.

"That's it," he said. With a wave of his long arms all around her, he cleared the bed and joined

her.

The End