

In The Time Of Oharu

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This is the final edit of In the Time of Oharu, The First year.

It was rejected by publishers and is now presented in this copyrighted form to any who wish to read it.

Colorfully painted, a twin engine aircraft of a design not seen on this planet in nearly eighty million years settled gently into rolling acidic waves. Once slowed it turned slowly towards a waiting outrigger canoe and cut both engines, quickly a crew member threw out a tentacle woven rope of expensively cultivated plant fibers. Pulling in close to the aluminum skinned vehicle, those four waiting in the canoe watched reverently as a female form stepped out. She wore only a grass skirt and a flower in her long green hair, on the left side of her skull of course. A flower that was even now worth a city's value. Gently the female figure carefully settled into the wooden craft's center. Quietly all four males began rowing away from the aircraft. Away from the caustic steam that drifted up as acidic ocean water attacked pure aluminum. Their voices, made rough by a raw biting atmosphere with too little free oxygen, slowly rose in a chant so old that the paper it had come from had crumbled under the slightest touch.

As soon as they were clear the aircraft restarted its engines, headed for a waiting hoverpad as the planets acidic oceans had already started eating away at the delicate metal hull. It could not possibly survive the long hours of waiting that lay ahead. For the aircraft had been reverently built in the best ancient technology workshops some three star systems away. Her oils and fuel recreated from formulas so old no one could remember where they came from. As for the canoe, itself built from a rare coconut tree trunk specially planted and nurtured for this one use, its own substance was already turning black. Though in its case it would take weeks for even these waters to damage it enough to cause its structure to fail.

Everything for this event had been taken from five recently discovered books. Books that had belonged to an unknown artist priestess who's name was unknown, and who's existence had been unsuspected until an ancient glass time capsule had been spotted floating in a certain area. Ancient books that should have crumbled to dust long, long ago had lain undisturbed within that time capsule. Ancient before they had been sealed in, whatever technology had protected them had proven beyond the current Galactic Empires science to understand.

It was near sunset when the boat, her rowers still chanting, arrived at their destination. It was a single rotting stone that appeared above the waves only at lowest tide. They had come because their fire dreams had told them this was the last time that this stone would rise above the waters. Only a meter or so square, it was surprisingly clear of any growths. Coming to the stone, now just beginning to rise above the waves the canoe eased up against it. Stepping out with care, for she had never in her life been aboard a boat of any kind, much less one riding waves, the woman felt her bare flesh step upon the stone's damp surface. A tingle told her that acidic water was already attacking her flesh but it didn't matter to her. She wouldn't be here long enough to be dangerously injured.

Across from her on a palm log raft fully two dozen others waited. They waited, knowing that a dozen years practice was meant for this one sunset. That after this, everything they had brought with them would be left behind. Left as offerings to the sunken lands so far below them. Gently a single voice rose from the platform. A young woman's voice. Pure and clean even in this accursed atmosphere. A voice singing words who's language had been lost in the mists of time. At least until those books had surfaced. As her voice rose something happened, something strange to any who did not believe. About them the air cleared while water ceased being acidic. Even the waves seemed to calm. Taking her stance, kneeling upon the stone, that single female form waited. Waited, her huge saucer eyes closed, appearing almost asleep as other voices slowly

joined the first. Even when the drums started she remained still.

Abruptly something, no one could tell what not even herself, touched the grass skirted woman's soul. Her voice joined the others, her multiple tentacle arms moving fluidly as she began a dance so long forgotten. Slowly standing, her movements mimicking that of a long lost flower as it rose from the ground the woman began to dance. She danced unheeding of the fact her grass skirt moved, allowing any who watched full view of her body. She danced ignoring the Imperial edict that none should visit this planet again. An edict lifted for only this one time. She danced not quite understanding the why, only that she must dance.

About her some would say spirits rose, but this was only mist from warm water. She danced and some thought they saw furs who's species had not breathed in over ten million years. This was only a trick of the fading light. She danced and the waves pulled back, ancient symbols apparent upon the stone but this was only bacterial growths, no such carving could exist in this environment. She danced and sang goodbye to the sun, and continued to dance. Forgetting herself, forgetting time, as did those aboard the platform. Her dance continued long after the planned ending of this ritual. She danced even as the water rose to her waist. Danced until exhausted, her skirt having slipped away to sink into the waters she could dance no more. Her head finally slipping under the water as she collapsed.

Arms quickly pulled her into the canoe, yet as she rose from the water amazed voices spoke. For where there had been iridescent scales there was now soft fur. Where attractive yellow eyes had shown now exotic dark brown orbs looked out. Smooth flowing tentacles were now impossibly stiff, her once green haired skull was covered with a long soft black fur. Carefully covering their priestess with a blanket the canoe rowers headed back out. They would reach a certain point where the aircraft would return. There they would transfer their precious cargo, then head for the transdisc that would send them back to their ship in orbit. They would leave their canoe, their oars, their aircraft even their clothing behind. Offerings to that which had woken one last time.

Aboard the aircraft a doctor examined his patient in stunned awe. Such things were known in the ancient past, but long long lost. Now such changes were known only in art and stories. To occur here, where not even a flashlamp existed was impossible. Yet it had happened. When his patient finally awoke she looked about her, noting old friends with a strange exotic smile. "I remember" she said in greeting. "Listen my children and remember. For I remember... All."

Chapter One

Early November, 1935

Smaller furs parted quickly, making an open path for a huge English bulldog that pushed towards the old railcars doorway. Heavily muscled, at over six feet tall easily a foot taller than the tallest Chinese around him Killian James Whitehall was well used to travel in China. Not to forget the advantage his height and weight gave him. Soon he stepped off his overcrowded train, coming to a rest onto the just as crowded station platform. Throngs of Chinese flowed around him like a river around some great unmovable stone. Calmly he studied his position while an early winters icy snow drifted around him. Nine years of travel in China had left him immune to the mass press of fur. Twenty-two years of chasing wars, brush fires, bandit kings and warlords had inured him to any suffering around him. He'd been serving as a London Thymes Overseas reporter since after the Great War, adding to that those four years of the war itself as a junior reporter. Uninterested in the dealings about him he turned towards the city. Until just a year ago he had thought he had experienced the absolute worst furkind could do to itself. Had felt that nothing affected him anymore. Not even begging children, mutilated by their own parents simply so that they might bring in an extra penny each day, touched his soul. Though the women who of late had started clustering around him, especially in the so public confines of his train was a mystery, yet love seemed to have abandoned him as well.

Now at the ripe old age of forty seven he was chasing his greatest and most dangerous story. No slave traders these, anyway he had exposed enough of those already. No tomb thieves, assassins, serial killers, corrupt politicians, false churches, false prophets, grave robbing archeologists, door to door salesmen or other such lowlife scum. No, he'd finally tracked down what he now considered the absolute lowest life form in this world. All he knew about them had come from whispered legends and a single ledger he had stumbled across. They called themselves The Brotherhood of the Boneless. They sold pelts mainly, though other materials were as easily available from them. Especially long forbidden meats. These were not your simple everyday dealers of four legged creatures, creatures often distantly related to themselves. No, not something as everyday and quite legal, though oftentimes reprehensible as that. He was on the trail of those who dealt in pelts that once walked on two legs. Once talk, loved, laughed.

Certainly stories had always abounded in this world of such horrible things. Mothers stories meant to frighten children into staying near their home. His studies though now suggested that apparently they had actually existed as far as written memory could be tracked. Many times such groups had risen, thrived in certain nations only to be brutally repressed eventually by others. But always they came back, and the manner of their return was a pattern he'd thought that he may finally have figured out. Each and every time such groups arrived it was with a Chinese flavor. Not just any Chinese flavor either. It was almost always a Manchurian flavor. Then Lady Luck had smiled on him. Smiled... she'd belly laughed. A little less than a year ago he had stumbled over the corpse of a wolverine. One who had fallen down a steep cliff, pulled down by a young doe chained to him. Both had been dead only a few hours and a simple inspection of the scene had told what had happened. Chained to the doe the wolverine had no chance of survival when she had leapt off a cliff. At first he'd thought the male a simple slaver, until within the dead wolverine's possession he had stumbled across a ledger, much as the ledgers Killian himself carried. Yet what was on those pages had both excited and then sickened him. It had given proof to him that the bedtime stories his crazy Aunt Mime had told him were based on hard fact. It had confirmed his worst nightmares. It had nearly driven him out of his mind.

He had carefully studied that ledger, committing to memory its facts, figures and code phrases. Then he had spent most of a year building a background for himself, just in case someone investigated. A year sounded like a long time, and for him it now was. But this kind of people would be covering their furless tails at every turn. He simply couldn't afford a mistake.

Code phrases, such as when asked one gave a small city in a nation abutting ones own birth nation as ones birthplace. He had since carefully followed the style of behavior its pages had indicated. On his right paw was a heavy gold ring, one that the wolverine had been wearing. A large red stone was insert within the ring, on that stones flat surface a strangely complex symbol had been carved. Killian knew that this would be his most dangerous investigation. His most important work. More importantly it would be his last story. Being his last, it had to be his best story. For Killian James Whitehall was dying. A tumor was slowly growing within his brain. A tumor the best Doctor he had found could not remove. Not without, at the absolute best leaving him with the mind of a two year old. Thus each day was a blessing, each day was precious. He could only hope that there were enough days left to him. At least enough that his publisher would send others to follow him. Or at best, enough to shatter the worlds complacent views of what sugar coated foundations their lives were built upon.

As he walked away from the train a dozen or more youngsters ran up. Typically they approached every non-Chinese in hopes of pawning off some little trinket, some little fragment of food. Each offered anything from food to 'lost ancient objects' to their own sisters. In answer he growled at them, showing his fangs in the manner of a hungry animal, his action causing each one to dash off in a different direction. It wasn't his normal way of dealing with such things but the headache he'd been fighting since just before dawn had severely shortened his temper. He'd run out of the pain killing herb an old woman had sold him days ago.

"Well done brother" a voice commented from his other side. Those words had been in Mandarin he noted, not Cantonese. Turning to his left Killian found a rather large bull standing near him. Large yes, but mostly made of fat, not the iron hard muscle Killian sported from a lifetime of difficult travel. A pointed look at the mans right paw showed that he too wore the same style ring Killian now sported. "Anyone may wear a ring" he said in greeting. "You are from Baotou?"

"Anyone may be from Baotau" the bull replied. "I was born in Altay. You are from London?"

"London is filled with mindless drones. I was born in Galway. Welcome Brother."

"And you" the bull agreed. "You are correct, any may wear the ring. One ripped from a dead brother or sister. Yet that ring will rarely fit without change, and as you can see" he held up the paw that his ring was on, showing a worn but still visible complex delicate pattern running around its outer surface. "Mine has never been stretched. Nor cut."

Killian mirrored the gesture. "Nor has mine" he agreed, thankful that the wolverine had been fat and thus they wore the same sized ring. He much missed his class ring, yet to wear this one and hide his theft he had been forced to leave it on the wolverine's finger. "Now do we shake with some archaic ancient long hidden secret pawshake, bounce buttocks against each other while cooing some wild song or wink and nod until we fall asleep?"

Laughing the bull clapped Killian on his back. "You have humor in you brother. So few English have useful humor. I very much like the way you ignored those about you on the train, even the women who threw themselves at you. You have learned to be away from rabble even when surrounded by them." He shrugged. "I have been watching you since Chengde, for no other reason than I boarded your train there."

"I have no patience for product" Killian explained, still speaking Mandarin. "I am travel weary. Would a brother be kind enough to point me towards the Hall? I understand one still stands here."

"Better than. I am myself headed that way. Please join me. I am called Sying. You are?"

"Parker. Captain Samuel Wilde Parker. Of the 1st Middlesex Regiment" he answered, using the name of a friend who had died in the trenches many years ago. Died badly because of a poorly coordinated attack. Died cursing the General sitting in his comfort miles behind the lines. Died cursing his children, and his children's children. Such curses Killian knew tended to have a life of their own. He still carried the ferrets identity

papers, though as to the why he could never explain. Not even to himself. "Call me Wilde."

Turning for the nearest exit Sying smiled again. "You English so much love your stilted forms of address Wilde. Have you come from the London Hall?"

"No" Killian admitted. "I never heard of us while in England, other than bedtime stories. Not until I stumbled across the Berlin Hall back in '21 after the war was I made aware of our existence. I looked around, found that I liked the idea so I decided to join. Of course, some could say that joining was the better alternative to becoming saddle leather." He continued following, having used the wolverine's personal history and detailed explanation of contact procedures to pass himself off as a Boneless Society member. Certainly that long dead wolverine must have had a rather bad memory, or was so foolish as to be mad for keeping such detailed notes. From this point on he would be depending upon what that ledger had taught him, and his memory. For the ledger had been shipped to London four months ago, along with a report on everything he had learned. By now he prayed to Buddha that it was in his editors paws. Privately the bulldog wondered if the effeminate Irish Setter would be able to hold his lunch upon reading its contents. Thomas was such a delicate man sometimes. Even if he had taken a bullet at the Some, then killed the Hun who had shot him. But he had his ways, and the contacts to circumvent even the densest Government bureaucracy. Or secrecy.

They walked together through the small city, one not quite large enough to be called an important city, yet by only a small measure. Sying pointed out areas of interest as they walked. Those areas Killian noted were generally filled with furs busy with their daily business. Not at all the typical tourist sights. "And how do you know your immune's" the bull suddenly asked.

Caught by surprise, he had been looking at a particularly delightful pair of apparent twin antelopes with odd hairdo's Killian covered himself with a laugh. "You mean the insured ones" he answered, giving himself time to sort through his memories. Yes, there it was. "They wear a symbol of course. Either on a necklace, bracelet or cut into their fur. Some a special hair style, like those two we just passed. There are so few insured families in Germany since the war that usually they are known by sight. Besides, the Berlin Hall culls from far outside Berlin itself. Most often outside Germany herself. France and Poland are their favorite hunting grounds. I am told there has never been an accident."

"They lied. There are always accidents" Sying corrected. "Like Berlin we do not cull those from within our own city or near it. We are as careful as we may be, but thirty nine years ago a young man from Jilin was processed. He had forgotten to wear his mark. We compensated the family of course, then they buried what product could be recovered. It was our first mistake in generations."

"You have since corrected your processing routine?"

"Yes" the bull answered. "Unless the product comes directly from a known member it is awakened first, then asked for its code word. Only after that test is it reduced to useful inventory. If though, say you were to arrange the pickup of a special product, by your mark it would already be known that this was no immune one. So the waking test would not be bothered with. That is preferred as it makes processing so much easier. Of course there haven't been any errors since this new step was added. Still we retain the routine. Ah, there it is. Come, you must meet our High Lady. She has an interest in bulldogs, and not as product."

They entered what seemed to be an old government building and almost immediately the air seemed cooler, though Killian thought he could scent the smell of ancient death seeping within its walls. They stopped at a reception desk where a very attractive female fennec stood, silently waiting. "Is Madam Xiùme in today my beautiful Shazeer" Sying asked.

"Not today Honored One" the woman answered. She opened a book that Sying did not bother to more than glance towards while she read. "Madam Xiùme went to inspect her latest acquisitions processing, to test fit her new clothing. After that she expected to visit her special project. She left the city two days ago and is expected back very late tomorrow. Would you leave a message?"

"Tell her I wish to speak to her of the missing moon, and tell her of my friend here as well. We both need chambers."

Closing her book the young fennec turned around, opening a tiny door. One of dozens behind her. From it she took two keys before closing it. Turning back to face them she smiled, handing Sying one key, Killian the other. When her eyes met Killian's there was a strange widening to them, a marked difference in expression. *'Not her too'* he thought as he accepted his key. "Third floor Honored ones. Rooms nineteen and twenty. Will there be anything else?"

"Yes. Have food, clean clothing and maids sent up. We are both tired and both in need of pleasure. Female pleasure."

"It will be done honored one" the fennec answered with her liquid soft voice.

Two strong looking hounds came up then, taking both fur's luggage and silently following the two as they walked up a wide sweep of stairs. As they climbed Sying kept looking over at Killian. "There is a problem?" the bulldog finally asked.

"No. I simply wonder why you sway occasionally. Have you used a drug, or has the sudden heat of our Hall affected you?"

"No to both I fear. There is a simple answer to that sway my friend. I am dying. I have a brain tumor. It is too deep to be taken out. My sense of balance is always in doubt now. Already my sight is sometimes affected. So I have perhaps three months left me. Most likely less. I much doubt more."

"Why not return to England then? To be home with friends and family."

Killian laughed. "England is full of straight laced snob nosed harlots. Here in China I may enjoy my last days. There are many pleasures I have come to love that I would not be able to enjoy in England, or even Berlin as yet. Besides, I prefer to leave what funds I have to the Society than to some wimp of a brother. Ah, my room." He held out his paw. "I am happy to have met you. Perhaps later we may talk again?"

Sying took Killian's offered paw with a firm grip that made lie to the visible fat. There was a great strength hidden behind that outer fat Killian realized. "I would be delighted my friend. And I am sorry to know that your time is so limited. Perhaps though we may manage a hunt? I am overseer of several farms. It would be easy for me to arrange a small one."

Images passed through Killian's mind from the ledger, dark images that had invaded his dreams many times this last year. "Perhaps. Though I would have to be nothing but an observer. I am no longer able to confidently make the moves I once did."

Nodded sagely the bull looked towards his own door. "Yet the thrill of a limited hunt is better than sitting in a hospital room, waiting for death to visit. I will see you later tonight. Where may I find you?"

"I would think the library. Reading is still a pleasure to me."

"The Library it is then." With that Sying released Killian's paw and turned to his own door.

Killian had barely managed to open his suitcase when a knock came on the door. "Enter" he called in English, wincing at the pain his own voice gave him at the moment.

For a moment nothing happened, then the door opened slightly. "Enter?" a woman's soft voice asked in Cantonese.

"Yes" he answered, switching languages. It was amazing he thought, how many languages one learned to converse in while wandering the world alone. He alone had been forced to learn eight fluently, not counting his native English. His door opened and two female panda's entered. Sisters he thought. One carried food, the other a robe and satchel. All employees within these walls would be automatically immune he knew, for trusted trained servants with very closed eyes and mouths were worth much more than any single pelt could ever bring. "We are assigned to you for your stay" the larger panda explained.

"Food on the table for now" he instructed the smaller panda. "I require a pain killer. A powerful one that will not leave me unable to continue my work. Fetch one please."

At his command the smaller panda turned and hurried out. There would be medical care within these walls certainly, very good medical care. Kings and Emperors might think themselves all powerful, but none was more powerful than one who could turn that same ruler into a rug at a whim, or their maiden daughter then live to boast of it. Only assassins were more dangerous he thought, even then the final results would be debatable. Turning his attention to the second panda he raised one eyebrow.

"I am Sheen. I am to bathe you, then trim your fur" she explained. "After, my younger sister Chi and I will be delighted to be your pleasure."

"My tastes are in thinner women" he explained in an attempt to avoid such an encounter, at least for tonight as she helped him from his traveling clothing. "Such as the fennec Shazeer."

"I am sorry we do not please you honored one. I will ask if Shazeer is available, though I think not. Her duty is not complete until midnight. If she is not then I will find another."

"Don't bother. Tonight I simply wish a warm body, so either or both of you will do. I sleep best in Winter with a companion." He stepped out of his trousers, allowing Sheen to complete his undressing then wrap him in that soft silk robe. Then he sat to wait as the panda went to ready his bath, wishing he was back in England. Back where civilized people didn't wear and eat their brothers and sisters. While he waited the first panda returned, a elderly tall goat arriving with her.

"You have pain brother?" the goat asked in perfect Mandarin, forcing Killian to again switch languages. His Mandarin was no where as good as his Cantonese. His greeting immediately announced to the bulldog that he was a member, not an employee.

"I have a tumor" he explained again. "In my brain. It cannot be removed so I will die soon. I prefer to die within the halls of my kind than in some whitewashed hospital surrounded by bleating sheep."

"I see. May I examine you first?"

"Feel free, though do please hurry. My head feels as though it may explode." Killian waited while he was examined, though the final answer was the same as always. "If not a tumor then something as bad. You have been examined before?"

"Delhi" Killian admitted. "A very good English doctor who thought he might have a chance. His machine took pictures of the inside of my head. All he could do was offer his sympathies and suggest I return to England. To die."

"Ah. Then I will prescribe a small dose of opiate in alcohol. It is, I am sorry to say, the best path I may offer you." He opened the bag he carried, taking out an ornate bottle. "I brought several drugs, this one is the best choice. One spoonful as needed. Later, when the pain is worse however much you feel that you need. At the end I will prepare a hypodermic for you, that you may pass beyond while unknowing your pain. To enter the great hunting lands without madness is preferable I believe. When you need more opiate send a servant to me." He switched to Cantonese, repeating his instructions to the two pandas before returning to Mandarin.

"I wish I had the skills, yet to reach so deeply. You would never be the same even should you live. If you need me again. I am Doctor Shi."

"A true pleasure to meet you" Killian admitted. Taking the bottle he studied it a moment, then poured a dollop into a spoon his temporary servant Chi now held. Opening his mouth he let her pour the liquid onto his tongue. Very soon his pain ebbed, turning his headache into a nearly forgotten event. Reaching for his money belt he took out several gold coins. "I do not know the price you normally charge, but for the lack of pain this is what I offer."

Doctor Shi nodded, accepting the coins. "Room and food are free always but medicine is expensive. Your payment is more than enough. Until your time comes Brother, I leave you to enjoy what pleasures you may."

After Shi had left Killian allowed Sheen to remove his robe, relaxing while she and her sister carefully brushed the worst travel dust from his fur. If this service had been because he was simply rich, or both had fallen in love with him he would be in paradise. Yet the knowledge that somewhere near him fellow furs died to support such pleasures kept him tense. After his bath though, he was to discover that the sisters knew quite well how to relax even that form of tension.

Chapter Two

"You are better today Brother?" a by now well known voice asked.

Killian looked up from his reading, noting that the bull Sying was standing across from the table he was using. It had been two days since his arrival and he had spent the first of those days doing nothing but resting, if what the two panda sisters did for him could remotely be called resting. In the least it was entertaining to watch. "Doctor Shi has given me a very effective medicine" he answered. "I felt almost no pain for some time after using it. Now that I have learned what dosage to use, I am experiencing a much better day. Please, join me."

"Which is why you are currently avoiding the Li sisters I assume, to enjoy some rest." After he had settled himself the bull leaned forward, picking up one of the books Killian had finished with. "Jo Lin's island safari of 1903, you find these journals interesting?" he asked as he returned the book.

"They are quite inventive" the bulldog admitted. "As I may no longer actively hunt" he continued. "Reliving others hunts through their own words is almost as exciting as the hunt itself. Though Lin made a mistake allowing that priestess to survive. Even if her pelt was too coarse for use. According to Osip it cost him much later. It seem's she was no simple priestess. She had real power and was somewhat unhappy that her husband was turned into someone's jacket."

"I seem to recall that story Brother Wilde" Sying admitted. "He died mad, claiming that those dark eyes were always there. Always watching him, never blinking. A second expedition was sent to that island many years later but no living soul returned. Thus has the Cranium Islands been marked off our lists of prospective hunting lands. It is simply too dangerous now. Perhaps in a hundred years it will be safe again. Perhaps never."

Closing his book the bulldog sighed. "I would think that several thousand miles would be a long way to go for a simple hunt. Even for special pelts."

"Ah, your words are those of one used to a large hunting lands with great variety. You have all of Europe to play with remember. China is large yes, but other than those herds we breed for speciality pelts most of our native pelts are much the same." He tapped a book, one filled with the reports of lost hunters. "Much too inbred after so many thousands of years of fool Emperors. Any safari's to Cipangu are doomed from the onset, though that land holds animals of great demand. For some time a brother on a Northern island sent pelts monthly. Fine pelts, of the best quality. Then he was found. We will not visit that island again until memories fade. Twenty, perhaps thirty years is normal. Yet his pattern held no weakness, we use it elsewhere even now. Only that he had become self important, and thus woke those eyes we so strive to avoid. Sometimes a brother or sister forgets that they are not in a Hall. They give themselves away. It was only by sacrificing many middlemen that Portiere's error did not lead to the Kou Han Hall."

"Russia also holds pelts in great demand" Killian reminded the bull. "I understand that sable's are currently in extreme demand there. Especially by certain rather high placed women."

"True. So great a demand that the species is now endangered. We now only take those Stalin himself has thrown out, for he would have them killed eventually anyway. Even then there are few enough young pelts to satisfy the desires of even one Hall. Certainly not the needs of over two hundred. Today we have several thousand orders we simply cannot fill, or fill only when opportunity allows. Yet sables are not the highest in demand. Ratel, mink, always mink, wildcat and panda are the most in demand. Sable comes in a low fifth, though even a good house cat or rabbit pelt is often worth the effort. For boot and glove inserts if nothing else."

Sying leaned back, resting his huge paws in his lap. "Sable's are slow to breed, even so their gestation period is very long. To create such a herd, as we did mink and ratel we would have had to have started generations ago. One must first breed out the aggressiveness. By culling at first, then by selectively breeding for somewhat lower intelligence. Only when one has a properly prepared herd may one expect a steady supply of product. Now with Cipangu invading such projects are best left for less disturbed times. I have already lost one farm to those barbarians. I am moving others further West even now. This reminds me, Madam Xiùme has returned with her special project. She wishes to meet with you." A sly grin came to the bulls lips. "As I said, she has an interest in bulldogs. Xiùme has certain skills I think you will find makes your pandas best efforts pale in comparison. Are you free for dinner?"

"Of course. I will have to send a message to my servants, that they do not wait up for me. I should meet you in the dining area?"

"That would be best I think. Please come dressed as you are. Few Brothers or Sisters go in for ostentatious clothing. Even Madam Xiùme prefers subdued clothing within these walls. It is unfortunate that all you wear is cloth, yet that will not bother Madam Xiùme at all. Not at all. I will see you there in a half hour then." He stood, looked about for a moment then walked over to another table much further away.

Killian looked at the pile books, all bound with the skin of some poor fur who had caught a hunters eye. It made him sick, yet this was not the place or time to show such feelings. There had been one article that had interested him greatly. It had been the hunter Portiere that Sying had spoken of. He had managed over thirty pelts of the absolute highest quality, along with delicate cuts of meat prepared especially for the speciality market. He had been an excellent cook after all. Yet his own arrogance had been his downfall, and it was the one who had shattered that hunters slowly growing power that interested Killian. "So my friend. I have found your roost at least. Too late, yet perhaps, Buddha willing, not much too late."

Setting those books he had read onto a waiting cart, for a servant would return them later, he stacked the few still unread volumes on his table. They would remain there until his return, or three days. Whichever came first. Rubbing his tired eyes he called a waiting servant over, sending him to explain to the Li sisters that their efforts to entertain him would not be needed tonight. It had been a delight to discover that he had the two assigned to him for his stay, and that neither could speak or read anything but Cantonese. It was not so much that he found them attractive, though they were. But in his condition it would soon be difficult to learn a new face each time he returned to his quarters. Anyway they seemed pleased with the situation, though he could wish for just a bit more sleep. What was it with the women in this region he wondered. Since entering this part of China they had been approaching him more often, to the point one had nearly disrobed before him while on the train. It was a strange puzzle to him though.

Madam Xiùme turned out to be an extremely attractive Russian wolfhound. She greeted Killian with a hungry look in her eyes, a look that warned the bulldog that Sying's comment about her tastes had been a serious one. Yet it was the woman beside her that caught his eye. No where near as attractive as Madam Xiùme, though much younger, an auburn furred hound sat completely at ease. He studied her quickly, not wishing to insult his hostess by ignoring her. Afghan, at least some with that muzzle and long fur. But with long auburn fur rather than the expected golden yellow most afghan's wore. It was her eyes though that captured his attention. Green eyes so dark as to be almost black, eyes magnified by large round glasses she wore. It took a force of will to break her gaze.

"So. My special project captures you as well" the wolfhound laughed. "It is the eyes, I not have seen the like before ever." She laughed again, a heavy, Russian sounding laugh, as was her accent. "Let me introduce. Helen, this is Captain Samuel Wilde Parker, of the 1st Middlesex Regiment. England. He come here to spend his last days. Captain Parker, this Doctor Helen Maggy Sneed. Phd. She has come to China to search fossils. I speak all correct?"

"Well enough" the woman Helen admitted in common Chinese. "Though your Cantonese is much better than your English you still have a thick accent. I am pleased to meet you Captain Parker, though I am sorry to

know that you are so ill.”

There was an accent to Helen Sneed’s voice that made Killian think of the American West. “New Mexico?” he asked bluntly.

“Wyoming” Helen corrected. “Though I have not been home more than a few weeks in these last eight years. I look forward to visiting my family for a month upon my return.”

A twist of Madam Xiùme’s face at those words told Killian more than he wanted to know. There was something else, something strange. Both women appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable, Xiùme more so than Helen. As if something in the air were bothering them. He was though saddened that this woman would never see her family again, that she would never see America again. Most likely she would not see the morning sunrise depending upon the wolfhound’s mood. He turned his attention to his hostess, shutting out those eyes. After all she was only one woman among billions. In a short time she wouldn’t even be that. He had to remember that. He had to remember his goal, his big picture as the American’s put it. But those eyes. “Fossils you say Madam Xiùme. If Doctor Sneed hunts fossils what could possibly bring her to your attention?”

Setting down the wine goblet she had been tasting the wolfhound turned her head to study Helen, or as Killian knew she considered her, her special project. “Like you. Her eyes. But more. She sweet, kind. Much fun to enjoy. Much fun in bedroom” she finished with another, baser laugh. Killian noted that comment caused the American hound more than a little embarrassment, her tail positively went limp. “I think maybe she too skinny though. Work too hard. I fatten her up. Another ten, fifteen pound she be perfect. Then we see America together yes?”

“Certainly” Helen agreed, happy the conversation had changed subjects. “You must see the Grand Canyon, it is as impressive as your own Great Wall. And the Painted Desert. Then the Valley of the Kings. There is so much I want to show you Xiùme. But we’ll only have two months after we leave the ranch. I need to find another job and most American schools don’t much like female professors.”

Reaching out with one paw the wolfhound stroked Helen’s face, her claws Killian noted were extended fully, as if to comb that long fur. “You never have worry about job. I promise you. You always with me. I take care of you.”

Killian noted the lower lip suck in on Helen’s face. Something odd, something she wasn’t happy about. Could she suspect her fate? Then Helen spoke and he thought that he understood.

“I only wish Ruth was still alive. I miss her. Damn it why did she have to go and drown like that, and only a week after getting here. She’d loved to have met you Captain Parker. She loved the English, though her opinion of your food wasn’t something repeatable in mixed company.”

“Ruth?” Killian asked, turning his attention fully on the younger hound.

“Leibowitz. She was a student assistant of mine, used to be a dorm mate when I was working on my Doctorate. My best friend. She came on this trip because it finished her science courses and I needed her as an assistant. A week after we got here our boat was rammed by accident. Ruth never could swim well, we didn’t even find her body in those currents. That’s when I met Madam Xiùme. Her boat was helping in the search. They dragged me out of the river. I was too exhausted to even float. She took me to her home, took care of me all night. She held me until I could stop crying. That was the hardest letter I have ever had to write, the one to her parents. I miss Ruth a lot.”

“That seven weeks ago” the wolfhound explained. “No one ever find body. I have reward out anyone find body. Cannot send home now, can bury.” Those words brought a thin smile to Helen’s face, but not to Killian or Syng. Both knew what really happened. There had been swimmers under the water, most likely otters.

Once the chosen product had fallen in that river her fate was sealed. She probably had been aboard Madam Xiùme's boat, drugged and hidden long before they bothered to fish out Helen, who would have exhausted herself hunting for a woman already out of her reach. Killian realized that he no longer had an appetite. Though the conversation moved to other matters he limited himself to wine. Besides, within the Hall he could never be exactly certain where his meat had really come from.

As their evening wore on Helen excused herself, claiming exhaustion. Killian knew better, he had easily spotted the drug being entered into her drink by a servant when she wasn't looking. Was tonight her last night then? It was Sying though who cleared up his odd worry. "I see you have decided upon hurrying events Madam Xiùme" he said. "She will gain weight that much quicker by sleeping after a large meal".

"Yes, her pelt still too close my size. It must be larger. She work much too much. Hard work. Make meat tough, not sell high price. Brain though. I have three bid already. Very intelligent. Many want intelligent child. Maybe two week she be ready process. Three outside. That I enjoy watch. Maybe tell what happen her Ruth before knife cut."

"Where did the Jewess's pelt end up" Killian asked.

Madam Xiùme smiled broadly. "Mink small, my size like Helen. I not fatten. Make body suit. Make me look mink, soft soft fur. Even make purse, long glove, boot, belt. Animal Ruth wonderful capture. Easy too."

"There is an American professor, not a member but an immune. One who brings one or two products each season" Sying explained. "He himself did not come this year, though he sent four. That mink, two arctic fox's and the green eyed hound. We have arranged an attack by bandits the last day of their encampment. Many will be carried away, abused, then most will escape. Those last three will vanish of course, though Ivan has his eyes on a buck he thinks would be tasty. We will see. It will of course close this area to his trips for several years. Still the war will do that anyway."

"An immune selling product" Killian asked. His surprise was not at all faked. "I have never heard of such."

"American's" Madam Xiùme spat, as if getting rid of a bad taste. "They sell anything. All care for money. No honor. None. If not so well known, if not so useful immune find self on table. I not like that kind, even product so excellent."

"So you will wait for how long to process this young hound" Killian asked. "A week or two? I am impressed by such restraint."

"Restraint" the wolfhound laughed. "I loan her you tomorrow. You see why restraint. If not for pelt I keep. Never I find anyone like her. Those eyes. They haunt."

"And are worth a great deal" Sying added. "Such eyes have never been seen around here. There are certain magicians who are in a bidding war over those eyes. Like gems, they are almost unreal, even if she is far sighted. If her sight were perfect her eyes alone would be worth more than ten pelts. She will bring Madam Xiùme a great deal of profit, even though she keeps the coat that will be made."

"We see America together. Next Winter" the wolfhound agreed. "Only Helen not be breathing then. I see what she so much love, know her better. She keep bones warm long time. Now I have need sleep. You too talk, been long day chasing rock climbing product."

Once their hostess had left Sying tapped the table, catching Killian's attention. "It is the eyes, isn't it" he asked.

"That, and something more" Killian admitted. "Were I not dying..."

"She is product and Madam Xiùme's property" the bull reminded him.

"It is not unknown for a furrier to desire a product, thus raise her to immune."

"Or love a servant, and raise her to member" the bull continued. "You asked for Shazeer. Was there a special reason?"

Killian smiled, staring into his half full glass. "Like the hound, her eyes. I have always been attracted to eyes. It has been my downfall."

"Thus you have left many pups wandering this world. Have you never found a woman?"

"Once. She was French. She had the most enormous eyes. She died in a Hun barrage. I swore never to allow another woman into my life again."

Sying signaled a waiter, returning to their conversation as the table was cleared. "Tell me brother. Had you the power and the lifetime. Would you choose Shazeer or Helen?"

Killian snorted, looking up to lock gazes with the bull. "Now why would I be so stupid as to try and take a brothers woman?"

Sying grinned at his words. "Obvious, yes I am. But answer me. Which?"

"An hour ago I would have taken Shazeer and been happy all my days. She is beautiful beyond belief, while Helen is almost plain. Yet, as you said. It is the eyes I have no defense against. Now. Now I desire a product I have no ability to touch. Why do you not take your fennec? It is allowed, even encouraged."

Sying leaned back before he answered, his chair creaking under his weight. "Wilde, here there are three who have taken rule at this Hall. We call them the stools legs. They have enough money and forces to lay to waste any who oppose them. One of the laws they changed was that one. No servant may be raised to member. No product may be raised to immune. Until they are gone I will have my pleasure, but never my love. Especially as HiYung desires Shazeer as well. He arrived this morning from Indo-China. If he keeps his habits he will call for her tonight, as he does each night he is within these walls. He hurts her. Yet I am powerless to save her."

Killian thought for a while before continuing. "HiYung is one of the three?"

"Yes. Oldest, most powerful. Doctor Shi and Madam Xiùme are the other two, though Doctor Shi only follows their lead to remain breathing."

"Loan me Shazeer. I give my word I will not harm her. But arrange that she comes to my rooms tonight."

"Why should I do that? It will cause troubles for her and you will be gone soon."

"Because when he wants her and finds she is with another, he will do what? Rage? Scream? Come to my door and demand her?"

"All that" Sying admitted.

"Then he will die. I will duel him. After all I have nothing to lose but a few weeks. That will take one leg from your stool."

Sying's drink vanished down his throat. "Why do this? If you lose nothing changes. Even if you win there is still Xiùme."

"Whom I believe few like?" He caught the slight nod of agreement. "With your permission I would like to taste

Shazeer's pleasures for two days. Perhaps longer. I have never been with a fennec. It would please me greatly. Yet I will not touch her unless I duel HiYung first. It is a win win situation for you."

Sying remained silent for a long time before answering. "I will agree, but there will still be Madam Xiùme."

Killian laughed, the first true laughter he'd had since discovering the wolverine's journal. "If you noticed, Xiùme seems to have found something interesting about me. I will deal with her as well. In my own way. Only if you agree to help Helen escape China. Alive."

"Why?"

"It is the eyes my brother. It is the eyes. I have little time and I do not like the way Xiùme toys with her product. She gives the woman hope, then will shatter her soul simply for the pleasure of doing so. We deal in product, we do not touch souls. If I may help the balance Buddha may smile upon me. As you said, I have nothing to lose but a very little time."

"You are Buddhist? I would not have believe such. An Englishman a Buddhist. So the world does come to an end after all. Very well. I will insure your green eyed goddess escapes China. But you must choose another destination for her. She will never be safe in America. Not once her seller discovers her return and that she still lives. She will be death for him should he allow her to breath. And no, I will not give you his name."

"Then let us play this game. Besides, I look forward to introducing my pandas to your fennec. It should prove.. Entertaining."

Chapter Three

HiYung reacted exactly as Sying had projected. Demanding his favorite toy he was at Killian's door almost as soon as he had discovered where she was. By then the Li sisters had started their own investigation into the fennec's gardens. This meant that Killian had to answer his own door. For all three were, at his orders, busy in the way those two panda's most enjoyed.

"The fennec" HiYung demanded as Killian opened his door.

Killian looked back, just in time to see the worried woman's face disappear behind brown and white fur. "I am currently enjoying her, as is my right as a member" he informed the older porcine. "When I have finished, which will be two days at least, I will be quite happy to allow her departure."

"She is mine" the fat Chinese snapped. "She is mine each night I am here. I am here."

"As I can scent" Killian growled. "I chose her. She was sent here. Speak with the Hall Master."

HiYung's reaction was the classic move of an angry man stymied by what he saw as a lessor intruder to his domain. He swung with all his strength, only to strike the door Killian had closed in his face. With a howl of pain the porcine lost the last of his composure. "I will kill you Englishman" he cursed at the top of his lungs. "I will wear your pelt as my underclothing."

That was a mistake. One did not so threaten a member, any member. Killian opened his door again, noting the gathering of furs about HiYung, the shocked expressions on their faces. "Your offer of a duel is accepted. When and where?"

"The courtyard. Now" HiYung answered before realizing what he had stepped into.

"Very good. Revolver or automatic. American fast draw. I trust you own one or the other. If not I am certain the Hall will provide one." With that he shut his door again, throwing the heavy latch before tossing off his robe. Underneath he wore his traveling clothing.

"Master Wilde?" Sheen asked from the bed.

Strapping his gun belt on Killian took a moment to check the special and heavy .45 cal. luger's action before answering the panda's unspoken question. "Have her ready when I come back. I will be very hungry." He then took the opportunity to take a drink of his medicine. This was no time for an attack. Not with so much on the line. "Very hungry."

"She knows so little" Sheen continued with a touch of worry in her voice.

"Then teach her everything she needs to know, she will be your student for two days after all. Or more if I may arrange such. I have to go." Grabbing his battered traveling hat he unlatched his door and stepped out, to find two burly servants waiting outside. One quickly stepped to block his access to the door he had just stepped through while the other gestured. "Do you really think I'd miss this duel" he asked in English. Then repeated the question again in Cantonese. Switching languages was getting tiresome. So were his headaches and his vision was slipping further at each attack. This would have to be fast he knew. He just hoped that his American friend had taught him well enough.

HiYung waited in the courtyard, his right paw swollen badly. "I ask for a delay" he said as Killian entered the courtyard. "My paw is damaged."

Killian spat at the ground. "You chose the time and place. Either now or lose your membership and your immunity. Your choice fat boy."

Growling a curse Killian barely heard the porcine step forward. "I'll sell your hide cheaply to Madam Xiùme. For her bed. You take advantage."

Killian ignored him, walking to the courtyards other side before turning to face his foe. There was no second, no referee. This was Hall business. Though dozens of members and servants were in evidence, not one stood to insure fairness. This was to the death. There was never anything fair about death. "When you are ready, draw."

For several minutes the two stood across from each other. Each silently watching the other, each hunting for a weakness. Finally HiYung moved, his speed catching Killian by surprise. His own luger had barely come level when HiYung's bullet screamed past his ear. Like most who preferred the fast draw HiYung's initial accuracy was poor. He was still pulling the hammer back on his American single action Colt for a second shot when Killian's slug plowed through his throat. It exited the back of HiYung's neck, taking a section of spine with it. This caused the porcine to collapse like a puppet with its string's cut. Safeing his own weapon Killian walked over to the dying man. Kneeling he brought his mouth close to the porcine's ear. "You were set up" he whispered. "I will take Xiùme next, then perhaps Shi. But you, you will be buried in the city cesspool." He watched the horror grow in his enemies eyes as he realized his fate. Then that light too died, leaving nothing but a dead body.

None too gently Killian removed the heavy gold ring from HiYung's paw, studying it a moment before slipping it into his own pocket. Several servants quickly came up to drag the body away, one asking what to do with it. "City cesspool" he answered, turning away from the man. Sying was standing there, waiting. "I'll send her too you as soon as I get to my room" he told the bull.

"No. We deal fairly here. Besides I want to hear from her just how good an Englishman can be. Xiùme watched. She was unhappy to lose HiYung, but not as unhappy as I thought she might be. Perhaps she see's in you something better than him."

"I am dying. She is a fool."

"More-so, she believes you are not dying, though she admits you are ill. I honestly believe that she plans to marry you."

"And the hound?"

Sying looked away a second before answering. "I inquired before the duel, as if I were interested. She is not for sale at any price. I do not know how I may help you further."

"Right now I need a drink, then I've three ladies waiting for me." Killian sighed. "I'd rather just sleep. Maybe if I gave them the bed and I took the divan." Rubbing his forehead he suddenly stumbled, only Sying's strong arms kept him from falling as he curled up in pain. "Left pocket" he gasped, a moment later tasting the medicine Shi had given him.

"You need rest" Sying whispered as he replaced the bottle a bit later.

"I need this damn tumor cut out" Killian countered. "Short of that a bullet to the head would be a delight right about now."

"Not at least until you have experienced Shazeer. She is quite remarkable should I say so myself. Quite remarkable."

They soon reached a parlor, Sying helping Killian to sit. "Bourbon" the bull ordered. "Two and large." Finding a chair for himself he ignored a waiting servant, carrying it next to Killian with his own paws. "I owe you brother. You have saved my love from great pain. Two days. I would grant you two years for this should you have them."

"Two weeks is pushing it I think now. I thought months, but the pain worsens each day. At least it is Winter. I so love the Winter." Killian accepted the bourbon, taking a deep draught of the fiery liquid before continuing. "And don't feel so in debt. I left her with the Li sisters."

"Shazeer has never been with a woman" Sying laughed. "And you left her with them? What orders did you give them?"

"To teach her everything in two days. I think she may be ruined for you. You should hate me."

Sying's following laughter caused heads to turn, such true laughter was rare among these halls. "Have you any idea what 'everything' means to those two?" He lowered his voice. "Shazeer will beg me to never let her out of my sight again. You have done me a great favor, a great favor. Tell me. What will you do with the pigs property."

Killian stared into his goblet, thinking. By accepting the challenge he had placed what little he owned on the table. By winning he now owned everything that the porcine had. Everything. What to do with it? "Half to the Hall immediately" he decided. "The other half I will hold, though I will write a testament. Is it much?"

"Half is three times what I have" Sying admitted. "You are now richer than I."

"Holding Shazeer I was already richer than you" the bulldog shot, pleased when the bull stuck out his tongue in good natured response.

"I will have her forever, you only have her a few days. Weeks at most. Thus I am the richer."

Killian abruptly realized that he truly liked Sying, that if it hadn't been for the bulls lifestyle they could have been true friends. He closed his eyes, thinking. So many of his friends were dead now. Only one he truly trusted still lived, and only recently had he discovered where the man had found a place to live. Letting his mind wander he went over his life. The Great War, so much death. Lives thrown away by generals who bought their way to power. Then the influenza pandemic, so many more gone. Brush wars, warlords, inept commanders who sat in cooled offices drinking sherry while good men died under a blazing sun. Now Germany and Italy were throwing sabers around. Japan had an undeclared war going on here in China and he was worried about a few thousand lives a year? Less than the whooping cough took in a season. Then those dark green eyes came to his mind. That voice whispered in his ears. What was it about Helen Sneed that made his heart ache, what could he do to save her.

"Wilde?"

"I was thinking" he answered. "Which for men like us is very dangerous. How long is a servants contract here?"

"Depends" Sying answered. "More Bourbon" he called, noting both their goblets empty. "Shazeer's has another year to go, then she will probably sign for another five years. Your Li sisters. They sold themselves to the Hall. They are still servants but they signed a lifetime contract. More money for their family, and to be honest they love their lives. Ask them, they are a surprising duo. Mainly servants stay for fifteen to twenty years. By then on their feet financially they move out of the way for someone else. Their immediate families are immune as well. Why do you ask?"

"Curious. I have some ideas. If you married Shazeer what would you do. Found your own hall?"

"No. Founding a Hall is always risky. Especially at this time of instability. I would move deeper into China. Japan will not reach all of China and if somehow they do I will go to America. I have relatives in Little China who do not know what I am. In any case I will be moving away with her as soon as it can be arranged. I could just buy her contract, but she would not be immune with only ten years service. It takes at least fifteen."

"She's been working here ten years? She's hardly twenty."

"Twenty-two, she started when she was thirteen. Her older sister brought her to us."

Killian sipped his new drink, then looked up at the ceiling above him. "If I bought the Li sister's contract..."

"They would sell themselves back when you die. They are extremely popular, even if they are in their thirties."

"... and gave them to you. To care for say, Shazeer? And your children"

"They would keep her exhausted" Sying admitted. "And me."

"A rich man living in far Western China with a beautiful wife and two completely devoted servants. I won't call them slaves, they aren't. If the war forces you to America, say a farm or ranch somewhere in the West. You would miss the Hunt I imagine, but there are other pleasures in this world. Especially if the entire world is involved in war."

Sying studied his own goblet, himself now in deep thought. Finally he looked up. "You are right. The Hunt no longer brings joy, only duty. I am finding of late that it sickens me." His ears snapped back and forth a few times as he thought. "Shazeer is worth retiring for. Both sisters received immunity long ago. Perhaps raising a family would be a new joy, though what a half panda half bovine would look like worries me."

"Nothing different that a half fennec half bovine" Killian suggested.

"You spin a delicate web my brother. But why? What is there in this dream for you?"

"I am dying Sying. I'll be dead long before Spring, I will never see the flowers bloom again. First come the blinding headaches, then periods of true blindness. Finally I will be fully blind. After that, a day or two. Perhaps less and I will die in great agony. Right now I am finding ways to have pleasure before I cannot do so anymore. I find that doing this, it gives me an odd sense of pleasure. Will you deny me?"

Sying smiled. "Who am I to deny a dying man his pleasure. Yes, I will do this. But there is still Xiùme and Shi."

Killian raised his paw, the signal causing a servant to hurry over. "Is the Hall Master awake?"

"Yes Honored One. For another quarter hour at least."

"Ask him to bring the Li sisters life contract. Shazeer's too. Since my duel I find myself with more money than sense. I wish to buy them."

"Immediately." As the servant took off Killian shrugged. "A dying man has no time to waste" he explained, dropping HiYung's ring on the table between them. "Thus falls a fool" he toasted as he lifted his goblet.

Several hours and much drunker later, Killian and Sying walked into Killian's rooms. "See" Killian told his companion. "Told you I wouldn't touch her 'for tha duel."

Shazeer tried and failed to raise her head. As much as she wished to move she was unable, she simply hadn't the energy. All she could manage was to turn her head, her eyes widening at the sight of Sying. "Save

me my true love” she begged, her voice weak from exhaustion.

“Why” Sying asked. “Y’er nothin but ah servant and those two look awfully happy.” Sheen looked up from her place, her facial fur damp, matted. Smiling she managed a wink to Killian before returning to what she had been doing. Of Chi there was no sign, until she came out of the bath. Staggered was more like it.

“They are exhausted” Killian observed. “But a’hm not.”

“No my brother, you are only drunk.”

“Drunk.”

“Very drunk.” Sying helped Killian into a chair, then walked over to the three women. “My friend is in too much pain to tell you this, so he has left it to me. Sheen, Chi? He has purchased your life contracts.” He noted the amazed looks on their faces. “Come come, you were aware that after thirty your contract could be bought by anyone, for any reason other than processing. Shazeer, he has also purchased your contract. Now you all know that our brother is not long for this world. Therefore he has placed in the Hall a paper that gives your contracts to me upon his death or departure.” Settling onto the bed he touched the fennec’s tail at its base, noting her reaction even through her exhaustion. “Wilde is a better man than any I have met within these walls, ever. He killed HiYung, he gave half of that fat pigs property to the Hall without complaint. The other half is mine upon, as with these contracts his death or departure. I want the three of you to care for him. I warn you that he has been in great pain twice tonight. Keep him warm, keep him happy and Sheen?”

“Yes Honored one?” the panda asked from the beds foot.

“You both will continue to serve Shazeer as you have been tonight. For as long as all three of you live.” Turning his attention to the fennec he was pleased to see the stunned expression on her face. “My wives must be pleasing to me little one. To please me they must be fully trained, and always in practice.” Leaning down he kissed Shazeer, noting an odd taste to her lips, then stood. “Take care of our brother, for if any has earned your love. He has.”

After Sying had left Chi looked to her sister. “Did he say wives?”

“He said wives” Shazeer agreed from the bed.

“But there is still Doctor Shi, and Madam Xiùme” Sheen reminded them.

“I will deal with Xiùme” Killian said weakly from his chair. “Now be quite. Someone bring me a drink, then continue with my entertainment.”

Chapter Four

Three days later Madam Xiùme met Killian after lunch. She was wearing, he noticed, a very revealing silk dress, though the dark black fur underneath could not be her own. "You like?" she asked, mistaking his stare. "It is Ruth. She very tight. Like second fur."

"Aren't you afraid that Helen might notice" he asked, appalled at what had been done to the Jewess.

"Helen busy study rocks. She ruin paws lifting rocks. Not important, I want long sleeve. Not long glove like Ruth give. Not return until late tonight. Come invite you see latest product be processed."

'*See latest product*' Killian thought. He swallowed his disgust. He was being invited to watch some poor fur be reduced to his component parts. '*Buddha*' he prayed. '*Help me. I cannot long hold this facade.*' His story though, his remaining life. He would gladly give both up to make all this go away. Yet it was real, he had to have all the details to force civilization to gag on their ignorance. This had to be stopped. Forcing a smile he bowed slightly. "Your processing place is nearby?"

"Half hour by car. Product arrive about then. We watch, see how fast they do. Bet fifteen minute. Come. Car waits." Following Xiùme out he soon found himself in a darkened car headed West, trapped by a woman who had more than one hunger and demanded him to satisfy her appetite. All her appetite.

By the time they had reached the 'plant' Killian was again presentable, though Madam Xiùme didn't seem to care. Barely wrapping herself with her thin dress she lead the way in, guards passing them through with hardly a look at either. By the time they arrived at their destination, a fan cooled chamber with a large glass wall overlooking what had to be a butcher shop there were cool drinks waiting. "Product now awake" Madam Xiùme commented. "They ask question."

Within the butcher shop below three heavysset bulls stood. Tied to a chair, unable to see the three was a rather handsome ringtail. At some unseen signal he was asked one question, one he had no answer too. A moment later for him it was over as a large iron hammer crashed into the back of his skull. "Now fun begin" the wolfhound giggled as she moved towards Killian.

"Again?" he asked, fighting for time. Below him the freshly murdered ringtail was being laid out on a table easily capable of holding a much larger creature.

"Best time" Xiùme purred as she wrapped herself around the ill bulldog. Below them one poor young ringtail lemur was quickly reduced to nothing, each organ prepared, each fluid bottled and marked. All to be sold to China's hungry holistic medicine market. Even the bone would be ground up, then bagged and sold to ill furs uncaring that this young man had only that morning been chasing a very pretty fawn, unaware she was bait for a hunt. For the price of his life he had managed one last false kiss, nothing more.

On the trip back Killian fought to understand why he had responded so readily to the wolfhounds advances. Especially considering the butcher house atmosphere they had been in. It made no sense, unless. He sniffed carefully at the woman now curled up against him, peacefully resting. It would be so easy to simply break that neck, to leave her and her female driver lying dead on the road. But that wouldn't save those green eyes, would it a part of his mind ask. Then he caught the scent and felt his body react against his will. Drugged, she had drugged him, with a drug as illegal as catnip. No wonder... "Ready again" Xiùme asked softly, her voice still laced with sleep. "That nice." She shifted, throwing one leg across his lap. It was going to be a long drive back Killian realized. A long exhausting one.

Late that night he found himself being helped into bed by young Chi, having for the third time emptied his stomach into the toilet. "It's the tumor" he half lied as she pulled covers over his shivering form. On the other side of him Sheen and Shazeer lay curled together, both already sound asleep. Chi carefully slipped under the covers, taking his shaking form into her arms with all the care of one who loved another, yet could do nothing to help him. His shaking however was more in reaction to the drug Xiùme had used on him. In truth, a reaction between it and Doctor Shi's pain numbing drug. Grateful for the pandas warmth in his winter chilled bed he tried to relax, carefully going over his conversation with Xiùme in his mind once they had returned. Somehow he slipped into a dreamless sleep.

"You didn't mind them watching us" he had asked. Xiùme had laughed, explaining that the glass was a one way mirror. That none of those below had ever seen a member of the society. In that way should the processing plant be raided no one could turn against their employers. He asked why they had bothered questioning the ringtail. After all, Xiùme herself had sent him. To that her answer was eye opening.

"He not wearing my mark. Remember necklace Helen wear? Blue teardrop? Silver chain. That my mark. They see that they know is special product. To take extra extra care. They process ringtail seventeen minute. Helen they take hour, probably longer. No break skull either. I keep skull like Helen, Ruth so they drain blood first. Take longer, better result. Helen not feel anything, I drug first. Fear make fur fall out. Helen fur beautiful. She gain weight fast now, not work so much. One week, two most." Xiùme had closed her eyes as she leaned against Killian. Had purred in pleasure at some thought, finally opening her eyes. "I promise Helen you, almost forget. Tomorrow night I bring her you. I make her ready be with you. You taste, tell me later what like. She like you. Talk about lot." Then she had left him standing there. Standing with the sudden memory that she had never taken off the mink body suit. That above all things caused him to lose his lunch. He had just come to the edge of his sanity and looked over the edge. Only by great effort had he pulled away from that edge.

All the next day he spent his time going over each mantra he'd been taught. He was living in a charnel house, within the den of madness and he had almost come to accept it. Slowly, between the occasional attacks of pain he found his way back to full sanity. Sying had come by once, recognized what Killian was doing and mistook it for preparations to meet death. He had gone away, most likely to his own work. Killian forced himself not to think of Sying doing that sort of thing. He did not want to think of his new friend doing the things Xiùme did. Thus by the time dinner was ready he was truly hungry, and as calm as he could be considering his situation. Yet even with Xiùme's warning it was a surprise to find Helen waiting for him, the wolfhound standing at her side.

"I leave Helen your gentle care" the wolfhound explained. "Have business away. I see tomorrow." Nipping Helen's neck lightly, the whispering something into the American's ear the Russian quickly vanished with her strange white furred driver.

"Xiùme said you wanted to have dinner with me" the American hound explained in English. "I thought it a good idea, especially as it beats sitting at her house alone. So few people here speak English and I don't understand Mandarin. Xiùme doesn't understand a tenth of what I talk about, like the fossil I dug up last week. If you don't mind sir, I'd just like to chatter a bit."

"No problem" Killian agreed while taking in the view before him. Helen's face would never be called beautiful. Attractive yes, but never beautiful. With her extra poundage though there was nothing to beg about her figure, she truly needed the weight he realized. Her many times brushed coat simply shined in the Hall's gaslight, and truth be told he would like to hear English again himself. Even if it was a battered version American's spoke. Leading her to a table he held the chair for her, his actions causing a few interested looks by others. Madam Xiùme's ways were well known. Helen was simply another of her special projects, a lamb willingly if unknowingly being led to the slaughter. As they returned to their own conversations Killian sat, a waiter arriving beside him before he was settled. He ordered quickly, sending the man away. "I hope you don't mind but I ordered an all vegetable meal. It has gotten so that even the scent of cooked meat makes me ill."

"I understand. Anyway Xiume's has had me eating so much meat I'm starting to have digestive problems." Helen giggled suddenly. "I think she's in love with me the way she dotes over me. Like this necklace, it must have cost her hundreds. I wish I felt the same, but she isn't a woman I might really want to spend my life with. Lately though she seems to have changed a bit. She talks about you. In the long term style."

"What about men?" Killian asked, noting that the necklace she had mentioned was the one Xiume had said marked Helen as 'special product.'

Helen blushed under her fur. "A few" she admitted. "But again. None I've ever felt I wanted to spend my life with, or to raise a family with." She picked up the wine goblet their waiter sat before her, glancing through the deep red liquid. "Though I have recently met one that I'd be willing to go the distance with. Tell me, are you married?"

"No. Not for a very long time. There was a French girl once. Then the Hun's bombarded her village. I couldn't even find her street. It was all craters and mustard gas. Since then no one."

"Ever since. It has been kiss the girls and leave them to cry?" Helen asked with a laugh.

"Oh yes, absolutely thousands" Killian admitted. "I was a company reporter. I spent the war reporting on death and destruction. Since then I have spent the time since wandering the world. Discovering all the horrors one fur can do to another. It was a way to forget the war I think. It hardens you though. In a way I'm glad I'm dying. There's another war coming and I don't think my sanity would survive it. So tell me about this fossil. Cambrian or Pre-Cambrian."

"Neither. I found it just below the extinction line. It was only about a quarter my size though its all twisted up around itself now. But the important thing is that its brain case was three times the size of anything else its physical size. The thing was smart."

"Or used scent heavily, or sight. Even hearing."

"You understand? I'm... I'm surprised."

"Did a stint in Afghanistan with a Professor Merker. Crazy stuff he talked about. Claimed that there was a reptilian civilization as advanced as our own, maybe more advanced. That it died out with all the dinosaurs sixty five million years ago. He even had some odd carvings he claimed were made by them. Could have been anyone's work for all I could see."

"The Rainbow City" Helen whispered in awe. "He found proof? In Afghanistan? I have to go there. I have to see it. Please take me. You have to show me."

"Hold on a moment Helen. Ah, our dinner." He waited until the food was delivered before continuing. "Antarctica. He said they would be in Antarctica. That Antarctica was warm back then. But I'm not going to be alive long enough to get there even if we left right now. So forget it. Wait till you get back home. I'll even write you a letter of introduction if you would like."

Helen looked down at her food. "That wouldn't help. He had a heart attack four months ago. It was a great loss. Say. This looks good."

"It is. Would you please wait a moment? I need to send a message to my servants."

"Sure. I'll just pig out here and get fatter." She looked up at Killian, again capturing his imagination with those impossible green eyes.

Standing Killian walked over to a waiting servant. Quickly he gave him a message for the three women in his rooms. Clean everything up. I'm bringing a special visitor. Then make yourself scarce in the other bedroom for the night. Returning to his table he was surprised to find that Helen had indeed finished most of her meal. "Eating for two?" he asked.

"Not funny" Helen answered. "I haven't been with a man in five years. It'd make the record books. It just would. The worlds longest pregnancy. Just hungry all the time for some reason. Especially when I'm with Xiùme."

Drugs again Killian knew without thinking about it. Xiùme so loved her drugs it seemed. He decided to change the subject slightly. "How do you keep your fur so glossy Helen, especially in the field? I know high society women who try everything they can think of and never manage such a glossy coat. They spend hundreds of pounds a year yet your coat would make theirs dull by comparison."

Grimacing Helen took a drink of wine. "They aren't looking low enough. Its fish oil. Nothing but plain everyday processed fish oil. Xiùme has me drink three glasses a day, but she does too and its not like she's forcing me too. I just like doing things to please her."

"So your in love?"

"Been there before Killian. This isn't love. Its something else yes, but not love."

"Your certain?" Killian asked. "I mean I've had fish oil before. Its great for constipation, but the taste. I wouldn't think that is was something you do just for a friend."

Helen stopped eating, turning her impossibly bottomless eyes on Killian she paused for a moment, as if collecting her thoughts. "I've been with men and women Wilde. I've loved both, but none really enough to spend my life with. I don't love Xiùme. Not one bit. But I like pleasing her. There's a difference and its one I can't really explain. I don't know why I like pleasing her, maybe its because she's so in love with me. Maybe I don't want to hurt her. But I won't be spending the rest of my life with her. I know love Mr. Wilde. I know what real love is now. I know who I want to spend my life with and it certainly isn't her."

"I see" Killian admitted. He had seen such devotion before. It came either from a feeling of servitude, duty or... biting into his baked potato he pushed the other thought down. Hypnotism wasn't supposed to make someone do what they didn't want to do. But if you added the right drugs it was said that you could get your victim to cut their own mothers throat if you wanted too. "So who's the lucky man" he asked, trying to derail his current train of thought.

Helen just looked back, still not finishing her meal. "Your one dense bulldog aren't you Wilde. Let me give you a hint. I just met him and I fell madly in love the instant I saw his ugly face. Now I'm having dinner with him. Ring any bells? Or do I have to draw you a map."

Killian's fork hitting his plate was the only sound that followed. For long moments there was silence between then while the Thymes reporter fought to breath. "Your playing a joke on me right?" he asked.

"No" Helen answered while she pushed her remaining food around on her plate.

"Helen. I'm dying. That's not a joke. Two weeks. Three on the very outside but I don't hold out for that long, then I'm dead. Three if I'm really lucky. Now is not the time to fall in love with me."

Helen shrugged in defeat. "What do you want me to do? Cut out my heart and set it on your plate? I love you. I've thought it over, thought it was just a phase. But all the time I was in the field all I could think of was that ugly mug of yours Wilde. Then I found myself writing Helen Susan Parker a lot. I know the signs. I watched poor Ruth go through them. I know I'm younger than you. I'm only twenty six but I'll be twenty seven

in a month. I know your dying Wilde and I know I can't get you out of my mind, or my heart. I know I've never loved anyone like this in my life. Not even my pet Sara."

"Sara?" Killian asked, trying to change the subject.

"Little fluff bunny chipmunk in High School. We had an absolutely horrendous fling going. I mean to say that we were an item and a half. Not that our parents were happy about it, but in Wyoming you take love wherever you can find it. I mean there's only like a couple thousand people in the whole state. More than likely they knew the truth, that we would grow out of it. Slowly yeah, but finally we drifted apart. I went to college and Sara ended up with this really butch prairie dog. Last letter I got from her they were happy as two peas in a pod. Sara loves housework while her Lee-Ann is the outdoors kind. They even have a couple of orphans living with them. A real family group. Should I go into detail as to what Sara and I used to do?"

"No thank you Helen. I've watched before." He thought about last night, deciding that whatever this Sara and Helen had done it could never match Li sisters and Shazeer.

"Dirty old hound" Helen whispered as a flush worked up her face. "I've never gotten a chance to watch."

Killian laughed softly in response. "Look, I'm not really hungry so why don't we just take a walk."

"I could show you the etchings in my room" Helen suggested slyly. "But there aren't any and its Xiùme's bedroom anyway. So, what about yours?"

"You're an awful forward young woman. Even for an American" Killian noted.

"I'm running out of time aren't I" she countered. "Anyway, for some reason I have to be with you. It started the first time I saw you. A slow hunger. Now I'm ravenous. You wouldn't leave a poor girl to starve to death would you?"

'More than you understand' Killian thought, glancing at an ancient water clock near the stairwell. "All right then, I just hope that I can preform to a level you find interesting. If I can't I'll send in the Li sisters." Helen just smiled, waiting until Killian had stepped to her chair before standing gracefully as he pulled it back. Together they headed for the stairs.

It was a very early morning when Killian was woken by the pain in his head. Forgetting his companion he tried to reach for his bottle, only to discover that Helen was laying atop him. "Gotta move" he whispered. With a soft moan the long haired hound slipped to one side, allowing him the reach he needed to obtain his prize. Carefully he poured the bottles remaining contents into his mouth, swallowing almost instantly. He would have to send Chi for more in the morning. As always when he drank the drug within seconds his pain receded. Dropping the empty bottle he laid back down, finding Helen sitting in the bed silently watching him. "What do you see" he asked gently.

"Without my glasses your just a big lovable blur" the American admitted softly. "But my nose isn't fooled, your still Killian."

"Wonderful nose you have my dear. And so... Killian?"

Helen smiled, snuggling up closer. "Ruth was a journalism major. I must have seen your photo twenty or thirty times in her books. She even quoted several of your stories in her schoolwork. Your quite famous in America you know." She licked his neck. "Truth be told I've had a crush on you for years. I've read everything you've written that I could find. So why are you hiding my love? Its not because your in danger. Not now. What story is so important you have to hide who you are."

"I can't tell you" he admitted. "Its too dangerous."

"I see. Well just remember that if you need me, I'm a wicked shot with a Winchester. Now come over here. We've got unfinished business."

Later as he slept a dream of a large hammer putting out the lights in those bewitching eyes kept coming to him. Though he tried he was unable to push the image away.

Chapter Five

Killian was writing in his journal when Chi kneeled beside him. Looking down at the panda he saw worry in her eyes. "What is it Chi" he asked, closing his journal to protect from her sight the words he had written. Even though she couldn't read them there was no reason to flaunt them to her.

"Master is in love with product" Chi answered. "Madam Xiùme never sell what is her's. What will Master do?"

Frowning he turned to face her fully. "Chi. What makes you think I'm in love with Helen" he asked.

"Chi see love before. See sometimes Masters fall in love with servants. Chi see's same thing in Masters eyes. Madam Xiùme will never sell product. Not even to you. This hurt you when girl processed. Chi not want to see master hurt anymore."

"Okay Chi. First. Why would you think I'm any different to Madam Xiùme than anyone else and two, even if I were in love with Helen, whom I haven't seen in four days anyway, I'll probably die before she does. So what does any of this matter."

"Chi love master. Sheen love master not so much but do. You are the first to see us as more than bed toys or servants." She grinned suddenly, a wonderful sight Killian thought. "You gave us Shazeer to play with. To train. You trusted us. Madam Xiùme is in love with you. She does not believe Doctor Shi. She believes your illness will pass. Even so. Even though she loves you she would not sell Helen for any price. It is as you whisper in your dreams. Her eyes. Madam Xiùme cannot forget those eyes."

"Servants see things then they talk among themselves." He sighed, leaning back in his chair. "And masters forget. We ignore our servants too our own danger. All right then. Accepting that what you say is true. Even if I could in some way save Helen from her fate why should I bother? We will be together very soon anyway."

Chi took a breath, looking around before speaking. "Illie says Helen was in heat first night she come here. Not in heat now. That can only mean one thing."

"There is no way anyone could know if they were pregnant in just what. Five, six days? What kind of story are you spinning Chi. I don't want to be angry with you but I need to understand where this is going."

"Helen... Hounds stay in heat until they conceive or season pass" Chi explained. "Then they cool quickly. Most men never notice because we have moved far away from our four footed cousins. Men still scent these things, but most do not truly understand. Illie is certain. Has sent message. Helen carries your child." She looked down, not meeting Killian's eyes. "Madam Xiùme will not care. She wants coat. She plans place Helen's head next to her friends. Like most masters Madam Xiùme does not believe product has any rights, is even truly sentient. Masters child will never be born. Master is Buddhist. Master knows that this is a crime against Buddha."

Killian closed his eyes against a pain worse than any his tumor had ever given him. Babbet had been pregnant when the Huns shells had found her. Just a month from birth his child had been blown apart still in its mothers womb. Now this. It was more than he could manage and his drug soaked brain couldn't work fast enough to find a way out. "I can't help her" he whispered, but his words were those of one in deep pain. Not emotionless words of some hunter who didn't care. "I couldn't help Babbet, now I can't help her. I'm useless."

"Illie has an idea. Would you like to hear her?"

"I have nothing to lose Chi. But I can't endanger you, your sister, Shazeer or Sying."

"You will endanger no one by listening" the panda lied. "I will bring Illie to you when she comes with Madam Xiùme." Chi smiled again. "Illie is Madam Xiùme's driver." Then she stood and walked out of the room. It was some time before Killian could return to his writing.

He arrived late for dinner that evening, unsurprised to find Madam Xiùme waiting for him. She was deep in discussion with Sying about something, both rattling along in Mandarin while Helen sat silently beside the wolfhound completely at a loss as to what was being said. Had she understood Mandarin he realized as he sat at the table, automatically signaling for a waiter, she would have been in hysterics. Xiùme and Sying were discussing the disposition of Ruth's final 'products' and how much her total worth had been. That he decided, was taking insult to a level he'd not seen outside of a certain now rather dead warlords tent.

Helen smiled up at him as he arrived and Killian had to admit that there was something different about her. Was Illie correct? Or was the Arctic Fox taking him for a ride? He wasn't certain but he knew how to find out, and quickly. "You are late" Sying commented as he sat.

"My apologies. I had an episode" he lied. "Chi and Sheen took care of me but it was a bad one. I feel well enough now thanks to Doctor Shi's medication." The meal he ordered was one Babbet had once warned him about. Although normally ignored by female hounds it became irresistible when they were with child. Even only a few days after conceiving. It was something to do with cravings she had admitted that one time. If Helen was truly pregnant she would all but steal his meal.

"They are getting worse?" Sying asked.

"They are" Killian admitted. He was growing fond of the huge bull even if the man was a furrier. There was about him that Killian liked. "And how is Shazeer?"

Sying laughed. "Still learning to walk again. My thanks for her loan. I would arrange another session with your pets for her, if you do not mind."

"Please. I love watching the three."

"Then she will arrive before you return to your rooms. Tell Sheen and Chi this. Do not show her any mercy. None. Now I must go for I have a train to catch. I hope to be back in the week." He stood then, taking a moment to say goodbye to Helen in her own language, which surprised her. Then he left.

"I miss you" Madam Xiùme said as she leaned against the bulldogs thick arm, still speaking Mandarin. "I be in season very soon. Will come to me? I would much like have your child."

"Abrupt and too the point" he laughed. "And if I say no?"

"Then I not leave Helen you tonight. So if say yes, I leave her you until return. If say no. Wilde love I must travel, though only few days. When return I process her. It be last chance drink again green eyes."

"You are leaving?" he asked. "Why?"

"An old order. Geisha vixen arrived Dalian. They entertain high rank officers. This is not low prostitute, is high class entertainer. I information that certain fox among them. I have order from New Amsterdam for special Japanese fox pelt. Her pelt. This a chance fill order. It is great deal money for me. More than I earn from Helen and friend together. I wish I stay, your company something I much want. But chance is rare. She not remain long."

"When will you leave" he asked, fringing interest. "We could play tonight after all. With Helen."

A growl rose in Madam Xiùme's throat and her eyes seemed to flash with excitement. "I hold you that. When return. I delay process one day. That image must taste. But must leave soon. You eat. Keep strong. I be ready when return." Leaning close she kissed Killian and he noted that her kiss that of a hot blooded woman, not a casual acquaintance. Pulling back she touched his lips with her paw. "Not know why so drawn to you. Never happen before. You get well. We marry. You see. I make you loving wife. Dutiful wife. Deny nothing. I give you many pups. At home I be your slave. Now must go." She stood, waving Helen back into her seat as the hound rose. "You stay Wilde" she ordered in English. "He take good care you. I see three, four days. Promise." Leaning past Killian, and in the process pressing her ample breasts against him, she kissed Helen goodbye. This kiss too was anything but chaste. Then Madam Xiùme too was gone.

"You were talking about me" Helen stated after Xiùme had left and she again had control of her breathing.

"How's a threesome sound" Killian answered.

"You, me and her? Why?"

He looked at her. Those damned eyes he decided. If he were suddenly healed he could live a billion years and never forget those eyes. "Because I need you to" he answered seriously.

"Need. Or want? I know about men and their wild dreams Mr. Wilde" she answered with an uncertain laugh.

"Need Helen. I need you to agree to this. Please."

"It is your story. It is something about Xiùme isn't it. All right, but it'll cost you mister. And big time."

Killian's food arrived, quickly he signaled the waiter to remain while he watched Helen's face. For a moment nothing changed, until the food's scent hit her that was. It was like watching a pup discovering something new. For a moment Helen just sat, then her tail straightened, fluffed and started wagging. "Um..." she started, only to have Killian silently slide his plate over to her. "Thanks" she managed before she started stuffing her mouth full.

"I'll have my usual" he instructed the waiter softly enough that the hound couldn't hear. "It appears my companion is somewhat hungry. No matter. For Madam Xiùme I will allow this insult. One time." He now had his answer and if Illie wasn't stringing him along he had a way out as well. A way out for Helen and a way to repay the wolfhound for all she had done to others. Either that, or they would die together. All of them.

Chapter Six

Killian woke screaming, at the same time blindly trying to curl himself into a ball while he grabbed his head, his tail twisting under him like a cheap curl dog. Quickly his mind twisted away from the pain, hiding within his skull as some great monster tried to shove its way through his brain. In seconds his three servants were around him in an effort to help. Chi desperately trying to pour medicine into his mouth, but the bottle was empty. She looked to her older sister who simply pointed at the door. Naked, the younger panda ran out of the room.

Now unconscious and with Shazeer rubbing his head Killian relaxed his grip on himself, only to grab the nearest thing to him when another bolt of pain slashed through his head. Killian now had an uncaring death grip on his sleeping companion. Breathing slowly through her mouth Helen could only whimper in pain as his great arms crushed her into him. Sheen knelt beside the suffering hound, gently brushing long shiny hair from Helen's pain contorted face. "This is the worst time. Xiùme is mad. He cannot live long." She tried to ease some of the auburn furred hounds pain by pulling against the bulldogs muscular arms, only to discover that she might as well have been trying to move welded iron bars for all her strength could manage. "How can I help" she whispered, not wanting to break Helen's concentration.

"Worst thing is" Helen gasped as she fought for breath. "I gotta pee."

Sheen turned to look towards the fennec. Silently she nodded to Shazeer before returning to caressing Helen's face. "She will help you. Chi will be quick, for she truly loves our master as you do. It will hurt her badly when he passes. Breath Helen. Slowly. Think of something nice. It will help you. I will help you. Shazeer will help you. You are our masters love, the mother of his child. We will protect you."

Of course none of this mattered to Killian who now was faced with pain worse than red hot iron needles under his claws (he had felt that before, in the Muslim countries.) Blindly he was fighting madly for some control. Control he could not manage to find.

It was near noon when Killian finally woke. Opening his eyes slowly he found dark green eyes watching him carefully. "Morning lover" Helen whispered. "You sure know how to show a girl a good time."

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, finding he hadn't the strength to move his arms from around her. Certainly he hadn't enough strength to move off her body.

"A little. I'll bruise but it'll pass. In a month or two I won't feel a thing."

'In a week' Killian mentally corrected. *'Less than. I have to get her to safety.'* "Chi. Sheen" he called weakly. "Help me roll off her." Almost instantly three sets of paws were on his body, moving him to one side and allowing Helen her first full breath of air in hours.

"Ow" she complained as she tried to move. "That hurts. Next time just break my neck will-yah?"

"I'll make a note of that. What happened anyway? I feel like hell."

"You had an attack master" Chi explained from her position beside him as she gently groomed his fur. "Sister. We need new bedding. He lost control." Nodding to her sister Sheen left, taking Shazeer with her. "There was no medication. I had to waken Doctor Shi. He was unhappy to be woken. He gave me your medicine." She looked over at a red bottle. "It took a quarter of the bottle before you calmed." A tear fell from her eye, drifting slowly along the soft fur of her face. "It will not be long, will it?"

"Not long" Killian agreed. "I must write. I must get my thoughts down for others to read before I lose those thoughts forever. There is so little time. So very little time." He tried to stand, only to find the world was going grey around him. "Damn. My eyesight is going."

"I will be your eyes" Chi offered, but Helen was already there. She nodded in unspoken agreement to the panda. Between them they helped Killian stand. "We will both be your eyes" the hound corrected. "To your desk, then Chi will get food. I'll strip the bed. Thanks to Shazeer at least it wasn't me who fouled the bedding." They gently helped him to the next room where his desk waited.

"Bet you haven't done that since you were a pup" Killian joked, rubbing his eyes. "I certainly haven't. My eyesight coming back now. Thank you. I'll be fine."

"I never did as a pup" Helen admitted. "My brother did. So did my sisters but I never did. I wasn't even afraid of the dark, not after the closet monster and my sister had that fight. Poor closet monster. She left my room dragging his pelt." Helen sighed at the memory. "It wasn't until High School I found out it was an old horse blanket she had hidden in the closet that she was dragging. Now there's a woman who can act." She patted Killian's arm protectively. "She's in New Amsterdam now. On the stage. Well liked by the critics too. I wish I could introduce you to her. She's mad I tell you. Absolutely bonkers."

"And you aren't" Killian asked.

"Hey there mister. I don't sleep with three women."

He smiled even though remembering part of the pain. "Four" he corrected. He looked out his window where heavy snow fell only inches away. "And you will. It's going to be very cold again tonight. I am tired of them sleeping on the floor, even if it is by the fireplace."

"You're just a dirty old hound" Helen sighed. "If we lived a hundred years you'd still be keeping me up at night wouldn't you."

"I think it'd be the other way around. Now off with you. I've writing to do and I need privacy to do it." He waited until Helen had left before opening his ledger. There was no possible way she couldn't understand what was written in it. None of the three Chinese girls could read English, in fact only the fennec could read more than a few dozen words at all, and that only Chinese. If Helen found out the truth it would probably ruin their only chance. He was still trying to get over her knowing who he really was. There was nothing he could do about it, but it still worried him. Pausing, he looked out his window at a bare tree across the courtyard, remembering an old friend. *'Damn I wish he was here. He taught me so much, but I haven't half his brains. Damn Schnauzer would have this wrapped up, this hall closed and everyone in it safe. Or dead within an hour. Me... Here I am, depending on four servants to help me save the woman I've grown to love and their all women.'* Turning his attention back to his book he started writing.

Sometime later Sheen sat hot tea and sandwiches beside him. "Chi?" he asked.

"She has been called elsewhere. She will return soon. I hope."

Sitting his pen down Killian turned to his servant. "Hope?"

"She asked..."

"WHAT!" he snapped.

"Doctor Shi was very unhappy to be taken from his bed. He did not wish to be bothered. He was.. Busy. Only by offering to serve him a few hours was Chi able to get your medication before sunrise."

"Damn bastard" Killian snapped. "Take me too him now. I own you. No one touches any of you without my

agreement.” Jumping up from his chair he took two steps, then the floor slammed into his face. He woke sometime later, a freshly washed and groomed Chi sitting beside him. Silently waiting.

“You are angry with me” she stated. It was not a question.

“Not you. Shi” Killian corrected. “Never again. You understand me? As long as I’m alive no other man touches you. Ever.”

“But the medicine” Chi protested.

“I would rather live in such pain forever than have you make such an agreement like that. Never again. Now some tea please. I seem to be awfully weak for some reason.”

“It is the medication. We gave you too much. It will take the day to settle from your body.” She stood from the bed. “I have closed your book. Helen was looking at it when I returned. She is very upset. I took it away from her. Shazeer is holding it.”

“Damn. Send Helen in. Then bring my tea.” He paused a moment, suddenly realizing he was holding her paw. “And stay while I explain her questions. She will need you.”

“She did not know?”

“No.”

Gently removing her paw from Killian’s the panda left. Relaxing he looked up at the painted ceiling, for the first time realizing it had been painted to resemble a winters night sky. There was the hunter. Of course the hunter would be there. There had been tears in Chi’s face. *‘Not one, but four. Does a man have shake paws with death in order to find heaven?’* He pushed that thought aside. Or hell if they were found out. He would probably be forced to watch all four being processed, then be processed himself. Awake. Closing his eyes he waited for his hell to begin.

“I want to go home. Now” Helen demanded as she sat beside him. Killian opened his eyes, taking in the tear matted face. “I want out of China now. I’m never coming back.”

“How much did you read” he asked.

“More than enough to know I’m in the house of madmen. That the woman I thought loved me only wants my pelt so she can have a new winter coat. Enough to know what your story is. Tell me Killian. The truth. Were you going to just let them do that to me?”

“Like they did to Ruth? At first yes, until I met you.”

“Ruth? They.. They did this to RUTH?” Quickly Chi came to Helen’s side, embracing her.

“Listen my child and you shall hear...” he began.

“The midnight ride of Paul. What does that have to do with this.”

“First. Keep your voice down. If we are found out we are all dead. All of us. Maybe more if they catch Illie.

“Xiùme’s driver? What has she got to do with anything?”

“Helen please. Be quiet and listen. Illie is a slave. Not a servant, a slave. She was bought in Xiamen after having been stolen from her home island. For twenty-four of her twenty-nine years she has known nothing

but slavery. There is absolutely no way to get you out of here without her help. If she's lucky she'll come with us. If not, well Arctic Fox meat is always in demand. Its either or for her now. Yes my love. You were just a name. Just another victim until I met you. One of millions in recorded history. One of thousands in the last year. When I met you that changed. Since then I've been doing nothing but trying to find a way to save you, and falling hopelessly in love with you."

"Chi is already in love with you" Helen observed.

"So is Xiùme, which will make this both hard and easy. I don't know why but the last month or so women have started throwing themselves at me. Its never happened before and its scary. Anyway this plan will be hard because I can't take Chi with me. Easy because a person in love makes mistakes, mistakes are what I need Xiùme to make. How good an actress are you?"

"I acted with Marty for several years. We were on stage for two years in High School before she went to New Amsterdam."

"Can you act like nothing is different between you and Xiùme. At least for a day?"

"Xiùme killed Ruth. I'll cut her throat when I see her."

"I have a better idea my love. What if Xiùme experienced the same fate she plans for you? The same fate Ruth experienced."

Helen thought for long minutes, finally nodding in agreement. "I can live with that. But I take all of Ruth we can find with me."

"Why? That's dangerous and unless we are stone lucky there's probably only one way you might be able to do it."

"Wear her. At least part of her. I understand that. Ruth was my best friend. She was my religious sounding board. Hell Killian, if she'd been interested I might have spent my life with her. She was Jewish. She deserves a Jewish burial. Even if it is only her pelt."

Killian closed his eyes against reality. This conversation was dangerous. Helen was way too calm. Way way too calm. And his head still felt as numb as a cotton ball. She should be going off like a vapor headed ten year old, at least in all the movies he'd seen that was the case. Adventure books too. "Why aren't you in hysterics" he asked suddenly.

Helen grimaced, absently pulling her tail in front of her as she answered. "I'm a Wyoming ranch girl Killian. I've fought rustlers out on the range. I've even killed a few. But don't worry, under this calm exterior before you is a little girl who wants to pee her pants, if she had any on. Who wants to run into her daddies arms for protection. Wants to run screaming out into the street to escape this madness. But I know that if I do I'm dead. It's the same with rustlers, one of you is going to give up or die. I don't give up. Besides" one paw went to her belly. "Shazeer confirms I'm pregnant and there's only one person in this world who could be the father. So I have to trust you don't I. But after this baby is born I'm going to have a serious nervous breakdown. Or at least I'm going to get so drunk I can't hold onto a blade of grass. I'm scared Killian, I've never been this scared in my life. But I'm mad too and I've never been this mad either."

"Fine then. Chi, Sheen and Shazeer already know. This plan belongs to Illie so their pelts are on the chopping block now because they didn't tell anyone. Hell girl, even if we do nothing and they find out all are as dead as I am."

"If we tell right now still be processed" Chi explained. "Because we wait so long. No more immune, no more breathing." She touched her own belly. "I too have child. Wilde... Killian?" She looked to the bulldog who

nodded yes. "Killian very much a man. More man than any I ever met before. I want my child to live."

"I take it Sheen and Shazeer are going to start swelling too?" Helen asked, her tail swishing behind her in irritation as she processed that information. "I said you were a dirty old hound. Now I know you really are."

"I didn't know" Killian admitted. "Chi?"

"Shazeer hope maybe yes, think yes. Sheen know not. Was wrong time for Sheen, now good time. She very unhappy she miss such great man's gifting."

"Wonderful. Well go tell Sheen that tonight we'll try again okay?" He watched Chi's face light up before she left. *Great he thought. So here we have our heroic figure, the wonderful gunslinging two fisted Englishman saves the day. With the help of four women. Then he leaves three of them behind pregnant, while escaping into the rising sun with two others. This is going to play well in my biography. Even the movies couldn't come up with this plot. Buddha I hope no one hears about this. It will absolutely ruin my sterling reputation. Oh snergs, will Mother be pissed. Sis will laugh her head off though. It'd be worth it to see fathers face. He'll be absolutely livid.*

Helen leaned over, popping him on the arm lightly. "Okay dirty old hound get out of your thoughts. If your going to save the fairy princess I trust you have an army of dragons at your beck and call?"

Turning to look again into those green eyes Killian made his decision. "No army, no dragons" he answered in Arabic, the only other language Helen knew. As to why he used that language, he doubted anyone on this side of China knew Arabic. "All right woman of mine. Here is the plan."

Chapter Seven

Madam Xiùme met him for their last dinner engagement at her door alone. In the icy Winter late afternoon she was wearing the thinnest of nothing he had ever seen on a woman. Beneath that she again wore the mink bodysuit. He noted with a sick feeling that it had been freshly brushed and oiled, now fitting her as tightly as her own flesh. Stepping into the house he glanced around. Unlike before Helen was no where in sight. Of course if Xiùme was wearing the mink Helen wouldn't be around, would she he realized. "Sad" he said, fighting a building despair that he was truly too late. "You have already processed her. I so wanted to watch those haunting green eyes fade into blankness."

"No. Helen at warehouse. Getting rock she say finally clean. I say I want to see but have other reason. Rock her most precious possession. I must have."

"Why bother? Its just a rock with some dead animals impression."

"True. But have reason. Come. I show you." Closing the door behind him Killian followed the wolfhound to her library. Once there she moved a lamp and a section of shelves silently rolled aside in response. "Trophy room" she explained.

Following her into the long room Killian found exactly what Illie had warned him to expect. Dozens of shelves were lined with row after row of stuffed heads. Each had a single item under or beside it. "Their most precious possession" he echoed in understanding. Following Xiùme to the rooms back he found her standing in front of a black furred minks head. Onyx dark false eyes stared out of dead sockets, probably a master artisans work of matching glass eyes with real ones he suspected. Ruth, he realized, had been a knockout. No wonder Helen had been so close to her.

Lifting the head gently with one paw Madam Xiùme handed Killian a worn book it had been sitting on. He opened it, thumbing through several pages. "Hebrew. Paw written copy. A Torah I think. It is the Jewish Holy Book. I can't read Hebrew so I might be wrong but I doubt it. This was her most precious possession?"

"So is holy book. Not know. Watcher see her with all time." Taking back the book she carefully arranged the sightless head back into place, pressing several out of place hairs down with her fingers. "Helen sit beside friend forever, like say wished could happen. They be happy." Picking up a small lacquered box waiting beside the minks head she opened it. Twin glass eyes stared out at Killian. Helen's eyes. Truly a master artisan had created those eyes. Turning to another shelf she pointed to an open fan. "Geshia go there. She hard catch. Fight hard. I lose two helper before drug work. Already pelt being tanned. Be shipped New Amsterdam three week. Buyer he very happy. Have Congressman customer want for mistress. Kiss please."

Acting enamored he did just that.

Sniffing the air deeply Xiùme sighed, leaning against Killian. "You smell better anything world. Now you wait. I change. Cover mink. I have drug in Helen food. After she eat she not able think right. I show her Ruth. I show her you, I and Ruth." Xiùme giggled in an odd, mad sounding way. "I tell her how we prepare her. What happen to her. So tonight Helen see what happen Ruth. See Ruth on me. Drugs make not care. She want to play, not really understand. We have much fun Helen. I do this before but never with man I love." Kissing Killian she vanished out of the trophy room, most likely to a back bedroom.

Regretfully he turned his back on the forever staring mink, following his hostess out of the room. If everything went well they would escape, the three of them. Illie knew where a flying boat was kept that would hold them all, though its range was limited. With luck they could be in the air before midnight. If not then many pelts would be tanning by then. Taking a sip of Doctor Shi's pain drug he returned to the living area. He carried

another drug with him of course. It would be up to him to insure Madam Xiùme received it. That part he knew would be easy. Slight of paw was in every good card sharks book of tricks, and in the trenches cards hadn't simply been a game. It was survival. If he was extremely lucky...

Xiùme had left him the main room while she went to change, a surprise for him she explained as she had vanished. What kind of surprise he wondered, could exceed the wearing of another woman's pelt as if it were ones own. He decided that looking around might be useful, perhaps he could find something incriminating some police agency could use. What he eventually found was Xiùme's own hunting journal. It was one of eight he noted from notes on the flyleaf. Though he could read Chinese fairly well there just wasn't more time than to insure himself that yes, this was what he thought it was. For the other seven volumes, most likely they were in her study or bedroom.

Almost too soon his hostess returned, now wearing a black silk gown that hid everything. He noted that she had taken time to brush her, no Ruth's fur he corrected himself. It brought a shine to it that highlighted her own natural beauty. She smiled in delight at his look. "I promised you. I deny you nothing ever. Tonight last time I wear clothing here. You want, you do. I never resist anything. Anytime. In these walls I be your slave all my life. I love you Wilde Parker. I love you all my heart. I have many pups for you. I never love anyone before. Not know why I fall love with you. You different. You kind. You powerful man Wilde Parker. Powerful man."

A car driving through the gates at that moment brought an end to her vows of love and a different expression to the wolfhound's face. "Helen go soon" Xiùme giggled as she eased up beside him. "She think she love my man. I show different. We play all night, then before sunup they take. All things ready." She pointed at a silver bound black box sitting in front of a wide couch. "I have drug ready make sleep for day. We put hound there, set on drive. Illie take us to plant. They come hour later. We watch process like last time. You I, we go America. We see Helen, Ruth family. Offer sorrow. Maybe even hunt. Both have many sister, brother. Maybe good pelt we take Jersey Hall. Make much money. Now act nice. Not want product know. Too tired fight again today."

When Xiùme turned towards the door Killian had an instant flash of panic as he remembered the plan. He hadn't expected Xiùme to move quite this quickly, had expected her to wait another day at least. There was no way to warn Chi, Sheen or Shazeer. They would end up processed because he had made a mistake. What was worse he had left his journals at the Hall. They would simply be lost. It would be all he could do to save Helen. Illie couldn't show up at the Hall without her mistress. There would be instant suspicion and Xiùme he knew had no phone.

Helen walked in before Illie, the silent Arctic Fox carrying a large cloth shoulder bag that she carefully sat on the black box Xiùme had indicated earlier. "You may go Illie" Xiùme ordered. "Sleep. Will call when need again." Illie bowed in a manner only the truly subservient could manage before leaving the house. "Now show special rock?" Xiùme asked Helen. Killian noted that the wolfhound was an excellent actress, she actually seemed excited. Of course she is you idiot he realized, she needs to see how to best display Helen's head on that stone his battered mind reminded him. Walking over he watched attentively as the hound withdrew her prize.

"It's from right below the extinction layer" Helen explained as she pulled out a heavy cloth wrapped object with both paws. "We call it that because there are no fossils above that layer for some time, though we don't know why yet." Carefully setting her stone on the bag so as not to scratch the expensive looking box Helen unwrapped her prize. Her head would fit easily on that thing Killian observed as the stone came into view. With plenty of room for Ruth's as well. It shook him that the thought carried no more emotion to him than observing the size of a melon.

Carefully brushing the flat stones surface Helen took out a small wooden rod. "See here Xiùme? This is clearly a reptile, but nothing like anything in the books. It stood on its hind legs and though only one arm is evident, they were twice as long as anything near this size." She ran her pointer over to where a skull lay.

"Note the braincase. As you can clearly see it is three times normal volume for a creature of this size. There is nothing like this in the books. This has to be the first evidence of this species ever found. It may be a century before we stumble across another like it. Possible two."

"Was intelligent?" Madam Xiùme asked, leaning over the box for a better view in spite of herself. Killian mentally shrugged. Now was as good a time as any and she had just presented him with an excellent target. Reaching into a pocket of his jacket he withdrew a hypodermic. It was the one that Shi had prepared for him for when the pain was too great. It would, he had been told, knock him out for a day. It was the same drug they used on product he had explained, so he could assure Killian that it was not only effective but fast. Very fast. Removing the needles protective cover he readied himself. Helen had to live. His books be damned, maybe he could call the hall from the harbor and warn the three girls but above all he would not let another woman he loved die.

"At least seven times more intelligent than anything its size" Helen was explaining as Killian plunged the needle into Xiùme's right buttock.

Xiùme didn't scream, she only yelped a bit and smiled. Then she giggled and told Helen that her husband to be had just stuck a pin into her buttocks. "I see he like give pain" she laughed. "I need learn like pain yes Wilde?" At those words Killian pressed the plunger to its base and then she did react. "What you do?" she asked, rubbing her injured posterior as she turned to face the bulldog.

"Something Shi gave me" Killian answered, holding up the empty hypodermic. "Its going to make you so hot you'll never cool down."

"Yes" the wolfhound agreed hungrily. "I your slave. Anything..." She yawned, looked puzzled then looked at the needle. "What in that" she slurred, swaying slightly even as Helen stood up behind her.

"Your going to hell Xiùme. As product" Killian admitted. "Say goodbye."

"No.. I yours. I love..." Xiùme collapsed, caught from hitting the floor by Helen.

"Stupid woman" the hound observed as she laid the unconscious huntress down.

"Not stupid Helen. Anymore than you or I would be in such a situation" Killian corrected. "She is a woman who believes that she is in love. And I'm just like her in that respect, though I know I'm in love. I'm doing stupid things for the same reason she just did. I love you. You already know that Chi loves me, in doing so she's putting her own life and her sisters life on the line. I don't know why Shazeer agreed. And Illie? She just scares me. Now help me get her out of this then get undressed. Xiùme has to be in your clothes or they may suspect."

"I have to find what's left of Ruth" Helen argued, until the robe fell away and she backed off, whimpering.

"Honey, its okay. Help me get this off Xiùme first. Then we'll search this death trap. At least I know where Ruth's head is, and her torah." He paused. Finally noting the tears running down Helens face, turning her facial fur into a mat of shiny hairs. "Go check her bedroom Helen" he snapped, his harsh voice breaking the hound from her shock. "I'll get this. But remember that we have to hurry. We don't have much time at all." He glanced up at a beautiful carved grandfather clock. Well after nine PM. They had to be out of here in less than three hours.

After Helen left he rolled Xiùme over onto her stomach. What he found made him grimace. Xiùme's mink bodysuit had been laced so tightly that her own skin was pressing out from between the cords. A quick inspection warned him that those cords were sinew. Most likely made from the poor mink herself. Cutting them was now out of the question. Fumbling, he began untying knots.

Later that evening, too near midnight for Killian's taste the two, carrying two large suitcases slipped out of Xiùme's house. Killian gently placed both bags into the trunk of Xiùme's waiting car while Helen jumped into the vehicles back seat to escape the cold and building storm. Assured the bags were safe he closed the trunk and followed her.

"Wondered how long you two would take" Sying said in greeting. He had a rather large firearm held against Illie's head. "Where is Xiùme?"

Feeling absolute defeat Killian pointed at the snow dusted box he and Helen had set on the drive minutes before. "There. Drugged. Asleep" he answered dully, noting that the bull was speaking Cantonese not Mandarin. Sying wanted Helen to understand what was happening. Wanted her to know he had lost. That she was lost.

"Very effective plan. So the great huntress is finally hoist by her own petard. You realize that without her special mark they will wake her, or when they see her ring. If you took her ring they will note its absence by the worn fur around that finger and suspect. Jewelry is never taken off product until it is dead. She will come after you like fire. I believe that she truly does love you, though for the life of me I cannot understand the attraction you have to women."

"She's wearing the necklace she gave me and my class ring" Helen answered, her own voice showing defeat. "And my clothing. I have her ring" she held up her paw, showing the heavy gold ring that once graced the wolfhound's finger.

"I see. Then this will be the last of Madam Xiùme. I must make certain to purchase her pelt when it is ready. It will make an excellent floor rug. Oh, I must say Helen that you make Xiùme's clothing look wonderful. Very tight, it shows everything. You must be freezing in this weather. Illie, start the car please. I believe that dear Helen needs the warmth."

"What now" Killian asked. "We get processed alive?"

Sying seemed to ponder that question. "Illie please do not attack me until I have explained. Then if you want, you can try." He carefully put his gun away before answering. "Don't be an idiot brother. If I turn you three over then Xiùme is saved. If she's saved then I can't marry Shazeer. Not only that, there will be an investigation. I will assure you that neither panda can resist our style interrogation, which involves slowly removing the pelt while alive and awake. Nor can I in any way shield them from such. They would quickly implicate Shazeer. I can't have that. I could no more shield her than them. The airport Illie and hurry. There isn't much time. Besides" he continued. "I seem to have broken Doctor Shi's neck a few hours ago."

"You broke his neck? Killian asked, stunned.

"Well you see it was like this. I went to your rooms to talk with you. Shi was already there. He knew you were gone, knew you really were not much of a danger to him by now and he wanted Chi. Poor Doctor Shi had a hunger for sweet Chi. He told me several times that she would make a wonderful pet, once correctly trained. Chi had resisted his advances of course, she only turned thirty a few weeks before you arrived and Shi hadn't the funds yet to buy her contract. I arrived just as Shi threw Shazeer across the room. She had tried to protect Chi, being as she was your property. Even if only temporarily. Pity, it seems our good doctor had a rather nasty fall down the main stairway. Everyone saw him fall. I doubt anyone knew his neck was broken before he fell. Such a loss."

"You don't seem bothered much about it" Helen remarked.

"Why should I? The stool is shattered. With Madam Xiùme soon to be my doormat it will not return in my lifetime. I will have Shazeer. I will have both panda sisters willingly, whom many have dreamed of owning and I will have all your money. I will be a rich man in many ways now."

"So why do I think your not telling me something" Killian asked.

Sying shrugged. "Maybe because I'm not. Just wait until we get to the airport. Oh, your going to need these" he handed Helen a bag that clinked. "Doctor Shi's pain drug. Enough I hope. It was all I could find. Where will you go?"

"Australia" Killian answered. "There are no Hall's in Australia."

"Not yet but there is a hunter. Stay away from the West coast. Saggath is very effective. We get very fine roo pelts from him almost weekly. You will need a plane though so I have arranged one. Have you any money?"

"Everything in Xiùme's safe. Illie gave us the combination. We're taking her with us."

"You better. She's a fixture with Xiùme. When Xiùme goes missing she's going to be number one target for our investigators. You couldn't have gotten to Xiùme unless Illie let you. She is not just a driver, she is a trained assassin. Xiùme's private bodyguard. They will flay her alive, very slowly. Then toss her still living body to the sewer rats. Still living because I have no fear she will break. Like I said, stay away from the West coast." He paused to look out the snow streaked windshield a moment before turning back to the two. "I warn you that word will eventually get out. They won't believe you were really dying Killian Whitehall. Not if they ever discover who you really were. I will do what I can to shield you both from that happening. Your goddess of the green eyes won't be safe alone if that happens and I do owe you debts. I'd suggest Canada, there are no longer any Hall's in that nation thank's to those red coated Mounties of theirs but it is too close to her home grounds. I'm sorry Killian. I truly would have liked to have known you longer."

"How did you know my name" Killian asked. Privately he was awed at how calm he felt. Perhaps it was the drug in his system. Perhaps it was simply his illness affecting him. More likely it was simple shock.

Sying smiled as he pulled a badly folded magazine out of his jacket, tossing it back into the bulldogs lap. "I ran across this. Its what brought me back early. You tore up the Prussian revolution rather well I think. Were you there?"

Opening the folded magazine Killian nodded. It was a copy of The London Illustrated Political Progress Weekly, the issue with those pictures of Princess Elizabeth in her bathing costume that had caused such a stir. "I remember this. Too bad about the fire in their printing rooms. Set them back two months before the following issue. Yes Syng. I was in Prussia for a while. One night just after those sham trials started I was roused out of my bed, my room searched, my notes taken. Then I was thrown out with the rest of my non-Prussian reporter clan. Ordered out of the country 'or else.'" He touched Helen's paw lightly. "Reporters don't like 'or else' threats. I lost a lot of good friends to that dachshund so I've no love for Prussia or anyone from there. Wouldn't mind putting a bullet in every one of those self styled new order heads. Writing that article was a labor of revenge, not love. I'm surprised you found that though. Its years old."

"This is China" the bull reminded Killian. "A magazine will pass through thousands of paws before it is lost. There are so few who can afford such luxuries that we, the ones who can afford them, normally leave them for the less fortunate. The South gate Illie, then left to where two twin engine aircraft wait."

"May I at least know your plan before you kill me" Killian asked.

Sying laughed. "I've read the Evil Overlords Manual Killian. It is required reading in my family. If I were going to kill you my answer would be no. Then I would have shot you in the heart and the head. Can you pilot a plane?"

"Of course."

“And Helen?”

“No” the younger hound admitted. “I’ve never even been in an aircraft. We arrived by boat. Our equipment was very bulky.”

Sying glanced to Illie. “Can you fly?” he asked softly.

“No” the fox replied and Helen shivered at the sound of that voice. She had never heard Illie speak before, what she heard sounded like a ghost’s voice. Soft, hollow. A sound of Death frozen several times over.

“Unfortunate. You had best hope that you live long enough my brother, because I’m taking my pilot with me. I gave you Shazeer for long enough. Too long I have discovered. I will raise your child as my own, else face her wrath. A woman angered is more dangerous than any living thing I have found. What is it about you that has women ripping their heart out at your sight? Are you some kind of mage? Never mind, she begs to go with you as does Chi. Sorry but I won’t let you vanish with either of them. Park next to the closer plane” he ordered. “Besides, these aircraft can only carry four each.”

When the car stopped all four stepped out. Illie quietly went to the car’s back with Helen, opening the trunk. “There’s something wrong” Sying whispered as he pulled out his weapon. “Shazeer should be greeting us.”

Quietly Killian matched the bull’s move, sniffing the cold air as he armed his luger. “Ferrets” he whispered. “Ten, twelve at most.”

“Pion’s men. Damn it. I thought I killed all the guards. Must have missed one. I’m slipping. You go left I’ll...”

“Do nothing” that ghost voice finished. Illie stood beside Sying, having sat the bag she carried onto the icy cold tarmac. Beside Killian Helen stood, holding her somewhat smaller but fatter bag close to her chest.

“There are at least ten. Perhaps twelve” Killian informed the fox, awed as she slipped out of her driver’s uniform. What was under that uniform was sleek, deadly and unexpected. “That much metal must be heavy” he observed.

“It is woven wire. It is nothing. Ten are nothing. Twelve are less. Wait for my return.” Then the fox simply vanished into the falling snow as if she had never existed.

“How...” Killian started to ask. “I was looking right at her.”

Sying simply shrugged. “Xiùme brought her back from Xiamen. All I know is she was taught by the best Chinese and Nippon assassin’s money could buy. I was boasting when I told her she could try. I’ve seen her take out three men with firearms and hardly move a muscle. Or seem that. I would not have survived a second unless she wanted me too. When Shazeer told me this was her plan I knew it would succeed.”

“She’s Chinese? She doesn’t look Chinese” Helen whispered.

“Hawaiian I think. Perhaps Samoa. One of those islands. Taken as a child. Someone decided she’d make a better body guard than a bed toy. Whomever it was I can only hope she never finds him, because he is seriously dead.”

“Why is that” Killian asked.

Sying looked around, searching for who knew what before he answered. “She turned against her owner. That means she broke her training. I’ve been told that is impossible, yet I’ve just seen it. Someone like that, without a master. Without a purpose. You might as well throw dynamite into a petrol tank. Killian. When I arrived and found Shi in your room he was boasting that you would not be back all night because Helen

would be processed. I knew that meant you would have to escape tonight so I took your women and your things. Your things are in the first aircraft. Your women. I keep them."

"And welcome to them" the bulldog sighed. "I can't keep up with them, couldn't even on my best day. They are going to send you to an early grave. A happy one, but an early one."

Sying nodded sagely. "Better to die young and happy than old and... Someone is coming."

Seconds later Shazeer ran up and leapt into Syng's arms. "Safe. We are all safe" she bubbled, seemingly trying for all her worth to strangle the bull in her grip, and doing a fair job at the effort. "She saved us."

"Is she hurt" Helen asked.

"I am well" Illie answered from beside Syng as she picked up her bag. "There were twelve. They are no more. We must leave. Now."

Sying managed to peel Shazeer off himself for a moment. "As the lady says. Where there are twelve there will be more. I will go West, you will go South. It will further confuse any followers."

As they ran to the waiting planes Killian called to Syng "What about the owner. Won't he be mad when his planes don't come back?"

"Pion suffered a serious accident" the bull called back as he continued to the second plane, still carrying his Fennic. "He seems to have eaten a dagger. I am afraid that it did not much agree with his digestion. Now hurry. More men will come."

Killian stepped over half a dozen bodies to gain access to the aircrafts open hatch. He glanced around as he lifted Helen into the waiting aircraft but no other figures were as yet apparent. Glancing at the dead ferrets he saw how they had died. Each one he noticed, had his throat slashed. Illie he decided was a woman he did not want to anger. While the fox preceded him into the craft he ran to the main wheels, yanking free both sets of chocks and tossing them into the aircraft before joining the two women. He found Illie sitting in the co-pilots seat, already starting the port side engine. "I thought you said you can't fly" he commented as he slipped into the pilots seat, noting that Helen had found a place in one of the crafts two other positions. She was, he realized, wide eyed and still holding the bag containing Ruth's remains tightly against her. Helen was rocking slightly as she softly sang some song. *'She's finally losing it'* he realized.

"I can not fly" Illie agreed. "I can however pilot a plane. I can not fly as I have no wings." Coughing once the port engine caught, spinning up with a roar as Illie turned her attention to the starboard engine.

"This is a German design" Killian noted as he pulled his straps tight. His head was beginning to hurt again and the engines were not helping. Along with that the world outside his cockpit window was beginning to brighten, changing colors even as he watched. White snow was electric purple, black was dark green. Quietly he took another draft from the dark red bottle that contained Shi's pain drug. Though the world soon stopped brightening the colors continued changing.

"Japanese make" Illie was explaining when he again turned his attention to her. "They made hundreds. Pion obtained four. We have a seven hundred fifty mile range with full load. Maximum. You will chart our course? I have never flown outside of China."

"When we're in the air yes. Where too?"

"Spontoon. I would like to see my family again."

"Spontoon it is then. Wherever that is. Lets get this baby in the air."

With a roar of raw power the Japanese built Junkers Ju 86D started down the frozen runway, her twin sister only seconds behind. As they passed an open, brightly lit warehouse several figures ran out. They were too few and much too late. By the time a car could start down the runway Sying's plane was already airborne, Shazeer turning hard right into a Westerly course while Killian maintained a South-South-Eastern course.

"I will help Helen when we are on auto-pilot" Illie told the bulldog as they climbed for altitude through the building snowstorm. "Before she slips into madness and is beyond my reach. Do not touch anything until your fit passes. It is dangerous for you now. Killian. You never understood your draw to women did you."

"Nope" he admitted. "Thought it was my manly ways."

"It is not. Your body is throwing out such a heavy cloud of mating scent that even I am affected. Which should be impossible. It is a scent that demands a woman to mate with you. I believe that your illness is responsible. That your body is attempting to pass your bloodline to as many as it may."

"And your only barely affected?" Killian asked. "This is a tiny place we are in."

"I am having some difficulty" Illie admitted. "It helps that I was made barren. A part of my training. It was determined that going into season would make protecting my owner difficult."

"So Helen really isn't in love with me then" he sighed as the Junkers passed two thousand feet.

"She is very much in love with you Killian Whitehall. As is Chi. Those others only came to you because of your scent. She was in love with you before she met you. Ask her about that. You must know."

"You know an awful lot about her" Killian noted.

"It is my profession. To know all things about those who are near the one I protect. Madam Xiùme thought to make Helen fall in love with her. She could not, for Helen was already in love. She mentioned you twice in conversation before you came. Her words were those of one in love. Not one discussing an unknown.

They broke five thousand feet before Killian reacted. "But. We never met. Its impossible to fall in love with someone without knowing them."

"You are a famous man Killian Whitehall. She read of you extensively. I believe it is your words that opened her heart. I have read many of those words to better understand Helen. You are a great man Killian Whitehall. Had you not been struck down you would have changed many things. As it is you have affected all who read your words."

"Even you" he asked softly as the medication caused him to start to drift.

"I came to you with my plan. Did I not?"

"Yes... Yes you did."

"Now sleep Killian Whitehall. I will attend to your true love. I will save her for you. Not because of your scent. But because of your words."

"Aye-aye Captain" Killian managed to reply, removing his feet and paws from the controls. He relaxed, letting the merciful drug draw him back into his own mind. Even as the aircraft reached its cruising altitude his mind faded back to old memories.

Chapter Eight

Killian lay helpless in the Junkers belly, squeezed into a makeshift bed. Around him were boxes, barrels and crates of Sion's cargo. Most was probably illegal, like the two twenty gallon barrels of virgin catnip oil Helen had found, by the simple matter of spilling some on herself. Some of the boxes they couldn't open, not without shifting cargo and thus disrupting the planes center of balance. None of the containers they had managed to open had carried aircraft parts so now they were on South Thomas island, an out of the way little spit of land known more for its laid back attitude than high technology. Still somehow Illie had found a mechanic to work on their ailing port engine while he laid helpless. His right side now completely paralyzed after an attack the evening before. As always Helen tended him. Never smiling, never laughing. It was as if she were a wooden puppet, though whatever Illie had done had brought her back from the edge of madness the fox had warned him that Helen would have to complete that trip alone. Apparently she had meant the trip to sanity, though could anyone who had experienced what they had ever again truly be called sane? He was certain that the answer would always be no. Now that she was safe he could only hope that she would break out of it, but there was nothing he could do.

Illie came in, nodded to him then picked up one of the barrels of catnip oil. "I have found a buyer" she explained before leaving. Soon she was back, the second barrel left with her. A buyer on South Thomas Helen explained a little later, meant Emperor for Life Bubba Joe Bob Willy Two Toes Junior. He loved too party and he absolutely loved felines and he loved what catnip did to them and himself. Which was odd because Bubba was supposed to be a full blooded ram. Still it was money, and though they still had plenty the island hopping route he had plotted would take another two or three days to get them to Spontoon. Fuel out here was expensive. So were parts and mechanics.

"What's her name" Helen asked a little while later. She was speaking English now, slowly combing his fur into odd, seemingly random patterns. She was still completely emotionless he noted.

"Who's name" he asked.

"You first love."

"Babbet. Babbet Marie LeBatelier. She was a French poodle. Not much of a looker, but like you she had eyes a man could drown in and never care." A flash of gold reminded him Helen was still wearing Xiùme's ring. Quietly he made no mention of it. He feared that to do so might push her still fragile mind the wrong way.

"She died?"

"In the Great War. Hun artillery. I couldn't even find her house. What else do you want to know."

"In your babbling you talked of her. Once you said 'Babbet likes you Helen.' Killian. Do you really love me?"

"As much as I loved Babbet. Helen I don't make jokes about love. Never. I love you. I want to live with you forever. This damn tumor won't let me so, if you don't mind, I want to experience as much of you as I can. While I can."

"Who do I tell. When you die I mean. Who do I tell?"

"Probably the London Thymes. My family and I haven't had any contact in almost twenty years now. Father wasn't happy his second eldest son didn't carry a gun and die honorable in the trenches like his older brother. We had a fight. Mother sided with father. I tried to make amends later, several times. Seems the blighters

finally decided to disown me. Except my sister. But Willy is always too busy exploring caves and climbing mountains and stuff to get involved in family matters much."

"Illie says we should name this plane. She says you have too. Is it important?"

"If Illie says something should be done, I think you better do it. For a name though. Odin's Eye. That's as good as any."

"There's something to that name isn't there."

"Yeah. But it'd take days to explain it. Besides I'm probably the only one left who knows the joke. Everyone else died at the Same or just after. Helen. I have to tell you something. Something very important."

"I'm listening" she whispered. It seemed to Killian that she was suddenly very far away. Still there, still listening, but somewhere from inside her mind. It worried him.

"When you get to Spontoon look for an Antonius Toews. von Antonius Toews actually. He's an old friend. Probably the best man I ever met. Always tried to be like him in my own way. Always trying to do something to make him proud of me. Take him that journal we've been working on. Give the others to any police you meet, it'll side track them away from him. But Toews. He gets the last journal. And something else. A bottle of good bourbon and my luger. He'll understand."

"All right Killian. Antonius Toews. Your last journal, a bottle of Bourbon and your luger. Do I give myself too him as well."

There was a twinkle in her eyes, the first in a long time. "You do and I'll kick that beautiful tail of yours around your ears. Toews a fine man. You can trust him with your soul. I mean that. But don't try to give yourself to him. I think that it would embarrass him."

Helen leaned over Killian, her long hair cascading over him like a dry soft waterfall as she kissed him. "No man will ever touch me again" she promised him. "Does this have anything to do with those words you keep saying in your sleep?"

"What words" Killian asked.

"It seems these stars too do darken" she answered.

"Antonius's last words to me" Killian explained. "He was on the stand in the dock at his show trial. That's a mock trial to you backwards American's my love. He was a dead man and everyone knew it. I was in the audience sitting not too far from him. They wanted me there because of my reputation. They thought that I would tell the world that everything was open and above board. Kangaroo court it was. Anyway, he was giving his speech to the court when he saw me. For some reason he paused a bit. Then Antonius made a reference to an old story of mine about Gallipoli. He turned to me and said 'It seems these stars too do darken. Were there but one to relight them.' I replied, um.. It's been a long time. 'I have with me oil, it shall be done.' About that time some tin pot teenager with a club dry gulched me. I woke up in a prison cell. Then I was tossed out the next morning with orders to get out of town by sundown." He grinned, a feral look. "Didn't, von Toews was too important. He still had so much useful life ahead of him. You know you never leave a friend behind if you have a chance."

"I think I understand." Helen seemed to pull back a little more from where she had been. Killian noted that more light seemed to be returning to her eyes. "I will love no man but you Killian James Whitehall. Though I live a thousand thousand years I will love no man but you. Forever" she promised.

"Don't say that" Killian begged. "Don't go through life alone."

"Not alone then" she agreed. "I will grant you that one wish my love. I will not live alone my love. But if I ever do find someone it will never be a man. No man but you will ever have my heart this way. No man will ever again have what you have had from me. This is not a promise Killian. This is an oath. I may love only one man in my life. I chose you long before I met you."

"Well at least Toews's safe from you then" Killian laughed weakly. "Love. He lost his family in Prussia. Parents, brothers and sisters. Boy never married so he was spared that. My friends tried to help them but..." He closed his eyes. "There were so many solders. So damn many solders. Don't talk to him when you see him, not about that. There's only one way to tell him that isn't going to hurt him. I don't want to hurt someone who did so much for me. Still I have told him what I can in that last journal. Never tell him I said that though, it would anger him. Possible a great deal."

A smile came to Helen's face, bringing light back into her soul. "You're a fine hound Killian James Whitehall. A damn fine hound. Your also the dirtiest old hound I ever met. I have to go out to Illie now, she's waiting with painters. You sleep now. I left your pain killer by your left paw." She kissed him again. "I love you" she whispered as her hair drew across his face, a sweet scent even after days without a real bath. Soon he was asleep.

When Killian again woke the world was cloudy. His eyesight wouldn't clear and he could see nothing but greys. A roar of the aircrafts engines was all he could hear. "Helen?" he called. She was with him so quickly that he knew she must have been within arms reach.

"Worse?" she asked, smoothing his fur with her fingers.

"Going blind" he admitted. "All I see are greys, everything is cloudy."

"Your voice is weaker too. Is there anything I can do?"

Killian thought a moment. Most likely the next time he fell asleep he'd never wake and as Helen said, he was a dirty old hound. Besides, his body was certain as to what it wanted. "What's our altitude?"

"Eight thousand five hundred, headed directly for Spontoon. We should be there in an hour or so."

"I'm going to miss you" he admitted. "But there's one thing I want to do before I can't anymore."

"Anything my love. Anything."

"Ever hear of the Mile High Club?"

Chapter Nine

Spontoon's airport radio crackled with an emergency call. Though spoken with a woman's voice, at this airport that was more the norm than any European would believe. "Mayday Mayday Mayday. This is Odin's Eye outbound from Barker island. I am declaring a Mayday. Spontoon Control, please answer."

In the tower a portly groundhog snatched the microphone out of a surprised young canines paws so quickly the hound counted to assure himself he still had the same number of fingers. "Spontoon Airport to Odin's Eye. We read you five by five. Nature of your emergency?"

"We have two dead engines, at angels eight and gliding. Approximately eight miles West of your position."

"Land or water" the groundhog asked as he hit the crash button.

"Land. Twin engine Junkers Ju 86D. Last out of Barker island. My pilot thinks they sold us contaminated fuel."

"What the hell is a eighty-six doing out here. It hasn't any real range" the old male growled as he grabbed another phone, quickly snapping orders to those who answered. Below him controlled chaos ruled as crash cars rolled. Meanwhile his trainee, having realized what was going on busied himself clearing traffic from around the runways. "Let me speak with your pilot" the groundhog snapped into the microphone.

"She only speaks Cantonese" came the reply.

"Well I don't, and Thomas here don't either. All right then you translate. Wind from the South South-East at twelve, gusting to nineteen. Visibility oh hell there you are... Runway length is..."

Odin's Eye almost fell out of the sky as Illie traded altitude for speed, lining up with an unmoving runway as best she could with a semi-responsive aircraft. One that seemed to have the gliding characteristics of a brick. With an anvil chained to it. She fought the earth's constant desire to pull them out of the sky as Helen translated information for her. Wind speed, direction, runway length, overrun distance.. "Need ambulance for Killian" she snapped at her impromptu radio operator, recovering as the right wing suddenly dipped in a downdraft. It wouldn't be until the plane rolled to a stop before the arctic fox would stop gritting her teeth. This was her first dead stick landing. She fervently hoped that it would be her last.

Two days later on a rain swept afternoon Helen was woken from her vigil at her husband's side. "We'd like to talk to you about your cargo" a uniformed tabby said to her.

Helen looked up from her chair beside Killian's bed, her green eyes long ago gone red from crying. "My husband is dying. I'm not going anywhere. Can't you just wait until he passes?"

"Normally yes miss, but yer pilots just vanished. If she could do that from ah police station interrogation room I'd hate to think what you could do."

"I can do nothing. My husband is dying. I am going nowhere." Helen pressed her unconscious husband's paw against her face, staring at the officer.

For a long time nothing happened. Finally the tabby nodded. "I'll be outside." He turned and left, a haunting image of dark green eyes judging him. He wasn't much happy at the verdict he thought he'd seen in them.

Not too much later Helen stepped from the room, her sealed and bulging students bag held in both paws. "What are your questions" she asked hollowly.

"I'm sorry" the tabby admitted. "Wasn' right for me tah bother you then. He's gone?"

"He is with Ruth and Babbet. They will help each other. Your questions?"

"Some. Your passport says Helen Sneed yet you claim to be Mr. Whitehall's wife. Ahn some of tha that cargo's contraband here. You planning on going any further?"

"No. Destroy it as you wish. A friend of Killian's gave him that plane, all that cargo came with it. There wasn't time to change my passport as we were married only a few days ago on St. James Island. There wasn't time to empty the cargo as we were being chased."

"An tha smell of catnip?"

"There were two twenty gallon barrels in the cargo. Illie got rid of it. She said it was dangerous, that it should not come here. Killian agreed with her so she dumped it."

"Your husbands friend. He was a banker?"

"No. A hunter. A successful hunter. Quite rich he said."

"And tha plane? Its your husbands?"

"A gift to him yes. So that he might save my life. Illie's life. I guess that makes it mine now. So?"

"Nothing for now. Paperwork. Okay. You'll have to answer a ton of questions. They can wait, at least until after the funeral. We've got both your passports though his isn't important now. You do have your pilots passport?"

"She too was a gift officer. Slaves do not have passports. Though my husband and I, we freed her. We could not though conjure from the thin air a passport."

"Kuo Han?"

"China."

"Same difference. Explains the marking changes I suppose. Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. Is there a Synagogue or Buddhist temple here?"

"Both on Casino island, though tha Buddhist temple's tiny. I'll arrange someone to take you there. Anything else?"

"A bottle of good bourbon and the location of a Mr. Antonius Toews."

"Bourbon you can get in town. Inspector von Toews is here on this island in Police Headquarters. I'll explain to your guide. That it?"

"My application for asylum? I am pregnant and my life is forfeit should I leave these islands. I beg at least time for my child to be born. That I may leave him here where it will be safe. Once my child is safe my own life no longer is so important to me, though I have no desire to lose it. That is all I require. When I am done I will return. I will be available for your pleasure."

"Your application is in the Allthings paws Mam. Donno what they'll decide. They gotta hear your story, weigh all tha sides. I couldn't even guess at their answer. Thank you Mrs. Whitehall. Again, I'm sorry he died."

Sometime later a young male canine arrived. "I'm to escort you Mam" he explained to Helen. Nodding in acceptance, she stood. Still holding her bag tightly against her as they walked.

Chapter Ten

Helen had found the two Buddhist monks quite willing to handle her husband's funeral. Just as quietly she donated a hundred American dollars to their temple. It was the Jewish temple she most dreaded to approach. Yet anything less would be an insult to her friend. Holding her now heavy bag tightly she walked behind her guide. Someone though must have seen her coming she thought, or been warned as an elderly monk stepped from the doors as she approached the building's first step.

"You have need of this temple my child" he asked.

"I have brought my friend to be buried" she admitted, fighting to keep her heart from filling her throat. "Her name is Ruth Ester Leibowitz. I knew her for five years. I was to be maid of honor at her wedding. To my limited understanding she obeyed all your laws. I believe that Ruth was as a true daughter of Abraham as any woman could be. She was also my best friend. She was my.. My guide when I was confused. When I had trouble understanding the why of something."

"I understand. You have brought her ashes?" the rabbi asked, noting her bag.

"Not ashes. Nothing so clean as that. May we go inside? I am not Jewish but... Not outside. Not this. Please." Her voice cracked with her emotion, tears starting to drift from her eyes.

"You may enter. We are not so elitist that we ask a woman to stand in the sun. Or deny our house to any friend. Come daughter. Tell me this story I see burning in your eyes."

Helen followed him in, followed and when they were alone began telling her story. When she started removing certain things from her bag the priest said something sharply in Hebrew. As she continued he began a prayer. It took over an hour to tell her full tale. It took longer before the rabbi would let her leave. Even when she did he still had an ash grey pallor to his face. He had also refused her offer of money, the act surprising her. "Three days my daughter. Her funeral will be in three days. You will be there. May God curse those who did this."

"He doesn't have too" Helen answered, a bit more life in her voice now. She thought of the journals now in police paws and the one still in her possession. "My husband has already arranged that." Returning to her guide she gave the young hound a weak smile. "I need to buy the bourbon, the best on these islands. Then we must return to the police station and Inspector Von Toews please. After that I have to surrender for questioning." She felt much better now. Not only because her bag was a great deal lighter but because Ruth was now with her own people. She was where she belonged. Some great weight seemed to have lifted from her soul. For life now seemed more the worth living.

A bit more than an hour later Helen Whitehall stopped outside an unimpressive doorway. "This is his office?" she asked the officer who had guided her.

"Is. Doesn't like big fancy places he doesn't."

"Then if you will wait, I will not be too long." She turned her back on the native officer, opening and walking through the door with more courage than she would have had just two short months ago. What she found was vastly different than what her husband's hero worship had prepared her for. It was certainly a male's domain of course. She felt almost as though she were the first woman to enter this room in some time. Clutter was everywhere, though it seemed a well kept clutter. Across from her was a battered desk with an older Schnauzer behind it. To her left another native officer had started to stand from his. No her desk Helen realized with surprise, only to return to her chair at some subtle signal from the other. 'Toews,' she thought,

'I expected a God, yet he looks rather ordinary.'

Ignoring the native officer Helen walked to Toews desk, noting with pleasure that he rose to greet her. "You are Inspector Toews" she declared. It was not a question.

The hound raised an eyebrow, but then smiled and gave a slight bow. "Indeed I am, but you have me at a disadvantage dear Lady. Who is it that I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am Mrs. Helen Whitehall, Doctor of Palenotology. Late of China. American by birth." She hesitated, noting an odd expression cross the Inspector's face. No, eyes. It was mainly his eyes she decided. Reaching up from habit, she pushed her large round glasses back into position. "My husband charged me to complete one task for him. He also told me that, and I quote, 'von Antonius Toews is a gentleman. More than that, he is an honorable gentleman. You may trust him with your soul.' She paused, catching not only her breath but her courage. It had taken time to memorize those words. Time spent in the darkness at over eight thousand feet while her dying husband, with Illie's aid, guided her to the best safety he knew. She could see the hound look down at his feet, and then look back at her with a question on his mind. A question she could see, for which he already knew the answer.

"I see." Von Toews answered. "And your...your husband's name is...?"

"Killian James Whitehall. He held you in the greatest of esteem. You Inspector, appear to have been his only real hero."

She could see a stricken look flicker across the males face. "You say that in the past tense my Lady. He is dead then?"

"This morning. Of a brain tumor. He died under drugs so powerful that he had no way of knowing that I sat beside him."

Looking down at his paws again von Toews released a long, drawn-out sigh. "My condolences Lady. I had not been aware of his illness, or even his presence here. I wish I had known."

"My husband tasked me with one service. If you will. Please." She reached into the heavy cloth bag she had carried since entering college so many years ago, the cloth bag Helen's remains had been carried out of China in. She decided then that she would burn it as soon as she could. From it she withdrew her husband's last ledger, the one he had started after they took off. One which she had finished for him after he had lost his sight. "This he asked that I give to you, and only to you." She laid the book on the desk, adding to it the gold ring she wore. "And this. More importantly, above all things I was to give you these." She reached into her bag again, withdrawing a bottle of Bourbon and a heavy, well used luger. Setting them beside the book she fought back tears. "He said to tell you, 'They have been relit.' Killian promised me that you would know what this meant. Someday. Someday I wish you would tell me."

"When you are ready to hear it Lady, rest assured I will explain it all to you. You are staying here in the Islands then?"

"I have been offered a position teaching sciences to High School students. This job though depends upon the outcome of my request for Asylum. It is not a high-paying job but I will be near my husband and Ruth. Killian said that this would be a good place to raise our son. I trust my husband's advice."

von Toews looked up, quite startled. "Your son? Killian had a son? Is he with you? Is he all right?"

"Or a daughter. I am but a month or little more pregnant. Shazeer promised it would be a son. I do hope for a son but a daughter is just as welcome."

"I see. If your hope is fulfilled I, for one, hope in turn that he takes after his father. This Ruth, she is...?"

"She was a student. She became a friend, then more than a friend. Less than a lover. She will be buried in three days. Beside my husband. That is, all of her that I could bring out of China. That ledger will explain everything. Now if you please sir. I do not wish to waste more of your precious time. That and, well I must speak with several officials. It seems that the aircraft we were given to escape in was loaded with a cargo of interest to them. Good day to you Inspector."

"Until next time Mrs. Whitehall" the officer echoed. He watched in silence as she left, his door closing behind her.

The native officer, the other occupant of the room had watched the whole dialogue in silent amazement. Even by the standards of her relationship with Toews this was unusual.

"Sir? Hope yah don min my askin', but...what wuz that all 'bout?" Officer Katrina O'Tool asked.

Softly rubbing the spine of the ledger he had been handed von Toews looked to his partner. "A voice from my past Katrina. It seems to have been silenced" and here he waved the ledger. "It would appear it has not been completely silenced." And with that he sat down and began to leaf through his legacy.

Illie was waiting outside the Inspectors office for Helen. Still as silent, as frightening to Helen as ever. For all intents she could have been standing there since the dawn of time. "Your family?" Helen asked in Cantonese, for though Helen knew English and Arabic as well Illie spoke no other language.

"They were pleased to see me. They were not pleased as to what I am, but they accept me. Fully" that ghostly voice answered.

"So now what will you do."

Illie reached out, touching Helen's nose softly. "I will live with my family. I will learn the ways I was born to live." She dropped her paw. "I cannot be the woman I would have been Helen Whitehall. I will not reach for that. I will reach for peace. In truth though I will always be a woman of death. It is my place in this life. Should you need me I will know. I will come."

Helen's tail perked up just a bit more, there was at least some good news finally. "Is there anything I can do for you" she asked.

"Perhaps. Be my friend. I have never had a friend. I think I would like you to be the first." She thought for a moment, apparently somewhat confused. Something which obviously bothered her. "What religion do you follow" the fox finally asked.

"I was raised Southern Baptist. Ruth showed me Judaism. I think I'm somewhere between those worlds. Why do you ask?"

"I have no God. I thought perhaps. But no. I will accept the Gods of my childhood. Now we must speak with those who uphold the law here. I am certain that our words will not be pleasant upon their ears."

"There Illie, I know your right." Helen held out her arm. "Shall we dance?"

Illie slid her arm into Helen's. "I would be delighted."

Turning to her bewildered guide Helen managed a friendly smile. "Led us into the place of judgement. That we may slay those lies that are brought against us and nurture those truths we bring with us." His look of confusion was, to Helen, a delight. "We are to be interrogated" she rephrased. "Please take us there."

Nodding in understanding, though still a bit confused by her first words the young hound started off again, both women arm in arm following him.

Chapter Eleven

January 11th, 1936

Now on Meeting Island Helen Whitehall found herself standing in a small open arena alone. Her black and white striped prison issued clothing hung on her body like oversized pajamas, even so unable to hide her swelling pregnancy. It seemed though that bulldogs were fast growers, she only hoped that she would not be ripped to shreds by her sons birth. Before her on ancient carved stone steps sat those who were known as the Allthing. Between them and Helen sat two others. One was a female star nosed mole that had been involved in all her interrogations. One whom she knew only as Shiva. The other was one of the local priestess's, a calico. Helen was fairly certain that she had never met this particular priestess before, though she had met two others. With the ornate mask upon her face it was certain that she had no idea who she was. Within her body Helen could sense the life of Killian's child. Of all that existed outside her body, nothing.

Abruptly and without warning a middle-aged fox stepped out from behind a doorway, a heavy clipboard in his paws. Helen recognized him as the officer who had interrogated her for nearly a half a month. He was reading as he walked, gracefully bypassing both women sitting in his way without bothering to look up from his reading. Oddly neither moved a hair. Apparently both took for granted that the walking man would move around them.

"Mrs. Whitehall" the fox called, not looking up from his pages. "You are come to this Allthing in request of Asylum. Is this correct?"

"Yes sir" she answered, finding it difficult not to look at those ugly wiggling things on the moles nose.

"Would you like to expound upon that request?"

"Expound?" Helen asked. "By expound sir, I am to assume you mean again explain fully the reasons for my request."

"I do" he admitted.

"Very well sir. My life is instantly forfeit should the Brotherhood of the Boneless ever discover where I am. I cannot return home as the one who freely, for his own profit, threw my colleagues and I into their nest would insure my death. My death because I would bear witness against him should I discover just who he is. To my misfortune is that I do not know exactly whom this person is. As I am already known in the circles of my profession, hiding from him is impossible. I am with child. Though my own death would simply mean that I will rejoin my husband Killian the sooner, my child's life is more important than my own. I ask. No. I BEG that I be allowed to remain on these islands only until my child is born. Afterwards, should it be your decision I will return home. Home, where I will be dead quite quickly. My child though I would leave here. To be raised by a native family. Any native family. Raised as a native. With a native name."

"I see" the fox replied. He lifted a page, glancing to his right where the mole sat unmoving, other than those tendrils that was. "This Brotherhood. It is from them that your husband rescued you?"

"Illie rescued us" Helen corrected. "Killian was too ill by then to have rescued a snail. He was dying. It was Illie. And Sying, who went another way with his family."

"This Sying. He was a full fledged Brother of the Boneless?"

"Yes Sir."

"I see. Tell us Mrs. Whitehall. Why would a so called Brother endanger even a toeclaw in order to help you and your husband escape. Your entire story doesn't sound believable I am afraid."

"Why does any man do anything" Helen responded. "Perhaps for love. He was in love with his Fennic woman. When it was discovered what Killian and I did to Madam Xiùme she would have been skinned alive. In front of him with no hope of saving her even the slightest of pain. Maybe he was frightened of Illie as well. I consider Illie my friend, yet she frightens me even so. Or perhaps it was simply a whim. I do not know."

"So you claim to have no knowledge as to why an admitted foul criminal would help you. I do not understand. Still we will move on. About this cargo you brought with you. Were you aware of its contents?"

"No Sir." Helen wished for a glass of water but this was a trial. Her trial. A trial for her life, her child's life. She hadn't the courage to ask. "As I explained each time I was interrogated, what eleven times now? As I explained. We arrived and took off in less than ten minutes time. There was no time to inspect our cargo, or any care to do such. We did discover the catnip. Illie disposed of it. We searched when we had time those packages we could reach. None held aircraft parts, food or drink. Other than two ancient pots most likely looted from some grave I can recall nothing I would consider illegal. I still have no knowledge of whatever else was there. Whatever else we could not reach. Nor have I been allowed back to Odin's Eye since we landed."

Turning another page the fox clucked much as a chicken might. "Then you were unaware that there was a full case of absinthe. A drink which due to containing the hallucination thujone is illegal in this country."

Helen sighed. It was a complete rehash of her original interrogations up to including the star nosed mole Shiva. As far as she could tell the only difference was that Priestess and all those silent furs watching her. "I was unaware. If you read further you will discover that I gave permission for a complete search of Odin's Eye and the destruction of anything illegal. Anything."

Pages turned again as the fox reviewed his notes. "Yes, yes you did. I see that you also freely signed the required permission forms. So you still claim that you are not a smuggler?"

"Of course I am" the hound snapped. "I smuggled in my child didn't I? I smuggled in Ruths remains didn't I?" Helen had reached her breaking point. So many weeks and more of constant claims that she was a criminal. That her story was a fabrication. That in truth there was no danger to her other than perhaps Chinese law enforcement officers. Abruptly she no longer cared that she was standing before the only people who could save her life. "Listen you self rightist little snot nosed fox. I have had enough of your slanted accusations. Either charge me with a crime or not. Right now."

Unflustered the fox turned another page, completely ignoring his victims outburst. "Quite a large sum of cash aboard. Along with jewelry, gold and silver bullion. Even several pounds of loose gems. You state here that half of any value of your legal cargo is to go to this Illie. Why?"

"You know why" Helen snapped. "Read it to this Allthing yourself." In the time of her imprisonment Helen had shown no anger, no emotion at all. Now though she was angry. Her feet hurt, her throat was dry, she had a headache and right now she truly needed to find a restroom.

Opening one eye a bit wider than the other her inquisitor seemed to smile. "Very well Mrs. Whitehall." Turning his back on his prisoner the fox began to read. "Mrs. Whitehall states that without Citizen Illie Fishhunters assistance..."

He went on, while Helen stood trying to make sense of things. Illie's name was Fishhunter? That made her seem less threatening somehow. Her family were fisherman then. So much started to make sense about her strange friends capture. A fishing village would be easy prey for such creatures. Especially at certain times of the day. Lost in her thoughts she was caught by surprise when she heard her name. "Yes?" she asked.

"If you will follow the guard please" the fox instructed. "Your case will be discussed and decided. You will be brought back when a decision is made." Finished with his instructions the fox turned and left, leaving Helen with her judges. Left her to follow his instructions or not. Turning around the hound quietly followed her guard.

After Helen had departed a badger leaned forward. "Shiva" she asked.

"She has spoken nothing but the truth in my presence" the mole answered. Her words given in the native Spontoan language, not the English that had been spoken in Helen Whitehall's presence. "Were that she a liar. That I could stomach more than this truth."

"Anyone?" the badger asked. No paws were raised, no voices spoke. "Then we thank you for your service Shiva. You may return to your life. For now."

All waited until the mole had departed. Finally the badger spoke again. "Honored Mother. Your words upon this woman's future?"

Standing, carefully brushing straight her soft grass skirt the masked calico feline known as Dia-Kura prepared herself to answer. "Refuse her plea at your souls pain" she answered. "I will speak with her." Without another word she too left.

Having first been allowed to visit 'the ladies room' in an attached building, or was it simply another carved cavern Helen wondered, she had eventually found herself standing on a balcony overlooking Meeting Islands main town. It couldn't really be called a city, as Casino Island alone had ten times the population of this town. Still the view of both town and the busy harbor beyond was impressive, even soothing.

"It is fifty seven feet to the ground from this point" a gentle voice informed her in lightly accented English. "And few inches. There are heavily strewn volcanic borders below. You would not survive your landing."

Turning quickly in surprise Helen found herself facing the still masked priestess who had been in the judgement chamber. "How did you know" she asked.

"It is my place to know" Dia-Kura explained. "To the how, your body language was that of one making a fateful decision. Knowing where we are, it is simple to understand your thought."

Leaning back on the substantial iron railing Helen studied the smaller feline before her. "They don't believe me" she claimed.

"Do not be a fool Helen. They know all that was in your husbands words. They know what happened here not that many months ago. They know Helen. Do not take us for fools simply because we are not Europeans. We know. How painfully well do we know. You have simply placed a face upon that evil. A face we did not have. In true Helen, that face makes this evil the more frightening."

"If they believe me why haven't they done anything" the afghan protested.

Dia-Kura settled down on a round topped stone stool. One apparently designed for one wearing grass skirts. For a few moments she remained silent, then spoke softly. "We are a tiny nation Helen Whitehall. What would you have us do. Invade China with our military forces? I promise you, a single tiny freighter will hold our entire military might with much room to spare. We have sent photographic copies of your husbands books to every nation who has a presence upon our islands. Some nations are our enemies, others dangerous in the future. Yet we have shared. What else can we do?"

"I don't know" Helen admitted, crossing her arms under her swelling breasts. "I apologize. I am simply used to my nation. What we would do. I just guess that I wasn't thinking is all. Its so infuriating. Knowing so much, not being able to do anything about it."

"Such is the way of life" the priestess answered.

"Won't you at least take that mask off" Helen asked.

"I can not" Dia-Kura explained. "Until your case is resolved. It is ritual with my people that when one is judged, one see's not the face of those who judge. Even if that one is a known childhood friend."

Helen pointed back the way they had come. "They don't wear masks."

"Though they are Spontoon. As I am. They are not my people" Dia-Kura explained. "It is complicated. My people were brought here from Egypt. Other tribes were brought from other countries. Together we are Spontoon. Proud to be Spontoon. Yet we are not all of the same culture. Not yet. Perhaps in a thousand years."

"That explains the mask of Bast. But where is your sistrum Priestess."

Dia-Kura nodded as though in agreement. "You are well educated for an American" she admitted. "I am a priestess of Spontoon, not of Bast. Though she I follow. There are perhaps a thousand, even more Gods and Goddess's followed on Spontoon. This is not important to everyone. Only that those Gods and Goddess's who rule these lands are respected by all. Though we have no official religion, we reject those new ones of Europe and Arabia. I am as much a daughter of these islands as the High Priestess Huakava herself. I am also a daughter of Egypt. Most Ancient Egypt."

"I would not have jumped anyway" Helen abruptly admitted. "It is against my beliefs. Even were it not, my child deserves to make his, or her own choices in life. Death is not a choice I may make. Not yet."

Dia-Kura smiled behind her mask, her expression unreadable through the carved ebony. She had been afraid that Helen would jump. It was rare, but had happened. "Should you be allowed to remain in our lands, what will you do."

Helen leaned on the ornately twisted iron railing again, looking out over the harbor. "I would like to teach" she answered. "I haven't my Doctorate. That nightmare of a field trip was to help me finish my thesis. I would have been defending it in a month or two. Ruth would have been with me, holding my notes." Tears abruptly filled her eyes, causing the scene before her to waver. "I miss her. Dammit, I loved her. I just realized that Priestess. I loved her, and I never even got to tell her that."

Dia-Kura eased forward, placing one paw on Helens back. "Did she love you" the feline asked softly.

"Ruth?" Helen laughed, though she made no effort to shake off that touch. "Ruth was getting married. I was going to be her Maid of Honor. He's a good man. A scientist. A physicist, or close enough its no difference. They would have been happy together."

"And you?"

"Until just now I wasn't certain I was in love with her. I knew I was happy to be with her. I would most likely never have known. We would have remained close friends. Priestess, it is obvious that I am comfortable upon both trains. Had I met Killian elsewhere. Had he not been dying I would never have looked at anyone ever again. I would have been happy beyond my dreams. Why do you ask these things. They hurt to think about."

"I must ask questions" Dia-Kura explained. "You are being judged even now. Were you to remain here all your days. Would you marry again?"

"No. I gave an oath to Killian. I would never allow another man to enter my heart as he did. To touch me as he did. Oh no Priestess. I will not turn my face away from men, I simply won't break an oath I made. An oath

I am content to live with all the days of my life. Besides, Killian has told me that he is waiting for me. He and Babbet. I look forward so much to meeting her."

"Babbet is?"

"Killian's first wife."

"Ah. Then this makes sense. Ruth will not be waiting?"

Helen shrugged. "Killian told me that she has already been reborn to her family. He told me that she was very thankful for what I did, that in some future life we would be a couple. I know it sounds like I'm nuts or something. It sounds like I need to be institutionalized for my own safety. But Killian does talk to me. He wants to see his child born. When his child is born, when he has seen us at home together then he will withdraw. He will wait with Babbet for me to come. You can call me crazy, I don't care. But it takes a lot for him to remain here. Only my love lets him manage it. He is not a Ghost. He says that your lands will not allow such."

"They do not" the calico agreed. "Tell me American. Will you truly leave behind your child? To be raised by savages?"

"Yes, though in all truth I have yet to meet a native savage on these islands. European ones yes. Even then less than a pawful. There are more savages in my home town than in all Spontoon I think. Yes Priestess. If this Allthing of yours denies me I will leave without even seeing my child. Without even knowing that I birthed a boy or girl. Without even knowing that the child lives. Yes I will do this. All that can occur to me is death. A painful, messy death yes. But only death. That our child shall live is more important to me than my own soul. Wither our child is raised a simple fisher or some great statesman is unimportant. Only the chance of life."

Dia-Kura stepped back, moving away from Helen. "You have answered my questions. Now I will speak with the Allthing. What occurs Mrs. Whitehall is beyond my simple abilities. For I am only a simple Priestess. I rule nothing but my own heart." She paused, reaching up to touch her mask. "Yet. I would like to be your friend. No matter the answer that awaits you."

Helen watched the woman walk away, still fingering that onyx black mask of her's.

In Cipangu a black arrow streaked across everyone's sight, striking an unpainted wooden board near its center. Shattering it. No one clapped, no one cheered. All eyes simply turned back to the red over white dressed mouse as she selected her own arrow. This competition was one of dozens. Held once a year it was not often won by a mere Miko. Carefully the mouse set herself, drew back and released all in one smooth action.

A second painted slat of wood shattered.

Immediately over a dozen men scrambled onto the field. In what seemed like seconds they had moved the target board another fifty paces back and new boards were set. Just as quickly the field was again empty. Standing up to the line came an aristocrat. A Lord. He had not lost such a challenge in over fifty years. Today it looked as though he might just do that. His arrow flew, struck the board and spun it. It did not though shatter. Only now it lay at an odd angle. A great release of disappointment came from the watching crowd.

Eizawa Oharu stepped up to the line, pausing as the Lord spoke softly to her. Everyone saw her nod of agreement. Everyone wondered what it meant. Not quite silently new bets were made. Yen changed paws while movie cameras began to run again. The mouse silently set a second arrow into the sand beside her.

Drawing her bowstring back Oharu understood her target. She had slipped deeply into her meditation training for this competition, for her temple badly needed the money she would receive should she win. Releasing her shaft she moved smoothly, had released another before the first reached its target. It was a challenge. One given by the Lord. Before her first shaft had reached its target she was already turning away, the suns bright light bringing out the best of her mahogany dark fur.

All eyes watched as the first wooden slat shattered. Were stunned as the second also shattered moments after. When they turned back to the Miko who had defeated all comers it was to find the Lord bowing to her, offering his own bow. A bow worth more than the mouse had earned in her life. Honorably Eizawa Oharu accepted the bow, then offered her own to him. To the crowds great delight he accepted.

Several hours later Oharu entered the temple she served, bowed towards the altar as she had been trained too, then stepped into her indoor slippers. To the Priest she surrendered the majority of her winnings. Later tonight she would take the rest to her crippled father. This month the temples roof would be repaired, new stones would replace those worn away by many steps and Millet would not be on the menu for at least two months. Walking softly to the simple small room granted her she unstrung the ornate bow, placing it upon the wooden pegs that had once held her own bow. Done with that she sat down to meditate. Oharu was near twenty seven now. She had been a Miko longer than most. Now her heart was opening. She knew the signs. That weekend with the tourist. A weekend spent exploring the town, the fields. Her sketchbook filled with new scenes. More importantly a memory of a moment when she had realized her attraction to the tourist. No. It was time to cease being a Miko. It was time to move on. There were few Priestess's in this area. It would do well to add one more.

With her decision made she stood. There were duties to complete, there were rituals to observe. As soon as she could find the time Oharu knew she would explain all to the Priest. Perhaps even she might take his place. For he was ancient and had often expressed to her his desire to move on. It was a ritualized life of course. A life that Oharu had come to love. It was the peace, along with helping others that drew her. It was her life. She needed only to serve others. Nothing more.

Back on Spontoon Island Helen Whitehall sipped from the glass of water someone had brought her. It was long past sunset yet she still stood looking out over Meeting Island and the harbor beyond. Now new lights filled her vision. Spontoon was not as bustling as her college town, but a great deal more than that little town she had shopped in as a child. Still no one had come to her, had given her a decision. Her stomach growled, reminding her that breakfast had been a long time ago and that her child needed food.

"You will come with me please."

Helen dropped the glass in her surprise. She had barely time to look down when it shattered on the stones so far below. Red faced under her delicate fur she turned to apologize, to find herself looking into the face of a very old male serval. "Sorry" she stammered.

Raising one eyebrow the Serval walked to where he could see down. "I believe that you missed anyone of importance" he remarked. "Pity that. Actually Mrs. Whitehall" he continued as he turned around. "You are not the first. Why, I accidentally dropped a potted plant just last month. Pity I missed Franklin. I really was trying my best. Shall we go?"

Soon Helen again found herself standing before those who would judge her. Interestingly neither star nosed mole or the little Priestess were now evident. Still all the rest sat waiting, including that insufferable fox. Helen was aware that he had and was doing nothing but his duty. Still did he have to be so good at it? "You have decided" she asked, her voice again under control though under her fur her emotions raged like a typhoon.

Instead of her judges it was the fox who answered. "In regard to your request of Asylum Mrs. Whitehall. Under strict restriction it has been granted."

"Those restrictions" Helen asked, though they were unimportant to her. At the moment it was all she could do to stand so great was her relief.

"You may never step foot upon Main Island without a native guide. You may never step foot upon Sacred Island without a Priestess's invitation. Should you break any law of our nation you will be deported to your homeland. You must agree to find gainful employment. It is understood that you wish to teach? That you have been offered a position?"

"Yes."

Glancing down at his papers the fox read for a bit. "S.I.T.H.S. has several openings. This will be acceptable employment. Just as becoming a fisher woman would be acceptable should that be your choice. Finally, no national secrets that you may discover may be spoken of to anyone. You may not speak of that group you discovered in China, or why you were accepted as a refugee other than in the most broadest of terms. Is this fully understood?"

"Fully" Helen agreed.

"Then it is our great pleasure to welcome you to our nation, as an official refugee. Your child will, of course have multiple citizenship. His father being British, you being American and having been born here. This will of course make official paperwork a nightmare for our clerks." He actually grinned, the first emotion she had ever seen her interrogator express. "That is a delightful thought." His expression went neutral again. "If you will step outside one waits who will assist you in finding a place to live and work." He was just beginning to look up when Helen collapsed in a faint of relief.

Why thought Helen as she later met her guide, was it a surprise to find a certain calico Priestess waiting her. That ever present mask held now in her paws. "You have mask fur" Helen noted gently.

"Truth" Dia-Kura admitted. "I am Dia-Kura. Di or Kura is acceptable. Dia-Kura only if you desire to irritate me. I am a Priestess of Meeting Island. Normally only once or twice a year do I leave this island, that to attend ceremonies upon Sacred Island. It is my habit this, no other reason. I may change that habit or not. Mrs Whitehall I was only one of your judges. I would like to be your friend. Is this acceptable, or should another be found."

"You are more than acceptable" Helen agreed. "Under one condition."

"That being" the feline asked.

"You take time to brush your face before we leave. I wouldn't want a friend embarrassed by mask fur."

"If you will wait." Dia-Kura offered the mask to Helen, then entered a doorway. When she returned some long minutes later her fur was again smooth, other than strange symbols carefully placed within them. She accepted her mask, turning in the direction they had brought Helen from that morning. "You must be hungry. We will find a meal I think."

"Your... Dia."

Stopping the feline looked back towards the taller hound. "Yes?"

"Your naked" Helen blurted. "In public?"

Carefully Dia-Kura inspected her knee length grass skirt. "Mrs. Whitehall. This is all I have ever worn in my life. Other than a small scrap of cloth now and then. I think that there are many things you will have to become comfortable with. Shall we find food?"

"I bow to your superior knowledge" Helen agreed. "Until the day I am as smart as you. Then we cut cards to see who leads." Laughing the feline Priestess lead her charge out into her new world.

Chapter Twelve

This bright calm December day in Cipangu, a nation known as Japan to Europeans, had started much as each in the mouse's short life had since her ninth birthday when she began her training. Up before the sun, dressed in freshly scrubbed if rough clothing, followed by cleaning her temple before morning rituals. Though her life hadn't been completely happy of late, Eizawa Oharu could not find any reason to complain. For her father though crippled still lived. Her brother, though now a child in mind since the ferry accident that had taken their mother and siblings, still lived. As did she. Her Priest had agreed to her change in station as of the New Year. It was not for one of her station to ask more than that, not in Cipangu. Certainly not in the 1930's. Her life was simple, as she honestly desired it. Care for her crippled father, her nearly helpless brother and the temple. In time she would move completely into the temple grounds as a Priestess, as was her dream. For her thoughts had begun to turn to mortal pleasures. As such she was aware her time as a Miko was ending, yet there was still time before she would have to make her decision. As with all things, she was aware why her time as a Miko, a Shrine Maiden, was ending. Why her time as a Priestess would soon begin. Yet for now, for today all was as it had been. She was at peace with herself and the world as she understood it. It was a peace that would not last much longer.

She finished her morning sweeping, placing her well used broom out of sight yet within easy reach should it be needed as was her habit. Again following her habit of each day she then left the temple gates, walking quickly to a small stall assigned to her. Here it was that she contributed to both her family and the temple's income. Educated in the Western style of art, Oharu had a delicate touch envied by many gajin tourists. Tourists who did not seem to mind spending large sums for what Oharu herself considered childishly simple works. For Oharu worked only with pen and black ink, creating mainly what could be called technical art. Undesirable by the average Cipangan, almost all was eventually shipped overseas. Usually as remembrance of exotic lands and a amazingly polite young woman in red over white clothing.

In truth the young mouse-fem disliked dealing with most tourists. They tended to speak too loudly for her temple trained ears, often smelled oddly and some of the men, even the rare Cipangan ones seemed to believe that even her body had a price. Still her family needed the extra money and though half of what her works sold for went to the temple she truly had no important complaints. After all her temple had granted her this stall. Her's as long as she maintained the proper decorum. There were the occasional tourist's however that made her efforts well worthwhile. She was thinking of one, a middle-aged Roo from New Zealand who had opened her eyes to what was possible and eventually sealed her ending as a Miko by doing so, though they had no more than touched paws that weekend... Her thoughts were broken when a soft sound caught her attention. Turning smoothly, lest she appear surprised Oharu found herself looking into the eyes of her temples elder priest. Bowing deeply, as was proper she waited his words.

"It is desired. By one who serves the Emperor. That you attend him this day" He informed her gently. "Ki will care for your stall. Until your return. Your escort is a young Navy Captain. He is waiting at the East gate."

"I understand" Oharu answered, still bowing. As a mere Miko, even one who within months would replace him, it would be improper for her to stand fully in his presence. At least in public. She heard him leave, soon followed by the sound of the young boy Ki's entrance. Stepping aside she left her stall and her work in the apprentice's paws. It would probably be a disaster again when she returned, still one must obey. To be truthful Oharu was somewhat excited. It was something different than her daily routine. As such was like an rare unexpected spice in her food. She would have to wait though to discover if the dish was sweet, or bitter.

Within minutes she found herself sitting in a car. A military car and her first ride within a motor vehicle in her life. Oharu found her situation confining, the soap her escort had used was much to bitter for her nose even with both windows open for the winds. That had been late morning. After a longer than expected ride she now found herself finally at rest, now waiting in a military office. It was a gentle, late afternoon sun that filtered through the offices frosted glass. Its softened light giving everything a muted glow of its own. She smiled to herself, for in this light it was almost as though each item in that office she waited in had a soft life of its own. Of course for her all things did have a life. A spirit, a Kami all to themselves. Yet her life as a Shinto Shrine Maiden held as much in common with the Imperial Navy as a dove held in common with a tiger. Abruptly worried as to why she had been brought here she gently straightened the rough silk of her temple clothing to calm her nerves. Soft sunlight lit highlights in her dark, walnut colored fur. Still her training held her in good stead, as outwardly she showed no hint of her wonder, her puzzlement. Even her tail remained still. As still as a length of wet rope that had been laid upon the floor. That would end soon. Very, very soon.

Taisa Akimoto Heiji absently tapped his right paw with the folder held in his left as he walked. His own tail flickered lightly in annoyance, as was his habit. In his office waited a young woman. A civilian. One with absolutely no training for the mission she had been chosen to complete. Nine others had arrived on that little island in the Pacific. Some men, some women. Even one couple. All had been carefully trained by Imperial Naval Intelligence Office. Their cover stories had run the field from simple tourist to cultural attache. Each and every one had ceased sending reports soon after their efforts began to bear fruit. Some had died. Odd deaths, deaths they should have been far too intelligent to stumble into. Some had simply vanished, never to be heard from again. Now the file was in his paws. Had he chosen correctly? Her family had served the Empire longer than his own had existed, certainly she would not refuse. His free paw paused near the door handle as memories of his morning meeting rushed through his mind.

"I am not in full agreement with this" he had told the fox sitting across from him. "We are sending a civilian. A completely untrained civilian into a most dangerous situation. One who has no knowledge of military, technical or strategic subjects. A woman. She cannot possibly know what we need. Thus she cannot possibly be of any use to us."

"This the Admiralty well understands" his dark furred visitor admitted. "It was your choice to place her family upon that list, without first investigating to determine the possibilities. You, no one other, placed her life upon that list. This choice you have only yourself to look too. These islands hold a strategic position. Far North of the American naval base in Hawaii, perhaps with natural resources we will badly need. Certainly a harbor we must have. It is in the least a defensible position that will threaten all Western holdings. They cannot ignore it, thus either they or we must invade." He pushed with his cane at a map on the table. "Excellent anchorage from what these few 'tourist' charts tell us. Yet there are dangers in every anchorage. We must know everything to complete our plans."

"I understand" Heiji admitted, well aware he could simply be ordered to send Oharu instead of being gently nudged in that direction. "Reports of native military forces are very vague, even though it is quite obvious that their air power capabilities are well beyond those one could possibly expect to encounter for such a small nation. Perhaps the truth is that American's are secretly supporting these people as they do the Chinese. I agree it would be a tactical error not to know all that could be known, as the Chinese are finding out even now." He had stood, leaning over the table as if to better study the charts there. "Control of this little island nation known as Spontoon, should we need to war with this Tiger is critical. This I must agree." Looking up he stared into his visitors eyes, as if in doing so he could read what the man was thinking. "Yet a temple maiden. One with no knowledge of war. With no ability to protect herself. Hardly my choice for such a mission."

"Yet now she is our only choice. Time is too short to attempt to train another." The cane vanished, his visitor was preparing to stand. "Yet of all our people perhaps our best choice for this mission. For they have refused the Western religions. Thus perhaps she may have some small advantage there."

"Will we leave her with even a shred of honor?"

His visitor stood, reaching for a western style hat which he settled on his balding head. Turning his back on Heiji he walked to one of the rooms two doors, one which opened as though by magic (or a well trained servant) as he approached. Suddenly he paused, not looking back as he spoke. "Not even the hope of Honor. She will lose all. Lose all to serve the Empire. She will not be the first to do so, nor the last. After all, as you yourself said. She is only a woman." Then he stepped through the door, leaving Heiji to his own thoughts.

Breaking from his memories Heiji opened the second door, stepping into his Tokyo offices to greet the young woman so calmly waiting his appearance.

"eii taisa Akimoto" she responded to his request. "This is not work befitting one of my training, my station. I cannot see how I may help you. Though I will gladly give my life for my Emperor I will not throw it away uselessly. I cannot understand why your superiors allowed even this interview, even should I have desired it. This. This I do not."

Heiji dropped the pen he had been holding. Her words had struck him like a bolt of lightning. A woman. Any woman. Telling him no? Impossible, yet it had just been done. And kindly for all that. He let his thoughts flow, searching for a way to break this willful woman without wasting her usefulness. For she would be used now, wither or not she accepted. Her fate was decided by his own actions, and those so far above him as to be impossible to ignore. Once with but a gesture he could have her vanish. Now that option no longer existed. Besides, their families had been friends for generations. In truth it was that age old friendship that had drawn him to her family's name. Had made him foolishly place her families name upon the parchment before discovering only she remained to serve. "This matter is ruled by order of the kai-gun tai-sho himself. He speaks for the Emperor in this matter."

"This is true?" Oharu asked, surprise evident in her voice. Her entire demeanor changed at those words.

"In as much as this matter pertains to us. Yes." He paused, wondering if he should give her the letter yet. It would stop all her protestations instantly, yet he hesitated. Heiji swallowed softly. Even in the folders protection its weight was presence, its importance unforgettable. Perhaps a flanking attack. "Still" he continued. "Your surviving brother, or better your father will do as well I suppose."

"My elder brother, through no ill action of his own now has the mind of a child. Though his body is that of an adult he has no more understanding of that about him than a six year old. My father lost his legs in the last war fighting the Russians. You attempt to blackmail me?" Her tail moved, for the first time since he had entered the office. A short flick, unconsciously made. It showed her irritation at such an attempt. For some odd reason that movement frightened Heiji more than any possible threat. He would have to tread carefully.

"No Eizawa Oharu" he admitted, voicing her name for the first time. "Our families have been bonded much too long, much too deeply for such foolishness. Your mother was my Aunts daughter, on my mothers side. Unfortunately these are my choices. Nine have gone before you. All nine well trained, completely dedicated. All have failed. It is your families time now. Though once great now only you three remain available. In all truth I was unaware of your families fall when I made my choice. Of the three you are best known by the Gajin Tourists, though I admit that in this your father is most qualified. Still one must go. I will leave the choice of whom to you."

Oharu blinked, trying to make sense of what to her was a completely alien world. That world of course was of the military. "Thus you wish to send a helpless woman" she asked softly, her word indicating her attempt to understand her hosts reasoning. "One who's days are spent sweeping temple floors? Tending the sacred flames, saying prayers? This makes to me no sense. I cannot find understanding in your decision. I have no understanding of what you need. Yet. Yet I do serve the Emperor willingly, at his

softest word. You will waste my life. To my thoughts you will destroy me for nothing of value in return."

"Perhaps" Heiji admitted. "Nothing in this world is certain. Those who defend this land are as strong in their belief, as strong in their desire to become a nation as we are to become a world power. I will not fault them that. Yet the time comes soon when war may wake again. Should such occur then their island is a strategic point that we must have. Already the American's, English and Russians. Both White and Red begin to show their presence. Russia we will defeat, as we did before. Perhaps not as easily I will admit. Those Americans. They appear weak upon their surface. Yet any who study history are well warned not to wake that tiger. Certainly not without serious thought to what will come of such a waking."

Oharu touched her knee through her rough silk clothing. Though the Colonel was unaware of the action, it was a habit she had when she was making a decision of great importance. "You. Through the veiled voice of our Emperor demand my service. This I will give, with no further argument. Still I must know. Who will care for my family when I am gone. Who will care for them when word of my death arrives? Have you asked this of your planners"

"One will be made available to take your place. Should you fail she will remain. I have been made aware that she holds much respect for your father already. Should you be successful and return, you will be rewarded."

Oharu smiled, her lips moving only slightly at the bitter taste of this spice. "Colonel. My family serves the Emperor. We have never accepted reward for our service. I will not break tradition by starting now. I understand, as you are placed between the bolder and the cliff I shall face this coming storm naked. Unprotected. You will have my service. You will have my life. Because the Emperor, thorough his dedicated servants has requested it. When this is over, should I survive, you will not speak with me or mention my name again. I will have no desire to remember any of it. Should I not survive still you will never speak my name again. That is my reward."

"Nor will any but I, my superior and the Emperor be aware of your service. This is as it should be. Very well then. I shall do as you request. It is little enough." He noted the tiny ink stains in the fur of her paws, almost undetectable to any but one with a trained eye. "You draw I understand. In the Western style?"

"I have some small talent" she admitted. "I was trained by Western 'missionaries.' If one would call them that, though their true desires were more to the flesh than spirit. My work, when sold to Western Gajin has brought a few extra coins to the temple coffers."

"I have seen your work, it is very detailed. You work mostly in what is called the technical style, though you have created several quite beautiful works I am told. Very fine work. You speak English as well."

"Well enough for small conversation" she admitted. "Though I cannot read but a pawfull of words without difficulty. My French is much better. My accent you are aware will mark me for my birth."

"It would be better if your limited knowledge was German. They have an excellent agent there already. One who has yet to be discovered. Very well" he leaned forward, setting a bright red folder in front of her. "This will be your cover story. Stay with it as you can, change it as you need too. A sum of money, not too much, will be made available to you. There will be no more funds. I warn you to spend carefully." He paused, his own claws digging slightly into the desktop. "Oharu. This money comes from my family. My friends. None was made available for this mission. Perhaps an oversight, or an admission as to what fate is expected for you. I must warn you also that there is a special envelope in that folder."

Oharu nodded in apparent agreement. "You understand me well. I see now that my fate was sealed before I woke this morning." Opening the folder she read the two sheets of paper within, her face losing expression as her eyes scanned the first page. "I was some part of the Sakuradamon Incident? I was only seventeen at that time." She visibly paled as she read further. "Assisted in the planning of the death

of Honorable Inukai Tsutoshi? I met him. I liked him. He died shortly before my eighteenth birthday. It darkened that event greatly.” She turned the page over, its surface rattling as she moved indicating to both how shaken she was. “I stand with the Tenno Kikan Setsu claims that our Emperor is not a God? I am disowned. I am outcast. Truly. I am just yet coming from my twenty-sixth birthday. You cut my ties cleanly. You take my honor from me with these words. You make me.. Not. You make me muda. Even less. You make me osui.”

“Oharu please understand. It is the only way I could think of reducing their suspicions. Exiles are well known there, quite often accepted. These charges will make you seem more like themselves.”

“I will have no honor. I will be.. I am now less than filth. I will be nothing.” She swallowed. “I... I will. For the love of my Emperor. My country. Only for that.” She looked up, holding his eyes with hers. “I will be unable to speak with anyone of my nation. I certainly cannot send reports back, no letter from myself would be allowed into the country. Not with this.” She laid the offending pages down on his desk, as though they were some dark spirit. “You use my honor, family, my life against me. Even my taste, though I have done all I may to hide that weakness. Having discovered it myself only months ago. Should I succeed or fail there will be no honor in my life, perhaps not even in my death that will come. Our families are now enemies eii taisa Akimoto. From this moment unto the end of all things. Such a dishonorable blow you have now struck. Remember this.”

Heiji took up the pages as Oharu spoke. Her words were nothing but the truth, yet her family was effectively dead. Her father would sire no further children, her brother was unacceptable to all. She herself would bear no children so other than her words, there was no danger to him or his family. Still he had written those words himself, had composed them himself. For him he accepted that one day there would be a reckoning. This he accepted, then continued his mission.

“None know this but you and I” he reminded the mouse. “None will know of it” he continued as he lit the pages with an ornate lighter. “Your friends will be warned that your falling was because of others. Certain others actions, not your own. With exceptions of course. There are always exceptions. Use this weakness of yours. With luck it will turn suspicion away from you. Regarding your reports, as they are. Certain ‘tourists’ will come to you wishing to buy your paintings. Special land and seascape works. These you will sell at a handsome profit. They will eventually make their way to Naval Intelligence.” He dropped the now flaming pages into his empty metal trash can. “It will supplement your limited funds, though you cannot depend upon such sales to be regular. We need information on the islands geography, harbor depths, aircraft, ships, industrial ability, any outward signs of defenses. Even simple cityscapes, as long as they are detailed enough for planning. Do not, and I can not stress this enough. Do not go into places you are in any way warned to stay away from. When we do invade, and I will tell you the truth that we will one day should war awaken, we need as much information as we can get. Tide levels, rain runoff, all the things that success depends upon. You will be instructed in our needs, how to supply them.”

“So. And how will I know these people, that I do not sell my special paintings to the wrong people.”

“That will be explained to you by my assistant. Do you know how to fly?”

“An aircraft? No. I have no knowledge of aircraft. I have never even touched one.”

“You will need to be familiar with aircraft before you leave. At least the basics. I think that the Nakajima P-1 should serve you well for training. It is possible that you may have to make your own escape. A knowledge of flight would be invaluable. Even if only a basic knowledge. There is a training place in that nation we are very interested in. One that claims to only teach women. We feel that it is truly a secret fighter-bomber school. Perhaps even an spy training school. One important part of your mission is to make friends with some of the students. This should be simple once they learn of your situation. Learn what they know. For that you must understand something about flying. Oharu. Your departure date is in three weeks. In four, five at the latest you will arrive at your destination with nothing but the clothing you

now wear, a few Yen and some minor identification. I am afraid that you will be, as the Americans put it, used badly during your voyage. To be blunt, you will be thrown off your transport ship with jeers following you. You will be lucky to have clothing, but the ships officers are Naval men. Though they will know only that you are not what the crew will think you to be, they are to protect you from too great an abuse. Knowing that your mission is important they will insure you reach the shore safely and with that little identification. Though the crew who will jeer you will not know your cover story, they will be aware only you are in extreme disfavor. You will not be violated. This I assure you. Beaten somewhat yes. Beaten badly perhaps. Yes this is possible. No matter what occurs, for your missions success they must never suspect your true mission. I ask that you help them believe this."

"For the Emperor..." Oharu whispered. Her paws shook as her mind raced, trying to warn her of what was to come. Yet in her sheltered world she truly could not suspect the whole of her fall. "Only for him will I do this. Very well eii taisa Akimoto. I am in your paws." Within her mind though the mouse shook with fear. She was to be a spy. To become such she must withdraw from the temple for such work was forbidden all temple servants. Wither the basest wood carrier or the highest Priest. She would never be a Priestess. She would never serve others again. So easily had the man before her admitted that she would be beaten, perhaps badly. Simply to make his plan work. Yet she was a woman, as such now that she was removed from the temple her value was less than that of a dog in the street. Should such things be weighed. It sent icy waves of fear through her soul. Yet outwardly nothing showed. Not even a flicker of an eyelid.

Heili opened a separate part of the folder he had laid on the desk. "You should read this Oharu. It was written by the Emperor himself. To you, and only you. It will remain with your family should you not return." So saying he stepped away and left the office. It was not for him to know the Emperor's words, or why the God Emperor himself had chosen Oharu from his short list, or personally written her a letter. It was not his place. Yet the fur on his face flamed at the thought of what honor it had been to simply deliver such a message. Even to a woman.

Five weeks had now passed on Spontoon Island. Huakava, High Priestess of all Spontoon and those places that accepted her appeared asleep. Yet the old wolf who served her, had served her predecessor knew well what her mistress was doing. They were at the High Priestess's home on Main Island of course, and as was her duty the wolf kept a small fire burning at just this level, added spiced woods at just these times. It was a task she had learned as a young teenager, it was a task she would train her replacement. One of hundreds of tasks she was responsible for.

"She is coming soon" Huakava asked those spirits who had answered her call.

"She is. Within the day. We warn you daughter of our lands, she has been near ruined" a soft voice answered. "Their plan went wrong somehow."

"How badly" Huakava asked, for at her words images of everything Oharu had experienced passed through her mind. Images that sickened her. "That badly. Will she survive?"

"This one is stronger than even you daughter of our lands. She will survive, yet even she will survive only through even greater sacrifice. Her Gods chose well. It is a great debt that must be repaid one day."

"I will not see that day" the panther admitted. "Perhaps she who takes my place, but not I. Yet even at such a cost to her, to us. We need her. Need her else within a pawful of generations our ways will be no more. And I must treat her badly myself. This does anger me."

"Your feelings are understood daughter of our lands. You are the right of it, yet to accept her instantly would be to cause their plan, your plan to fail. She must work her own way through, must make those choices herself. Truly, these actions will turn her away from her Emperor, but will they turn her towards

us? This we all must wait to see, for the future with her is a tangled web.”

“She comes still. Very well, broken, damaged or worn. We must have her. We cannot continue without her. Thus all will be as it must. My thanks.”

“Until we speak again daughter of our lands.”

Huakava’s eyes opened a slit, then wider as they adjusted to the fires light. “She comes” the High Priestess of Spontoon announced. “Badly used, damaged. Yet still she comes. I must be ready. I must warn those who watch to look for her, but give no special treatment..”

Oharu dragged herself ashore of South Island the next morning, her once spotless temple clothing now severely abused, a small box hanging by a rough chain wrapped about her neck. Her body was covered in bunker oil, sea water and things she fought not to remember. She could barely keep from breaking down and crying. ‘Used badly’ explained what she had endured about as closely as stating that bonfire had some small warmth to it. Oharu prayed to her now lost ancestors that she would not bear a child from her abusers. She could certainly never be a Miko again.

As she stumbled towards the beach sharp stones and other things cut unto the water softened pads of her feet. Soon the water around her was tinged pink, until by the time she managed the sand the young mouse was unable to stand further pain. She would have to make those last few yards on her paws and knees. Yet that didn’t happen. Two young, and very strong men ran into the surf, lifting her bodily from the sea’s clutching embrace. When again she felt the solid earth it was hot dry sand against her back. Barely she was able to hear the men speaking in a language she’d never heard before as both examined her raw, torn feet. They spoke quickly until finally one stood and ran off. The other quickly tore at what was left of her clothing. Afraid she would again be abused Oharu tried weakly to fight back, though her clothing no longer held any secrets from the sun bleached mans eyes. Finally he took her paws into his own.

“Do you speak English?” he asked in a heavily accented voice.

“Some” Oharu admitted weakly, unsurprised to find her voice barely functioning after being partially hung the day before. Perhaps he wanted to curse her as the others had. It no longer mattered to her what was done to her, though she fought a little anyway.

“I need bind these wounds, until Doctor comes.” He indicated his apparently native dress. “No cloth. So I must use yours.”

Oharu answered his request by closing her eyes, as well as letting her arms drop limply to her sides.

Exhausted beyond life itself she fell into a troubled sleep. It was some time later when her eyes again flickered open. She found herself in a bed, a scent of freshly cleaned though unstarched sheets reached her numbed brain. A woman in a nurses uniform was watching her.

“You feel better now?” she asked in heavily accented Cipangan. “You have slept many days now.”

“I live. I never walk again” Oharu answered.

“Yes walk. Some time later. Even dance. What happened?”

Oharu shifted to English, though her own accent was probably as heavy it would be better than the mangled Cipangan her nurse was speaking. “I thrown off ship” she answered. “I am exile. I have papers when thrown from ship. I do not know. The crew... I no longer amuse them. I think.”

"Customs have papers" her nurse admitted, herself shifting into an English much less accented than Oharu's own. "You have no passport?"

"Not after the second day" Oharu admitted. "Nor money, though friends gave me bank draft. My father.... I have no father anymore." Tears came to her eyes, matting the delicate fur on her face at the memory of her father's last words to her. He was unaware of her mission, only that his daughter had reportably insulted the God Emperor then refused to take her own life in apology. "We are not... my family..." She stopped talking as she partially realized the position she was in. "I no longer have a family" she whispered. "Or country. I am Not."

This officially was true, though certain papers resided in the Emperor's court to prove the truth. Should her mission be a success those papers would be presented to her family by the Emperor's personal assistant himself, thus proving her honor. Should she fail they would vanish, leaving her as she was now. Forever.

"I see. Customs will wish to speak with you" the woman explained. "You may be deported."

"Where? I can not return Cipangu. I would not be allowed touch soil, even stand aboard simple fishing boat not be allowed." Oharu lifted her paws, staring almost blankly at the tended cuts on her fingers, absently noting that one claw had been torn free. It should be painful beyond pain, yet she felt nothing more than the dullness of throbbing. It was though her body was not her own. So fogged was her mind she was unaware her condition was due to pain reducing drugs and not some otherworldly action.

"You worry about later. Now you need rest. I ask about papers. Is anything else?"

"Nothing. Nothing." Oharu closed her eyes, fighting the fear that promised to overwhelm her. She was dead. No. She had never existed. Her only hope to become 'real' again would be to complete her mission, then live long enough to be rescued. Until that occurred no citizen of Cipangu would admit she existed, even if she lay bleeding to death in their own home. She was Not. She was nothing. She was lost. Still she would survive. Somehow. Her mission demanded such.

Unless her dreams sent her into madness first. With a sob of loss she began crying.

Chapter Thirteen

Over two weeks had passed since the Cipangu mouse Oharu had been drawn from the surf. Had been pulled from the bleeding seas cold embrace to lay upon South Island's beach. Her life had been saved by two young native fishermen who had been relaxing after a nights work. Since then she laid nearly helpless in bed, accepting the ministrations of nurses, the humiliation of not being able to attend even a common bathroom need without help. Living with a constant fear of being touched by a man. Any man. Time that she had spent mulling over her position and finally believing that she understood how it had come about. Why of all her clan she had been chosen.

It had been simple numbers.

It had been simple numbers that had doomed her. She now sat in one her hospital rooms two chairs staring out at the harbor not far away. Simple numbers. Of all her clan her family was smallest. Three years ago her mother had perished in a ferry accident. With her had gone both of Oharu's living sisters and her youngest brother. Her father had never remarried. Being a cripple, even with some little money and land it had not made him a desirable catch. Even had he desired a new wife. Her older sister had vanished before the accident. Having left to climb Mount Fuji with friends she had never returned, never been heard from again. Her now child minded brother, injured in the same accident that took their mother was another blade against further interest. That had left only Oharu herself. Tireless in her duties to family and temple she had appeared worthy in the eyes of others. Eyes that had watched, paws that had reached, mouths that had offered. All of which she had politely declined. Giving for her reason that her father and brother needed her full attention. Certainly no one had suspected the truth.

So she had believed.

Thus when new eyes had searched her clan Oharu would have seemed the perfect choice. As unattached someone could easily be found to replace her, and had been. The woman she had been introduced to was well known to Oharu. A widowed neighbor who had come by often with meals. With a kind word, freely offered helping paws. She had suspected the neighbor had interest in her father, but with a young strong daughter to do everything and if she was refusing every suitor certainly she must be caring for -every- need her father had, what chance had she. It had amused Oharu to see her reaction when she had off-pawed remarked that she was still a maiden. In all ways.

That had been what, a month ago? At least give or take a few weeks. Perhaps even two months had passed, for her battered mind could no longer lock in on specific dates. It had been time spent learning new things. How to fly for one. Oharu remembered with unease her two forced solo flights. Flying held a joy for her, but as a passenger only. She discovered that she loved the feel of an aircraft, had loved working on them. To actually sit behind the controls though, where only the wind gods were there to help her had left her shaking. What had been most important was the woman who visited her the day before she left. Oharu had been primped, several portraits had been taken of her with the new photography devices. Then she had been left alone for some time, until a heavily covered woman had entered the room. Alone.

Oharu had stood, falling to her knees instantly. That Mons. The Chrysanthemum. It was worn by none but the Royal Family or their most important servants. Oharu's visitor had settled delicately on a cushion across from her, saying nothing until she was comfortable. "It is the way. That each special servant sent to distant shores will receive a thank you from the Emperor" her soft, whispering voice had announced. "Unlike most others you have freely given away Clan, family, name, honor. This only to serve your Emperor."

For some time the room remained silent, only the sound of the two women's breathing disturbed the stillness. Slowly Oharu had detected the woman's scent. A gentle, clean scent with nothing added. She would remember it past her dying days. "I come from the Emperor himself young Eizana Oharu. It is his wish that you understand. Understand that such devotion never goes unrewarded. No matter your personal decision. Your reasons. Your desires. Though after today you may never use the name Eizana, you even may not be able to live with what you are to become. I know that I could not. To be called osui. To accept such. You shame me with your honor. Shame me as none has before. Yet you must do this. For our country. It is the Emperor's wish that you survive. Survive to pass information on to others, though they know not that which you truly are. A personal servant of the God-King."

There had been more, so much more. Until finally the woman had left as silently as she had arrived. Had she been a simple court maid, one of the Queen's own or even of royal blood? That Oharu didn't need to know. She was nothing now. Undone, unborn, never having been conceived. To all her race but less than a pawfull. The man who had selected her, his superior, the woman who had just visited her and the Emperor himself. That was enough. She reminded herself of her duty. *'I am to find information. That should we be forced to war upon the world, that this place may be known. Should we invade, to do so with elegance. If not, to know what lies here. That we may be aware of what we leave behind.'*

Oharu was now a spy. As a spy should she be discovered, or even suspected her death would most likely be very slow, and very messy. She blinked her eyes, unaware that while deep within her thoughts they had dried. Their pain reminded her of the now, forcing her to release the past. All spies it seemed had elaborate backgrounds, extensive training, a web of support. Oharu however would have nothing. Even her paws were torn, a claw having been lost in the battle for her life against the ocean. It would never grow back. It would be a constant reminder of what had brought her here. One of many. Somehow she must heal, must find a way to survive, must draw the pictures certain non-Cipanguians would buy and still somehow remain undetected. At least until it was decided that there would be no war (her greatest hope) or if war came, her people successfully invaded. War was something she had always prayed would never happen. War was the murderer of hope. Of peace. Of honor. She was to survive. A simple thing to do. Nothing more.

If she were, like her Emperor, a God.

A knock came to her rooms thin door taking her from her thoughts as a doctor slowly eased open the door. "There are two gentlemen to see you Miss Oharu" he announced. Standing slowly, the still healing pads of her feet reminding her none too gently of their damage, Oharu turned to face the door. These would be the ones to decide her next path. It would be best to greet them standing. To be sitting would indicate weakness, or worse a false belief that she was better than they.

Oharu stepped back carefully away from the door as two men walked in. As they entered each searched her room with their eyes as though some creature might spring out to attack them. Obviously nothing did, as they indicated she should seat herself before they would. Behind them the door closed as her doctor removed himself. Quickly everyone was seated, Oharu on her bed to grant the men her tiny rooms two uncomfortable chairs. And to be as far from the two as she could. She watched in silence as one opened a case he had brought with him. He was the older she noted, yet his companion somehow seemed to be the more important of the two. His tail remained still, while the older man's twisted somewhat. A sign of nervousness. Certainly the younger man had a face she would love to draw.

"Miss Oharu" the older man opened. "You give no last name?"

"I no longer have other name" she admitted. "I have been... unmade."

"I... I don't quite understand. Still for my records we must have a last name. Have you any to give, or should I chose something?"

"Osui" she decided.

"Oharu Osui then." He pulled out a pen, opening his folder to carefully write the name down, not bothering to ask how it was spelled. "Now Miss Osui. Your entry into Spontoon was rather, shall we say unorthodox? Though your statement seems to suggest that you were abandoned offshore by the... um... Burat Maru, no record of any ship by that name making port here is found in our records. According to your country's officials the Burat Maru was scheduled to make a route from Chipangu to Tilamooka, Hawaii, Kuo Han and back. No mention of it coming within a hundred nautical miles of Spontoon. Burat Maru reports they took on no passenger matching your description. In fact no female passengers of any description this trip. How do you explain this?"

"I can not" Oharu admitted. "I took passage on the Burat Maru because she was headed for Tilamooka. A friend, I hope I have there. She may have taken me in. At least given some aid."

"This friend. This Elizabeth Whitehall-Hunter?"

"Yes" Oharu answered, an image of the brightly smiling canine easily coming to her face. A good name to use she had thought as the woman had asked her to one day visit her own studio. Two artists talking over tea. Oharu subdued, as always, the blond Elizabeth nearly bouncing around. Yes they would have inquired. She was certain Elizabeth would have vouched for her. Certainly not, had she any idea as to why Oharu was now or had become.

"..city" the older man asked, breaking into her memories. "Miss? What city in Tilamooka."

"You asked before. She mentioned small ranch. Outside Quarter Moon Bay. I think island was Tun... Tha.. something like that. On south end of chain."

"Tahng Island" the younger man supplied, suddenly taking over the conversation. "I checked on it for you. Would you be willing to continue your journey should she be willing to accept you?"

Oharu was puzzled, why care? "I haven't funds" she admitted. "I had brought with small cheque, hidden in picture wallet. My wallet. My pictures. All that gone now. But yes, should she willing I be delighted." Silently the mouse prayed her one virginal dalliance with Elizabeth hadn't turned into something serious. Even though that one dalliance had lasted a weekend. If it had, and she were shipped off to Tilamooka then her mission was a failure. Trapped by her own lie she realized that she should have thought ahead. A fools mistake. It was long too late now to change her words.

Inside her however a soft glow came at the thought. To leave behind everything. To vanish. A place where what she had become wouldn't be known. For a moment she felt a soft warmth, then her reality washed away that faint warmth. Leaving her as stone cold inside she had been before as she heard his next words.

"I've spoken with the lady. Quite a voice she has. I'm sorry to tell you this Oharu but she cannot take you in. Her. Um, Her husband wouldn't understand. At least that is the impression I was left with. Nor is Tilamooka accepting Cipangu refugees. Something about the difficulties current in China. Have you any other options?"

"None" Oharu admitted. "I cannot return. Not if desire take more than single breath after arrive. Where you send me?"

"That is the hot potato" the older man answered, wedging himself in to regain control of the conversation. "There at the moment really isn't anyplace we can send you. Do you have any skills? A profession, other than your temple duties? Something that might allow you to earn a living. At least until your situation improves and you find a place to go."

"I am an artist, some small skill" she admitted. "Or... Now." Her eyes dropped, her gaze locking onto her still bandaged paws. "I could. Farm. Labor or the street. I mean..."

"That isn't allowed" her older visitor whispered. "You are able to draw. Then do so. Soon the tourist season will begin. I am told you have sufficient funds to survive until the end of that season. If you do not mind eating poi most of the time. Yes we have your bearers cheque. A bit damaged by water, but still acceptable. Your photos I am afraid, they were ruined. Your wallet was found tied around your neck, though no provision had been made to protect its contents from the sea. Perhaps you may survive selling your art to tourists. As you claim you did so in your native land. If not there are many farms that could use a strong back."

"Claim?" Oharu looked from one man to the other, shock evident in her face. "I did so. Ask at Temple. They will tell you it is so."

"More bad news" her younger visitor admitted. "According to this Temple no woman matching your description has studied there in the last thirty years. Nor has there ever been a 'western style art' booth anywhere near Temple property."

Her final wall fell, turning Oharu's soul to cold dust. "May... May I have some time. Alone. Please?" she asked.

Both men rose immediately, the older closing his leather case with an ease of long practice as he stood. "We'll be just outside in the waiting room" the older informed her. "Call the nurse when your ready to continue this."

"I understand. Just... little time. Please." Oharu waited until she was alone again. Then softly, she began crying.

Outside in the small waiting room both men looked to each other. "An interesting case" the older whispered, suspecting that normal conversation could be heard by the odd woman just a few dozen feet away. "I dislike playing the dumb old man."

"More believable than 'the dumb young one.' his companion admitted. "How much of her story do you think is true?"

"All of it" his companion and superior answered. "A section of shipping crate, with the name Burat Maru painted on it washed ashore on Moon Island the day after her arrival. There's evidence a body had been tied to it. The rope had been cut in such a way only certain, unnamed, people would do. That's just a start. Think this through. How difficult would it be to divert less a hundred miles off course, in order to dump an unwanted passenger and still have hopes she might, just might wash ashore on one of our islands? More importantly that she not wash ashore on a shore that might be more inquisitive. Like say, Tilamooka itself? Or worse the United States? My brother Samuel and his wife visited Cipangu last year. On business of course. I have seen a photo in their collection of a stall selling western style paintings, and the temple gates appear to match those of the one she claimed to have studied at."

"Gods. Could she be a spy then? Trying to sneak in with some concocted story? They have sent so many already."

"I honestly don't think so, though I have been wrong before. She has no backup, she doesn't exist according to people she should be well known by. No contact, no local friends, even that cheque was made out 'to the bearer.' You don't do that with a spy. And you don't treat one like she's been treated. Not and expect her to retain any loyalty. It's too bad about her voice, that hanging damaged her vocal cords I'm told. She'll have that whisky sour voice the rest of her life, though the rope scar should fade in time. You read the letter of disownment from her father, the one we found in that wallet. She was

involved in an attempted assassination of the Emperor. Considering her background it was probably no more than knowing one of those involved. Maybe her boyfriend, or simply a student under her care. What clinches it for me in the name she chose. Have you any idea what Osui means? No? It translates to filth, sewer. No Cipangan with any shred of honor or self worth would take that name. Not willingly."

"So. We give her a chance then. She doesn't have an accident or unexpected infection. We just watch her."

"We do. And if I'm wrong, after what's she's been through it should be quick. As painless as possible."

"We'll need someone she can learn to trust. One of the water taxi people?"

"I think in this case the standard way of doing things will work just fine. If she's not what she appears to be it will show up in a few months at most. An interest in places she shouldn't know about, letters going out with 'interesting things going on' or weather reports, even an attempt to make close friends with a 'government official.' We all know the signs by now. So we watch for them. Ah, her nurse is waving for us. I think our little puzzle has just found another piece. Shall we wander the minefield of shattered souls again my young know it all protégée?"

Three days later Oharu stepped out of the hospital. Her movements were careful, as the pads of her feet still complained. A young woman walked with her, a native though not quite in native dress. Oharu had noticed the odd swirls combed into her guide's hair and wondered what they meant, if anything. She dared not ask, in case it was something religious. Still weak she was soon nearly exhausted. Both by the walk and a hot tropical sun beating down upon her.

Spontoon she noted was nothing like her homeland. People smiled, waved hello, bustled about laughing. Though there were no great buildings or even any discernable temples everyone seemed full of life. Sometime after she had left the hospital, after a water taxi trip across the bay her guide brought her to a bundle of buildings. While an exhausted Oharu waited sitting under a Ohi'a lehua tree, though she had no idea yet what species it was, she watched as her guide spoke to a rather large bovine woman. After a few minutes her guide returned. "Live here" she was told in her native language. "Take care of you. I go now. Back hospital."

Left alone Oharu was surprised by the larger woman's reaction. As she started to stand the Oharu felt herself gathered up like a small child and carried into the building. It was the beginning of a new life for her. One she might one day decide was worth more than her old life.

People have been known to change. Especially on Spontoon.

Chapter Fourteen

Months had passed since Oharu's last visit to Taisa (Colonel) Akimoto Heiji's office. Months in which even the weather in Tokyo had changed dramatically. Both natural and political. Currently Heiji stood silently, staring out his office window at the scene beyond. It was raining, a soft, gentle rain so warm one might think the Gods were crying. Behind him on his desk was the latest report on his agent Oharu. Nothing more than what anyone on those islands would know, still important in its own right. Oharu against all predictions had made her way to Spontoon's Casino island, where she was now renting a small hut from a local family. A well known family who catered to the tourist trade. No further details were currently available, nor did he honestly expect any further specific news. Unless it was the unfortunate death of the young woman. Only those general things known publically about his agent came to his desk now. Oharu was not. As not her people would have no interest in her. This image must be maintained, even though it would most probably end with her death. Odd he thought, that she had not already taken that step. After what had already occurred to her against all plans. Her fate had not been one she had been warned about, nor would he had held against her that path to regain her Honor. It must be her love of the Emperor and her sense of duty that maintained her. Certainly he knew his own daughters would have broken long ago under such harsh treatment. He had chosen Oharu because she was a Miko. Simply due to their training Miko's were much stronger emotionally than normal women.

Still they, as Oharu, were nothing but women. Thus they were all expendable.

A soft rap on his office's main door pulled him from his brooding. Turning he found his secretary standing just inside his office, a small card in her paw. Her expression told him all he needed to know. "Place her card in the tray Mina" he ordered softly. "Then escort her in." She had come again. That woman from the Emperors court. She who had so unexpectedly spent so much time alone with Oharu. Was the Emperor that interested in one small part of his military's machine, or was it something different. His mind shed away from further thoughts. It was still painfully obvious that where this woman was concerned Oharu had officially been made her prime interest. He was much too intelligent to ponder her position in Court. Even a single slip of his tongue would find him with only one option. One he had no interest in taking.

She came in silently, veiled as always. Her voice. So soft, so musical asked only one question. "You have Oharu's records ready?"

"I have Lady" he answered, bowing in respect. If not to her (though he did respect her) then the God on Earth whom she represented. "On my desk. Shall I clarify?"

"I am well educated in the words I will find here. If I may have time?"

"Of course Lady." He took a moment to place the best chair in his office in a position most suited for reading. "Will you desire refreshment" he asked as he placed his paw on the latch of his offices second door.

"I shall require nothing Colonel. Yet I thank you for the kindness of your asking." She settled down with a rustle of silks. Silks Akimoto Heiji knew he could not afford for his current mistress, even though he pledged his salary for the next six years. Bowing again he backed from his office to wait, to reflect upon what news was in that file. Settling into a chair in his second office, the one where he made his most important decisions Heiji opened a duplicate of the file his mysterious visitor was reading.

Those first dozen pages were general reports from those who had instructed the ex-Miko. She had found a love for aircraft he noted, a surprise when one remembered her upbringing. She enjoyed flying, as she did tracking down problems in dangerous places even while thousands of feet in the air. Yet Oharu was

terrified of piloting. That seemed odd to him as he himself loved to fly the few times a month he found to engage in his joy.

Cartography had taught her only what they needed her to know. How to hide elevation lines in her art. How to indicate important geographical structures without being obvious about it. What they needed to know, from the differences in beach exposure between high and low tide to what currents flowed through the group and how to show them along with their estimated strength. Even how to detail rarely used or abandoned paths through the jungles.

She had excelled at all things except paw to paw defense. In that she had refused to even raise her voice against an attacker. "It is not done" she continually explained. Though these words had confused her instructors, as a Miko she had been given extensive Misogi training and was known to be a near expert at the ancient art of Yawara. Having spoken with her defense instructor, her temple instructors then her he had finally understood. Oharu had found her balance quickly, since then nothing had been able to shake it. Though outwardly Oharu, like most of her race followed both Shinto and Northern Buddhism, in truth he had soon realized that she only gave lip service to Buddhism. Oharu had taken a path that others rarely did. She wished only to serve her temple, her Emperor, her people. In peace. Violence was not part of that chosen path. Though she could and would defend herself, she would not learn offensive styles of combat.

Misogi he thought, running through his mind those images he was aware of such training. Training oneself to the edge of death, then turning calmly away from that edge. Or not. During the most severe misogi training it is said that one was led to the border of life and death. To the point where one would say, "I do not care, chose yourself wither I should live or die." That Heiji had finally realized had been what carried the young woman through what must have seemed the visit of Yaso magatsuhi no kami. Countless demons. "I could not do that" he whispered to himself, shamed in his own understanding of the truth. "I could not. Not and remain sane."

Then he could not know if Oharu was truly sane now, or something else.

It was the next pages that would cause his visitor her greatest pain. He had chosen Captain Kobayashi's ship for this mission. Specifically because his Burat Maru had never been used to transport agents before. Though Kobayashi and his officers were Imperial Navy they had been officially 'released from service for cause' years ago. Their ship was well known on its current route. It was his crew who had reacted in a much more violent manner than any had expected. His crew who had proved to be Magagoto. Evil things that would have to be cast out. Only by chance had the second officer stumbled across Oharu's hanging body. Only by chance had she been rescued. Upon reading what had been done Heiji had silently vowed that somehow, someday he would track down every man and kill them himself. Such filth did not deserve to breath the Emperors sweet air. Even one thrown out by the Emperor himself deserved better treatment than they had offered Oharu.

With those feelings, overall it was still the truth that she was but one agent of hundreds his own office oversaw. One agent only. One agent of thousands that Japan had released. Though related to him she was after all simply a woman.

Expendable.

They were standing in the small yard behind McGee's rather large kitchen. Butterfly McGee (a strange name for a Bovine one might think, much less a native Spontoonian) was finishing drying the noonday dishes while her long term guest Oharu, who had helped with the washing, was busy with a delicate project. Butterfly leaned over Oharu's shoulder to study what she was doing. "Why saw bones?" the older woman asked, diligently drying a paw carved wooden bowl as she waited for an answer.

"Ink pen" the young mouse explained as she slowly drew her self-made saw back towards her. In her other paw was a thin rib bone from last weeks chicken. Cleaned, sun dried then polished with salt and a scrap of silk from Oharu's own silk rags it now sported a thin channel from its tip to just before the hollow inner channel began. It had taken the young mouse all morning to cut that channel, using nothing but a saw made from a carefully chosen twig and, over time, several single strands of her own rough hair. "Can not afford steel" she admitted.

Butterfly blinked in surprise though the mouse could not see that action. As Oharu's landlady and observer for a certain grey furred ferret she was well aware how close her border was coming to the ends of her funds. There really hadn't been much left of that small cheque found in the mouse's one possession, after the Cipanguain had used over half of it to pay her medical bill. That certain grey furred ferret had, through various intermediaries, gently requested that Ms. McGee keep an eye on this odd problem of theirs. Her own problem was that she had begun to like Oharu. Not simply as a castaway, but as a friend. Should Oharu prove to be other than what she seemed it would probably break the bovine's heart to see her lifeless body floating just below the water's surface.

"From the way yer doing this you've done it a lot. Hard to learn? I mean, you could make money selling those things. Maybe more than your art."

Oharu gently laid her saw aside, picking up a sliver of ahakea cut from a cast off poi board. Reaching into her hair she pulled sharply, removing yet another long strand. "Maybe. But love art. Not love make pen" she admitted. Opening a small pot of klu gum, a pot that had once been a small light bulb, itself discarded when it had burned out the mouse carefully ran her freshly selected hair through the thick material. "Much work" she admitted as she began wrapping the single strand of black hair, binding both bone pen and wooden sliver together. "Many of my pictures done this long time. It lot work make one pen."

Butterfly moved back, setting her now dried bowl aside to pick up another. "I wouldna have the patience child" she admitted. "That took you half tha day. Is it worth it?"

"I prefer steel" the mouse admitted. "Bone is good enough. If thin enough." She studied the completed instrument in her paws, moving the bone just a fraction before dipping one claw in her pot to apply a single drop of Klu gum to the hair. "Tomorrow can use." Setting her new pen aside she stretched, yawning from her prolonged effort.

Butterfly couldn't help but feel sympathy as gaps showed between the mouse's teeth. Gaps where broken teeth had been removed, teeth Oharu could not yet afford to have replaced. Yet she had given no complaint, simply adjusting to her new condition. And she never smiled. "Do you drink?" she asked her guest.

Oharu mulled that question while she carefully wrapped up her few tools. She was certain that her landlady wasn't talking about Nootnops Blue. One experience of that drink had left the young mouse shaking for hours. It hadn't been an unpleasant reaction, she simply hadn't been ready for the visions that had come to her under its calming influence. "Saki" she answered softly as the last fold of reused red silk slipped into place, protecting her tools. "If alcohol you mean."

"I do" Butterfly admitted as she too placed the last of her work away. "Saki would be hard tha find here. How bout ah beer?"

"Western drink. I have no experience with" Oharu admitted. She slid her silk packet under a fold in her Obi, the cloth wrap that was all that kept her homemade Kimono closed. Her Kimono itself created from a drab, light brown cotton fabric. A cast-off from some ship's damaged cargo that had found its way somehow into the McGee's storage building. Still it was unmistakable as to its design and function. "What is taste like" she asked.

"Either like it, or hate it" Butterfly admitted. She rolled down the sleeves of her husband's old work shirt. Like most Spontoons she preferred a much less restrictive form of dress. However since Oharu's arrival she'd taken to covering more of herself than normal. That, the bovine hoped, wouldn't last much longer as Oharu seemed to be accepting native dress around her more. Though she herself remained almost completely covered. *'Wait until she see's pure native dress'* Butterfly thought. *'Now that will be a shock to her.'* "There's light ale, dark ale, bitters and everything between. Dark drinks usually heavier in taste. I'm headed to a place I like to drink at. No men around. Can let down my hair without shocking the men or bein' taken as a huntress. Want to join me?"

Butterfly had watched for and caught the relaxing of muscles at her mention of no men. It'd taken only minutes to discover her guest's feelings about men. She hated none of them, not even the ones who had so abused her. It had surprised the bovine to discover that before her nightmare Oharu had enjoyed the company of men. Especially considering that from what she'd discovered that Oharu had no physical interest in them. That was one of the reasons she'd decided to take her guest to the Double Lotus. Maybe one of the women there could help. In the least it'd be nice to share a drink with someone new. And a certain panther would be there today she had been informed. "Good. Then I buy today. When you sell some paintings you buy. Let's clean up and get, for the rush hits. Or my husband gets back from fishing."

Twenty minutes later found the two walking towards the Double Lotus's front door. Together Oharu seemed almost a child next to the taller, more endowed Butterfly. "Who?" Oharu suddenly asked, indicating with a wave of her right paw a small group of girls in an odd uniform.

Butterfly hardly gave the four a second glance. "Third years from Songmark. Last year here. A boarding school for female pilots" she explained. "Probably hunting missing second year students. A game they play that makes life easier for teachers. Send students hunting for students." She failed to catch a slight change in expression on Oharu's face.

Songmark Oharu quickly remembered from her briefings. One of the secret military bases on Spontoon. One she was supposed to learn everything about. Especially any unusual aircraft. She should approach those young women, should try to become a friend of one of them. But third years wouldn't give her enough time. Not if they would be leaving soon. Being in Butterfly's company also meant she couldn't simply walk over to talk, as much as she wanted to. One of the girls was a lupine, and lupines had always attracted her. *'Be honest'* she scolded herself. *'Not just lupines, felines too.'* She was taken from her thoughts by their arrival at the Double Lotus and the doorwoman asking questions. They spoke in Spontoon, a language Oharu had yet to pick up more than a few dozen words of. Most of those she had learned from Butterfly's children, whom she had taken to caring for while her landlady went out to shop. Suddenly the doberman turned to Oharu. "Your age" she nearly barked in English.

"Twenty-seven" Oharu admitted, for her birth date had come just a few days past though she had not mentioned it. As to why the question had been asked she didn't quite understand. Her kimono's rounded sleeves announced her as an adult, unwed woman. Not a child. When the Doberman moved aside she followed Butterfly inside.

It was a bar certainly, though the decor of intertwined lotus's created a soothing even pleasant effect. Unlike what she'd been taught to expect there were no heavy clouds of smoke, though her sensitive nose informed her that smoking was allowed here. Of tobacco, and other things of less pleasant scent. There were candles about, though only a few were lit. There was no need for extra light at the moment, it being sometime after the lunch hour while well before what the British termed tea time. Butterfly led Oharu to a bench seat, one obviously designed to support the business's 'heftier' clients. Waiting there was an elderly pantheress, her fur combed in patterns Oharu couldn't even guess at.

"I am Huakava" the waiting woman announced. "You are Oharu?" the grey-black furred woman extended a paw in greeting as Oharu settled in beside her landlady.

"Oharu. Yes." she answered. "Osui Oharu."

Wincing from the second names connotation the panteress gestured for a waitress. "Bourbon" she ordered. "Larger for the bovine." Eyeing Oharu she weighed her decision. "Sloe gin for our oriental guest." While the waitress went to fill her order Huakava turned her attention back to Oharu. "Osui is not a word to be used in good company" she explained. "Not with one of your obvious beauty. Inside and out." She looked over to the silent Butterfly, switching to Spontoon for her conversation. "*Right you were*" she agreed to some previous statement. "*She is beautiful. She is also filled with pain. You have done nothing to help her?*"

"*What I can*" Butterfly answered, also in Spontoon. "*I am no priestess. Though I visit here I am not like those here either. I can go so far, no more.*"

Silence seeped into the table as the aged Huakava thought over her options, calmly noting that Oharu had taken no offense to the conversation switching to a language she did not understand. "*No pride*" she noted, still in native Spontoon. "*Only emptiness, and a rot that must be lanced. Else she will go mad, and soon. We would lose her then. We cannot afford to lose this one.*"

Their drinks arrived, ending all words until hot throats were cooled. Huakava continued her conversation in the native language. "*There are few available at this time who can do this. Only two who might try. There are at least two at the flying school who show much promise. It is too soon for either to become involved.*" Switching to English she asked Oharu a question. "Child. If you could live anywhere on this planet. Where would it be?"

"Any temple Honored Huakava. Mountains of Shikoku" Oharu answered. "Very beautify. Soft snow, cool summer."

"Not many people live in those mountains?"

"More further down. Some in mountains yes. Not so many some temples."

"Thank you." She closed her eyes, as if to rest them. What thoughts went through the woman's mind no one could say. However when she again spoke it was with convection, and again in Spontoon. "*Send her to the waterfall where you first met me*" she ordered Butterfly. "*Show her the way, but let her find it herself. Walk some way with her if you need, but not further than half the distance. I will see that someone comes who will calm her heart. For her other needs, this I cannot help with. I am no matchmaker. It must be the Gods who chose that for her.*" She opened her eyes, took a sip of her drink and smiled. "*You did well Butterfly. Now it is to others we must turn. She is no spy, as the slippery one believes?*"

"*I do not know*" the bovine admitted. "*She asks questions, some odd ones. Sometimes I think yes, most I think no.*"

"*It would pain you, should she... pass on?*"

Butterfly looked to her own drink. "*I begin to see her as a daughter Huakava. I would be lying to say her loss would not harm my soul.*"

"*Then we must assure, if she is as the grey one suspects, that the spy dies while the woman lives. It will be difficult. Never impossible, but difficult.*" Turning her gaze to Oharu Huakava gave her a smile that would warm even the coldest heart. "Child" she asked again in English. "Tell me about yourself. About the yourself before your boat ride. What were you. What did you wish to be?"

Oharu nodded yes, taking a bit larger sip of her drink before answering. It harmed nothing to tell this woman the truth. Her own training had already informed her that this was a woman of religion. Tasting the drink she almost smiled, for she liked the drink. It was mild, milder than even saki but it contained a taste she found she preferred. Setting her glass down she began to speak. Within a space of a few dozen words Butterfly had slipped away. Oharu, captured by the eyes of her ancient host never noticed. Nor did she notice when her cup was refilled time and again. She spoke of her childhood, her dreams, her education in the Temples. Even of her once future position. Somehow her carefully crafted story of intrigue never came up, its forged facts simply not fitting her truth. Yet when she finished she hadn't spoken a word of Taisa Akimoto Heiji' or her true mission. When she had finished speaking it was late, extremely late. Managing excuses to Huakava Oharu tried to stand. This she found was a mistake. All the alcohol she had ingested hit her like a pile iron. One of the unnoticed women standing quietly behind her barely had time to throw the pillow she was holding, it being the only thing that kept Oharu's head from hitting hard wood.

"Take her home. Place her in her bed" Huakava ordered. She studied three women standing, waiting. Pointing to a middle-aged lupin she nodded. "Stay with her. I feel she finds your kind attractive. When she awakes return home. Do not take advantage, she has experienced too much of that. Now..." She stood with the help of another. "Home. I have dinner to make and a warm bed to visit."

Chapter Fifteen

It would seem strange that someone as large as Butterfly McGee could move so silently, until one understood that she had in her younger years twice been (solo) Grand Champion in the island dancing competitions. That, along with often sneaking up on her own four children gave the middle aged bovine a grace unexpected of such a large person. At the moment, as she had many times of late, Butterfly stood just outside her long term tenants small cabin. She was watching silently as the small Cipangan went through her prayers. Prayers Butterfly noted had, of recent days become more intense. Though she herself understood less than a pawfull of words in the mouse's native language Oharu's growing emotional intensity was impossible to miss. It was as the High Priestess Huakava had warned her. Within the small mouse was a rot, a rot that was growing. Slowly to be certain, yet visibly to one who had been warned where to look and was careful to watch for. There was also a war going on within the Cipangan's soul. A war that Butterfly was certain her guest was as yet unready to fight. Was perhaps even unwilling or unable as yet to admit existed. Somehow Oharu was holding back the true pain from her defilement. A pain and hate all must feel after such abuse, or not be sane. Within that walnut colored mouse's small body was a force not even the strongest could hold back forever. Silently Butterfly listened to the repeated litany. Words spoken over and over. Words that even as she listed became almost emotionless.

Quietly aware of her land ladies presence Oharu continued with her prayers. As much as there was pain within the mouse's soul her voice remained calm. Rough though was its sound. Rough as sand rubbing across wood. Rough as it would be for the rest of her life unless some miracle healed her throat. Her falling was greater than most on Spontoon could imagine. Certainly greater than her hostess Butterfly could possibly believe. She had once spoken with the Gods, had spoken for the dead. Once Gods had spoken through her. Using her body as their pure vessel, her voice to speak words mortals could understand. She had fought evil spirits as an equal, grain from her paws had been fertile beyond belief. All as was true of any pure Miko. No more. Now... Now all that had passed. She had no idea where her path would take her, yet anger was not part of her being. Even though of late her dreams had become... unpleasant. Her voice filled the small room as she completed again her prayer;

*Storm clouds gather.
Darkness fills my eyes
Am I to stand
Am I to fall
Open my path to my eyes
That I may follow your desire.*

Finished with her so often repeated prayer for guidance Oharu slowly opened her eyes. Once white and red would have greeted her, the traditional dress of all Miko. Now only a soft brown answered her gaze. Would the Gods still listen to her she wondered, as more than a mere mortal? For she had sacrificed all for her God-King. Would that matter in the eyes of her Gods? Certainly her ancestors had turned away from her, but would the Gods also see her as less she wondered. She wasn't certain. She did not think so, yet she was uncertain. That in itself warned her she had truly lost her center. Had stepped upon a path she was uncertain of. "You wish something?" she asked softly as, still kneeling she smoothly turned to face Butterfly.

"I've ah proposition" Butterfly answered, settling into a bit more comfortable position herself. "First cruse ship docks in the hour. Mah husbands taken his seasonal job at tha Casino. As a um... guard." Butterfly smiled softly at that word. Bouncer was more a correct description, as many a drunken tourist had discovered. One simply did not argue with an adult Buffalo Wolf no matter what your species. "Ah need

help here, children, lodgers, housework.”

“Maid, servant or slave” Oharu asked gently. Not that it mattered to her. But her position and how she must act depended upon which answer Butterfly gave her. To be truthful her landlady's offer was a light sent into growing darkness. A light that Oharu was not fool enough to ignore. Even should slave be the answer.

“Noh so much either” her land lady admitted. “Ahn never slave. Assistant. You'd share in tha profits as lon as you work. Not much, a part though. We don often have Japanese guests so tha wouldn't be much of a problem. Should we have any, we'll adjust.”

Oharu understood. Through the months of her living on Spontoon she had drifted from helpless victim to paying guest to talent-less helper. In that time her position, with respect to her own race had slowly become evident to Butterfly and her unexpectedly gentle husband. That she had thought of such a problem in advance warmed the mouse's heart. There were honorable people on Spontoon she had discovered, though slowly. “Perhaps. Simply as servant. At first” Oharu offered. “Until certain?”

“You mean until certain yer art will sell” Butterfly added. “It will. Even some of my friends like yer work, though yah price it tah low ah think. Servant then, for two weeks. Room ahn board as pay. Then we talk again?”

“Accepted. Do I move?” Oharu asked, a single paw waving to take in her meager possessions.

Shaking her head no the bovine indicated her compound with one of her own huge paws. “Almost never have sold out” she admitted. “This is tha smallest cabin, too close tha the main house for most tourists. Its yours until yah find ah place of your own. Buh iffing yah have tah move tha storage room's noh really tha bad. By tha way, what is that prayer yah keep saying?”

Oharu preformed a short bow to Butterfly from her seated position. “My thank” she answered. “It is prayer for guidance” she explained. “My... Cipangu aggresses China. Such is not correct. I do not agree. I have lost my balance. In truth I have lost all way. It angers I think. I beg to calm a storm I see coming. I beg guidance find my way back.”

“Think it'll work? Peace ah mean.”

Fingers absently plucked at brown cloth as Oharu examined the question seriously. Once she could have slipped into a trance, with a true answer soon upon her lips. Now, now she would have to work out that answer herself. “Once” she whispered, giving words to what had just passed through her mind. “Once answer easy I could give. Now....” Gently her left paw, the one missing a claw, lay flat on the wooden floor. “I think no” she admitted. “Too late. Path to far walked. Too many want much. Not want walk peace. One time I Miko. I have voice. Now. No worth. None listen Oharu anymore.” Her emotions had become bittersweet with the memory of what she had once been, what she had so easily surrendered. “Not even worm listen Oharu anymore.”

“I listen to yah” Butterfly corrected. “Mah children listen to yah. Even that dumb husband of mine listens to yah sometimes. So don't say that.” She stood up, stretching a bit to loosen muscles that had set while she had watched Oharu pray. “Main room, half ahn hour after supper. We'll work out tha schedule then. Ahn' please. Buy som brighter cloth. Or go native. Tha dull brown is depressin.”

Oharu watched her new employer leave, waiting to settle her thoughts until she was again alone. Brighter cloth? But that would cost... Perhaps she decided. She could afford something brighter. Red and white would be her first choice. That though would be presuming she was still Miko. She wasn't. But native dress? Oharu shivered, remembering the otter she'd met at that waterfall. Running around in effectively nothing but a grass skirt wasn't correct. Even now a blush burned under her facial fur at the image of

Leokau as she surfaced from the pool. Her thoughts drifted back to that event, only a few days ago.

Leokau's dive had caught Oharu off guard. At first surprised, even a little frightened soon she had watched in delight the otter's movements underwater. Though the odd shape of Leokau's body had puzzled the mouse for a bit until she realized her visitor was at least several months pregnant. It was when Leokau had emerged from those bushes, where she had slipped into a grass skirt that Oharu realized the true nature of a term she had sometimes heard. 'Going Native' was something that she would never have imagined, though the treasures displayed before her were a delight to admire.

"My name is Leokau. Huakava asked me to speak to you" the otter had said in greeting, still wringing water from her long, dark brown hair. "To ask of you certain things." Leokau settled on a stone across from the mouse, ignoring the stunned expression on the artist's face. "Prepare to have your soul bared young one, for I read all" the otter warned her. Then Leokau had almost smiled. "It works on the tourists, somehow I don't think it works on a temple maiden."

"Not maiden" Oharu corrected. "Simple... Oharu."

Leokau had given the mouse an odd, appraising look after that answer before she continued. Taking out a comb from the small bag she carried Leokau began to work out the excess water from her fur. Her glance however had been noted by the mouse. A look Oharu was well aware of, having seen it in her own sensei's eyes many times. "If you say so. I'll be honest then. All I know of what you were I learned this morning from a tourist pamphlet. So if you don't mind talking to an old married woman, what is a Miko anyway. And how would I know one from a distance."

Silently turning to a blank page in her sketchbook Oharu used the movement to decide how she would answer. There was the pat, tourist answer. One aimed at the sensibilities and limited understandings of Western tourists, or the answer given to children who were interested in becoming a Miko. Then there was the one that she had given her sensei just last year. None would truly fit this occasion, for though the otter was no base Western tourist already certain in her opinion, nor a child, she wasn't... Well, she felt like a sensei Oharu thought. There was about her, something. As her pencil made its first thin line on clean paper she made her decision. Between child and sensei.

"Miko many things, each different. Each part of whole" she explained as she drew. "True, Miko clean temple. Tend sacred fire. Be Miko bring honor family yes, not most important. Sometimes many generation women same family serve temple." She touched her clothing, its dull brown shen blended in well with the landscape around her. "Miko wear white with red, always in temple, often elsewhere. Chihaya, um, Kimono" she touched her clothing, "Always white. Hibakama, skirt? Apron? always red. Is two part clothing. See red over white, must be Miko."

"I see. So it's a uniform of sorts. Something like the European religion's wear." Leokau decided. She had finished combing out the excess water, now turning to combing patterns into her exposed fur. "So if your not just a serving girl in the temple, what are your other duties?"

Oharu continued drawing as she worked out what she needed to say. "Miko act as temporary vessel, send evil spirit when take from one held by such. Keep spirit from escape or infect other. Then send spirit away. When need Miko enter trance. She receive divination from Gods, pass to others. Perform sacred kagura... music. Offer prayers, announce what Gods decide. Remember ritual. Teach new Miko. Remember custom, religious law. Care shrines, offerings, deal visitor need aid. Start training no later seven years. Take four, sometimes more year learning before accepted temple. Assist older Miko first. Long path attain balance. Part training bow, arrow. Sound bowstring frighten evil spirit. Some walk path misogi, dangerous training. Help those take know where belong. Miko maiden, always. No matter what age."

Leokau seemed to nod to herself, as though in some secret understanding. "And you Oharu, being no longer a maiden. You are cast from the temple" she asked softly. "You walked misogi. Didn't you."

"Make own choice. Walk own path. I accept what is, as what I reach for" Oharu admitted, ignoring, or refusing to answer the question of misogi. "Was stumbling. Reaching for love. Still maiden though." She paused a moment, her body burning at the memory of what had almost been that one weekend. A weekend when she had seriously debated losing her status for a single night of pleasure. "Strong tempted. Now no longer Miko, not know what am other than not. Must be something. Not know. Yet."

"It sounds more like you're more a priestess than a simple helper. But how do you make certain a Miko never steps over the line. What I ask is, what keeps a Miko from thinking she is always right, everyone else wrong?"

Oharu looked up at the clouds overhead as if searching for something, before turning back to her sketch. "Not often Miko become Shrine Priestess" she admitted. "Not forbidden, it not what Miko is. What Miko wish to be. Truth I wish be Priestess. Once. Those wish will become. You ask how Miko hold center, when sometime vessel for Gods? That hard, even for best. Miko have aid these time. Assistant, remind Miko she human, not God. Remind Miko she mortal, maybe not always right. Help Miko return center when stray."

"You loved your work didn't you. Did it pay very well?"

Oharu almost smiled, a bear twitch of one corner of one lip. "Temple not rich. Always more expense than yen. Make extra sell things. I good with art, Western kind. Each coin help, cost much keep any temple open. Yes. I love what did. Love all of heart. Love help, love work. Always remember I mortal. I only vessel for Gods, I not voice of Gods." She set her pencil aside, picking up a small, broken blade she'd rescued from the garbage. Deftly the mouse slid her thin blade along one edge of the page, releasing it from the binding holding it. Replacing her blade on the bright red cloth her other drawing tools were sitting on she carefully closed her book, leaving just an edge of the now loose paper showing. "Why ask so much? All past. Must find new life now. All past. No longer matter."

"Sometimes, rarely, the past does no longer matter Oharu" the otter agreed. "Huakava would not have asked me to speak to you if your past was worthless to her. We have our own Gods here. From what I have just learned your training is a lot like what we are trained to be. True, during tourist season we play with our reality. It turns curious eyes aside from truths we wish hidden and amuses overly wealthy visitors to spend much they would normally not spend. I'll be honest with you Oharu. I viewed your works before I came here. Your eye is good, you highlight the things most people ignore. She is interested in you but there are others interested in you as well. Even people from other islands, where I am afraid one of your beauty would be rather badly treated. Oharu you have promise, but you have two strikes against you. You're still an unknown and you've a darkness within that must be dealt with. I'm afraid that only you can deal with that, only once you accept that it exists. Most importantly, only when you are ready."

"Oharu not have darkness. Hate no one. Want nothing for self. Not wish harm anyone" the mouse protested. "Not feel darkness within self. Think maybe Leokau mistake."

Leokau twisted a curl of fur on her right breast, turning the pattern into a three dimensional sculpture that oddly remained as she had left it. "That is for you to decide little one. You must decide your own path Oharu. No one else can do that for you. Remember this though, there are those who will help you if you only ask. Now I have to go. My sister is waiting and I've my own duties to attend too."

"Two question, please?" Oharu asked as her visitor stood.

"Two? Not two hundred?" Leokau asked.

Oharu did blush at that, for within her heart were two hundred questions, and two hundred more after and even after that and that. "Two" she repeated firmly.

"Okay, two. They are?"

"Pattern on fur. Is religious?"

Leokau lifted her right paw, tracing certain patterns. "Means I'm married, what family I'm married into. These two are religious, but the rest. They are simply statements of how I feel today. Happy, lighthearted, hoping for a son. Other things. Promise me you won't let anyone you don't fully trust pattern your fur. You could end up being asked how much. Second question."

"I think understand. Other question. Only wear skirt. All others I see wear more. Not much most cases. But cover..." She blushed deeply this time as she indicated her own chest.

"Native dress is just this or even less. Huakava felt you are ready to understand that, at least on Casino Island things are not like they are elsewhere. Should you visit the other islands that make up Spontoon, she wanted to be certain you wouldn't explode in humiliation at seeing women in such a state of dress. Especially away from the tourist areas." Leokau smiled, "Though I did learn what part of a woman attracts you the most is the part everyone see's anyway. Now I've got to go, unless there is something else."

"One last" Oharu admitted, pulling the loose sheet of paper from her book she handed it to the otter. "For you. Yes is eyes, lips I look most" she admitted.

Accepting the page Leokau turned it to its image side. "Exceptionally well done" she half whispered. "Even the patterns. You are very good Oharu, very quick. I hope you remain with us and not travel on. Now my goodbye, as my sister has children to feed and its late. Until next time." She bowed slightly, as much as one in her condition safely could then turned to walk down the path she had arrived on.

Oharu's eyes opened slowly as her memories faded. Leokau had never shown any emotion. Odd she thought. So many suggestions, hints and even two warnings. Was she already known as a spy the mouse asked herself, or was it something else. She had made certain not to ask too many questions, and then only those that she would have asked in any occasion. Except for Songmark of course. That though. Was she asking because she was supposed to spy for the Emperor, or because somewhere within her those engines kept calling to her. To touch one again. To dismantle it, then return it to its youth again. Of their own accord her fingers twitched, curling into position learned while handling certain tools. To touch a plane again. Any plane.

A flicker from the candle she had left burning brought her from her daydream. There was no breath of air yet the flame had twisted. As she watched it twisted again. Gently she leaned forward, blowing a soft breeze from her lips to the flame. In horror she watched as it leaned towards her, not away. *'There is a darkness within me'* she realized with dread. But what she wondered. She felt, though still paralyzed emotionally, as she had always felt. Not how she had felt when holding an evil spirit within her, a feeling she was well used too. Then what? There was only one way to find out. Settling herself into a comfortable position Oharu slipped slowly into a trance. *'I will discover what darkness is within me'* she decided, *'And cast it away.'* Silence soon filled the room Oharu was in, silence broken only by the gradually slowing breathing of an ex-Miko preparing for a battle within herself.

Butterfly dropped the wooden platter she was holding, an unhuman scream still echoing through her compound as she and her husband rushed to the building holding their long term guest. Taza McGee stopped just outside of Oharu's still open door, allowing his larger and somewhat more gentle wife to enter first. A moment after she entered Butterfly called for her husband. What both saw was frightening. Oharu was splayed out on her back like a child's forgotten rag doll. Her eyes, though open showed only white. Her tiny shrine was shattered, spread across the floor in splinters. A smoking candle lay against

one wall, its wax cooling rapidly. "Get... Get Huakava if yah can" Butterfly ordered her husband. "Or well.. Yah know who. Just get one, ahn quickly." She knelt beside the convulsing mouse as her husband ran (and no one could fault his speed, buffalo wolves have never been known to be slow) to get help. Lifting Oharu's form against her own body she wrapped her large arms around the small woman, as if by will alone she could heal her. She held the unresponsive mouse tightly, keeping her head up, all the while deathly worried at how cold the Cipangan's body was. Pre-warned it was obvious to her what had happened and just as obvious that it was beyond modern medical science or her own very tiny skills.

Huakava's warning was strong in her mind. That there was a darkness within the mouse, and that most likely Oharu would try to deal with it alone. As warned and foolishly, a still unready ex-Miko had tried to heal herself. "You shouldn't have tried" Butterfly cooed to the slowly calming woman. "Nah ready. Nah ready yet." She continued talking, rocking Oharu as though she were one of her own children. By the time help arrived Oharu had stopped shaking, but she was still unresponsive. And barely breathing.

Chapter Sixteen

Drifting twisting pain darkness flames madness laughing.... Oharu's mind fought for stability in a world that knew of no such thing. Still she would not give up trying, for doing so would lead instantly into a new madness. A madness something deep inside her knew could never be survived. Waves of something that clung, yet washed away as it did so passed over her. Her clothing became heavier, tearing away even as it dragged her down into... Shattered lands crawling with things more akin to a madman's idea of squid than reality. Long tentacles reaching for her, great fang filled moths opening to bite. Sulphur yellow slime dripping from their open maws. Blood red sky screamed, shifting to orange as bilious green fogs rolled in, parting slowly when the sky moaned, shifting back again to red, or pale eggshell ivory.

It was late February, it was casino Island and the once Miko had fallen into madness.

Something touched her gently. There, and there. Again she felt another touch where none should reach. Then pain as two splintered swords rose to slash her body, releasing ribbons of blood. Red ribbons that fell, twisting about each other until far below they struck a white stone. Her blood flowed, not splashed as it should. Flowed in lines to become her nations flag. Oharu's body fell past the stone, lifeless, to be impaled upon sharpened flint spikes mounted in a pattern shaped like her island nation. Her bones shattered like cheap glass as dark brown stone slid through her as she passed through even this, continuing her fall until with a sudden splash her limp body was floating in a salty sea. She rose to her feet, her body pale. Still bloodless. Reaching out with her bare paws. Her flesh now ragged strips she touched more stone. Stone that became rotted teeth, then a huge mouth which opened to swallow her. It was a mouth set in her Emperors own face. Billowing rising sun flags crossed the sky behind her Emperors massive head, fresh hot blood falling endlessly from their dark red centers. There was no rhyme nor reason to the place she found herself in. Against her own will Oharu closed her eyes from this madness, finally understanding she could not win, not against this. But she must never dare to surrender.

"Oharu" a woman's soft voice called. Soft yet insistent. Oharu opened her eyes, though the madness still spun about her she found that her feet now stood upon a small grass covered hill. "Come Oharu. It is time to leave this place."

Oharu rose and stepped forward slowly on shattered feet, moving towards the voice. At each step a small plot of grass appeared, it's cool touch upon the ragged bloody pads of her feet a soothing feeling. "Who?" she manage to ask, her torn voice box making the work a rasping sound. Her tail twisted in nervousness around first one leg, then another. She couldn't find her center. "I am lost" she gasped at the revelation, nearly falling to her knees.

"We all are lost at one time" the gentle voice whispered, drifting on a cool, welcome breeze. "Come to me Oharu. That you my find yourself again."

Step by slow step Oharu followed that soft voice until she stood again in peace. Behind her a great grey stone wall lifted slowly, ponderously. Its appearance sealing from her the path she had just walked. Beyond it lay the madness that had come so close to claiming her. A madness she knew was only held a bay, not defeated. Exhausted Oharu fell face forward onto cool sweet grass. A soft waterfall nearby sent gentle voices of water nymphs to her ears. Near instantly she fell asleep.

"She is?" Butterfly McGee asked, her voice so soft it could barely be heard.

Looking up, her own exhausted gaze meeting the bovines a younger female feline pushed sweat soaked hair away from her face. "This one will survive, for now" the young Priestess known as Saimmi Hooe'toemi answered. She reached to her right, adjusting a candle burning next to the sleeping mouse's

head. "I have protected her as best I may. It will not last long. Poor one, striking unready. She could have been lost forever. She will have but some little time to prepare before my barrier falls to that great madness I found her in."

Butterfly settled her bulk down a few feet away from the young priestess. "Wha' happened anyway" she asked.

Saimmi stretched, her supple feline form twisting in ways Butterfly envied. For her own greater bulk allowed few of the moves she watched the feline easily manage. Silently she held out a glass of water, the twentieth or so since Saimmi had first arrived. Accepting the offered drink Saimmi sipped silently while she watched Oharu's body slowly slip into a deep sleep. "She was trained to strike at evil spirits, trained very well" the feline explained. "Perhaps by the best in her nation from what I saw her enduring. Where I would have gone mad. Where all whom I know would have gone mad. Yet she endured. She pressed on. She fought. What she faced though was no evil spirit, no enraged god. She faced her old self without knowing it, what had happened to her and why. She faced what she could not understand. She faced the truth. In such misunderstanding struck out at herself as though against an outside enemy. I wish I knew more about her, about what a Miko is, about her training. Simply finding her among all that her mind created, I have not worked so hard before." She swallowed more water, her own body begging for sleep. "What has she become to so anger what she once was" the feline asked herself. "How could one so gentle shatter her own self so elegantly." Turning her eyes again to Butterfly Saimmi made a decision. "We must know more about her, before and now. She is more than I, more than Leokau. Less than Huakava though not by much I think. I must go now. Leokau will come later."

She stood, her body trembling under the strain after so much effort had been placed upon its reserves. Suddenly her knees gave out, the wooden cup in her paw tumbling to dry earth. "Tired, so..." Unconscious before she fell a foot, she tumbled into Butterfly's waiting arms.

"Ah bed I can give yah" Butterfly whispered, standing with the priestess's slighter weight in her arms. A weight that to the bovine was no more than her own children. Stepping from the doorway she found her husband and her older children waiting. "A bed fer her" Butterfly ordered her husband. "One o' us stay with Oharu. Till she wakes."

Morning came, and passed. Another morning came, and passed. It was near noon the second day when Oharu's eyes fluttered open, to find one of Butterfly's children sitting next to her. A young boy he was reading some kind of small book. "Water" she managed, her throat strangely raw.

"Ala, makalahi, po'o pa'akiki makuahine" the young boy called without lifting his head from the page. At the same time he reached beside himself, lifting up a large wooden cup and holding it, still without looking up from his reading, to the grateful Oharu.

She accepted the cup gingerly, lifting it to desert dry lips. Though the water it held had been sitting several hours it was sweet nectar to her body. She drank slowly, yet by the time Butterfly arrived she'd finished it all. As Butterfly entered her son slipped out of his seat, still reading, and wandered off. Most likely to the central compound where the light was best for such. "More water?" the bovine asked softly.

"Hei... yes. Please" Oharu answered, lifting the cup to Butterfly's paw. "Your son said.. Mother I did understand, and awake. His other word?" She accepted the cup, beginning to slowly sip.

"Headstrong" Butterfly translated. "Headstrong's awake mother. Close enough I think." Butterfly smiled, "You better noh? It did noh brother you that 'e was here?"

"He is but child" Oharu reminded her landlady. "No. Not well. Difficult explain." She pushed herself up into a sitting position, then laid one paw against her bare breast. "Something inside. Not evil spirit. Feel more like self. Self hates self. Try run off, lose battle. I not lose battle since eleven winter old." She took

another sip of water. "Oharu... afraid" she admitted.

"How well yah read English" Butterfly asked.

"Not well" the mouse admitted. "Can make out, if have time. If block print only."

"Saimmi laft ah note. Wan's yah to talk with her. Said nah to try this again. Nah till she talks with yo'." She picked up a folded paper from the table the water was on, handing it to Oharu. "Nah long, says how tah find her." She settled back, letting time pass while Oharu read with difficulty.

Eventually Oharu set the paper down. Saimmi had written in block print, evidently suspecting the mouse's difficulty with English (Spontoon would have been impossible.) Though she could read English slightly, it was still very difficult for her. She'd had to puzzle out some words, others she'd guessed at. A few she had no clue for. "Say need get out" she explained. "Walk among people. Walk beach, see sun. Will see two month. Speak then." Taking a deep breath the mouse held it some time before releasing it slowly. "What say strange. Say old Oharu angry new Oharu. Need balance. Need deal what happened. Mention Songmark. Girl there same same. Maybe help." Carefully sliding her legs from under the sheet Oharu sat up fully, one paw holding her bed's bamboo headboard while she regained her composure. "Maybe make sense. Oharu go Songmark. Ask this girl. Maybe learn how deal with nightmare." She started to stand, then sat again as the world spun about her. "Maybe in few minutes."

"I will hav' Reiko take yah to tha water taxi, explain things. Yah listen tah her an be back by sundown. Casino Island's no safe likes of you after dark. Oh, couple yer smaller drawin's sold. She'll have tha money."

"Sundown" Oharu agreed, slowly managing to stand without the universe spinning about her. "Perhaps cloth for new kimono too?"

"Main islands best fer tha, better price than Casino. Even Eastern Island's better'n Casino. Better quality tah. Reiko can take yah intha mornin fer shoppin. Still gonna work for me?"

"Yes. Good offer. I take." Oharu bowed slightly towards her benefactor, careful not to allow the world to spin about her again. A few minutes later she slowly made her way to the baths to clean up and dress. What she wore now was nothing more than an old slip, from its size one of Butterfly's from her younger years. Much younger years Oharu thought. She felt like she was in a tent, yet it was obviously much too small for the mother of six. A mother who's actions most likely had just saved her sanity. Right now though Songmark was her priority.

Not quite an hour later Oharu found herself sitting under the sun canopy in the center of what the locals called a water taxi, her drawing pad in her lap. She had her pencil at the ready. It was amazing she thought, in so many ways like home yet in so many other ways totally unlike it.

Behind her a silent wolf guided his small boat among the harbor traffic, his position behind and slightly above the busy mouse enabling him to watch as she drew, and what she drew. Just as obvious as what she was drawing he noted that she paid him absolutely no attention whatsoever. From what he saw though she had nothing to hide. That, however, was for others to decide. His job at the moment was to dodge the harbor traffic and deliver his cargo, undamaged, to Eastern Island. This he did with such skill Oharu never noticed they had almost been flattened by a rather decrepit looking aircraft, leaking oil as it lifted off less than sixty yards from their little water taxi.

Stepping carefully off the boat Oharu took a moment to thank her pilot, who almost seemed to blush at her words. Still it was a bright day and her eyes were burning a bit from sunlight reflected by the water. She could have misunderstood. Turning towards land Oharu made her way slowly and carefully through the milling people until she again stood on dry land. It was the first time she had stood alone on any part of

the Spontoon chain since waking at the hospital on Casino Island. She really just wanted to explore, the artist in her wanting to see what there was to draw while within her mind a nagging voice warned her not to appear too interested in things. She had an important job to do. For the Emperor.

"Way to Songmark?" she asked a young man sitting on a rather large crate. He smiled back, pointing up the road before returning to peeling some kind of tuber. Thanking him for his kindness the mouse turned to follow the direction he had pointed. It wasn't a long walk to the school and as she walked Oharu noted many of the uniforms she had been told belonged to students there. Yet not one of the wearers were male, an interesting thought she would have to make note of somehow. Considering the ease in which she made her way to the school gates it was a surprise to be stopped at them.

"How can I help you" a bored looking young canine girl asked. Oharu cleared her throat before answering. Although she wasn't much smaller than the canine asking, she had no intention of causing trouble.

"My name Oharu" she explained. "Live Casino island. Come talk student. Two year" she explained. Pulling out the note Saimmi had left she ran her eyes down the page a moment. "Name Mol-lie" she mispronounced.

"Are you family, or a friend" the canine asked, suddenly very interested.

"No know Moh-Lie" Oharu admitted. "Woman say speak Mol-Lie, share pain. Maybe Moh-Lie help Oharu through same she."

"See that bench over there" the canine asked. "Have a seat. I'll get one of the staff. I can't let you in and please don't try to slip in with any of the students's while I'm gone. You'll just get into trouble."

"I wait" Oharu agreed, slipping the refolded letter into her obi while she walked to the tree. It was placed, she discovered, in a grove of young palms. This lent shade to anyone sitting there, giving some sense of privacy though still in full view of the gate itself. Deciding not to waste time while waiting the mouse opened her sketch book to began a detailed drawing of the gates and their surroundings.

So involved was Oharu that when a shadow suddenly covered her page she simply moved slightly to regain the sun. Only when the shadow returned did she look up. "I am Miss Devinski" an older, and very attractive yellow furred canine woman announced. "You are Oharu?"

Standing Oharu bowed. "Hei, Oharu" she answered, straightening up carefully lest her body remind her of its exhaustion again. "Can see Moh-Lie now?"

"I'm sorry. Non-students are not allowed in the compound. May I join you?"

"Please, yes" Oharu agreed, waiting until Miss Devinski sat before settling down herself.

"I would like to know why you want to see one of our students" Miss Devinski asked. "Your not a native, I don't recall her speaking of meeting a.." She paused, "Chipangian. Correct?"

"Once yes" the mouse admitted as softly as her voice would allow. "No more."

"Difficulties at home? Family?"

"Emperor" Oharu admitted just as softly.

"Ouch. Politics. So, back to my original question. Why would you want to see one of my students. Does she owe you money or has she caused you a problem perhaps."

"None. Letter say speak Moh-Lie. She have same..." Oharu fought for the word, "Exsperc I have. Bad time on ship."

"Experience" Miss Devinski corrected. "Exactly what happened to you on a ship, that you think may have happened to one of my students. And if somehow it did who gave you her name."

Withdrawing her letter Oharu unfolded the paper carefully. "Name here" she explained, pointing to a signature she couldn't read as she offered the page to Miss Devinski.

"I know of her" the older woman admitted, carefully re-folding the page before returning it to Oharu. "And what happened?"

Oharu fidgeted, looking away before answering. "Once I Miko" she explained slowly, unable to look at the woman in her shame as she spoke of her fall. "Temple Maiden. Mean stay pure mind. Body. Soul. Now. Now no more. Not my doing. Not remember much, ship crew many men, many days. Need learn how understand. How let pain go. How... How understand" her right paw touched just over her heart. "How understand why dark now. How make dark go away. How make old self no more angry new self."

Having looked away she couldn't see how white Miss Devinski's face became under her fur, how her eyes showed not shock, but anger. Before Oharu could turn her head Miss Devinski had brought her feelings under control, though with some effort. "I know which student you are talking about" she admitted. "I will speak with her" she promised. "Remember though. It is up to her to decide. Where, if she wishes to speak to you, can she find you."

Oharu had closed her eyes as she spoke. Opening them again she turned back to face her companion. "I work McGee Resort. Casino Island. I artist, sell drawings. Servant too, now. Maybe more later. Not there then Mrs. McGee know where find. Send runner for Oharu."

Miss Devinski nodded in understanding. "I'll see what can be done. No promises. Now I have to get back to work. Will you return to Casino now?"

Oharu laid one paw on her lap. "Think maybe walk public area. See what see. Draw." An engines sound came from the seaplane base, its growl of power rolling gently across the land. Oharu's head automatically turned to bring her gaze in that direction, much like a compass needle unresistantly hunts magnetic North.

"You like airplanes?" Miss Devinski asked. "Are you a pilot too?"

Shaking her head Oharu forced her eyes away from the sound. "Not like fly plane" she admitted. "Try twice, not feel right. Like work engines. Like feel work on engines, see broken engine come life again. Only do so few weeks but like. Like much."

"That's the civil seaplane base" Miss Devinski explained. "It is a long walk. If I were you I might stop by Song Soda. Pilots are usually there. Some of our students gather there as well. Have you ever had ice cream?"

"Some time" the mouse admitted. "Like strawberry, expensive. Vanilla nice too. They sell to Cipangu Oharu?"

"They sell to anyone with cash" Miss Devinski laughed. "Do you have enough, I could arrange a soda for you."

"Have money" Oharu admitted. "Several drawing sell yesterday. Thank you for offer. For time." Standing the mouse bowed again to Miss Devinski before carefully walking back the way she had come. Lost in her

thoughts she was unaware of the eyes that followed her. There were few things Miss Devinski could not abide. Now she knew two who had suffered in a way none should. Standing herself she started to return to her office, then changed her mind. A visit to Song Sodas might be nice, and watching over her girls was a full time job after all. One certainly deserved a refreshment now and then after all, though arriving too closely behind her strange visitor would be an error. Walking to the guard she explained where she would be, just in case another student decided to jump the fence today.

Song Sodas proved easy for Oharu to locate and it was full of laughing people from all over the island. As Miss Devinski had suggested there was the occasional Songmark uniform in evidence, along with many pilots. To Oharu's delight strawberry was available, though the price was just high enough to make her think carefully. It was expensive, having to be flown in from Hawaii of all places. Steeling herself she dug out the extra money needed for her choice and a bottle of Nootnops Red. Then settled down to enjoy her first true luxury since leaving for the temple and Miko training a lifetime ago.

People came and went while the mouse nursed her ice cream and drink. There were many pilots, all whom merrily talked about adventures past and expected future income. Often their voices were clear enough for her to follow conversations. There was also a slowly growing number of students. One couple caught her eye, an obvious Songmark student with what appeared to be a native girl. Both were very close. From what Oharu could see of their body language it was more than friendship. Much... much more. If such could be allowed here... She was well aware that it never would be in her homeland. She allowed herself to dream a bit. No longer able to preform her duties as a Miko it would be expected of her to find someone. Though none of her race would think of even noticing her. Yet there were many pretty young women about. Though most of those she saw that still seemed unattached were younger than Oharu herself. She felt it would be wrong to approach one younger, especially considering her own social position. Silently she allowed herself to enjoy the love that young couple were expressing to flow over her.

Abruptly they parted as a larger figure wandered in. Miss Devinski Oharu realized. She also realized that she had been staring, a very impolite thing to do. Returning to her now half melted dish she dug in. Certainly she really must return to the Double Lotus. Perhaps Saturday would be a good day. As for now, there would be a great deal of walking to do before she returned to her new home. Perhaps she might even locate a stall selling cloth for a reasonable price. When she finished her dish Oharu left quickly, not looking back. Not noticing the two pairs of eyes that followed her.

A little while later she was sitting on a beach looking out at the water as a seaplane landed, its pilot bringing the craft in with such a delicate touch it simply appeared to kiss the water. Though the distance was too far for details Oharu thought the pilot might be female. As it slowed Oharu's paw went to work, quickly tracing out the crafts lines, how it sat in the water. These quick sketches would be used to prod her memory later, when she started her detailed work at night. Water suddenly caressed her toes, waves formed from the landing airships wake. Shocked she jerked her feet away from the cool saltwater. Had anyone been close enough they would have noted an expression of pure horror on the mouse's face. Moments later though a wistful look came to the mouses face at a different thought. In such a small way she was now connected to that ship, that pilot. Sharing, if only for a moment an experience. Turning back to her art she went from page to page with sometimes rough sketches, occasionally detailed bits of craft but mainly quick, simple images.

Her stomach rumbling reminded her that it had been some time since she had eaten. Some poi before leaving Mrs' McGee's home (a strange, purple cream like pudding with a wonderful taste she had discovered) then the ice cream. In truth though, nothing substantial had entered her stomach in over two days. Closer to three actually. Closing her book she stood, noting that the tide had withdrawn while she had been lost in her art. A light meal then, after that perhaps find a stall selling cloth though chances of finding real Kimono cloth here was extremely small.

During her meal, fresh baked bread and cooked fish with water, Oharu watched for the troller's she knew would be about. Those people who 'knew someone who knew someone' who were always sent out to find

buyers for 'special places off the beaten path.' Usually stalls that carried the lesser desirable products and services, though for cloth she felt her chances were good that she'd find someone with cast off scraps. Someone having sent a family member or partner out to find buyers for materials that he would otherwise have to throw away. Her time spent in the temple stall had trained her eye to spot these, and though several were wandering about it was only by luck she tumbled across an old hound hawking cloth samples. She was only a little surprised when he asked if she going to Casino island.

"Yeah lady, knows som'on selling odd bits" the scruffy hound admitted after she told him she lived there. "Down tha' road, towards tha warehouses. Third on yer left. Tell'em Evers sent yah. He'll do right by yah."

Some few minutes walking found Oharu standing inside a rather substantial outdoor display of cloth. Brightly colored as well as muted bolts, bits and scraps were everywhere around her. A middle aged otter seemed to run the place, and though nothing had a price on it she discovered by trial and error that the more expensive cloth was farther towards the back. What she could afford was nearer the center. Some beautiful yellow silk was in one bin, with barely enough to make a native dress. By native Oharu was thinking of what Huakava wore when she'd first met her. An image of herself in such a tight form hugging outfit came to Oharu's mind, followed by a flush of embarrassment the like she hadn't had in some time. No. It would have to be a kimono. True native dress, maybe in a hundred years or so.

"This?" she asked, holding up a bolt of blue and silver cloth, sunlight glinting off silver threads that she felt must be real metal. He named a price, one above any possibility of her affording. Disappointed, for the blue was dark, a color she found very attractive she started setting it back down.

Another, much lower price was offered. She shook her head. "More than Oharu have" she admitted, reaching for a courser, more somber cloth she already knew was affordable.

"Maybe aye has some scrap" the otter offered. "Inna back. Scrap's cheaper. Wait, please?" He vanished into the warehouse while Oharu waited, soon coming out with a much smaller bolt. "Left over from ah costume order" he explained. "Can let er go for, oh..." He named a price equal to the lesser cloth she had been about to buy. "Check er out."

Unrolling over half the bolt Oharu was surprised to discover there would be more than enough for a kimono, perhaps two if she were very careful. "For so little?" she asked, surprised.

"No un's gonna want ah part bolt" the otter admitted. "Not soon. Better sell fer what aye can get, than sit an' let that bugs eat it up. Yah want it, its yours."

"Yes. I take" she agreed, reaching for her purse while the otter re-folded the bolt, then carried it off to wrap in paper as she watched. Just before sundown, her cloth held like some precious treasure against her chest, Oharu headed back to where she could find a water taxi.

Behind her two new sets of eyes watched. "Shame she's ah gonna lose tha cloth" the otter whispered.

"Beautiful yes, she would look. In such" an oily voice agreed from shadows behind him. "Message get through. Maybe cloth find way back to her."

"Aye don' lik being used" the otter reminded his unwanted visitor. "Not mah customers neither."

"Debt is debt. Payment is payment. No gun to your head was held. Debt you made. Debt you now pay in full."

"Yeah. Mahbe aye made ah mistake. Mahbe aye didn't. We see later. Debt though is cancelled."

"Aye. Even we are now." Silently the other left, leaving a much bothered otter behind to care for his wares and other customers.

Later that afternoon found the young mouse walking onto the water taxi pier, her large paper covered bundle in her arms tied tightly with white cord. Though she tried to watch where she was going people found themselves making way for her. In truth the bundle was almost too large for her to handle by herself. Managing to find a waiting taxi Oharu gratefully allowed its owner to take her package, almost stumbling as she entered his craft. It was some surprise to discover that she was in the same water taxi that she had arrived in. Opening her purse she asked the price back to Casino Island, again surprised to discover that the trip back would cost her exactly what the trip over had been. She was used to people rising their prices, if only a bit. Seeing that she did have just a bit more left over from her shopping than she'd expected it pleased her not to be forced to pay more to return than to arrive. Accepting his honesty as gracefully as she could Oharu handed over the sum, the trip leaving her with barely a quarter shell to her name.

As she relaxed against the bolt her body began absorbing the air's warmth, the sea's moisture. As it did Oharu looked back over her day. Her luck had certainly changed. Running across a man selling cloth for much less than she could have hoped for, and such beautiful cloth as well. Used to the tricks of her own people Oharu had watched carefully as he unrolled the partial bolt of blue and silver cloth, until she was certain it wasn't good cloth rolled over poor goods. For this she would have expected to pay ten, perhaps twenty times all the money she had. Though it wasn't silk, only the best linen, it was a find that had opened her heart to the sun for the first time in months. From her rough measuring there was just enough for two kimono's if she was extremely careful with her sewing. Unlike Chipangian kimono cloth, which came thirteen inches wide and was sewn uncut this was western cloth. She would have to buy thread and borrow Mrs. McGee's sewing kit again.

As her taxi moved across the harbor Oharu tore a bit of paper from her package, if nothing else than to insure her she did indeed have what she'd paid for. In the boats somewhat softer light the cloth seemed even richer. She would have preferred silk, had in fact been looking at the stalls cheaper silks. She remembered how the red and white silks had shone, had seemed to say 'we are here, where are you.' "In truth. Where am I" she whispered in her native language. "In truth. What am I now." She looked out the boat's Port side, watching as Casino Island approached. "Saimmi may help. Perhaps Mol-le too. I just..." Unconsciously her paws lifted, covering her heart. "I feel so empty."

Behind her the taxi pilot carefully memorized her words. Though he knew some of Oharu's language, there were so many languages to know, one could not be an expert in all. It helped that his passenger had used a native and Euro name, and that her worlds had been few. It was her emotion though that reached him. Silently he shifted course, still headed for Casino Island but now to a pier much closer to the McGee complex. It wouldn't hurt him to land his passenger and her large package a few hundred feet closer to her destination.

Unknown to either the water taxis change in course foiled a planned robbery. Two young toughs were waiting for Oharu and her package of cloth. Though they had no interest in the mouse as it was to be a simple snatch and run, their trap would be foiled. As Oharu had thought, the cloth she held was worth much more than what she had paid for it. More importantly there was a letter parcel hidden inside her rolled cloth. A coded letter meant for an unnamed person on Casino Island. A letter that couldn't have been trusted to any of the known carriers as too many eyes already watched them. Though the cloth could be easily replaced, there was much more in the warehouse it had come from, the letter hidden deep inside would take several days to recreate. Even then there would still be a problem of finding another carrier and time for those involved was extremely short.

Oharu was momentarily confused when she first stepped onto the pier, until she finally recognized where she was. "My thanks" she told the taxi driver as she removed her purse from her obi. Opening it, she took out her last quarter shell, handing the coin to her benefactor. "Many thank." A quick bow to the again

surprised wolf and she picked up her package, hurrying home. Butterfly had specified before sundown, at the moment the sun was just about to vanish behind Main Island. It was with little time to spare that she arrived at the compound to be greeted by one of the younger children.

"Momneedhelpinnakitchen" the little girl told Oharu in the Spontoon language.

"Again. Slower" Oharu instructed patiently.

"Kitchen. Mom need help" the child repeated.

"A moment" Oharu agreed, taking time to stare at the McGee's tourist stall just inside the resorts main entrance. Her art was clearly visible there on display, though the prices listed were twice what she'd set and items were already missing. Shaking her head in disbelief she hurried to her room where she sat her package on the bed, then brushed off the days travel dust while removing everything she didn't need from the folds of her obi. Arriving in the kitchen she was hit by a sauna.

"Full up" Butterfly announced cheerfully. "First time this earl' inna season. All American's too. Came in a convoy o' seaplanes. Three of 'em. Sikorsky S-43's. Want tha go visiting tha natives tomorrow. Can yah take out that tray hon? Then set tha table for..." She counted quickly on her fingers as the mouse watched. "Fourteen. Wish you had ah prettier dress fer tonight. Hafta do. Get going."

Oharu got.

American's she rediscovered, were noise making, nosey people who laughed as loudly as they talked. All the men save one wore pistols, while the four women sported their own not so modest weapons. Uncomfortable around firearms Oharu kept quiet, hoping to be ignored. It worked most of the night, until finally the one unarmed man spoke to her in her own language. "Are you a servant here" he asked bluntly. "Or an adopted daughter."

"Employee" she answered back, gathering plates from the table.

"Your wearing an very dull kimono for a free woman" he commented.

Oharu stopped what she was doing, not quite making eye contact with the man. "Is all could afford when needed clothing. I have found new cloth today, tonight I begin new kimono. What one wears reflects not upon ones station, only upon what one has experienced. Today may be poverty. Tomorrow may bring riches or more rags. It is unimportant to the soul. I have recently encountered troubles. Today I have gained."

Her answer was a grunt, however the man ceased talking to her. Apparently satisfied by her answer he turned his attentions to a rather rougher looking blond man with goggles hanging about his neck. She didn't like that mans looks, or the way he kept staring at her so quickly making her exit she returned to the kitchen. Cleaning dishes was a hotter, more tiring job than serving the table. Still it was honest work though in truth Oharu didn't much like it. It was simply one of those things one has to do. Butterfly however was positively singing as she cleaned.

It was an exhausted mouse who dragged herself first to the private family bath, then to her own room that night. Remembering the strange American she carefully locked her door. It was the first time since she'd arrived that her door had even been closed. Her fear was proved valid as, sometime after moonset while she was carefully sewing a seam her door creaked. With the bar Mr. McGee had mounted across it her door opened only half an inch. She could hear the door rattle gently as whomever was on the other side tried again, then oddly light footsteps walking away across the compound when Mr. McGee started calling for one of his roaming children. Much lighter footsteps than she would have expected from a man she realized. Perhaps one of the women? But why she wondered. When all was quiet the mouse was

shocked to find her heart racing. 'Afraid' she thought. 'I was petrified with fear.' Though she didn't know who had come to her door, she had a very good idea what they wanted. Setting her unfinished Kimono aside she crawled into her rough bed. Sleep that night though proved fitful, and poor.

Morning found everyone working hard, as was usual during tourist season. Getting breakfast ready for the guests, cleaning rooms and changing sheets after they left for the day. It was work Oharu was well used to, having cared for her father and brother but it wasn't work she enjoyed though she did try. Eventually she found herself gently, but firmly pushed into the courtyard, a broom in her paws. This was something she could do without much thought.

As she swept the American who'd spoken with her before walked by, stopping to watch. "You worked in a temple. A cleaning woman." he stated in her native language. Not asked.

"Miko, once" Oharu responded automatically, before closing her mouth. This was something no one needed to know unless she wanted them to know.

"Then you are trained. Would you be willing to do some work for us later?"

Oharu stopped sweeping, thinking over his words. Work was work, and coin was coin but... "No" she decided. "Mrs. McGee has strict rules."

"Like the new sign. Very well then. Still if you would, please think on it." He walked away while Oharu returned to her sweeping. How, she wondered, had he known so much from a simple daily action and what new sign.

A nudge soon brought her out of her thoughts. Butterfly was standing beside her, a load of sheets in her massive arms. "Says employees are nah tha mix with tha guests" she explained. "Means guests are nah tha try tha open employees doors at nigh. Nah matter how pretty tha guest is." She winked at her new employee before heading off to the resorts laundry.

For the rest of the day Butterfly kept Oharu very busy. Either preparing food, cleaning, watching their stall or simply sewing on her kimono. By evening it was a very exhausted young mouse who drew the bolt on her door, and stopped stunned. Her normally clean and orderly room was a shambles. Her scream brought both Butterfly and her husband Taza on the run.

"Smell weasel" Taza snapped as he took in the tossed room, for tossed it had been. Stepping past both women, for once ignoring Oharu's unconscious flinch as he passed her Taza McGee searched the bungalow's two small rooms. "Bedroom window" he reported. "You sleep with Butterfly tonight" he almost snapped at Oharu. "I'll fix it in the morning. Anything missin?"

Oharu carefully stepped past the heavy buffalo wolf, searching both rooms. Though everything was disturbed the only thing truly bothered was her bolt of cloth. It lay in a jumble at the side of her bed, as though someone had sat on her bed and unrolled it though the cloth itself seemed unharmed. Quietly she reported her finding to Taza, adding that the smell of weasel was strongest by her bed.

"New sheet's in the morning then" Taza told his wife. "Musta thought you rich, stayin here so long. Maybe thought yah kept money in that cloth. Yah didn't did yah?"

Lifting her small cloth purse from her obi Oharu held it up. "Now empty. Little else in bank. Butterfly say bank safer. See now she right."

"Then nothing else tah do. I'll fix that window inna morning, you sleep with Butterfly." He grinned suddenly. "Just don' ruin her for me. Now I gotta get tah work." Stepping past Oharu he embraced his wife, then left the two alone. Later when they were alone he would tell his wife that he had a good idea

who had tossed the room, though not the why. Only a few rare weasels worked around the docks, where shipments of gun oil protected machine parts might pass through on their way to a certain Northern neighbor. One of them had been here, but the why he didn't know. Certainly none he knew would chance angering him for a few coins. It bore looking into.

When Saturday came the American's were gone immediately after breakfast. "Off hunting lost temples" Butterfly explained. "Aint any on these islands. " She laughed suddenly. "Taza, he sent them tah Orpington Island. Otta keep them busy awhile. Won' be back fer two, three days. Yah take tha day off. Try tah forget yesterday. Go roam round in tha new Kimono. Open some eyes." She laughed, swatting Oharu on her buttocks before turning back to her daily chores.

Most of the morning though Oharu spent working on her new drawings. By the time lunch had come and gone she did feel the need to relax. Her injured paw was cramping and the thought of a small glass of that Sloe Gin had her mouth watering. Pulling on her new kimono as Butterfly had suggested she wrapped it with her old obi. A soft blue obi would look good, for now she was stuck with what she had. At least until some of her pictures sold again. Butterfly had passed over her half of the sales yesterday, it was more than enough for a drink. Or two.

Later as she walked towards the Double Lotus Oharu noted new faces on the streets. Most were wearing bright, even gaudy clothing. On them it looked like plumage during a mating ritual. Tourists of course. Tourists with nothing better to do than burn themselves, make themselves ill eating too much of foods they had never experienced and spend more money for trinkets than they would at home. Still she'd been a tourist herself, twice. One time to Fuji Ama, the other to Osaka. One should climb Fuji Ama once in their life she remembered. Only a fool climbed Fuji Ama twice. Having done so once she well understood the saying. She remembered spending money on trinkets just as foolishly as these people were now doing. How would it feel she thought, to visit some strange country with someone she loved and be able to act so foolishly. It would be an interesting feeling to experience she decided as she reached the Double Lotus, her new kimono's silver threads sparkling in the sunlight.

There were new faces here as well when she entered, but Oharu simply ordered her one drink and found a small, out of the way place to enjoy it. As always her pad was out as she quietly sketched the faces she saw. This might become a place she would enjoy visiting the mouse realized as she slowly relaxed. It was... It was comfortable she decided, though she stayed out of the social games being played about her.

Chapter Seventeen

As Oharu had hoped, her short time at the Double Lotus this Saturday had helped relax her frayed nerves. At least for this little while. Later, when she would return home there were drawings waiting to be completed, others to start, cleaning to do and preparing for tomorrow's business. For a moment however contentment settled upon the nation-less woman. Her life was much like it had been before, falling again into patterns she could understand without thought. It was then that her true memories woke, reminding her of what she would never be again. Upon those memories awaking all contentment vanished. With a soft sigh of understanding Oharu began to make ready to leave the friendly bar.

Though she had managed quite a bit of completed work before the tourist season started, it was now painfully evident that if her sales continued at this pace she would run out of completed material long before the season ended. This knowledge she had achieved from the sales to only one small cruise ship. It seemed to her that tourists were like the locusts she had once read about. Descending upon a quite paradise, devouring all they could find before leaving for another paradise. Leaving behind them nothing but scorched earth, all delight having been wrung out of the land. If her work continued to gain popularity she would never be able to keep up, though there were certain subjects she refused to draw. At least for sale to the public. As she made to strand another moved to her side. It was she noted one of the American's staying at the McGee's small resort. A navigator if her memory served correctly.

"Can I speak with yah" the woman asked politely.

Oharu nodded yes, indicating a seat opposite from where she had spent the last hour while settling again into her still warm place.

"Barkeep, two of what she had" the woman called. Her voice was a bit rough, a roughness caused Oharu knew from hard living. Not from near murder. "Came to yer room. Door was locked. Needed tah talk with yah but that wolf started yelling for his kid, scared me off I guess. Before ah could knock. I'm Sandy. Sandy Doecan. Of the Bar Everything ranch."

"I see" Oharu replied, not really understanding just where this conversation was going. It never hurt to be polite however. "Your ranch. It is where?"

Their drinks arrived quickly as business was slack at this time of afternoon, momentarily stopping conversation as cups were placed before each woman. The barmaid gave Sandy a rough look, though she saved a gentle smile for Oharu before she left.

"East oh tha mile high city" Sandy explained. She grinned at the blank look Oharu gave her. "Denver, Colorado. Gold fields are West of us, in tha mountains. That's not important. What is this. We need tah talk. In private."

"I believe, if understand conversations. That one, maybe two rooms here" Oharu admitted. "For private discussion. A moment please?" She stood, leaving her drink untouched while she approached the barmaid. "She wish private meeting. Is possible?" Oharu asked.

"Meeting, or more" she was asked. A concerned expression meeting her gaze.

"Meeting only. No more one hour."

"Back that way. First door on your left. You need someone close?"

Oharu couldn't misunderstand the question, nor the gaze. "Oharu safe here" she explained. "No men."

"There's Nikki" she was reminded. Oharu matched that name with an image in her mind. Nikki was a fillypino mare. One who wore leather, studs and chains. A mare with a habit of approaching all women the same as she would some wild animal. As prey, not friends. "I think even she less problem some men" the mouse admitted. "Not all. Some. May use room?"

"Just don't break anything. We know that your not rich."

Oharu bowed slightly to the woman before returning to her visitor. "Say use room one hour. No more."

"Long enough. You lead." Gathering both drinks the bobcat waited until Oharu had retrieved her drawing pad, then followed as she led them to that more private place. Once they had settled down again, with the thick door beside them closed Sandy started in. "Celestial dragons have no left wing" she stated bluntly, her words not in English but Oharu's native tongue, though with that odd western accent. Sandy settled back to enjoy the stunned look on the artist's face. "Yeah, I'm yer contact. Actually yer control. What. You think they'd send a man? After what they did tah yah? No way."

"I see" Oharu admitted, slipping into her native language as well. "I have little special art to offer. A series on the harbor, some odd aircraft, a few strange things about Songmark. Those from the outside only. I have been unable to enter those gates. Visitors are apparently frowned upon. I do have detailed drawings of certain students, mostly what are called third years."

Sandy opened her purse, pulling out a thin brown envelope that she sat on the table. "It'll do till yer pickup swings back by in high-season. I'll ship 'em out from sommer else. There only test pieces. Yer new contact code is Blue eggs rarely crack. Celestial Dragon isn't valid anymore. Understand?"

"I do" Oharu answered just as softly as before. "Blue eggs rarely crack. It is easy to memorize."

"Good then. It'll probably be a man. I hope that ain't a big problem. Pickups I am not allowed to know. Only the agents I control. Mainly that means telling you were I want looked at ahn giving yah money. By the way, you were not supposed to pay your hospital bill with those funds so I will replace them. This once. Now, this is a snap I took on our flyover. I marked tha places I need attention payed too. As much as yah can but not enough we lose you. Ah don't wanna lose yah. Anyway there's no one tah replace yah, less they find another Miko artist. Things are goin into motion already. Times running away."

Carefully opening the envelope Oharu pulled out a single sheet of photographic paper. It was an air shot of the island group. From very high, but how high Oharu had no ability to discern as she wasn't yet certain of the islands true size. There were dozens of delicately made black arrows on the page. Oharu quickly made a rough count of over sixty. "Many of these places are forbidden" she warned. "Even to approach, I would be offering my life to the butcher. This island" she picked out Sacred Island with one claw. "Impossible."

"As if I don't do tha same dance myself with that self-same butcher girl. What do you think my president would do if he know I was on your side" Sandy asked. "I'm half Cipangan myself. Mom died at birth, dad remarried soon after. On ranches that often happens. So Beth is my mother, not Takana. Dad's a right stanch Republican, blind to tha what his oldest kids doin. We knew your first art wouldn't be much use, but no one could tell yah where tah start till I got here. Now you know. Keep that photo safe though. Sacred Island, only if yah can. I lost that married couple trying tah picnic there. They never made it back. Unfortunate drowning tha paper said, though Chaiki's body never surfaced. She was ah nice lady. Only following her husband's desires. Would'ah made someone a good mother."

Oharu had opened her sketchbook as Sandy rambled. Pulling out a common, slightly used tourist map she sat it on the table, then withdrew her red silk cloth wrapped tool kit from her Obi. "I will not need this

picture" she explained as she selected her small blade. Using the blades point at an angle she carefully pressed her tourist map in the places marked on Sandy's photo, using the coastline for reference rather than the marked towns. She had noticed the map seemed off, but wasn't yet certain why. Still tourist maps were not expected to be the most accurate of documents after all. Those her own temple had sold were as close as Takana could manage, but even she had admitted to her that some points were off badly. It was interesting the mouse noted, that Sandy's mother and her old friend shared the same first name. Still Takana was a common name. "Why did you turn against your country" she asked as she worked.

"Try being ah half breed in a Western town" Sandy explained. "Never good enough, somethin always wrong with yah and if I did too good, beaten into tha dirt for tryin. Forget what tha boys think of yah. Or try tah do when they think no-ones around. Nah girl. Somethin's wrong with a country that claims freedom, claims equality, then treats people like unintelligent animals cause their mother, or father isn't white. Or don't sit in tha same church, same pew, same page, same paragraph. Maybe it aint right for me tah feel this way but maybe it is right. I got no love for America no more. Some oh tha people yes, but tha country. It can burn all I care. What are yah doing anyway?"

"Each impression will remain, even should this paper become damp. I will be able to detect it with my fingertip, or a light dusting of graphite when I need. Your photograph is an invitation for death. An invitation I would accept. Were it within my right to do so. If you will grant me such release." She stopped, closing her eyes as some thought ran through her mind. "Sandy. I think perhaps you are wrong to act as you do. Do all people truly treat you so badly?"

"Even gradma. Mah dah's mom. She kicked me outta her house one Christmas cause she didn't want no slant eyed demon ruining her celebration. I broke ah dish, horsing around with mah younger brother. I damn near froze before dad arrived. They had words. He aint talked to her since an she aint come tah visit either. Not like mah brother hadn't broken a dozen or more them ugly blue plates himself over tha years. But yeah, most all whitesfurs. Not many of tha blacks furs, certainly not tha reds."

"Reds" Oharu asked as she started replacing her kit. "Russia?"

"Injuns. Native Americans. Tha ones all them high and mighty whites killed tha steal their land. So now yah know." She glanced at a pendent hanging from her neck, a watch Oharu realized. "We still have fifty minutes sah what now?"

"Take of your shirt and bra" Oharu ordered as she opened her book to a fresh page. "You would not like your other homeland" she warned as she prepared to draw. "You are half Gajin. You would be treated badly by all. Even the lowest would feel above you. Worse for having tainted blood than for being completely Gajin."

"Hah, I aint no..." Sandy waved her paw towards the door.

"Accepted. Though I find that perhaps I am. Even I am not certain of that, as yet. It matters not. To explain privacy it must be something personal. As we do not know each other, this is the best I may do. Unless you wish to drink from the other stream and thus fully answer my own question."

Sandy stood so fast she almost knocked her chair over. Stripping quickly she dropped her clothing on one of the other chairs before sitting down again. Suddenly grabbing her untouched drink she swallowed it in one gulp. "Been tha home" she admitted as the alcohol hit her stomach. "Already know what yah mean. Worse than America. All polite but sorry, sorry. Tha cannot be done. I'm thinking of Australia. They like everyone. Mostly."

"You have a brush?" Oharu asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Your fur is mussed. Please tend to while I sketch."

While Sandy brushed her fur, the everyday action easing her embarrassment slightly Oharu made several quick sketches. She had finally made a decision of what pose she wanted by the time Sandy had replaced her brush. "You would make a beautiful model Sandy" she offered as she stood and approached her visitor, moving the girl into a new position before returning to her chair. "It would be easier and safer than what you do now."

"Maybe. But I like flying. I like tha excitement of foolin tha government. What was that stuff ah drank. Its awful sweet."

"Sloe Gin" Oharu answered, pausing to take a sip from her own drink. She worked quickly, knowing that much had to be done in the little time they had. "Something my landlady introduced me to. I believe I like it. I also believe I would like to work a full image of you" she decided. "Your pattern is wonderful, your structure delicate, even with all that muscle beneath."

"Meanin yah want me to spend special time with yah" Sandy snorted. "Men tried that before. Took ah bit but I learned."

"Though, as I have admitted I am most likely attracted to women, I have no desire for anyone" Oharu answered. "Not after...." Her paw stuttered, forcing her to erase a line. "Not after that" she managed finally. "I have no desire for anything but death now" she admitted. "To regain my Honor before I lose even that chance. I speak the truth. You are a rare body type. Well proportioned, expressing great promise. When you marry your husband will be a very privileged man." She turned her page, making another series of quick sketches. Each one noting a feature she wanted to further enhance. "I will do as you ask. I will give my heart to the butcher. For my emperor..." She paused a second. "And for the peace I will have once my soul is free of this ruined body. I warn you. I think I may have made a mistake with this choice. Yet I had no option. I had to protect what family I had left. Do not be afraid to discard me when you are through. I will welcome such an ending." Sometime later she closed her pad. "That is enough. I think you should only put on your blouse, leave your undergarment in your purse."

"Why?"

"We will be observed when we leave. I must pay my bill. With this small act I will insure your safety here until we leave. Should you return alone, you will most likely be approached. Still I may be able to avert even that for a short time by claiming you as my own."

Standing again Sandy started slipping on her blouse. "You an awful intelligent woman Oharu. Why this great desire tah die anyway? Just cause some men did you wrong? Same happened to me. Kicked their asses, broke ah few bones, got over it. Kept goin."

"That shows why you will never understand our shared homeland Sandy" Oharu warned as she finished her drink. "Honor is all. In America it is right or wrong. In our homeland it is honor, or dishonor. For some things honor may only be regained by taking ones life." She too stood. "Each breath I take is an insult to my father, my family, my clan. By direct guidance of the God Emperor himself I may not in any way attempt to touch death upon my own guidance. I now have no honor. I am nothing. I am waste. Should I turn against the Emperor not even death would regain my honor. So I must play this game for you as best I may. In the hope you may soon grant me death by following your orders, and through you my Emperors desires. Should I fail, should I lose my heart. Should I as in my dreams of late I have, turn against him. In that then death will no longer be an option, for it would bring only ashes. This you must know. I believe I am beginning to lose my focus. To question my mission. It is possible I may turn away. You will attend to me should I do so. Weakness is permitted, not danger to our shared homeland. We should leave now."

"Didn't know things were so convoluted" Sandy admitted as she closed her purse, now covering her dangerous photograph under her bra. Few honest men would dig past that article of clothing, even though it was in a purse. Such simply wasn't done. "I'll burn this photograph in my room"

Opening the door Oharu let Sandy leave first. "Yes" she whispered in agreement as the American passed her. Stopping at the bar Oharu thanked the barmaid for her room as she settled the bill. Three drinks really were not that expensive, even on her budget. "She is not like us" the barmaid whispered as if warning her oriental costumer.

"No. She want drawing" Oharu whispered back, opening her book just enough for the barmaid to see what she'd drawn.

"You are very good."

"She beautiful."

"Yes, but. Never mind." Turning back to her work the barmaid kept watch through a special mirror arrangement as Oharu and her visitor left, watching until she could no longer see the mouse.

"Yah really wanna do ah full page spread?" Sandy asked as they walked together towards the resort, still speaking Oharu's native tongue.

"I believe it would be worth my effort, but it would be expensive should you want it. I must keep up appearances."

"Think about it" Sandy promised. "That barmaid. I think she has it for you. Least she watches yah like someone hungry for ah meal of fresh mouse." She suddenly shifted to English. "I'll see yah again tomorrow. Right now I gotta see ah man about ah boat ride. Till later."

Oharu stopped, watching as the bobcat turned to run towards Casino Island's water taxi docks. Wondering if she really would see Sandy again, or if her body would drift to shore on the morning tide. Another tragic swimming accident. It was a hard way to die, perhaps as hard as living for some. Pushing such morose thoughts from her mind Oharu concentrated on the delightful way Sandy's unrestrained body had moved under her blouse. With that sweet image in her mind she returned home in better spirits than she had hoped.

Her night was late again. After having helped clean up the main building, there were no residents other than Sandy until the rest returned, Oharu had turned to converting her sketches. Most were no more than an artists notes to herself in image form, and a small pawful of finished drawings. It would take two days to finish what she had started this night. By the time she had decided to stop drawing her paw was complaining again. It probably always would she knew. Being left pawed, which by her luck had been her most damaged paw, made life difficult anyway. Several joints had been cracked. Though now fully healed, when weather changes occurred they reminded her of their damage. Carefully placing her instruments back into their proper storage areas she stretched. All she wanted to do now was sleep, but there was one last thing she needed to complete.

Putting out her light she slipped out of her kimono. Now naked but for a thin loincloth she stepped into her larger room. Stretching again, this time in a series of ritual moves the mouse began retraining her body to the studies she had been taught. Though Oharu was not an aggressive woman by nature, there was at least one martial art that had no aggressive moves. Even as she slipped from one well remembered position to another Oharu was thinking about something else.

She really had to find a bow.

Late that same night, somewhere on Meeting Island a grey furred ferret commonly known as Mr. Sapohatan entered his private meeting chamber. A windowless room in the center of an European style house somewhere between his office and the docks. One of the many such houses left over from the colonial days, now it served as his home. Sometimes it served as his office as well. Waiting for him was a mid-twenties something female bobcat, one he noted was dressed just a little less modestly than he remembered her liking as a child. "Strange. You never took to our island ways" he committed.

"She's yer girl" Sandy told him bluntly as he sat a cup of tea before her. She pulled out her photograph, pointedly ignoring the article of clothing that tumbled out of her purse with it. Another change since she had come to these islands the ferret noticed. Another change since she had pushed herself to become his best student. Once she had been so modist that simply the thought of a slip showing would bring a blush to her face. Sandy tossed her print on a table between them as he sat. "Copied it neat as you please. Answered to tha code like you thought she would. So now what?"

"I had hoped, against hope" her host admitted. "We have discovered much about her, from what isn't said and what is, along with her own actions." He closed his eyes as if in pain. "How those of her race on our own lands treat her, speak of her." He opened his eyes again. Now they carried a sad look. "As soon as we know how she expects to get her information out and can assure that you will not be suspect, an accident" he answered. "Such as occur to all who push their snouts where they don't belong."

"Including your pet Songmark girls" Sandy asked. There was no humor in her voice now. Simply a serious woman speaking with an even more serious man.

"No. Not like them. They have all proven quite useful. Quite willing to learn and not go beyond the limits I place upon them while they work for me. Though in some cases it has become obvious they wish to. Songmark has proven a fertile field for our needs."

"So this woman, who has nothin because it was ripped from her, your just gonna deep six her. That's not right. Not this time. It hurt bad enough with Chaiki. She was tha brightest, sweetest woman I ever met. All she wanted was to be a mother and care for her husbands home. Now she's dead. Listen to me. I talked to Oharu. She's not happy with what she's doing, she believes its wrong. She even warned me that she's having second thoughts."

"Right or wrong my dear young lady, the security of our tiny island nation depends upon secrecy. Too much damage was done when that English spy Charity escaped. Things were made known we wished not known." He stood, looking at the rooms single door as if expecting someone to break in. "Those latest two Songmark girls found our defenses as though they were painted red, with flares burning on welcome signs. Truly we have failed in something most simple, though I cannot for the life of me figure out what it is. Then there is this. There will be war. Not tomorrow, but soon. Germany strengthens, which is not important here other than it will draw the European powers away. But with them so does Russia and Japan. There is little we can do but make the taking of our nation so costly as to make even the fieriest aggressor think twice. There will not be a second gunboat war. No second massacre of innocent non-combatants. Not here. Now. Have you any idea how she is supposed to transfer her information?"

"None" Sandy admitted. "I'm her go between, her controller, her pointer, her bank book. They trust me but only so far. I ain't a pureblood you know. Then there's that little problem of not knowin' enough tah take down more than they want."

"I am well aware of your blood" the ferret admitted. "Having been your father and stepmothers best friend. Their loss was painful. To me, to many people. You're a controller and like my own you don't know who her contact is. That keeps you from giving critical information should you be caught."

"I know that. I lost my parents tah Influenza, yeah. Least it wasn't like in '19 when half tha' world died. Only tha Europeans tha wasn't here the season before. I was twelve when my kin died, remember?" She wrung her paws, remembering. "I do. Every day. Yah took me in, on one condition. Defend Spontoon with mah life. I'm keeping that condition, but I gotta warn yah dear foster-father I'm on ah slippery slope now."

Turning to face his foster daughter the man known simply as Mr. Sapohatan had real concern on his voice. "Explain."

"American's in Hawaii. I'm pretty sure they fed me false information last trip. I've got the Markham's double checking during their vacation, but I don't believe half what I read on tha way here. So I'm not passing one word along. I think I tripped up tha officer who tried tah set me up by reportin him, but I won't know until I get back. And tha Cipangan's. They've almost figured out there's ah leak in their circle. Least wise they've been asking me about specific agents I cover. I'm first up for tha butcher, or whatever they use if they get cranky an find out I'm their girl."

For some time the ferret was silent, then he spoke again. "Can you afford one last circle? There are reports of American CV's being in Hawaii Harbor soon. I would very much like your opinion on those ships. Should Germany go to war the English will quickly withdraw their greater forces to defend their own island nation. America though, we are too sweet a target to be ignored by any aggressor and of those powers that will come we prefer America. As a partner, not an occupying force. At least they will not colonize. There is also a new class of CV due out soon. The Yorktown. If you could get any information on those ships."

"Why dear sweet daddy. We gonna start building aircraft carriers too?" She held up her right paw, stopping his response. "Yah wanna know how many aircraft, what type, what kind of support, draft, fuels. All tha stuff yah need tah prepare for when tha do arrive and tha will. Or the other. God help us if tha Russian's invade tho. Their animals tha make even Cipangan's look like yer best friend. I know same as you, it comes to war better my people than my people" She grinned at his pained expression. "Better the devil yah know than tha one yah don't. We can deal with the American's, maybe tha British. Not with anyone else. Specially tha Cipangan's. I'll see what I can do." She picked up her glass filled with iced tea, taking a sip before continuing. "Sandy Doecan is gonna have to disappear soon. An unfortunate accident would be good. Better ah simple murder. Why not me and Oharu at the same time."

"Because Oharu can not reappear under a new identity my friends daughter" Mr. Sapohatan reminded her. "I was thinking something quick in her case. She has suffered more for her country than any foreigner I have met in all the years since our Gunboat Wars. There is no need to have her held underwater until her lungs burn, to feel the heavy crush of water filling them. To fight for breath that cannot come. It is a hard death."

"I agree. Takes five tah seven minutes tha docs told me. But I want time for her. I'm askin, not as your personal double agent but as your foster daughter. I want time. There's somthin about her. Somthin we need and somthin she needs. An we can use her."

"You think she can be turned?"

"With a Cipangan normally I'd say no an be right. Proved that already couple oh times. In this case there somthin ripping her apart inside. I spoke with Saimmi and Mrs. McGee, not just read the reports. Yeah I think she can be turned. But not by one person."

"A coordinated attack then. It would be an interesting challenge." He sat again, thinking over the possibilities. "Truly we could use her to feed false information if nothing else. She has also asked to speak with a certain Songmark girl". He smiled at his foster daughters look of amazement. "She is not suspect, as a spy that is. A criminal family yes but nothing worth worrying about at this time. Nothing she

has done here has been illegal, though she has a love for rather high caliber weapons and high explosives. Not to forget the girls a pyromaniac. I've been thinking about trying to shift her to something more useful than Songmark. Still, she has the ear of one of my pets as you put it. If there is a way to this mouse's soul she will reveal it to her, then she to my 'pet' who will tell me indirectly. Though I will have to nudge her into the right direction of course. Perhaps a report on a certain suspect artist." He smiled at the thought. Amelia's reports had always been brutally honest, as well as exceptionally detailed. "Amelia's reports, though complete tend to show that often she often does not fully understand exactly what she has seen. If it does not fit into her previous social training or experience that is. She is learning and learns fast. Thus I doubt she will realize what she is doing at first. All right, until the end of this tourist season. You'll be back by then. I'll give you all that much time."

"All? Who else is involved" Sandy asked.

"Huakava" he answered. "Saimmi, Butterfly and I think even Moeli may have some interest."

"Huakava's the island high priestess's isn't she" Sandy asked. "Saimmi's getting there too last I heard from Jerri. Heard he has ah girl now. Anyone I know? No? Didn't think so. Whoever she is she's one lucky girl. Ah had my eye on him once. But why would those others be interested. Can't remember Moeli, been too long since I last visited Jerri's family."

"I do not know child. All Huakava said was, 'If you prove this one is a spy, then the spy must die leaving the woman alive.' I'd hazard a guess she wants Oharu for herself" again he saw that look of amazement in his foster daughters eyes and laughed. "Not like that young lady. There are few enough priestess's today. Very, very few are 'like that' and it takes a long time to train one correctly. Especially one who has been called to it, who has one of the gifts. Saimmi claims this Oharu is more than herself and we both know where Saimmi fits in that hierarchy. This mouse is better trained than I could have believed, and I admit that it has been interesting reading about Miko's. I had always taken them as simple helpers like in the European beliefs, nothing more than a glorified assistant. They are so much more than that."

Sandy took another, deeper drink of her tea. "So I have allies. Allies who's ways I don't understand ah by teachin should consider hopeless backwards savages needin guidance to tha light." She smiled at the grimace on his face. "Ah am Southern Baptist yah remember. Ahn you know how nearsighted we are. From how many sides do you intend to hit this nut, in the hope of cracking not shattering it."

"You're the anvil Sandy" he answered. "I had already decided to give this Oharu some time to find herself, else she'd already be a memory. We would have deported her back to her homeland if we could, but the Allthing has this weird rule about not sending people to their deaths if they don't deserve it. So we were looking elsewhere. Then there was already interest by Huakava. That complicated things so we wait. Your request simply forced me to decide how long to wait. I can afford to lose a potential Allie, certainly not a potential priestess. I can't afford to lose you either, while I certainly cannot afford to let any more critical information out to potential enemies."

Sandy grimaced at the thought, this would be a tough puzzle to solve she admitted to herself. "So I go play my part as her controller, knowin she's on tha razor edge of your sword. Grey-fur, you two face me on this one I'm kickin yer ass up around yer ears. Then I'm returning to America. I won't come back neither. She'll need a visa, or passport or something. I need to send her tah Hawaii as ah test anyway. Huakava or Saimmi might need tah send her places too. For testin ahn trainin at least. Some places will want proof of identity, and a couple places don't much like the Chipanguan race no matter where they come from."

"I'll see to it. Tell her you've bribed or blackmailed a lower official. I'll have it delivered to her after your departure. Thursday isn't it? Enjoy the Southern islands, and bring me back pictures will you? Now shouldn't you better get back. Mrs. McGee may understand, knowing who you are and all. But the idea of a young, proper and very pretty woman wandering the streets of Casino Island this late isn't to be allowed."

Now. Will I see you again before you leave?"

"Don't think that's ah good idea for me tah leave too soon, spotted a watcher as I walked up yer path. I'm balancing too many plates now tah take any chances. It was a calculated risk seeing you this time but one ah needed tah take. Yer right though, we leave Thursday afternoon."

"I see, any idea who is watching?"

"Smelled of cougar. That's American I think. Dangerous. I wouldn't wanna tackle one on mah best day. Removing 'im might be a mistake. He's watchin me, or you. Either way he saw me come in. If he vanishes won't take long for people to add things up."

"There is something to say about being too efficient" Mr. Sapohatan agreed. "It is well known within our tight group that I sponsored you into our nation, though you are still not officially a native I'm afraid. It is also known to those outside our tight group that you and I have some kind of history, though not exactly what. That has helped your cover story, but what will you use to cover a long visit with me?"

"I do have ah huntin license yah know" Sandy answered with a grin.

"You are my daughter" he protested almost instantly.

"Foster daughter. No relation. An' you've been single since mamma Yoana died three years ago." She picked her purse back up, digging out her wallet. Taking out a sheaf of shells Sandy dropped them on the table. "Give me this when I leave. It'll clear tha decks. I'm not tha first spy tah sleep with tha enemy, especially an enemy I've history with. Sides, won't be tha first time ah widowed man showed special interest in ah foster daughter."

He looked at the money, blinking. "You carry this much around?"

"Hell, I carry tha much shells. Ah got dollars, yen an yaun. Even ah few hundred Francs. Never know when I need tah bribe someone or resupply an agent. Ah do cover six oh 'em you remember. Seven noh with Oharu.

"All right then. I am very unhappy with your idea. Still we best retire to the bedroom. An act only, and only to make this look right.

Two hours later they were again in the secure room, having acted out an event their watcher had expected, though in truth nothing had actually happened. "This is the last time I will see you" Sandy told her foster father. "Until yah off me that is."

"Then until your 'death.' I look forward to having my foster daughter Elizabeth Kathleen Brighton home again. I miss her greatly. So, what will you do after?"

"Get married, settle down, have a dozen or two kits" Sharon answered. "Least that's mah dream. Won't happen. Settlin down I mean. Marriage and kits yeah, but I'm too good ah intelligence agent tha let wander off. An I have too many contacts. Be ah waste of resources for yah."

"So you've chosen someone have you" the ferret asked, a gleam in his eyes. "Who?"

"Tah's for me tah know and you tah find out. Yer tha bright boy intelligence genius, you've enough agents. Use 'em." She finished her tea before preparing to leave, finally noticing her bra. Unbothered she stuffed it back in her purse. "Oharu's dangerous" she warned her foster father with a soft laugh. "She had me out of my blouse and bra in two minutes and she's, well affor that ship she was ah maiden. So yah better watch your pets close, she may start gathering her own little Harem. Natural talent. Anyway. Like you

said, I'm headed back tah Casino. I'll be leaving with these ancient empire nuts fer Kuo Han on Thursday. Flights Midway, Wake, Kuo Han, Brisinaland then Hawaii ahn ah bit South. We part company for six months then. Tha take ah ship tah Nunui Hale where tah jump off tah Antarctica, looking for some Rainbow City down there. I'm supposed tah wait with tha planes in Hawaii, keep 'em ready. Couple days after they leave I'll tah ah three month break. Ah promise, so see yah next trip." Closing her purse Sandy Doecan quietly left the building, returning to her still waiting water taxi and the most delicate problem she'd ever handled. Unless you counted that time she'd slipped into the English consulate's bedroom in Hawaii with camera in hand, while he and his current mistress were 'sleeping.' But that was another matter.

Dawn Sunday was still some time away when Reiko tapped on Oharu's doorframe, the thick bamboo frame giving a somewhat hollow note as it was struck by a smaller version of itself. "Time fix breakfast" the twelve year old announced softly. "Still have one guest. Need be ready."

Oharu groaned slightly as muscles in her body she'd forgotten complained while she eased out of bed. "Awake" she called to Reiko in the native language as she rubbed her face with her paws. To long. It had been to long since she had last done her exercises. Now she was paying for it with muscle aches she hadn't had in over ten years. Standing slowly she listened as the twinges in her back warn her of what could and could not be done at the moment. Finally Oharu slowly staggered the few steps to her dressing area. At the moment she felt like an old woman. Even her fur ached it seemed. Fifteen minutes later, her fur brushed and still wrapping her oni about her waist Oharu staggered out of her doorway.

"Had a rough night?" Butterfly asked as she handed Oharu a bowl of one finger poi a little later.

"Sore" Oharu admitted, before catching a gleam in her employers eye. "Exercise" she continued. "Long time since do. Muscles sore."

"Ah" Butterfly laughed as she understood. "What kind-ah exercises?"

"Dance. Martial" the mouse answered as she dug into her breakfast of Poi. She'd heard some people hated it, but compared to eating millet or moldy rice for weeks on end while making ends meet in a not too popular temple, poi was a delight. It also had much more taste than simple cooked rice. Eating also kept her from answering Butterfly's next question long enough to form a polite answer.

"So yer ah ninja then" Butterfly remarked as she worked her bread dough to be baked for the noon meal.

"Ninja evil" Oharu explained finally. Though her voice was calm, having had time to deal with her reaction at the unintended insult. "Assassin all. I was Miko. Temple Maiden. Miko different Ninja same food different filth."

"I see" the bovine admitted, her paws still in the breadfruit dough. "I insulted yah, didn't I."

"Not meant. Not angry" the mouse explained. "Beside. I Not. Not matter what say, no insult possible."

"Tha's not it. I'm sorry. Ah didn't know." She took her dough, setting it on a stone and placing a clean cloth over it to firm and rise until it was ready to cook. Wiping her paws on a towel Butterfly settled her bulk into a chair. "Sah tell me, wha kind of martial art does ah Miko learn?"

"All Miko learn bow. Sound bow scare evil spirit. Scare demon. Learn bow from first day. Also learn protect self. I not like hurt anyone so I learn Yawara. Is ancient style fighting. No aggressive. Gentle. Use attacker power against attacker. No attack." She sat her now empty bowl beside her. "Why ask?"

Butterfly shrugged. "Ah never thought about yah being able tah care for yerself. After what happened."

"Different. I outcast. I not, nothing. No reason protect nothing."

"Don't say that aghin. Not here" Butterfly ordered Oharu. "No on these islands. Noh after what happened, not after tha gunbo..." She stopped talking, taking a deep breath. "Oharu. All people are worth somthin. Least in Spontoan. Yah wanna be nothing, go swim with tha sharks. No. Don do tha. Ah shouldnah said that. Look, ah'm not good at this. Just. Just wait til one oh that priestess can talk with yah serious like. But here ther is nah Not. Yer somthin. Remember that."

"I will try" Oharu agreed.

"Good. Nah, wha about this dance. Anythin like we do here?"

Oharu shook her head no. "I think not. Then. I not know what dance popular here. I temple dancer. Dance sometime for please self. Please others. Can show what mean?"

"Later, after our guest has wandered off ah-gin. Nah lets set tha table cause she came in real late. But she's gotta wake up sometime."

Later that afternoon Reiko again came to Oharu's room, waiting until the mouse sat her pen down before speaking. "Mom say come see dance" she told Oharu, an amused giggle escaping her lips as she spun away. Racing away to rejoin her siblings in some strange island game involving odd shaped sticks and a rather battered ball.

Stepping into the eating room Oharu was surprised to find all the European style furniture placed against one wall. A rather new phonograph was sitting on one of the smaller tables, an obviously well played record spinning silently as it waited for the needle. From a side door Butterfly entered wearing a grass skirt, a very thin cloth across her rather expansive breasts and nothing else. "Ah show you mine, iffing you'll show me yours" Butterfly said in greeting. "Dance ah mean. Been ah long time so only two minutes okay?" Butterfly laughed softly then, apparently at herself. "It's been ah long time since ah competed professionally."

"I try" Oharu agreed, stepping to the wall to give her employer room. Not quite knowing what she was about to see she watched in silence as the bovine carefully lifted her phonograph's pickup arm, setting the needle at the records' edge. Expected pops and scratches of an old record came from the machine's speaker as Butterfly stepped to the room's center. Suddenly fast music exploded from the speaker, or music as Oharu had learned these islanders called it. At the same time Butterfly herself exploded into movement.

Oharu stood transfixed as the seemingly ungainly bovine moved in ways nature certainly hadn't expected her too. Eventually the mouse remembered to breathe, finally understanding that no, the floor was not going to collapse (though it did occasionally tremble under her feet) and yes, there did appear to be some reason for each move. Finally the music ended and Butterfly collapsed to her knees, deep breaths giving evidence to how exhausting the dance had been. Another tune started up but Butterfly made her way to the player, lifting its arm thus silencing the machine.

"Show'in off" she gasped, her face more than slightly red from exertion. "Tah-hetie style. Too lon since ah danced like that. Should get back into but ah think ah dislocated mah brain. Ow. Yer turn. Some of yer music in that stack."

"I not know anything like that" Oharu admitted as she walked over to a stack of records. It took some digging before she found a half pawful of records in her own language, having set aside music from many nations first. Who was Croony Valley she wondered. Selecting a series of pieces she was comfortable with the mouse first removed Butterfly's record, gently holding it by its edges while slipping it first into a waiting paper sleeve, then the colorful protective cardboard cover. Treating the new record with exactly

the same care she gently laid it upon the player before setting needle to grove. "Is called Tanko Bushi. Coal Miner dance" she explained as she took her place in the rooms center. As the music played Oharu danced, her rough voice giving an odd sound to the ancient lyrics as she moved.

*Tsuki ga deta deta tsuki ga deta
Uchi no oyama no ueni deta
Anmari entotsu ga takai node
Sazoya otsukisama kemutakaro
Sano yoi yoi

Anata ga sonoki de yuno nara
Omoi kiri masu wakare masu
Moto no musume no juhachi ni
Kaeshite kure tara wakare masu
Sano yoi yoi

Osatsu o makura ni neru yori mo
Tsuki ga sashikomu barak ku de
Nushi no kaina ni honnorito
Watasha dakare te kurashitai
Sano yoi yoi

As the music died she came to a motionless pose, waiting until the last note faded away before moving quickly to the player, lifting needle from record before another sound could be played. Unlike her bovine employer the mouse was not tired, for the music had lasted little over a minute. Nor had it been that long since she had last danced. Still it had brought back to her some feeling of her old life. "Is folk dance. Come from West coast. Old dance, most by children now."

"Ah lot different than our dances" Butterfly admitted. "You've longer ones maybe?"

"Many yes. One I know last three day. You wish to see?"

"Later, Ahm tired an a dip in tha ocean sounds nice but I better settle fer ah shower. Yah mind dancin for customers?"

"I not Geisha" the mouse explained. "Not entertainer. Simple Temple woman."

"Geisha? Ah, those um..."

"Not woman streets" Oharu answered quickly, cutting off a question she had been asked so many times before by tourists. "They different. Low class saseko. Geisha high class. Eventually find sponsor yes, even husband. That right all women. Geisha life long training, same Miko. Entertainer. Learn dance, sing, play game. Intelligent. Always keep up politics, business, military. Able talk same same customer. Hard work, give up much. "

"Your awful quick tah defend them" Butterfly noted. "Howcome?"

"What you say tourist see dance. Girl in grass skirt. Offer money" Oharu asked seriously.

"Tourist's did, still do" the bovine admitted. "We, we laugh it off. But its still an insult. I think I see what yah mean. Okay then, truce on tha subject. We both got things tah do. Yah know when tah be at tha kitchen."

"When Reiko beat drum on door" Oharu admitted, both understanding how easily she forgot time when she was working on her art.

"Tha's when" the bovine agreed with a laugh. "Now off with yah. I need ah wash."

Monday Afternoon Sandy wandered over to Oharu's little stall, watching quietly while the mouse finished a small detail on her newest bit of art. "What need" Oharu asked softly while she cleaned her pen.

"We need tah be seen together. Ah lot" Sandy answered in Oharu's native tongue. "I need ah reason tah leave yah more cash ahn there's only one way ah know with sah little time left."

"You are not that kind, nor do I know even this island enough to act as a guide" the mouse responded, herself slipping into her native language. Though her English was good enough for most conversations, Oharu had to admit that Sandy's oddly accented Cipangan was better than her own English. Much better.

Sandy smiled, leaning over the counter as if approaching Oharu. "I've been here dozens of times little girl. I'll show you the places. As for that minor problem, I am ah good actress else ah'd be dead ah long time ago."

Oharu thought over the proposition. True, her funds were very tight at the moment, having used much of her cash today simply obtaining better paper, pens and ink. "Very well. When?"

"Bout five minutes. Already talked with Mrs. McGee. Told her we were an item." Though it was true that she had spoken with Butterfly about Oharu, the subject matter had been much different.

Carefully Oharu began putting her things away, gathering to her the travel book she used for sketches and the small packet of pencils, pens and waterproof ink she had just bought. A bit after she was finished Butterfly herself came out. "You two shoo off now" she told them in a pleasant voice. "Have ah good time."

Thus went Oharu's next three days. Leaving early in the morning with Sandy, returning artfully mussed late at night. Most of their time was spent simply talking while Oharu sketched Sandy in some pose, more importantly the landscape around her. At least Oharu believed that the landscape was important, though never why. Early Thursday morning though Sandy took them to Main Island and a large waterfall there. It was obvious tourists came to the site quite often, but presently there wasn't anyone around.

"I've been thinking about your offer" Sandy told Oharu, having remained in the Cipangan language while they were together. "Tha full sketch you wanted to make."

"And your decision is" Oharu asked, having found a comfortable place to settle down.

Sandy started disrobing. "There's a guy I want tah see me like ah am" she explained. "Ah guy I've been in love with a ton of years, but he doesn't seem tha notice me. Can yah make it look real? At least, real enough he knows its me? Don't worry bout people slippin up on us. Ah know tha today this place is off limits tah all but us. Until we leave. Favor ah called in."

"I see. Will you desire your current fur pattern or your real one" Oharu asked simply as she opened her book to a clean page, ignoring the implied 'I have very important firends here' hint.

"My..." Sandy stopped, one leg in mid air. "How?"

"It has been at least a month since you last touched up your dye" The mouse explained while she looked around for inspiration. "We have played the very loving couple several times, at your insistence. I am an artist. You are a very good kisser."

Sandy sat with such force pain flared up her tail, causing a sharp yelp to echo around the waterfalls shore. "I never thought. But then" She shrugged, continuing to ready herself. "I should have expected it. Mah real pattern if yah know it. He's seen me in this pattern, didn't even realize who I was."

"I shall do my best then. You are truly unfrightened that someone may wander by?"

Laughing the bobcat retrieved her brush from her purse. "This time of year tourists don't come ta Main Island till after ten, ah under construction signs up an we have tah be back by noon. My groups headen out at two. Time enough?"

"More than. I will press my talent to its utmost to please your man. As soon as you have completed brushing please lay by the water in a position you find most comfortable. I will begin then."

A little after two pm local time Oharu watched silently as the three flying boats lifted off, turned then headed South-West. She watched from the docks as the three shapes slowly dwindled into tiny dots, finally vanishing into a cloud. Sandy was gone, and though she was Oharu's controller she had somehow become her friend as well. It bothered the mouse. She had intended not to make friends, to have no one care when she vanished. Yet events were obviously completely out of her control.

More ships were due soon. Tourist season was here and with it came the movie companies. She had watched as natives in bright costumes, men and woman she'd seen in different dress now guided self important entertainers about the island. Soon they too would be gone, off to different parts of the island chain to film stories for their audiences. Spontoon she was fast discovering was a nation with two distinct faces. One they showed only to themselves and one they showed only to outsiders. Though she herself was an outsider, she was an artist with an artists eye. Facial structures remained unchanged no matter the clothing or fur coloring. As she turned back towards the resort an ancient tiki hidden under a walkway caught her eye. It seemed to be watching her and she could almost swear it's eyes had been glowing for an instant. For no reason she fully understood Oharu stepped in front of the weathered stone carving, clapping her paws three times to catch any friendly spirits attention as she bowed before the stone. It simply felt right.

* A song of the 'O Bon' festival in Japan.
Chapter Eighteen

Deep in Tokyo an aged male ferret, the many tattoo's upon his body mostly unseen under his loose clothing sat quietly before a small coal brazier. It was the twenty-eighth of February and many things had just changed in his life. For in his paws were two sheets of delicate rice paper. One was a request, the other a list of thirteen names. Only one of which he was vaguely aware of. Beside him sat his most trusted advisor, an even older boa. One who's scales showed many scars, for this man declined to wear any but the most needed clothing. "You have spoken with her" the ferret whispered softly. "Her story, how does it hold under your investigation?"

"As solidly as Fuji itself" his advisor answered. No sound of his boyhood peasant beginnings shown in his voice. Not unless he wanted them too.

"Should we accept this commission" the ferret continued. "It may inform the Emperor's lessor advisors that we still exist, show them in such a manner he can not ignore us anymore. Will they will be informed through her lips?"

"That too is considered. There is a fourteenth name yet. One not on that list."

"The Emperor?" The ferret asked, surprise and some shock in his voice. "He would have been involved surly, yet he is untouchable."

"No my friend. Not the Emperor. The Lady herself. She has assured me that she will care for her own... disposal. Once proof of the last names removal is given her."

Setting aside both pages the ferret struggled to his feet. "It will be simple of course, to remove those who so mindlessly destroyed a Miko. Though we too have taken certain Miko's lives, even Priests and Priestesses, not even we have so treated a daughter of the Gods. Even in our worst days, none would think of such a thing." Standing he walked forward, into the shadows that hid more than a pawful of those who guarded him. Walked forward until he stood before a small cask. Reaching out with one half crippled paw he lifted again the cask's lid, staring down onto jewels, gold, silver and more than one delicate bit of pottery.

"We will take what we need. Return the rest to she who hires us" he decided. This opened his advisors eyes wider than they had been in many years.

"Return? We have..." he started, only to be silenced by a look from his leader.

"Done so before in our history" the ferret continued just as calmly. "Even such as we have some honor. These have stripped a Miko of all honor. ALL HONOR." His last words were spoken with such force that many of those in the darkness trembled. "Not even allowing her the escape of honorable death. Take only what is needed from the gold and silver. All else will be returned with that last name. Use those you believe best for each job. Most should be simple, the crew, officers. That last name. He will be difficult. He is no fool after all. I would like his passing to be of the old style. The very old style."

"It will be done my lord" the boa agreed, himself standing. "And the Lady?"

"I will speak with the Emperor. She is not to blame. Nor do I think that dying clan needs to spill any more of its blood upon our soil today. I shall lay upon his blade her fate." He grinned, a rare thing these days. "After all, I am his faithful servant in times of special need. Along with being his Great Uncle. Now go, inform me when the last deed is done."

March 1st, 1936

With nearly a full 'house' of guests to care for, Oharu had been out of bed and working before the sun rose. Until Butterfly needed her she usually spent her time sweeping the inner courtyard. Working out paw prints, picking up the odd item. In general making things look fresh and new again. All the resorts did these things of course, it was tourist season after all. Thus putting on your best face was important. It brought in customers, with customers came not only work but shells. Shells that would carry everyone, including the mouse herself over during the lean times between seasons. Word of mouth advertising was every hotels bread of butter, even beyond any paid advertising they might do. Word of mouth made or broke a resort. Any resort.

A smell of cooking bread came to Oharu's nose. It was a smell she much enjoyed, even though the bread was of Western design. Its taste when still hot from Butterfly's oven, with a touch of butter or jam as the Euro's preferred it, was a taste she had quickly come to enjoy. Though her dreams of last evening were bothering her somewhat they would wait until her meditation time. They were of such that she needed to understand them and there would be time once morning chores were done. Tourists rarely bothered staying around after breakfast, being off to 'see the sights.' Often wandering back just before supper, or even later in many cases. Besides bread cooled quickly.

She walked into the kitchen, having left her outside broom and slippers leaning against the exterior kitchen wall. "They sleep late" she observed as she picked up plates and silverware.

"Tha spent the night at tha Coconut Grove" Butterfly answered. "Kind-ah dragged in bout three ah think. Coffee, light meal. Course iffn yah want, ah could make up some ham ahn eggs, bit of sausage, even some fresh sea cucumber eggs. Maybe ah Tepin?"

Oharu paused, looking out at the still courtyard. "Such would give bad reputation" she warned. "They seem nice. Maybe if bad, but they not deserve. Tepin start fire. Even touch burn."

"Yeah" Butterfly agreed. "It's ah hot pepper all righ. This bunch of mid-western teachers come here every year. Always overdue it. Nah wait till tha sunbath tamorrow. Seem tah never learn."

An image grew in Oharu's mind. Most of their present borders were as Butterfly had said, school teachers who had come to Spontoon for vacation. Several had been trying out their Cipangan with Oharu, happily helping her with her English and French in return. The idea of having to deal with a dozen dry roasted middle aged school teachers wasn't something to look forward to. "Have sun oil?" she asked.

"Sure. Buh it darkens tha fur. Thay won't use it cause they think it makes 'em ugly."

Oharu thought over the problem while she carefully sat the table, insuring every place was as Butterfly had taught her. When she returned she had an idea. "I wear oil" she decided. "You have husband say how makes look attrac.. attrac..."

"Sexy" Butterfly offered.

Oharu thought, well it was right. "Yes. Have suit can wear?" She suddenly blushed.

"You've never shown yer body righ?"

"Not. Not... Not willing" the mouse admitted.

"Well its only Taza ahn he thinks yer too skinny, so tha's no mind. Rest just women ahn mah kids, souldn'ah be ah problem. But if tha wanna go tah the beach, there's men gonna see yah. Can yah swim too?"

Oharu's flesh under her fur went deathly pale, a chill running down to the tip of her tail at the thought. "No" she whispered, her eyes widening. "No, not go sea water."

"Your scared of tha ocean" Butterfly gasped. "But, tha water taxis,..."

"Are enclosed. I not swim ocean. I never swim." She shivered in reaction to some half remembered event. "Sea have things in. Things cover, touch. Go where not wanted. Things try eat living flesh." She sat suddenly as her knees gave way. "No sea. Beach yes. No sea."

"Well, there's no reason yah can't sunbath in tha courtyard is there?"

"No" Oharu agreed, her mood clearing slowly. "No reason."

"Shouldah though ah this years ago. Hired a girl tah do it. Okay. Later we do tha suntan bit. Have tah get enough oil anyway. You finish settin tha table. Oh, almost forgot. Letter for yah from Songmark. On tha mail board."

Oharu merely nodded as she worked to regain her composure. She'd never been afraid of the sea before though she had never learned to swim. Living in a city, no where near even a large pond she'd never needed the skill. But something had happened to her during her drift to the island. Something only partially remembered. Paws moving over her body. Touching her, almost like they were examining her. Then there was the smell she couldn't remember, would never forget. But she could remember questing fingers. Fingers that seemed much too smooth, that felt like living plants sliding across her water soaked fur. Burning, stinging sensations as though tiny teeth were trying to consume her mostly dead body before her spirit could escape. Even now the memories were enough to send shivers of fear down her tail again.

And there were those four strangely shaped scars on her body.

March 3rd, 1936

On Southeastern Casino island a single elderly Cipangan male sat silently across from a small dias, a dias upon which sat a young Miko. Urako by name, though at this time her name was at the moment meaningless, as soon she would be vessel of the Gods. Only one God truly, still one could never know which God or Goddess would decide to answer a question asked. Unlike most such questions this was not about love, future, family or even fortune. This man was the acknowledged elder of the Cipangan presence on Spontoan. Though small, they obeyed all laws openly but their inner lives were still highly ritual. Ritual's reaching back to well before the first had stepped onto this nations soil.

Urako prepared herself for the trance she must enter that the Gods may use her body, her voice to answer his question. This time she was faced with a personally repulsive task, yet a task she would complete to the best of her ability. She was to ask if it were permissible to kill an ex-Miko, even one who had fallen through no action of her own. To Urako the mouse Oharu was still a Temple servant. There was still one path open to her, that of Priestess. No matter what the Emperor may decree. Unlike Oharu Urako had grown up on Spontoan. Her belief that the Emperor was kami, truly descended of Amaterasu, was not as strong as her fathers who's beliefs were rock solid. With one last glance to her assistant, a young fox girl as herself, Urako began her chant. What she experienced, would remember had little to do with reality. For when those greater than oneself came within you, ones mind formed memories to match what that one could understand. Not what truthfully occurred. Else madness would certainly come.

Benzaiten appeared to walk in the young Miko's dreams, stepping gently around those images most important to her servant until she eventually found the woman's soul waiting silently at a wide low waterfall. "This is not Cipangu. It is Main Island, Spontoan" the Goddess spoke in greeting. "Just before the Great

Fall.”

Her servant opened her eyes, meeting unafraid the gaze of one of those whom she served. She had never been a vessel for Benzaiten, who’s appearance somewhat surprised her. “I have not been home in my life. It is always much safer to tie ones soul to a place near ones body, rather than some unknown place far away. I hold a question.”

“Which I read from your heart. You are not neutral about this question, as you should be.” She waved a paw at the young vixen. “Fear not, you are not the first to disagree with a question. Nor will you be the last” Benzaiten admitted. “I am troubled, and being troubled I have come to the servant most able to assist me.”

That a God or Goddess may be troubled was nothing new to the young Miko. Mortals often moved in ways that bothered them. Unlike many other deities, those who moved among mortals who walked the earth, Cipangan deities disliked becoming too involved in their worshipers daily lives. It was why they had created the Miko after all. “How may I sooth your worry honored one” she asked.

Settling down beside her servant Benzaiten instead watched the water, gathering in the peace as it cascaded over stones for some time. “You are Urako. I remember well she who taught you, she whom you replaced. This one you ask of has been taken from us without our acceptance. She was a gift to these lands, her ruining darkens even our thoughts. Soils our gift. Events have occurred that make her return as Miko impossible. There are things. Events even a God cannot reverse. Not without damage to the affected one. She is whom your question is for. No. Her life may not be ended. We have chosen a new path for her. One deathly important to these lands.”

Urako lowered her head. “You speak of the once Miko Oharu. She has been made Not by the God Emperor himself.”

“One must remember Urako, though you may speak of this to no one, that the God Emperor is lowest of all gods while he lives” Benzaiten reminded her servant. “He had not spoken with us, thus his action was that much as a child making a decision. A child given well meaning but very poor advice from even lessor children. As such there are on the very rare occasion, small errors. She was to be sent here yes, but not in the manner she came.”

Raising her head again the young Miko pursed her lips. “Our Temples exist to support the God Emperor. We are bound to him. To his words. He has made this one Not. She is exiled forever. I may not disobey him without dishonor.”

“Unless instructed to do so by one above him. Such as, perhaps, myself?”

“What is your wish Honored one” Urako asked, her own path chosen by those words. For truth was though the Emperor is God on Earth, he is only a Mortal God and will be replaced eventually. His words ruled all, all but those spoken by the Gods themselves. In those cases even he must defer to those above himself. Urako knew that no matter what Benzaiten instructed her to do, none would deny her the doing of such. Not even the God Emperor himself.

Benzaiten again looked about her, again taking in the scene her servant had made for herself during her meditation. “This lands Great Ones have felt Oharu would still do well as their servant, even damaged as she is. For such they did send an emissary to us. We have thought this over carefully. For granting this gift, one who once served us faithfully is not something to be taken lightly. Though she will be forced to change her beliefs somewhat, her doing so will in some small way bind our lands together for eternity. We wish you to speak with her. To help her back to the path she was taken from. Should it be her wish to serve these Gods only then you will inform her we feel this to be in all our best interest. She must heal, in that by her service to this land she may help these people heal. You are aware that a great mistake once

occurred here. An error made by those with the best intentions, but who had lost touch with their Gods. I am told that it nears the time when these lands wounds must be healed. Oharu is not that healer, cannot be. That responsibility falls upon a native born. She may though, through her actions, be one of those archaic ones who works will support such healing. Or she may not. I have always preferred not to look into the future. I prefer to be surprised in such things."

Urako smiled. "I will do as you ask honored one. I do not agree with what has occurred to my sister Miko, yet as a servant to the Emperor my path was closed. You open it for me, and all other Miko's and their temples. I will strive to bear your burden upon my frail shoulders. As all servants must."

Benzaiten laughed. "Burden. Frail shoulders. Such a small task could never bend such a strong young back. You look forward to this as the warrior does to honorable battle. Now I am no longer troubled. You serve us well. Still I must ask you grant me the use of your body, that I may speak to he who waits."

"All I am is yours" the vixen intoned, opening a path through her spirit for the Goddess to travel. What would be said, what would happen she would never know. At the moment she was at peace, but when she awoke her body, her soul would be unsettled. It was her assistants duty to help her regain her center as she had many times before. To remind her that she was only a simple vessel of the Gods. Not a Goddess herself.

Time seemed to slow as she felt within her spirit the Goddess's touch, until she was finally gone. Softly she had departed her mortal servants soul, her departure as untroubling to the young vixen as her arrival had been. Turning back to her body Urako felt the weight of life build again upon her. There were certain things that would have to be done first. Only when they had been completed could she approach the task given her. It would be many days, perhaps weeks before she could approach the woman known as Oharu. There was much to prepare, for Urako was long and well aware the details of what Oharu had experienced. She would have but one chance to help turn the pain within her once sister Miko's soul. It was best not to move quickly, but to walk her path with rice paper paws. It would be a tragedy to waste this chance.

Urako opened her eyes slowly, now very tired. What he who had waited experienced, what words had been spoken in Urako's voice she would never know. For her assistant was sworn never to reveal what she heard least the differences in memory unbalance her Miko. Of the man who had sat waiting, who had asked a question there was no sign other than a small folded paper laying on the tatami mat he had occupied.

March 5th, 1936

Oharu settled her battered body carefully onto a small stone bench in Luakinikia Park, letting an ancient Cajaput tree, one most likely imported by the British, to shade her from the afternoon sun. Many tourists were about already, as always taking more of their endless photos, talking loudly together as they did. In truth she found their voices were often as loud as their cheap clothing, clothing the locals eagerly sold them. Oharu soon found herself a target of several camera's, most likely simply because she was obviously not a native though her tanning oil darkened fur made her look exotic, even to herself.

Soon a woman quietly sat beside her, her scent instantly recognizable as that of the hound Miss Devinski. "Your on time" the older woman noted as she sat a rather large straw hat on her lap. "Thank you. But why the darker fur. Are you perhaps hiding from some interested boy?" This last was asked in a tone that told Oharu it was meant as a joke. Something Butterfly had schooled her in, after a rather unfortunate misunderstanding between the two and Butterfly's husband.

"Help make visit teachers wear oil. Make understand some find darker fur attractive" she answered. "Save have treat many sunburn all rest week."

"A good idea" Miss Devinski agreed. "Your's or Mrs. McGee's?"

"My thought. Her plan" the mouse admitted.

"You asked to speak to one of my students" the Labrador continued, easily changing the subject now that she had calmed her curiosity. "A doe named Molly as I recall. I am afraid that she cannot speak with you at the moment." Noting a tiny slump in her companions shoulders Miss Devinski cut her normally round-about explanation. "Molly would like to speak with you, but she has to take her commercial pilots license test. Right now she is studying her tail off. Then there is a trip to the nearest examination site for her nation. Which I am afraid is off island. She has asked me to convey to you her apologies, and that she will be able to speak to you soon. Probably after the twenty-third. Is that acceptable?"

"I be available then" Oharu agreed. "Will give time to ask right questions. Where I meet her?"

"That bench outside of Songmark's main gate would be best choice. It is for visitors after all. You will be watched certainly. I've no intention of losing a student to kidnaping, assassination or some such." She smiled softly. "From personal experience I am well aware how dangerous your people can be. As an example we've one young first year who is a well trained swords woman after all, though Chinese. Still I've some information you need to dwell upon. The first is, Molly was as badly treated as you though in a different way. She always had the choice to make a swim for it, and did so when she was still a mile from our shores. More importantly, that ships Captain was a woman. Molly is having a bad time over it. Taking into consideration your own tastes..." She let the word fade

"I not attracted to doe" Oharu admitted. "Subject not important. Maybe help Molly, maybe Molly help me. Maybe help both, or no help. If some problem I leave. I not trying find companion."

Miss Devinski laughed. "Not after finding that rather delightful bobcat right? Don't worry. I'm no mind reader. I've a dorm in Molly's years that spends time at the Double Lotus. They have been more than willing to 'spill the beans' on you and your young lady."

Oharu looked up, staring into the canines eyes. "Sharon friend. Not my kind. As she say. But good friend." Opening her ever present sketch book she selected her pages from the Main Island waterfall, showing it to the older woman. "Want special drawing for man she love. When finish I mail to him at nine box." Closing her book after Miss Devinski indicated she'd seen enough the mouse thought her words over a moment. "Can have friend, not need sleep anyone" she continued. "Even if interested, and not, Sharon too dangerous my life path. Maybe I too dangerous her life." She stretched a bit, feeling her still healing scars complain when lifting her feet for a moment. "Maybe find nice older hound call pet. Maybe nice tall yellow hound."

Miss Devinski laughed. "Touche then. A point to you" she admitted. "I surrender. Will it be a collar or just commands and a big stick."

For the first time since she'd left her temple Oharu giggled, her ruined voice giving it a soft raspy sound. "Think maybe collar, leash. You big hound. Tough keep control. Drag Oharu all around island chasing boy hounds."

"I'll remind my boyfriends of that" the hound decided. "Had I any. Truthfully, have you decided what you want to do now?"

"Think maybe study local religion. Is somewhat like Shinto, in small way. Enough maybe I learn, be small use. Maybe turn Priestess path. Is one of few open to me. Do what can, till government find place send me." She looked around her, taking in the natural beauty of Luakinikia Park. "Almost as beautiful home. Not mind living. Maybe dying here. Rather some small place not so pretty."

Miss Devinski suddenly stood, swinging her hat onto her head somewhat forcibly. Her action inadvertently scattered a half dozen tourists who'd started coming towards the two. "Your English is improving, those teachers are helping you I guess. About this place though. I agree with you. Sometimes your heart finds a place your mind would never have suspected. Until the twenty-third then?"

"Until then." Oharu herself stood, bowed to her visitor, both slowly walking away from the other.

March 12th, 1936

Suitably resplendent in her natural, though somewhat unusual fur pattern the half feline, half mephitis known to her Songmark students only as Miss Wildford sat quietly behind her desk. She was listening with half her mind, while the rather mature (and obviously very well off) American wildcat sitting across from her continued explaining why she hoped her daughter might find a place at Songmark. During this time of year, the beginning of the tourist season, one of three things occurred at Songmark. Prospective students visited with or without their parents, their parents visited, or some paid investigator visited. By mid-tourist season the next years list would be complete. Acceptance and rejection letters would then be sent out and those lucky few accepted would begin preparing for their first year. By September the first girls would be en-route, some already arriving. As always it was a hectic time. Added that it was all done during the third year finals. Yet it was the way things had been decided long ago, before the first announcement of a new and rather elite girls school was opening on Spontoon's Eastern Island.

What had struck Miss Wildford's interest hadn't been the woman's bearing (obviously the well dressed wildcat had entered this world low class, somehow working her way up the ladder to her present position), her money (very new, no old world snobbishness here), or her daughters credentials (acceptable, miss mashed, eventful, but well within Songmark's unpublished desires for raw talent.) It was the woman's honestly expressed hope, not demands or expectations that her daughter be accepted which had raised the interviewers eyebrow. That in itself was somewhat unusual. Those with money tended to think that they could buy their child's way in anywhere. A memory of a certain French woman and her very effeminate son quickly came to mind. Miss Devinski had held that interview, thank whomever was sitting in the God Throne that day. Because Wildford was dead certain she wouldn't have been able to avoid laughing in the French woman's face.

Finally the wildcat wound down. "Ah don't think there's anythin else I can say Mam" she finished, that deep Texas drawl sounding alien to Miss Wildford's Spontoon acclimated ears. "Ah do hope y'all will at least look at her records. Ah never would ah ah-greed tha she should fly. Buh she's ol enough tah make her own choice nah, and I'll back her tah that fence posts even iffin ah don' agree. Ah think she'd fit in, but ah can't make tha decision. Only y'all can."

Miss Wildford nodded as if agreeing. In truth she had read those records the hour they had arrived, several days ago. It had been mixed in a thick packet with at least three dozen others, and she had been impressed. For a prospective first year the girl in question appeared to have great raw talent, though her complete lack of any documented aeronautical experience weighed heavily against her. Of course, it weighed for her in other respects as she would have no bad habits to break. Still it would require assigning her a tutor, an unusual but not unknown action when the student in question had no experience in a subject.

Actually Miss Wildford admitted to herself, every student tutored another in something. It just wasn't always official. Even so it would mean more work for both girls. For a moment she toyed with the idea of selecting Helen Ducros for the tutoring position. She too was from Texas, but she was fast approaching her third year. It would be asking too much considering the studies she would soon be involved with. Besides, the mistake of assigning Liberty Morgenstern and Tatiana Bryzov together still struck a raw nerve. Were there Texan's that couldn't stand each other anymore than the two Communists? That was something she'd have to be careful with. Still it couldn't hurt to ask, if this new student was accepted. That

was a decision of the entire faculty of course, not just herself. From memory she knew that an awful lot of date wine would be consumed that night.

Sitting up just a little straighter Miss Wildford allowed a friendly expression to bloom on her face. "Mrs. Ullrich. I must admit to never having visited your city. San Antonio correct?" She noted the energetic smile at having gotten the cities name right her first try. "I have been to Dallas yes, but only a delay while enroute to London and back. Yes, I have carefully reviewed your daughters application. As far as I am able to determine it has no problems. To be certain I went over it this morning and still found nothing amiss. However you are aware that from the moment a student steps foot on their transportation to Songmark, until they step off into your arms upon their return after graduation that they are, under Spontoon law, legally under our Guardianship? That your rights as a parent are null and void until that time. Even citizenship may be in doubt, should something happen to you. Seeing as how your husband has already passed on."

"Its Candy dear, between us" the wildcat corrected gently. "Dad had ah strange sense oh humor, or visited tha local bawdy house once tah often. Yes dear, ah read that ahn had Randy, he's mah lawyer, clear it up fer me. Lucy is ah born full blooded Texan. She'd knows righ from wron and ah trust her. Ah question though, wah if they never come home?"

Blushing the instructor hid a laugh under a cough. "I see that didn't slip past you Candy. By Spontoon law until they do so, or reach the age of twenty-five I'm afraid they remain under our guardianship. Technically a temporary citizen of these islands."

"Lik som air banditoes I've heard about?" Noting the half-felines puzzled look the wildcat smiled. "Bandits hon, ah think y'all call 'em pirates?"

"Ah yes. Them. Yes, even them I'm afraid" Miss Wildford admitted.

"Good. Then yer honest. That's all ah can ask. Already know yer unbriable. Same as tha government. Ah'd move out here iffing it didn't mean leavin San Antonio behind. If there's nothin else, ah know yer times precious." Candy stood to go, her plain though expensive dress falling softly into place. "Lucy's outsid, iffing yah wanna chat with her."

"I think that would be a good idea Candy. And please. Before you leave we really must share a soda. I'd love to hear more about your state."

"Whiskey dear" the older woman corrected. "Straight up. Sodas fer children ahn padres. Mah treat, yah got mah hotel. Ship don't leave fer another nine days so you pick tha time an place. Ah'll buy."

Standing smoothly Miss Wildford held out her paw, delighted by the firm grip Candy gave in return even though unlike the wildcat her own paws were black. "I'll let you know by tomorrow. About the drink that is. Your daughter. I must remind you that we don't make that decision for a bit yet. I won't promise you false hope. We already have almost three times the qualified applications as openings and submission application closing isn't until Friday midnight."

"Understood. Only can ask, can't badger. Bad form, badgerin. Tends tah get people slapin leather. That ten's tah get messy. Ah'll send Lucy in."

As the door shut behind her visitor Miss Wildford sat again, running part of the interview through her mind. It had been better than most, not as good as others. Mrs. Ullrich's lack of formal education was evident in her speech patterns. Yet she appeared a gentle, intelligent woman. Her husband had made his money wildcatting somewhere called Midland-Odessa. Wherever that was. Perhaps wildcatting involved something about his wife being a wildcat she thought. That thought lasted only for a moment though. Hadn't she overheard the second year girl Ducros mention something about oil wells in reference to

wildcatting? As much as she hated to admit it, Wildford knew she simply could not keep up with a world filled with local slang. A few moments later a soft, yet solid knock on her door brought her out of her thoughts. "Enter" she snapped, bringing to bear the Drill Instructor persona she took with all prospective students.

Whatever she had expected having just met with the mother, Lucy Ullrich was nothing like any of that. True, she wore a barely knee length denim skirt that showed legs well worth looking at, a waist length jacket over a cotton blouse with pockets, but none of the leather Wildford had expected. Her shoes, no strike that, work boots, were clean and shined but there was no indication of the bow legged stance a long term horse rider would exhibit. Her hair, a stunning true platinum blond that would probably give her problems in later years, fell only to her shoulders and the thin Franklin style wire rimmed glasses she wore complimented her looks. She stood at least five nine, maybe a touch more. That and... "You do not much favor your mother" she commented.

"My father was a cougar" the young woman answered Miss Wildford's statement boldly. "A full blooded Inuna-ina. You would know them as Arapaho. When they married he took mothers name and a Christian first name rather than attempt to teach her how to pronounce his own. Esahpahwishe does take some practice." Both alien sounding words seemed to flow easily from the young woman's mouth. "Miss Wildford? My name is Ullrich, Lucy Penny Falling-Star Ullrich and I have come to apply for a position in your school. I am here now in order to answer any questions that you may have." She stood quietly, arms to her sides, paws loosely open. Her right paw hooked oddly, as though preparing to grasp something. A small leather shoulder bag was hanging from her left shoulder, its base stopping exactly at her belt line.

"Have a seat please Lucy" Wildford offered. She waited until the girl had settled down before continuing. "Your mother was quite kind with her words for you. But you must know that last year we turned away almost two prospective students for every one we accepted. This year I fear that final number may be more than three to one. Though your academic records are extremely good I fear that they are no better than most of those who apply, while being worse than some others. Have you anything to say about that?"

Lucy answered in a strong voice, though keeping it well within socially acceptable levels. "Mam, I applied my very best to all my studies. Those grades show what I am capable of. I honestly don't think I could have done better even with a tutor. I make no excuses. I had the same teachers everyone else did. I had all the same chances."

"I see. So no one is to blame for any failure or missed opportunities other than yourself? Not even your mother?"

"No Mam" Lucy admitted. "As you must already know mother never formally finished fifth grade. My siblings and I have helped her, but honestly there is no way she could handle a checkbook when I was nine. Certainly she would have been unable to help with my school courses. Even if I had been home at the time. That is no fault of her own. Mother's father was a cow puncher, he went where the work was and took his family with him. Her chances of any worthwhile education were highly limited."

Another slang word. Miss Wildford decided not to be overwhelmed by them. "What, Miss Ullrich, is a Cow Puncher?"

"I am sorry Mam," Lucy apologized. "He is a ranch worker. What popularly is known as a Ranch Hand, or colloquially as a cowboy. He handled the cattle from his horse, usually making a bare living wage each day. Unlike the average ranch hand a true cow puncher is a nomad. He just doesn't stay in one place long. Drifting from job to job each roundup season. Few marry. Mother just got lucky when she ran into dad." She paused. "A round up Mam, is when free ranging animals are searched for, herded to a central location, checked, cut out, branded and sold."

"I think I see. You must understand that with so many nationalities wandering through that I simply cannot keep up with all the slang used."

"Yes Mam. I will try to be more careful" Lucy promised.

"Very well." Checking her notes a moment the older woman returned her attention on the young girl. "You have zero aviation training. Since this is an aviation school why did you apply with us?"

Lucy blushed, the emotion warning Miss Wildford something was coming up that the girl's mother didn't know. "Actually Mam I have full ground training and some solo's. Mother simply doesn't know or she would have stopped me. It wasn't something she felt I should be involved with, and she is appalled that I prefer the air to a solid horse."

"You of course young lady, have documents proving your claim?"

Standing as smoothly as any finishing school could have trained her Lucy approached the desk. Her left paw vanished into her bag, coming out with a red leather bound pilots flight book. Gently she laid it on the desk between them. Almost exactly between them Miss Wildford realized. This girl had gone through a finishing school, a very good finishing school. Without touching the offered record she leaned back in her chair, away from Lucy.

"Lucy. Would you like to explain why your mother was unaware of that" she pointed towards the little red leather booklet. "Then why she would apparently do an about face and allow you to apply here?"

"Mam. I turned nineteen a week ago. Father's will stated that when his children turned eighteen we were to be allowed to make all our own decisions. It is later than currently socially acceptable, but he wanted mother to insure we had all the social skills we might need before we started, as he wrote, 'riding ah wild mare.' I took aeronautical classes while mother thought I was taking dancing class. I trained at Windburn Field, it is to be renamed Stinson Field in July. Katherine Stinson was my instructor. I learned from the Aviation Manual written by John Iseman. Mother never knew what was going on as my older sister Sandra taught me ballroom dancing at night while mother was asleep. I taught her how to draw and shoot a leg iron." She paused again. "That is a slang term for a revolver held in a holster against your leg. When I turned eighteen I started looking for a good school. Not just flying, but survival in all known or suspected disasters. There are three worthwhile schools for young women as you certainly know. One in Spain, which due to the current political situation has closed 'for the duration.' One in South Africa. Then there is yours. As I am appalled by specieism I felt that South Africa would not be an acceptable institution for one with my feelings."

"When did you go to finishing school and where?" Miss Wildford asked suddenly.

"Institute Le Rosey, Switzerland" Lucy answered just as swiftly. "From when I was nine until I reached fourteen."

Miss Wildford raised an eyebrow at that statement. She was well aware of that school's reputation. "And after that" she asked, as if she didn't already know.

"I returned home to help mother with father. He was dying. A result of German gas during the war. He died when I was sixteen. I therefore finished my schooling at the local public school. My oldest brother Thomas returned home to help until mother could get back on her feet, even though he was already twenty-two and engaged."

Leaning forward Miss Wildford recovered the red leather book Lucy had placed on her desk. Without another word to the girl she spun her chair so that her back was to Lucy. An insult of course in high society, but if Lucy was going to survive in this world it was one of the most minor insults she would ever

receive. It was an interesting document she noted, even having several rather famous signatures beside certain training flights. Yet other than her chief instructor, whom all of Songmark's faculty was well aware of, Lucy hadn't mentioned that Charlie Lemblearg himself had taken her up for her instrument flight test. She'd met the famous stagg several times. It wasn't unexpected that had he been around he would have taken a promising student into the clouds and he did keep a private plane in San Antonio. He was simply like that. Closing the book when she was done she turned her chair back to face Lucy, finding the girl still standing at ease, with no hint in her eyes at the insult. Institute Le Rosey still trained well she noted. "Some solo's? Your log shows twenty-seven hours of solo flight Lucy."

Lucy nodded in acceptance. "Yes Mam. My instructor told me that until I reached a hundred hours that I should always say I had some solo's. She warned me that only greenhorns and fools claim more than they have."

"I see" Miss Wildford said. "A very good attitude. Do you have any hobbies other than disregarding your mothers wishes?"

"Yes Mam" Lucy answered. "I write. It is not much, yet it is an outlet for my other side."

'Other side' perked Wildford's interest. Everyone had an 'other side', so what would be Lucy's she wondered. "That is" she asked softly.

"I make a few dollars writing under a pen name. My stories appear in a rag called Weird Tales in most cases."

"Your subject matter?"

Lucy closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. "Young woman captured by other world monsters, to be rescued by their white knight" she answered in just as soft a voice.

"Such as" Wildford asked, reaching over and using one finger to pull a paper off something on her desk. An issue of Weird Tales glared up at Lucy, its garish cover showing a young fennec, her dress gone, her slip artfully torn being dragged into a cavern by half a dozen slightly phallic looking tentacles.

"Yes Mam" Lucy admitted. "That was one of my stories."

Lifting the magazine with her free paw Wildford glanced at its cover. "Kosh, the Invader From E'Tol" she read. "As I recall her would be rescuer failed to arrive in this story. I think he fell down the cliff and died?"

"It happens" Lucy admitted.

"Poor Lynn. I assume she became the monsters supper?"

"Not... exactly" Lucy admitted.

"I see. Does she ever escape?"

Lucy smiled. "Miss Wildford please. You will have to wait with everyone else to read the next section. Mainly because I have been too busy trying to bribe my way into a rather secretive girls school. One hidden deep in the middle of an unnamed ocean. One based upon an island where snooping is oftentimes fatal. Perhaps it will never be written, there have been rumors of slave trading, mad scientists, cannibals and human sacrifices around those islands I understand. Why, I could end my days in some den of moral decadence, my worn out body tossed to the guard dogs as an evening snack. Or used by some scientist as an experiment in her mad scheme to rule the world. One never knows what one will discover when they pull back the curtain of mystery."

Dropping the magazine Miss Wildford laughed. "I like you, you have a vivid imagination. That won't help your application I'm afraid, but I would like to read the next part. When its ready." She glanced at the pilots book in her other paw, suddenly dropping the book back where she had picked it up from and again studied this prospective student. "You are aware" she continued after a few minutes of study. "That we have an average twenty-percent dropout rate for the first year, another ten for the second, and five for the third. If you do not complete the entire course successfully, you might as well have never come. We do not refund our fee's for any reason. That if we accept you and you walk out after a week, or fail after three years that you have taken another girls chance away from her for nothing. Finally, that we will not ever accept 'I tried' as an excuse."

Of course the young Lucy Ullrich could have no idea that the numbers Miss Wildford had quoted were blatantly false. Songmarks washout rate was no where near that high, even if one included Chastity 'Soppy' Forsythe's sudden abdication of her place into the equation.

"I do now Mam" Lucy answered. "I may not be the best student you have ever had, or ever will have. Still if I fail it will be because my body failed. Not my mind or spirit."

"Unlike Spain we don't let our girls ruin their bodies or worse, kill themselves here" Miss Wilford corrected sternly. "We keep very good watch over you. Even when you think you've gotten away with something, trust me you haven't. If you kick sand on a crab on the West beach of Main Island we will know before you return. But if Miss Oelabe comes to any of us expressing concern for your physical well being, believe me when I tell you we take that concern most seriously. There have been girls who washed out because their bodies, not their mind or spirit failed them. But not because we didn't do everything we could to help them. Some bodies Mother Nature simply short changes, to no fault of the wearer. You are comfortable with firearms?"

"Yes Mam. I was trained with the Winchester 30-30 and the Model 1911 automatic, though I prefer a scattergun." Miss Wildford glanced up, a questioning look on her face. "A scattergun is a sawed off double barrel twelve gauge shotgun Mam" Lucy explained. "Usually filled with double ought buckshot, though I prefer a slightly different load. Lead rods. It is very messy at close range, like my younger sisters bedroom."

"You had an accident?"

"No Mam" Lucy admitted. "A Northern city-slicker had an accident. He apparently entered the wrong bedroom window. We believe that he wanted my bedroom, as I had met him at the airfield several times. He was lucky. My brother Paul prefers knives for close in work like that. We painted for a week to get rid of the mess, even after all that Sassy moved to a different bedroom."

"I see. What religious convictions do you have Miss Ullrich."

Lucy fidgeted. "I was raised Baptist. Institute Le Rosey taught Catholic, you are aware of their views of Protestant beliefs. Dad... Dad said we should question everything and he almost never spoke of his beliefs. Right now I'm still searching. I've tried Judaism, Islam, and I know for certainty that Christianity is not for me. They all lie too much, try to control you too much as all three treat women like three month old dirt. I believe in a Supreme being. I just have not found him. Or her. I think I'm edging towards Dads path."

Nodding in understanding Miss Wildford smiled suddenly. "If, and that I am afraid is a very small if, you are accepted here I will warn you now that those girls without religion. Well they find themselves with other duties while their classmates attend services. Less desirable duties. We don't care what church one selects, only that one attends. It is part of our moral teaching. I am aware of quite a few faiths not listed by you that are available here. Of course as a first year you would be escorted to and from your selected place of worship. Your time in worship is between you and your supreme being. Do you drink or smoke?"

"Yes Mam, but I am not addicted to drink. I tried smoking, it made me short of breath when I was caving. Even worse at altitude so I quit."

"Caving?"

Lucy didn't quite manage to hide a smile. "San Antonio sits on top of the Edwards Aquifer Mam. It is where we get most of our water. The entire area is limestone, what is known internationally as a Karst area. There are caves everywhere. It is quite fun to wander through them, to see things few people ever see. In the summer, when it is in the high nineties with humidity you can cut with a dull knife they are cool and quiet. When we blow out our candles it is pitch black. I find it amusing watching all the tiny spinning lights our eyes try to claim are there, but are not."

"Not to mention the occasional stolen kiss?"

"Yes Mam, more than one. I am not a maiden Mam, not by any sense of that word. From either side of the bed. I am though extremely careful. I would not be so foolish as to allow a single nights fun ruin my chances at the education I want, that I need. You may be assured that, should I find I am in need of such release it will be of a style that insures I do not become a mother before I am ready."

"Your rather brash for a Institute Le Rosey trained girl. Are you certain you were not thrown out?"

Lucy blushed again, deeper this time. "Mam. I was raised to call a spade a spade and hold no punches, to slap leather when the time came and explain myself later. I have more than enough funds remaining in my educational account to pay all three years of your school, and the return ticket fund right now. When I turn twenty-seven I inherit another \$50,000, perhaps more depending upon oil futures. By then I plan to be capable of turning that money into even more, legally, by starting my own air cargo company. If I have to drop Le Rosey training in order to come here understand this Mam. I'll drop it."

Miss Wildford leaned back, interested. Not many girls ever admitted their true cash worth, though Songmark had ways of discovering it. Lucy was talking about enough money to live comfortable on for thirty years, if one was frugal with their expenditures. Why the average working mans income in America was only a little over \$1,600 a year even now. She decided to change tactics. "Your records show you speak English and um.. Tex-Mex? Fluently. First what is Tex-Mex, what other languages do you speak and how well.

They had talked some time and when Lucy licked her lips, a sign she wanted a drink of water but wasn't about to ask for it, Miss Wildford was even more impressed. "Tex-Mex Mam is a combination of the Mixtexa, English, French and Spanish slang. If you are fluent in Spanish I am afraid that you will have difficulty holding a long conversation in Tex-Mex. I also speak my fathers language, which he taught me. Some little French and at least passable Swiss."

"I note that you said French with a sour taste in your mouth Lucy" Miss Wildford commented. "Any particular reason why?"

"France killed my father" Lucy answered. "Oh the German's made ahn fired that gas, it was the French that issued substandard masks to his platoon that killed him. He was the only survivor and the French let him lay in that ditch for hours while they tended to their own officers with no injury greater than a cold or hang claw." She stopped suddenly, internally grabbing hold of herself. "I am sorry Miss Wildford. If I may have insulted anyone you know. It is simply my personal feelings in this matter."

Holding back a bit of pride in the girls stand for her father Miss Wildford again changed tactics. "Tell me how you felt after you killed that um, city slicker" she asked suddenly.

Lucy turned pale, the first real emotion she had shown other than embarrassment. "At first relief that Sassy was unharmed. Then I looked at what was left and..." She took a deep breath. "I got sick. Mother had to take me to my room and feed me half a bottle of whisky before I fell asleep. I woke up hung over, a massive headache and with my reloaded scattergun still locked in my paws. I don't remember reloading it but Sassy told me she watched me. She said it was like watching a machine move, and the crack of metal on metal when I closed the breech is still something that snaps her out of her nightmares. I still feel bad about it, but I've learned to live with it. Between him and Sassy there wasn't any decision to be made. I had to slap leather Mam. I slapped leather most seriously. I would do it again, right now."

"All right Miss Ullrich. That covers my questions. I, or one of the others may ask you to return within the week. Or we may not. Don't worry about being available. This is a small nation after all. And Lucy, thank you for being completely honest. Take your flight log with you please."

She waited until Lucy had left, then leaned back going over the five interviews she'd had today. One woman from Rome who demanded her two daughters attend the same school as El Duce's niece, a Vietnamese family who had been stunned to learn that their daughter couldn't live and work with them on their fishing boat while she attended classes and a Swedish mother whose daughter, much like Lucy, would be a dream to have. Then there had been the fennec girl from Spain. Miss Wildford was well aware that the Spanish school was a long four year term, though they covered nothing Songmark didn't. Unless you included their rather heavy indoctrination into the Catholic religion. A course one had to pass to graduate. Toya López Covas had just completed her third year when the unrest forced that school to close. That had left her with two choices. Wait until the school reopened, if it reopened, or start over. She had come directly to Songmark, more than willing to start from scratch.

Left in a quandary, knowing she had at least twelve more interviews before Friday evening Miss Wildford weighed Lucy's pros and cons, as she had each girl who had ever stood before her. Money was often a sudden problem for these girls, usually as power bases shifted. Ultra rich one day, poor beyond imagining the next, sometimes rich again by semesters end. Though Songmark rules left no official opening to aid any student, certain avenues had occasionally been made available for those very promising students suddenly in a bind. Not that this Texan would have that problem, few were willing to place an entire three years tuition in a Songmark account, to lose it if they quit or were kicked out. To offer full costs and deposit, that took guts. Like many times before she was careful to make her opinion. Finally the instructor did something she rarely had done, and only once today after she picked up her pen. In the comments section for her interview she simply wrote three letters. I.W.H.

I want her.

March 14th, 1936

Some forty or so yards away from the artists position Main Island's greatest waterfall thundered. Its waters were pounding into a large pool, forming cold spray and mist, creating an unending cloud within the jungle. Just above its roar, if one cared to listen, dozens of sharp tourist voices made a course counter call to its sweet voice. However here, even so close to the beauty of nature Oharu was alone, for she was surrounded by what the locals called three yard jungle, with but with the crumbled cliffs, overgrowth and a curved ridge of shattered stone with its own tiny fall surrounding her. Plus the much muted roar of the falls itself as a constant backdrop the mouse was as alone as if the only living being on Earth. No where else had she found such peace and beauty on Spontoan, for the waterfall on Casino Island was pawmade and kept alive by an electric pumping system. A small toy for those who visited but briefly, then wandered on. Oharu was certain she would find no more peaceful site unless perhaps she went to certain taboo places, for even in this place her paid guide waited just out of sight. Places the mouse knew in her heart she had no right to trod. At least not at this time.

Sandy had selected this great wall of tumbled stone for Oharu to draw, indicating only vaguely that it was of some importance. As to the why or how the mouse had no idea. To the naked eye, even her own artists eye it was as it appeared to be. Crumbled stone from some older fall before the waters course changed, with no easy climb, no path to the ragged cliffs lip nearly a hundred feet above her. On one side was a second wall. A place where some ancient building had once stood, while from the wall she was drawing was a single very tiny waterfall. It was, she thought, a pale remnant of the once thunderous falls of the past that had roared through her, then for some reason changed paths to the new fall. Still it was in her orders to draw this place, and those orders she followed without thought. She could not know that she had been sent not to locate some hidden fortification, but to experience something her new friend had experienced herself long ago.

Should anyone have informed her that she was observed it would not have surprised her. Over the last few days she had noted the same faces popping up. Different combing patterns, some slight fur dying, even different clothing styles. All obvious attempts to hide the truth. Yet Oharu was an artist, she read not surface markings but those unchangeable bone structures under the fur and flesh itself. It was a talent she took for granted. In truth she couldn't say when she had first noted that she had it, it had simply always been with her. Had a certain ferret been made aware of her talent he would have changed his standard operating procedure. Unfortunately he hadn't been so informed, as even his agent closest to the mouse hadn't the knowledge. Oharu never spoke of it, she never thought of it. Thus her advantage, as little as it was had slipped by everyone.

It was with stunned surprise for the hidden watcher when Oharu abruptly sat her tools and book aside, stood ever so slowly then turned to face a huge moss and vine covered splinter of stone standing in front of those ruined carvings. The stone itself, what could be seen rising through the rubble, was fully five times her size, perhaps even a little more. A monolith delicate in shape, an elongated sliver of stone somewhat in a teardrop shape with its base wider than its top. Standing before the stone, one the watcher had viewed himself several times before she suddenly brought her paws together sharply three times. Her claps, loud in such a small clearing were absorbed before they came anywhere near those tourists enjoying the larger waterfall. They were heard only by herself, her watcher, her waiting guide and any spirits within range. Her guide remained out of sight as she requested, though her watcher.. Watched. Watched in silence as she knelt before the stone, as if it were one of the shrine's his grandmother had trained him about. Knelt, then began a soft conversation with the stone as though it were alive.

Chosen for this mission not only for his ability to follow without being seen (though he would be shocked to discover his face, in several different 'disguises', carefully drawn upon some of the artist's pages) but for his knowledge of her native language. Even so he was embarrassed by what he heard. Still he listened, for his reports were always as detailed as possible. As he listened he began to understand that there was more to this outlander Euro mouse Oharu than any of his companions or he himself had ever suspected.

Oharu spoke to the ancient stone as she would speak to an elder. Her conversation to anyone but herself seeming to be one sided, was of her own troubled spirit, her pain and a growing love that she was beginning to feel for these islands. She spoke of her hopes that war might still be avoided, at the same time admitting she honestly felt it was now unavoidable, but could the land and people she was coming to love somehow be sheltered from violence. Of herself she made only one request, one that left the watching weasel's jaw hanging open. "Might I" he heard her ask softly in her native tongue. "Be allowed to rest in this place. For a time. Once they have ended me?"

Some hours later Oharu was on a large tourist water taxi headed back to Casino Island. She had several pieces to finish waiting for her and first on her list was Sandy's special drawing. As she sat, surrounded by tired tourists and busy natives she noticed a young weasel apparently sleeping. Without conscious thought she opened her book, found his latest page and began drawing this new incarnation in an empty space. It was a game now with her, catching her watchers. It was a game she was beginning to enjoy. It was a game she had no idea, or care as to its possible deadly ending.

March 19th

One grey furred ferret, commonly known as Mr. Sapohatan, looked surprised when his assistant sat the bamboo travel tube on his desk. Addressed only to Box Nine its label was in a delicate calligraphic script he did not recognize. Looking up into the middle-aged rabbit's eyes he questioned without speaking. "Casino Island" she answered that unspoken question. "A certain mouse you are interested in." Picking up his ready outgoing correspondence she left, carefully closing the door behind her. After all, if it was a bomb she had no desire to be around when it went off. Such events were known to be messy and she'd spent some time on her fur this morning after separating herself from her husband.

Thinking the same thing Sapohatan picked up the tube gingerly, to find it much too light to be an explosive. Certain now he wasn't going to die before his next breath he carefully peeled open one end and unpeeled the tube. A single small sheet of paper fell out, though it was obvious a much larger, much thicker paper was still inside. Setting aside his mystery tube the ferret retrieved his fallen paper. It was, he discovered, a note written by Oharu herself. Though it was unsigned its block print was unmistakable and it explained how the sender had gotten his special address, though obviously not knowing who he was.

"Sir;

Though she did not ask me to remain silent, I believe she expected it. Yet this is much too important to remain silent about. Sandy commissioned this art of herself, in the hope that upon seeing her your heart may open to her. From my observance she is much in love with you. I have worked hard to capture her in such a way that you might find her attractive. She is a wonderful lady, please do not hurt her, should you not desire her.

An artist."

Setting aside the note, one he suspected had taken the Cipangan some time and an English-Chipangu dictionary's assistance to write, he carefully removed his new picture from its protective tube, all the while wondering what his foster daughter might have done this time. 'Well it isn't a bomb at least' he thought. Unrolling the page to its full size, somewhere around a foot by two, silence filled his office. Silence unbroken as he studied the work. He had been wrong. Seriously, deadly wrong.

It was a live torpedo, and it was aimed directly at his heart.

March 21st

"Good afternoon" a silky soft male voice with a French accent announced in greeting, his sudden appearance catching Oharu somewhat by surprise. She was currently sitting at her borrowed stall at the McGee resort working on her art while waiting for customers. That this one had appeared so quietly had her instantly on her guard. "This art is for sale?" the voice continued. "I very much like that one of the S-6B floatplane."

Looking up she found herself facing a rather dapper, older Brittany Spaniel. His brown and white fur was beginning to turn in place the grey of age. "Yes. For sale. Five shell" she answered. She hadn't known what kind of aircraft she'd drawn, only that it looked fast and its lines were very clean.

"Five shells. Not a large sum for such a pretty little piece." That he was speaking of her and not the art was not missed by the mouse, yet he wasn't looking at her so she ignored it. "I remember well when the Schneider Cup was won by a Supermarine. September 10th, 1929. I was forty eight. A wonderful race.

Again on September 13th, 1931. A rigged race and the English retired that trophy. I have often wondered how Jacques race ended up out here on this tiny island. “

“I know not” Oharu admitted. “I know little of aircraft. Nothing of race. I am Oharu. You are?”

“My pardon. Girard. Dalphas Filiberht Oberon Girard. I am taking the Great Circle trip from America’s San Frisco to San Dago, via way of the Oriental route. I hope to be in your country in a month. There is a dish there that I much look forward to tasting. I understand that blue eggs rarely crack, when boiled.” He remained straight faced as the words sank in, then continued as though nothing amiss had been said. “My family is related to Georges Bougault, through my dear mother. He died in 1931 when his Bernard H.V.120 crashed in a dive. I am a collector of good seaplane art and yours is very detailed. You wish only five shells? I would expect to pay ten times that in Paris.”

“This not Paris” Oharu reminded the spaniel. “Here things not so expensive as your home. Five shell, I put in bamboo tube for travel.”

“Yes then. Acceptable. I believe that I will purchase the item.” He laid a five shell note on the small panel of wood that served as a counter. “Nor will I ask what your price may be, as I feel my life is much too precious to spend so willfully. Nor have I any true interst.”

Removing her drawing from its place of display Oharu pulled a seemingly random bamboo tube from a box of dozens. Removing one end she carefully rolled up the picture, slipping it gently into the waiting hollow. Replacing its cap she handed the tube to Mr. Girard, only then picking up her payment. That the tube was much heavier than it should be for one simple drawing the spaniel ignored. He had been sent to make a pickup. That he had been able to add to his own private collection was a bonus. “Perhaps, when I return with my entry to the next race you might grace me with your skill. By drawing my craft I mean.”

“If still here. Yes” she agreed. “Can help something else?”

“Might I ask” he admitted. “I am looking for a café, or bar. One where gentlemen of a certain lifestyle might be welcome. I am afraid that it has been some time since I indulged my... baser desires, and as you are so obviously not available perhaps some young man might be willing.” He gave her a fatherly smile.

“Think maybe Yellow Lance place you want” she answered, having been asked several times before for such ‘lifestyle cafe’s.’ “Place men meet men.” Much as she had been asked for directions to the Double Lotus, often by the most surprising of people. Her first time a man had asked about a special café she had been forced to ask Mrs. McGee, now she simply handled it as she would any request. Carefully giving the man directions she waited until he had left, watching him walk away with wonder in her mind. At least this time there had been dozens of drawings waiting, drawings of many of the places Sandy had indicated. Still she had one question in her mind. What was that odd broken cross he wore on his collar anyway. Some new religion perhaps?

So simply had the transfer of secret material been done, so out in the open that Oharu’s current highly trained watcher missed the whole thing.

At the Marlybone Lucy Ulrich’s mother was trying to get her daughters attention. “Lucy. Tha ship leaves in three hors and yer naught even packed yet.”

Lucy Ullrich slowly closed the newspaper she was working her way through, it being a native edition of the Daily Ellie. Between asking questions over the last weeks and a tourist translation book sitting beside her she had finished three of the main stories. “Mother, check out time is not until four in the afternoon. I assure you that I will be packed and departed by then.”

Her mother stopped, a bag half held out to the native bellhop. "Hon. Tha ship leve at noon. Twelve oh three tah be exact. With tha tides. Yer no goin with us are yah."

Lucy stood gracefully, carefully folding her paper before sitting it aside. "Mother. I have exactly one chance to enter Songmark. That chance each applicant is given. No, I will be staying at a place called the McGee Resort. Should Songmark refuse my application, as they well may considering how many more qualified Spanish students have applied, then I shall request from them a list of the companies on Spontoon whom they feel may teach me what I must know. True mother, it will not be a tenth of the education Songmark would grant me. But I simply can not allow myself to miss a chance because a letter or radiogram misses us."

Mrs. Ullrich, better known as Candy even to her children smiled. "To! Miss Wildford yer lik yer daddy. Strong willed. Lot of him in-yah."

"A lot more of you mother. Oh I may have more classic education. I may know the right words. But mother, you dragged yourself out of the bean fields. You worked in a saloon and you knew a good man when you saw him. You held us together, fathers company together when he died and you have raised us all the best manner that anyone may hope. I may only hope that my strength, my tastes, my choices are a tenth as correct as your own."

"Got yer fathers silver ton' yah do" Candy nodded. "Tha why yah wired all them fund tah tha local bank then. Yer tossin tha dice, gonna accept how they lan. Tha's yer father. He mad sum bad choices, buh noh many."

"I have your blessing then?"

Candy walked to her daughter, enfolding her within her arms. "Hon. Ah gotta let tha chick's outta tha nest somhow. Buh you nee help, yah kno how tah get it. I'll be here inna company plane fast as it can fly."

Returning her mothers embrace Lucy felt the burn of tears on her own eyes. For several minutes the two held each other, then slowly broke apart. "Then yah bes get doin what yah need doin, I'll get yer sister home safe, even if she doe's wan be some pie-rats pet. Darn girl dreams ahn don think. Tha's yer uncle Rice, mah he sleep in peace. Ahn don mak no mistakes, ah don wan no out oh marrage granchildren yah understand?" Picking up her hat Candy sat it firmly on her head, slipping two very, very long hat pins through it. "Write. Unnerstan? Ah wanna kno everthin." Picking up her last bag, the one she had been about to give to the bellhop Candy waved him out. "Co'on son. No need tah dwaddle. Girl made up her mind, noh evan ah twenty mule team's gonna change that."

After the door closed Lucy sat again in her chair, ignoring the newspaper. "I've done it" she whispered to herself. "I've made my bed, now I must lie in it." For a few moments everything was quiet until softly, gently, Lucy's sob's of relief trickled through the now empty rooms.

Later that evening Lucy Ullrich found herself sitting in a much less ornate, much smaller set of rooms. She had selected the best that McGee's had to offer. Two rooms (three if you counted the dinky water closet dash cold shower combination) to be exact. A bedroom and a sitting room. In all there was almost as much space in these rooms as her own bedroom back in Texas. It was certainly not as large as the sitting room she had said goodbye to her mother in. Yet the difference in cost was immense, for last nights stay in that grand tourist hotel she could almost afford two weeks at the McGee resort. Of course there was no small kitchen, maid service was limited to bed sheets, towels and a quick cleaning each morning. Certainly no three am room service. In fact no room service at all. Though plentiful and filling, her supper had proven rather bland by her taste buds. She was certainly going to have to find Jalapeno peppers somewhere and barbecue sauces or have them shipped in. More importantly she found herself treated more like family than a guest. Though no one jumped to her beck and call, likewise no one had asked her where she was going when she left for a short walk. It would take some getting used too, but until she

heard from Songmark her time was her own. Time she could use exploring these islands. Exploring for new ideas for her stories. Lucy had already decided that in the morning she would start looking for a job, or better yet someone she could pay to teach her about aircraft. Anything about aircraft or running a business. It wouldn't be a lonely time for her. There was much to do and she did still owe her magazine several stories. Besides the local talent was quite interesting. From both sides of the fence.

She had no idea that her actions were being observed by those from the school she so wished to attend. Her actions, and those actions of every young girl who had taken residence. Taken residence in the hope they might be chosen, thus they were always watched. It was of course a test, a rare test to be certain. Songmark did not often have prospective students who's actions, attitudes and drives they could observe for weeks before weighing their true worth as prospective students. Songmark however never ignored an offered opportunity. It was why they were on top of the list of those three schools that certain young women wanted to attend. Those who truly wished to make it on their own in this male dominated world.

March 22nd 1936

Staggering through a Kuo Han swamp a bedraggled bobcat made her way from an ambush. She had been speaking with one of her local agents when the local police suddenly raided the place they were in. Luck, and the probable cost of her agents life had allowed Sandy to escape, though she had been forced to take flight through a swamp. A year ago that same agent had shown her the way through, just in case something like this happened. Now his fore-planning was all that stood between her and a sharp blade across her throat. Not ten minutes behind her a large force of men loudly followed her trail.

That someone had turned her or her agent in was a forgone conclusion. Her agent had been the target most likely, as the trap was well laid. Only sprung a few moments too late to catch both its targets. Something smoothly slid through Sandy's flying boot sole as she ran, through her right foot then out the boots tongue and the top of her foot. Holding back a cry of agony she forced herself to stop, pushing her paws underwater to examine the damage. A moments study gave her the bad news, she had stepped on a thin sharpened section of bamboo. A trap, one more than likely set by local hunters. Putting both paws under her knee while bracing with her good foot she pulled the injured foot free. There was nothing to do now but wait and surrender. With luck they would kill her quickly. But Sandy wasn't the kind to surrender. Pulling out a hankie she tore in it half, using the pieces to plug both ends of her wound. A careful search with her feline vision told her the entire open area was probably a minefield of traps exactly like the one she'd stumbled on.

An angry smile came to her face as a deadly plan gelled. Standing, she shuffled across the open water, feeling her boots bounce off lengths of bamboo as she moved. Though there was no pain yet in her numb foot she knew it would come soon. When it did any movement would be agony. Eventually clearing the area she again headed North. North and the waiting three aircraft that where her expeditions transportation. Behind the stumbling bobcat her pursers, having spotted her silhouette as she crested a hill before them ran into the same field a few minutes later. From the screams she knew that they were not so lucky as she had been. Falling in that water would have meant near instant death.

As the sun rose in front of her hours later an exhausted, crippled bobcat was delighted to see her craft waiting in the bay. A few steps more and she collapsed at the beach. It was all she could do to catch her otter friend Mindy's attention before she passed out. Later she would learn that the local police had come looking for her, had examined all three aircraft before letting them take off. That they had missed her was understandable, no one ever really checked a flying boats wing floats for a living body.

Sometime later she would wake up in a hospital. An American hospital. Only by luck and the new sulfa drugs was her life saved. Her expedition would wait a week until she was well enough to resume travel, for though they were treasure hunters her illness gave them the excuse they needed to relax. Being

treasure hunters and at a tropical paradise, that opportunity was grabbed with both paws. Her scarred foot though would occasionally remind her of her mistake the rest of her life.

March 23rd, 1936

Oharu had arrived at Songmark's front gate a little before the time given in Miss Devinski's second letter. Again she settled down again at the bench. This time there was no one in Songmark's guard house watching her, as though she was now trusted not to disobey the rules. Oharu had to smile at this, there was no place she would more like to explore than Songmark. If nothing more than to settle her own curiosity. If only she could afford the cost of classes here. But she had no ability to be a pilot, and Songmark did not simply teach mechanics. This time instead of drawing while she waited the mouse decided to study the area around her. It was not long before her attention was captured by two tiny brown and white birds building a nest. Though she was as yet unaware, they were escaped `Elepaio, imported long ago from Hawaii to help with an insect problem created by British colonists. As she studied the birds something important made itself apparent to her about the pair.

A sound abruptly pulled her from her study, two sets of flying boots walking on crushed coral. Looking towards the sound she found the hound Miss Devinski and a young doe walking towards her. She was standing when Molly approached close enough for her looks to register on the mouse's brain. Oharu swallowed, then fought to catch her breath and restart her heart at the same time. Bowing as the two came near she hoped that her nervousness would be misconstrued, for she was deathly aware of what had just happened to her.

"Oharu, Molly. Molly, Oharu" Miss Devinski said in introduction. "Should you need me I will be in the guardhouse." She held up a once popular novel, *A Six Cylinder Romance*. "Reading." With that the older woman turned her back on the two and walked away.

"Please" Oharu said softly to Molly, indicating the bench with one paw. Molly smiled nervously, setting on one end of the bench. Taking that as her cue Oharu took the other end. "I have asked..."

"Tah see me cause we share somethin" Molly finished, her own speech somewhat nervous. "We both had ah bad time on a boat."

"Small freighter" Oharu corrected carefully. "It important. Details. I first think. Best that way. I aboard Burat Maru, mean Black Merchant. I pay passenger, exile." From there she carefully and graphically explained her fate in broken English, not stopping until she had come to the islands, unaware her shattered voice was changing slowly as her emotions released. It was with silent tears falling from her eyes, matting her facial fur that she finally asked softly "You?"

Not so much stunned as amazed at what the mouse had gone through Molly suddenly felt her own fate had been somewhat less, but she had been asked. "Three Moons" she answered. "Thought I could work my way across..." She went on. As she spoke her emotions too began to escape. She forced herself to dwell upon what she felt had been the worst. Three Moon's Captain and her special needs. Her special needs and the fact that she had quickly responded almost eagerly to them. "So, when we were ah mile offshore I jumped ship. Swam ashore. Better than another night aboard tha ship. Ended up givin mah friends fleas tho."

Oharu nodded in understanding. Cipangan ships were usually extremely clean. That European ones were not had been taught to her since she could remember. "We survive. I think maybe we have much common." Oharu decided her next actions, having managed some control over her emotions while Molly spoke. "Some not common. You have question?"

"Yeah" Molly admitted. "How can ah woman do that tah someone else. I mean. I know Ada and her dorm, but that...that..." She suddenly burst into tears, her paws covering her face as her pain overwhelmed her. "Tah make me..." As she cried Oharu gently move closer, taking her in her arms, pulling the doe over until she was enfolded in the mouse's embrace. Saying nothing Oharu let Molly cry, her own heart trying and failing to absorb the younger woman's pain, trying to take it from her and make it her own. Hot tears soaked the mouse's kimono, yet she spoke no word, made no further advance. What was happening to her heart was beyond Oharu's ability to control, though her physical actions were still well within her command.

Finally Molly stopped crying. When she eventually made a gentle move to escape Oharu quietly released her, moving away as the doe gathered herself together. "Thanks" Molly whispered softly. "Always wanted tah cry, tah let it out. But I couldn't let Amelia or tha others see me like that. Coudn' be tha weak."

Brushing at her dampened kimono with a clean rag, one she carried just for such accidents Oharu looked into Molly's face. "I once Miko" she answered. "Place help others. Maybe learn be priestess now, think. Feel good help Moh-lee. Think maybe help Oharu too. Think I need cry too. Not here. Not now. You ask why people do. I not know. People all strange. Some peaceful. Some want war all time. Some want power over other. Not Miko place understand mortal heart. Miko understand Gods. Same Priestess." She carefully folded her now damp rag, slipping it into her obi. "When you understand people you tell me. We become powerful beyond all. Rule universe like Ming Merciless."

That brought a giggle from the deer. "You know about Flash Gordon" she asked.

Oharu fluttered one paw in a null pattern. "McGee children listen American radio night. San Francisco station. I like Sherlock Hound better."

"Great Detective" Molly admitted "So I'll never understand why she did tha tah me, right?"

"You understand one day Moh-lee. When older. When more experienced. Not make what happen right. Still understand help heal. Maybe we both sleep better now."

"We'll never get over it, will we" the doe asked.

"No Moh-lee" Oharu admitted. "Some thing..." A sound of a seaplane's motors reached them, both instantly turning their attention to the sound as it rose in power, the sound slowly fading away as whatever craft flew off. "Missing one cylinder" Oharu whispered.

"Yeah, probably port side... Hey, wait a minute. You're a pilot?"

"No Moh-lee. I try fly. Not my place guide machine air spirits realm. Anger air spirits. I like work on engine, have little experience."

"Then we hav' more-n one thing in common" Molly laughed. "You should come tah Songmark, you'll learn..." She stopped at the mouse's expression. "Can't afford it?"

"No" the mouse admitted. "Not adventuress either. Happy be priestess, if allowed. Not have papers. Probably deport soon." She touched her knee lightly with her right paw. "Sometime Moh-lee what want not happen. Want live here. Want work engine. Want be Miko again. Last never possible. Probably not any other. Life what come, not what want. We know. We survive. We stronger. Bad time yes. Bad dream yes. But survive. Heal. Grow. You be great lady one day Moh-lee. Great pilot. Maybe never rich. Maybe happy though. Still you say what Captain want not natural. That you wrong about. Watch brown white birds there. Study carefully. Then say not natural. Now time I go. Have duty attend." She stood, looking towards the setting sun. Towards her homeland. A land she would never step upon again. "Oharu maid at resort. Important work."

"Will I see you again" Molly asked.

"Not need Moh-lee. You help Oharu. I help you. All can do now. You live long time, be great lady. I live all what life give." Turning her back on the doe she walked quickly down towards the docks and waiting water taxis. Walked quickly lest her heart burst within her breast. She was unaware as she walked that Molly watched her until she was out of sight, then turned her attention on the two birds lovingly building a nest. Unaware of the tears that fell from her own face at the pain she felt. For Molly, tonight would be without the nightmares. For Oharu there would be more questions, but no pain.

She settled into the first waiting taxi, now unsurprised that its owner was the same wolf who had brought her over, who had seemed available almost every time she went off Casino Island. "Casino" she told him, placing the fare where he could easily reach it. However before her taxi could move another person entered, settling down across from the mouse. "Miss Devinski" Oharu said in greeting as the taxi moved slowly away.

"She looks better" the hound admitted. "Good cry will do that for you. What was with the birds?"

"Both male" the mouse explained.

"Ah, yes. That does happen often in nature. You looked better too, but now you look so sad. You'll see her again?"

"No. I not see Moh-lee ever again."

"Ah... hah. Thought I noticed something. She's a very stunning girl."

"That why Captain hurt her. Not able tell her. Hurt even worse. Hurt know used because beautiful. Hurt know used. Abused. Because pretty. Make Moh-lee hide self" Oharu explained. "Moh-lee have great hate burn inside. Need lash out, need hurt. Cry help, still she lash out one day. Someone get hurt."

"You've seen this before" Devinski asked.

"I Miko for many year. I see many thing. Know when step back, when step forward. Now know who make pay Moh-lee pain."

"Whoa bucko" Miss Devinski warned. "Molly isn't your responsibility. She's mine and the schools. If anyone is going to exact revenge for what happened to her its not going to be you."

"Molly your responsibility?" Oharu asked softly. "You let pain sit. Let pain grow. Almost become hate. Still claim responsibility? Where you when Molly need."

"Looking for someone like you" the hound admitted. "Looking hard. Are you aware how few women have gone through what you two have, and survived?"

"Only need mother figure help Molly. You almost wait too long. You let beautiful spirit burn. Almost burn ash. Not right."

"Beautiful... Oh no. Oharu, look at me." She waited until the mouse was meeting her eyes. "I saw you react when Molly came into view. How bad is it. How deep has she.... Oh my poor dear girl." Miss Devinski sat back. "You've got it bad haven't you. Of course you have. Your alone, you've no one and the first person to touch your heart..."

"Moh-lee never know" Oharu warned. "Make Moh-lee hate Oharu. Can live without love, think can not live with hate."

"So you'll exact revenge, won't you."

"Yes" Oharu admitted. "Moh-lee not woman's first victim. Not last. Predator need be stopped. Find way put jail. Not kill, I not kill. I not able kill."

"But your able to live in the shadows aren't you. To watch as her life unfolds while your own remains in shadows."

Oharu laughed shortly, looking out at the sunlit waters. "Miss Devinski. I not first person tragic love another. I not last. One day I find someone, but Moh-lee always great love. I learn live with, like everything else."

"Hurts though. Knowing she'll never respond."

Oharu nodded, her eyes watering again, forcing her to turn away from the reflected sunlight. "Not understand. Never want this. Not want this." Her shoulders shook as her own emotions took over. One great sob of pain came before the hound was beside Oharu, cradling the mouse in her arms just as Oharu had cradled Molly only a little before. A single word from Miss Devinski had the water taxi change course. Soon it was orbiting in a holding pattern, waiting for the order to continue to Casino Island.

Like Molly Oharu had a great deal of pain to release. Just like the doe Oharu had no idea just how deep her pain was, nor did she realize what she was saying as she cried. By the time she fell asleep in Miss Devinski's arms the Songmark instructor had the whole story. Even those secret parts Oharu had promised herself she'd never tell anyone. It was a little while later that the water taxi gently bumped into a dock, the same dock where Oharu had accidentally avoided those waiting cloth thieves. While Miss Devinski waited with a sleeping mouse in her arms the boat's pilot vanished. To return a few minutes later with Butterfly McGee in tow. For the hound Oharu was too great a weight to carry. For Butterfly the mouse was no more than a child. No words passed between the two as Butterfly accepted the sleeping mouse's weight, only a knowing look. Then Butterfly was gone while the water taxi turned for Meeting Island. There was a ferret to beard in his den and Miss Devinski had an idea. If she knew her old friend well enough it just might work.

Oharu woke a short time later in her own bed, still fully clothed. Wiping the sleep from her eyes she struggled up. It was getting late, there was work to be done. She remembered breaking down but not all that she had said. Yet there was a lightness to her soul that she had not felt since before her mother had died. Perhaps that ancient saying was true, that to cleans one's soul, one must occasionally cry it dry.

Sitting up told her the worst of it. Not only had Molly's tears temporarily stained her kimono, but sleeping in it had truly rumpled the cloth. She would have to change before she stepped out of her rented rooms, and tomorrow would be spent with laundry. There would be no walks around Casino Island, no visit to the Double Lotus. Certain chores had to be taken seriously, being clean was one of the most important. While she changed Oharu thought over the afternoon's events. How she had been stunned at Molly's natural beauty. How, in her attempt to help the younger deer work through her pain she had foolishly allowed her own heart to be trapped. "It will not matter" she told herself, returning to her native language as always when talking to herself, or spirits. "Moh-lee does not walk my path. We will not see each other ever again. I die very soon anyway." She sighed suddenly as an image of the deer's deep eyes came to focus in her mind. "Why you" she asked herself, still standing holding her second good kimono, wearing nothing but a thin loin cloth. "Why did my heart blossom for you? After what you have experienced, even the slightest admission of my feelings will turn you to hate me."

She sighed a second time, struggling into her clean kimono while turning her obi inside out. With only one obi she was seriously restricted in a fashion sense. Should it become too soiled, well it was all that held her kimono closed. She would have to visit a fabric stall again when she had more shells to spend. Perhaps that silk she had seen. It had such a wonderful bamboo leaf pattern on it. Finally dressed, her

fur combed and her mind settled as much as it could be she headed for the kitchen and her evening duties there.

About the same time Oharu dressed Miss Devinski was being ushered into the official office on Meeting Island of one rather mysterious grey furred ferret. "Welcome" he said in greeting, a rare true smile on his lips. "As always, such a pleasure."

"As long as you can use our girls for your spying missions, on their own shells" the hound responded, gently settling herself into the offered chair.

"Now now Miss Devinski, you know our deal. As long as you allow us to recruit, using stealth of course, certain information regarding your first class will never come to light. Among other much more important things we have agreed upon. As to Amelia and her friends not turning in expense vouchers. Well I can't be expected to replace funds I have no idea have been spent."

Turning her gaze on the ferret Miss Devinski decided tact was not an option today. "We are old friends Sapohatan, very old friends. However you have placed Amelia's dorm, and Amelia herself in more danger than any others. Who survived that is. Amelia has the luck, and the ability to accept what must be done. Even should it cost her greatly. You will start treating them better starting today. Or a certain young bobcat will never be allowed to enter Songmark."

Mr. Sapohatan grinned, himself setting down. "So the battle is joined. Devi, that certain young bobcat torpedoed me earlier with the help of her local agent. I doubt she'd care if you let her attend or not. But I do agree. Certain things will go into motion to make at least that dorms lives a bit easier. I'm not certain what, but it will come to me."

"Everything comes to you" the hound replied. "Except love."

Raising his eyebrows for a moment the older ferret opened a drawer, taking out a polished bamboo tube. Setting it on his desk he gently rolled it towards the hound. "When this arrived I thought it a bomb" he explained. "Then I remembered what she is. Knew that it couldn't be and it wasn't. It was a torpedo. A very well aimed one at that. Take a look."

Picking up the tube Miss Devinski carefully opened it, gently extracting a rolled piece of heavy paper that was inside. Unrolling it her eyes widened even as she turned it over to view the image correctly. For a few moments she forgot how to breath. "This is Elizabeth" she managed finally. "This is her real pattern, not the dyed one she uses now. How?"

"As I said, her local agent. Recognize the style, the detail? If not that, her hack mark on the lower right? It came to post office box nine, with an unsigned note."

"I hate to admit this" Miss Devinski admitted, "But I don't quite understand." She started rolling up the paper. "This leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination. Why would your foster daughter have something like this sent to you."

"Foster is the key Devi. She's tired of being foster daughter, not quite a legal resident of the Spontoon nation while putting her life on the line for my country every beath. I believe that she wants to be Mrs. Sapohatan and she's leaving me no option in the matter. I either agree or I withdraw my support and she's sent back to America."

Sliding the artwork back into its tube the hound chuckled. "Hoisted by your own devious petard my friend. How many women have approached you. How many have you said no to. Your going to lose your best agent, your most loyal and dedicated agent. So when does she return to America."

"That" the ferret admitted as he accepted his art back, now safely in its traveling tube. "Remains to be seen. I have not as yet decided upon my next course of action in this matter."

"In short, your interested."

"I'm her father."

"FOSTER father, as you reminded me. It's a legal term. Guardian would only have allowed her to remain until she reached eighteen. You chose fostering her because until you dropped the ball, or died she could stay as long as she wanted. There isn't any moral or legal reason you can't say yes. Only your love for a woman long dead. One she loved as well I recall."

"I hate you when your right" he sighed, defeated. "But how can I be sure?"

"Ask Saimmi."

"A priestess? For something this important. Are you out of your mind."

Miss Devinski laughed again. "There is Oharu, if you want an independent opinion. She was a Miko. I'm pretty sure that she's decided to become a priestess. Speaking of her, she had an emotional house cleaning today. I've got the full story and it'll cost you heavy to get it."

His ears snapping forward the ferret leaned towards his visitor. "Would this information have an effect on my opinion of that mouse" he asked, his voice suddenly serious.

"And her nation."

Mr. Sapohatan sat back, mulling over her words. "Her fate is already decided" he warned the hound.

"She's fallen in love with Molly Procyk."

"Oh... She's taller than the mouse." Silence filled the room until finally the ferret asked what was to him the most important question at the moment. "Tragically, or is she going to be stupid and admit it."

"Tragically" the hound answered. "Amelia is late getting back. No one has seen her since testing, or knows how she got to testing anyway though she did get there. Considering that she hasn't a passport, which will make further 'adventures' nigh near impossible by the way it is worrisky."

He nodded in agreement. "Working on that, someone stuck her name on the British official enemies list. Might have to arrange a temporary Spontoon passport. Still looking into our options there." He stood, turning his back on his visitor, looking out a window in his office. "Clouds are growing" he observed, though both knew he wasn't speaking of the weather.

"Have we time to prepare for the coming storm" she asked, her own voice softening.

"Given four years yes. By 1940 we will be ready, though I'd prefer a few more years. If it breaks before then. No we haven't time. You could leave of course, though it would mean your niece wouldn't have anyone to come too when her air pirate days are over. War does that you know. Crushes pirates."

"I won't leave my girls alone in the rain" Miss Devinski answered. "Even if only a few certain women remain, their better than most of the non-native men you can get."

"Oh yes" he agreed, still studying the sky. "I have such a wonderful crew available. A bobcat spy no one has caught in four years of trying, a madwoman who loves large caliber guns and high explosives. Not to

mention setting things on fire. An orphan Texan who can't take a water taxi ride without tossing up her toe-claws and an English Lady who seems to have the luck of the Irish, and a heart to match. Yes, a wonderful crew."

"You left out a lot" the hound reminded him. "For example there is Nikki, though she won't admit it. Oharu will turn to you soon and two or three dozen others that will flock to Spontoon in event of a war."

"Even certain air pirates?"

"Especially certain air pirates."

He made his decision, returning to his chair. "Tell me. Payment to be decided later. To be delivered in a cheap cardboard box of indiscriminate origin. At an unspecified place. By an unspecified person."

"Favor" she reminded him. "Wrapped in plain brown paper with no return address, tied with plain cotton twine. All right, here it is..." It was almost sunset when Miss Devinski returned to Songmark, a smile now on her face. That smile would remain only until she discovered that Amelia was still missing.

March 24th, 1936

"You've ah visitor" Butterfly informed Oharu, having discovered the young mouse busy cleaning the resorts kitchen. "Ah'n leave this. Clean enough already." She shoed the mouse out, looking with pride at how clean her kitchen was. After Oharu was gone that was.

Walking into the main room Oharu found a young well dressed fox awaiting her, an official looking leather briefcase held in one paw. Stopping well away from the stranger, unconsciously taking care to keep a table between herself and him she bowed ever so slightly as one to an unknown. "I Oharu. You wish speak?" she asked him in English.

"Ah yes, certainly. I've papers for you" he answered, setting his briefcase on the table. "You have identification? No, of course you don't. How silly of me. After all that's why I'm here. I'm here to supply you with such papers." He smiled brightly, opening his briefcase with a grand flourish.

Upside down of course.

Oharu suppressed a giggle as papers tumbled out, along with what looking like a waxed paper wrapped sandwich. From what she'd caught of his words the fox must represent Spontoon's government. Thus he must be treated with upmost respect. If not for himself, then for the position he held. She waited in silence as the young fox first turned his briefcase over then gathered his papers. Once he'd done that it was another wait until he dug out a small brown manila envelope. With great care he handed the envelope to Oharu. "Your papers" he told her, turning to rearrange his briefcase while she examined what the envelope contained. Eventually she carefully laid several photographs on the table between them while she fought back laughter. "She very pretty."

"Ohh... my... Sorry sorry sorry" the fox gasped, quickly shoving back into the envelope a dozen or more photographs of a rather beautiful vixen, one in very native dress. "My youngest sister, honest. My mistake." He started digging again, finally coming up with another identical envelope. Opening it he peaked in, then with obvious relief handed it to Oharu.

What she withdrew turned out to be a passport, a Spontoon passport. Opening it she found a photograph of herself looking back, one that had been taken when she applied for a licence to sell her art. All the information was correct, even her birthday and weight. "But, how" she asked.

"I am simply an errand boy Mam" the fox admitted. "Don't ask me anything about why something happens or doesn't, things just work that way. Now if you will sign here please" he slid a sheet of paper to her, along with a fountain pen. One of the new type she noted. With the new replaceable cartridges. Reading everything would have taken her a day on her own. Looking up at the fox she gestured to the form. "Just says your who you say you are, that I gave you the papers and everything is correct. If something is wrong let me know now so I can note it and get the document replaced."

"All correct" she admitted. Quickly signing the form she slid it back. For a moment she held the pen, studying its construction before sliding it back as well. "Thank you" she told him. "You are very kind."

"Its you who've been kind" he corrected. "Not laughing at me when I dumped my papers, or getting mad at my sisters photos."

Oharu thought for a moment for her best response in this situation. "In life" she told him, "We must learn. Errors are way we learn. When grow older errors less, but larger. I not upset photographs, she very pretty."

"Gosh thanks. She's dancing at the Coconut Grove and wanted some publicity shots. My tailfast is a photographer and..." He laughed again. "I really should slow down right?"

"It might help" Oharu agreed.

"Then that's it, take care Miss Osui." He picked up a hat that had been laying on a chair, tried to bow only to almost fall. With a sheepish grin the young fox left, his hat still in his paw.

Taking a seat Oharu silently turned each page of her brand new passport. Everything in its data pages indicated she was a citizen of Spontoon Island. Even her birthplace was listed as Casino Island, yet she knew that wasn't so. All the other pages, the ones customs would stamp as she entered and left countries were blank. A new life, but how? What word she had heard was that the Spontoon government was impossible to bribe. Yet in her paws... Just how had Sandy managed this she wondered, until finally she decided to set it aside. Should she need it then it would be there. That she would need it was undoubtable. Sandy wouldn't have gone to this much trouble for nothing. Otherwise it was useless. Certainly if she showed it around someone would realize it was false, then she would end up in prison. Knowing her homelands prisons the mouse decided to avoid that if at all possible. Without a word to her employer she went to her room, slipping the document into her pillow.

April 1st, 1936

It was a late afternoon when Oharu and Reiko returned to the McGee resort. As had become practice, they had been out to market gathering food needed for the next days meals. Combined with their shopping Reiko was teaching Oharu the Spontoon language. At least the version she spoke. Apparently each transplanted nationality had their own additional words, though everyone understood the base language. They were chatting along in the native language, with Reiko giggling at Oharu's mistakes when Butterfly interrupted them. "You've ah letter" she told the mouse, holding out an envelope.

Accepting the envelope Oharu first noted that there was no return address, though the postmark was from Oahu. One of the American occupied Hawaiian Islands she thought, though she wasn't certain. Curious she slit it open with one thumb claw, pulling out two thin pages of paper and a bank draft. One was a letter, the other a rough paw drawn map of the main island. "From Sandy" she explained excitedly after glancing at the signature. "May?" she asked, as always with respect to her employer.

Butterfly nodded yes. "Sure. We'll get this stuff shoved in tha corners. You read."

Returning to her room Oharu sat, reading carefully the written words. English was very difficult for her to read, with the letter being in near script form it took her three times as long as normal to make out what it said.

'Oharu'

Visiting Hawaii, again. I stepped on something in a swamp in Kuo Han, so we had to come back for medical aid. I am fine, just a limp now. While laying in bed at the hospital I had a wonderful view out my window. I think it would be nice if you would come here and do some landscape drawings. Those movie makers are always looking for new places. We might be able to send some down here.

By now you should have your papers. It will allow you to travel to Hawaii and back. That should make some things a bit easier. It would be easier if you could talk though. Don't forget enough notepads this time. People talk a lot here. I wish I was going to be here when you arrived. I really want to know if you finished that drawing for me. Oh, speaking of that. Send these new drawings to the same address. He will get them into the right paws.

I hope that you have found yourself by now, I would really hate to lose a friend. Maybe you will find someone. If you do I bet she keeps you busy all the time. I'm running out of room and Sam wants to get this in today's airmail. Since I am well now we are flying out tonight. I really love night flights, you can see so many stars. That is all for now. Will try to write again.

Sandy'

Setting her letter aside Oharu picked up the map. It was a fairly detailed outline of the island Oahu. One apparently copied from a tourist map. Considering Sandy's occupation the mouse was unsurprised. A few areas were pointed out with arrows, just like the photograph Sandy had shown her when they first met. With that memory came a thought. Running one finger lightly along the papers backside she found a series of impressed marks. Marks exactly like the ones Sandy had watched her make. Referencing the marks with the maps front she discovered that what Sandy really wanted drawn was the harbor and an air base. Biting her lower lip she stood, walking over to where she had hidden her passport and retrieved it.

Four days later she was in a flying boat, on her way to the Hawaiian islands.

Chapter Nineteen

April 5th, 1936

Sand Island. A more properly named spit of land most likely did not exist. At least not within several thousand miles of this place. Oharu had been walking the beach alone, listening to the sound of waves softly caressing the sands as she slowly circled the small island. Sand island of course was the larger of Midways two main islands. Had it been daytime she would have been inundated by goony birds. Birds making helpless attempts to land or take off. There would be the heat, and desolation to contend with as well. As it was, a third of the way through her lay-over for her next connection there were still a few hours before sunrise.

Sand Island had slowly been converted from a desolate, lifeless patch of sand (and thus the name she easily guessed) to a vegetated two mile wide strip of simple desolation. Had there been no buildings she was certain that there would have been no place, no place at all from where she couldn't have watched the ocean. This place, or one most like it the mouse was certain would be where she could expect to be deported too. A desolate, impossible to live with pile of sand, sea and sea birds. It would not be a place where one would retain their sanity long. Nor would she make the attempt, were she trapped here. Better mindless rambling that hopeless reflection. Still for now this desolation and quiet allowed her time to reflect.

'What am I doing' the mouse asked herself. 'Spying. Spying for my country yes. But do I honestly have a country? No. I do not. According to the God Emperors own words I am exile. Without any country. So then who do I spy for?' She turned to look out towards the dark sea, its existence barely discernable for many species though her prey based eyesight had no difficulty making out its gentle movement. 'Logic has no place in this question' she continued in her mind. 'For logic would say I am wrong to spy for a country that has turned me away. Emotions too have no place, for my emotions tell me to run away from this, to join with Spontoon. This option also is not open to me. Thus only faith remains for me. It is faith that gives me the hope of return, and faith that tells me I cannot, even should the God Emperor stand on a dock with open arms, return. I am Ousi now, for I have been used as such. Morally and physically. So what path truly is open to me? I cannot return to the temple, yet I feel the path open to me is to become a priestess. To help others. Yet how? Certainly not in Shinto, yet I cannot turn my tail to what I believe. There must be another way, my dreams would not open that door were there no true path to follow.' She stood thus, silently facing the ocean, fighting her internal demons. *'There is Moh-lee. How does she fit into this puzzle? How could I be so foolish as to allow one so sweet and innocent as she into my heart. Even knowing me taints her, darkens her beauty. That I should love her, to this she would be horrified. I must find a way to forget her lest what I am should bring her to ruin.'* These problems she fought with. Fought to understand, to deal with. Worried with until well after the sun rose.

After that time on self inspection only one answer had come to her. Cipangu was no longer her life, her soul. Her God Emperor had turned his back upon his own daughter. There was much that could be forgiven. This though, this was beyond all duty. Perhaps she would admit to Spontoon what she truly was. Perhaps. Perhaps they would make her death quick. It would be little enough to beg for.

Somewhere on Main Island Great Mother Huakava, High Priestess of Spontoon sat quietly next to her tiny fire, a thin smoke drifting about her grey-black form to then dissipate slowly. Her own aged eyes watched the same sun rise as Oharu. Moving carefully, lest she too much disturb the tendrils of smoke, Huakava quietly crushed an herb in one aged paw. Eventually she sprinkled its remains over her fires hot coals, the act causing further lines of smoke to rise. "Oharu?" a younger woman's voice asked from behind her.

"Oharu works with her demons" the older pantheress answered. "She fights well, though her true battle of the heart is beyond her yet. Unaided. And you?"

Leokau sat behind her teacher as she always did at such times. The better to study what was done and how. "I have spoken with the young Miko Urako. She tells me her God's gave Oharu to our Gods. As a gift. Her falling was not intended."

"That is excellent news my child. Still the girl must decide her final path for herself" Huakava reminded her student. Her only student. Her last true student for there was no longer time for her to fully train another..

"I thought as much myself" Leokau admitted. "So does Urako. Tell me great mother. What does this mean, the giving of ones servant to another."

Gently brushing her paw of the herbs remaining dust, Huakava thought over her students question. How best to answer yet leave questions her student would have to answer herself. This time it would be a little difficult, for in this even she had questions. "From what grey fur has told us, and the dancer, Oharu has begun looking for a path with which to continue her life. Having discovered that her death, though available, will be of no use to her family anymore. Or her nation or even to herself. Tell me child, why would this be true?"

"Why? Death?" Leokau searched her knowledge. "I know little of the Cipangan ways. Do they not feel that their honor may be regained by taking their own lives?"

"In most cases yes. If this is so, then why would Oharu's honor not return to her should she take her own life."

"Perhaps because she has changed her beliefs."

"Leokau my child. Not the easy answer please. Not this time."

"Very well. If she has changed her beliefs, then it would have to be in a way that does not affect her core religious beliefs. Else her Gods would not still look upon her with favor. Certainly they in the least would not offer damaged goods to another, as would certain other gods we are aware of. This would mean that it is a social belief she has turned away from. About the only such possibility that I can think of is that she no longer believes in her God Emperor as a living God, but as a mortal."

"Thus you win the golden coconut" Huakava responded with gentle humor. "By turning away from her God Emperor she can never regain her honor. Not in the traditional ways. She must serve, serve and hope that one day her service is sufficient that some god may return a shred of her honor. In this too she is wrong." Huakava opened her pouch, selecting another herb before continuing. As she crushed its dried leaves a sharp peppery scent filled the air about the two. "There is no place in her temple for her. She cannot return to anything native to her homeland, even if offered by her God Emperor."

"So we make a place for her. A place and a new name. It is difficult to accept that one such as her, with her talent, training and beauty should willingly call herself filth. So in making that place we give her a chance to regain some honor. To serve others as she was trained to do. As I think she most fervently desires to do. It will be very difficult for her. Even if her heart is true to a new path."

Huakava nodded in agreement. "You are learning my young child. You are learning still. Now you must choose that new name for her, as you have decided that she must have one." She smiled inwardly at her young students look of surprise. Leokau would make an excellent priestess the pantheress knew. But her lack of foresight, her constantly leaving herself open like this would insure she remained an assistant to those such as Saimmi. Never their equal. "Yes, we make a place for her. We need her, would be

fools to discard such an opportunity. With the troubles coming, the storms that will soon wash upon our shores we need her skills and all those like her that we may find. But such opportunities are rare, and as with all such things she must want the place we offer. Oharu cannot be forced, lead or enticed into it. We may unlock the door. We may open it, stand within, our arms held wide in welcome. Oharu must step through of her own choice. Now we must go, for your son is waking."

"Miss Ousi?" a young man, a cocker spaniel wearing what looked like a uniform asked.

Oharu looked up from the Cipangan newspaper she had been reading. Taking out a small notebook she carefully wrote, tearing out the page to surrender to the boy.

'Yes. *I am Ousi Oharu*' he read. "Great. I have a letter for you. It was supposed to be given to you when your flight arrived, but the old guy running night shift has this thing about non-Americans. Especially Orientals." He held out a thin envelope to her which she accepted graciously.

'*My thanks*' she wrote. '*Will be anything else?*'

"No mam. Oh yes. Good news I think. China Clipper picked of a heck of a tail wind. She'll be here almost an hour early." He glanced at his wrist watch. "About twenty minutes from now. There are five open seats, people who paid but somehow missed the flight. If you want I can try to get you one. No extra cost since they're paid for already and Pan Am hates running empty seats. I can change your ticket in a few minutes if you want."

'*I would like that*' she wrote, opening her purse to remove her ticket. Island hopping was cheaper than direct flights, however the chance to fly on such a huge plane might never come again. Only a fool would pass up such an opportunity. Especially since her ticket was for a short hop to Kauai that wouldn't leave for another nine hours, then a further inter-island hop to Honolulu Airport later the next morning.

"Great" the young man told her. "I'll be back in a few minutes." He took off with her ticket, headed for the main counter. Oharu couldn't know that he'd taken a shine to her. A bit of puppy love that would have no chance to blossom, yet his youthful feelings demanded something be done for the woman his own heart had instantly sped up for upon seeing her face. A few minutes later, true to his word he returned with her original ticket and a boarding pass for the China Clipper. "Not the best seat" he admitted. "At the tail, but its faster than Paula Paula's rickety old planes. If you need anything else just ask for Eddy. That's me."

Oharu smiled, nodding her head in acknowledgment before the boy vanished again. She returned her ticket and the new boarding pass to her purse before examining the envelope he'd handed her earlier. It had been sent by Sandy some days ago, but how had she known where to send it? It had also been recently opened by someone, then poorly resealed. By whom was unimportant, as even had she known who to challenge there was nothing she could have done about what would have been an insult to anyone else. Running a claw under the flap she slit the thin paper. A single page, actually the envelopes inner side opened to her gaze. Opening the envelope fully she started to read.

'*Hi. Me again.*

Bet your wondering how I knew where to send this. You know there are only two routes from home to Hawaii and I bet dollars to donuts you aren't taking the long one through America. I hope this gets to you because I forgot to tell you where to stay, knowing your special needs and tight funds. I have made arrangements for you with the Split Palms. Its an old hotel near Kualoa Point. Bus number seven will get you there from the Honolulu airport, for a pretty good price. I stay at Split Palms when I'm in Hawaii, its cheap yes but cheap like the McGee's. Not like some tourist trap joint.

If you have time I think you'll like the American's naval base at Pearl Harbor. There are a lot of new aircraft there. I'm certain that the mechanic in your soul will delight to see how advanced the American's can be, when they want to try.

Remember that we have to have good art to show those nuts from Hollywood. There may even be some money in it. I'm sure not one to pass up a shell. Anyway I should be back in Spontoon near the end of tourist season. Earlier if I can manage it. I'm looking forward to spending time with you again.

Sandy'

She gently refolded her letter, a letter who's contents would have told that unknown reader nothing more important than where she would probably be staying, and that she loved aircraft. For safe keeping she slid it into the small locally manufactured purse that Butterfly had selected for her. Oharu was absolutely certain now that it was the aircraft Sandy wanted information on. Aircraft, and having mentioned the harbor rather than the army base, any ships they might be assigned too. Although Sandy's instructions in her letters were rather easy to understand it was beginning to be an enjoyable pastime not only to understand exactly what she wanted, but how to avoid suspicion at the same time. Such as using her throat wound to explain why she didn't speak. That covered the fact that she still only knew a little Spontoon and that her accent would always be a dead giveaway to her real birthplace. In short, a single sound from her could make a lie to the passport she held. Perhaps a fatal lie.

"She's due in when" the somewhat overweight bulldog asked a young yeoman beside him.

"XPBY-1 is now due to arrive Pearl Harbor at 1740 sir" the rating answered. "There have been strong headwinds since leaving San Diego. Shall I notify your staff?"

"If they can't read a simple weather report, they can stand on the dock an extra hour and learn to like it" the older man answered. "So this is the new flying boat I'd heard so much about. XPBY-1, a patrol-bomber. Doesn't Washington realize attack aircraft are a fad? It's the battleship that rules the waves. Aircraft. Useless tin toys that just buzz around and get in the way. Now their putting out more useless ships. The what? Yorktown class? Give me the Arizona any day. One salvo from her and these new fangled CV's will be rusting on the bottom in minutes. So much for their vaunted aircraft."

He turned to his offices huge windows, looking down at battleship row. "If it wasn't for the Admiral's insistence I'd ignore this toys arrival." He pointed out the window. "There yeoman. There is the might of a fleet. Not some low fat flat topped target of opportunity. A bloated target anyone with a three inch gun on their bow could hit. Those are the ships, the real ships that will keep America safe from any aggressor. Now, what's next on my schedule."

Even as the Captain in question was roaring at his long suffering yeoman Oharu was sitting in a very comfortable seat high above the ocean. She was reliving how the China Clipper had shook her to her toe-claws as it flew low over Sand Island, its four 1,600-horsepower Wright Twin Cyclone engines actually causing the sand under her feet to shiver and move. Even then she hadn't fully accepted how large the craft was, until it finally docked only a hundred or so feet away from her.

From the Pan-Am flyer that she'd spent some time reading Oharu had known what numbers were involved. But numbers are simply marks on paper. Her mind hadn't truly accepted what they meant. China Clipper had a wing span of 152 feet, reached 106 feet from nose to tail, sat in the water with a gross weight of 84,000 pounds and held a top speed of 199 mph within her heart. Still these were simply numbers to her mind. Now that she saw the monster before her, Pan-Am's other claims of a flight range of 5,200 miles, maximum flight ceiling of 19,600 feet (over three and a half miles) and ability to carry up to

ten crew and seventy-four passengers finally made sense. What sat before her made lie to the claims of Taisa Akimoto Heiji. His claim that Cipangu had the greatest, most powerful air arm in the Pacific.

China Clipper was larger than the home she'd grown up in. Almost larger than the temple she'd studied in. It was certainly as large, or larger than the entire McGee resort compound. Oharu swallowed her curiosity. Even had she not been traveling as a mute, she would have been unable to speak. Certainly no single Cipangu fighter could threaten such a great craft. It would be like a hornet attacking a horse. Hurt it yes. Kill? Never.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" a familiar voice asked.

Tuning, Oharu found the boy Eddy standing beside her, his lanky frame towering nearly a head above her. Taking out her pad she wrote quickly, handing the slip to him even as she returned her admiring gaze at the beautiful dragon so close to her.

"*Would they mind if we stole her?*" Eddy read out loud. He laughed. "If you can fly her we'll take a shot" he agreed. "Now that would be an adventure. Can you fly a plane?"

Oharu only shook her head negatively. Fly yes, she loved to fly. Even cramped up in the back of some island hopping cargo plane, with barely enough room for her to breath. Flying woke within her more than anything she had ever dreamed of. Nothing touched that feeling. Nothing she reminded herself, but love.

"Too bad you can't. I can't either" the hound admitted. "It would be a wonderful adventure though. Running from the law, carrying illegal cargos to exotic places just like those pirate girls in the papers. Just you and I." He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly as he thought over the images that ran through his brain. "That would make a Gee Whiz story though. Maybe even a movie huh?" He returned his attention to Oharu, only to discover she'd gathered her single bag while he rambled on and was preparing to leave. "Take-off's not for an hour Miss Osui" he reminded her. "Refueling, cleaning, stuff like that. Can I walk you down to the pier though? I'd be happy to wait with you until they let you board."

All Oharu wanted then was to get away, to leave behind this besotted young man. To remove herself from his well meaning but unwanted attentions. His actions, although in all innocence, were setting alarms off within her soul. Alarms she took careful time to silence. *'He is only a child'* she reminded herself. *'Young, brash, filled with unruly energy. He cannot know my fears. I must act friendly towards him, or in the least I may lose my flight.'* Outwardly she only seemed to take a breath, holding it for several beats of her heart before releasing it slowly. With a curt nod she offered her bag.

"You really don't" Eddy observed. "I've seen that look before, even though I'm just a young boy." He shrugged. "Your right, but I'm getting older. One day I'll be a pilot, then maybe I can take you up for a flight?"

Oharu managed a small smile as she finally understood her unexpected assistant. It had happened to her before, when she wore the red over white of a Miko, until the young boys mother explained to him what a Miko was. That his attentions were like throwing a cup of water into a forest fire for all the good they would do him. They had remained friends, so perhaps this Eddy and she might remain on friendly terms. For now. Gesturing with her right paw, hiding the left least he notice its scars and missing claw, Oharu followed the young hound outside.

China Clipper was even more of a monster up close. She had to ask herself how such a mass of metal could ever break free of the oceans grasp. How could it fly. Yet it had, she had seen it with her own eyes. Turning gracefully into the wind upon approach, sunlight glinting like liquid fire from wingtip to wingtip as it banked. Finally drifting down to a landing like she had seen only once before. What had happened to that female pilot the mouse asked herself. She had seen her plane tied to a dock, but nothing of its pilot or anyone else with such striking hair.

“... and she can... Miss Osui?”

Oharu turned, opening her mouth to speak. Only barely did she remember her disguise, closing her mouth quickly as she reached for her pad. Scribbling quickly she handed a paper to her guide.

“The aircraft. You were saying?” he read aloud, then laughed. “I know how you feel, I was gobsmacked myself when she landed the first time. I was saying that she can fly all the way across America without stopping. I envy you Mam. I’ve never flown in her. It must like being in a house, way up there above the clouds and all. Well, its time enough now that you can board. Maybe I’ll see you on your way back.”

Retrieving her paper from Eddy Oharu quickly wrote the date she expected to return this way. That was, if Paula Paula airlines would accept her ticket after her not being here when they arrived. She bowed slightly to the boy, accepting her bag before turning to board the plane. Board a ship was more like it she thought as the hot sun was left behind her. China Clipper was larger than anything she had been on, short of the Burat Maru. Even on that ship she had been regulated to her tiny cabin, until the night her door was broken in. Pushing that dark thought back she handed her boarding pass to a young otter woman who then showed her where to sit. Even the seats were a delight, with adjustable tail room depending upon one’s species. As Oharu waited the seat was adjusted for her by the young, and very cute otter. A glint of amusement shown in the mouse’s eyes at a thought. Neither Sandy nor Molly would ever need anything like the tail room she, or Butterfly required. Tail room on an aircraft, sitting in the tail. Somehow that thought had caused her some amusement.

That had been hours ago. Now they were nearing the Hawaiian island of Ohau. Even for Oharu, who found the engines throaty roar exciting, events had settled down to those boring details long distance travelers often complained of. Two young kits were running up and down the aisle, their once delightful calls now putting more than one passenger on edge. She however had pushed the distraction aside, turning to her drawings of Midway as she attempted to finish each work while details were still fresh in her mind. Had she a camera it would have been simple to take a photo, have it developed, then spend even more hours with nothing to do. As an artist her attention was on her work, thus for her time seemed to pass quickly. Until a small body suddenly screamed and dove into the empty chair beside her.

Quickly closing her art book lest her work be damaged the mouse turned her attention to the child. What had happened she wondered. An injury? However the child wasn’t holding an injury, he was instead cowering in fright. Turning her attention further to the crafts interior it wasn’t difficult to understand why. A large porcine male was towering over what had to be the child’s mother. His voice, raised above simple conversational levels was loud and angry. Oharu couldn’t understand what was being said, as it was in a guttural language she didn’t understand. His words though cascaded like liquid fire as he browbeat the young mother, a meerkat if Oharu could remember her species correctly. So angry was the man he had cowered all those about him, while easily dealing with the two otter flight attendants that attempted to calm him. As she wondered what she should do he suddenly raised one enormous paw and slapped the woman. That decided her.

Standing, she left her property behind her as she made her way first past the cowering child, then to the angry man. Others had started to approach as well, however she was the closer. Reaching him she had just enough time to realize that he had both noticed her, and that he had aimed a blow at her. This proved his undoing. For though Oharu was by nature a peaceful woman, she was not about to allow herself to be beaten into the ground again. Without conscious thought her right paw seemed to caress the descending hammer of a fist, to move it off course somewhat. A moment later the man was roaring in pain as his body simply spun in the air, his feet brushing the aircrafts ceiling as he came down hard on his now out of position arm. A heavy thump of breaking bone filled the aircraft and a moment later several men were on her attacker, holding him down until one of the flight crew could arrive with binders. Ignoring him now that he was no longer any threat Oharu turned her attention to the young mother. She was unconscious, with a small trickle of blood seeping slowly from the corner of her mouth. As the mouse began to care for her both flight attendants, ignoring their own injuries quickly joined her. In minutes the two otters were

carrying the injured woman to the planes tail section. There a tiny sleeping area (most likely meant for those same flight attendants) waited, leaving Oharu with nothing more to do.

She had acted without thought, now that the problem was solved Oharu simply returned to her seat, to discover both children huddled there in fear. Settling down in her seat beside them the mouse managed to convince both to stay with her. Caring for them would keep them out of the attendants way, while both calming them and keeping them out of further trouble. It was a few moments before she noticed one of the boys had a -Y- shaped object in one pocket, an elastic band stretched across its wider part. Pointing to it she raised her eyebrows and, sheepishly the young meerkat pulled it out, offering it to her. As he did his brother, a twin she suddenly realized, explained in broken English what had happened. Playing, one had shot a dried bean at the other, missing wildly to strike the porcine man in the back of his head. That had caused the explosion. According to them it was as if someone had dropped a flare into a pool of petrol. Well this was something the flight crew would have to handle she decided as she sat the device out of reach of both boys. For the rest of the flight she spent her time keeping the two boys distracted as she drew strange impossible animals on her pages. Thankfully the rest of their flight proved rather uneventful.

After landing at Honolulu airport and having managed to slip away from the commotion caused by unloading both injured passengers, plus half a dozen police officers demanding explanations from every passenger, Oharu now found herself standing in front of a customs officer. He had already searched her few things quite thoroughly she thought and was now studying her passport. "Frank" he finally called. "You ever seen a passport from some place called Spuntood?"

Another man turned from his work, glancing over. "That's Spontoon dork. And yeah, few businessmen come through now and then. What's up?"

"Its brand new. Here. Look at it." He handed over the booklet, watching as his partner flipped through the pages.

"Nothing unusual Roger. Not many people travel from Spontoon. Its kinda backwards. Like old Hawaii only more so. Nothing wrong I can see. All the places she's been are marked and its pretty much a straight line from there to here. Took her time though, probably cheapest transport she could find. Go ahead and clear her." He returned the passport, returning his attention to an over weight and very vocal hen. His own nightmare of the moment.

"Okay. Sorry mam, but you look Japanese and I've never seen one of these before." Roger quickly stamped the correct page, returned it then pointed to her left as he did so. "Information kiosk is that way. Any questions they can answer them for you. Have a nice visit."

She would be long on her way by the time one of Pan Am's representative's, with two angry police officers in tow, arrived to ask about her.

Bus seven pulled out soon after she found the correct stop. Again Pan Am's representative, dragging his two police officers behind him was just enough too late to give chase. This time he had no clue as to where his quarry would end up. His boss was going to be very upset with him he knew, but the airport was busy this time of day and all he'd had to go on was a name, species and the color of her clothing. Neither, to his mind out of the ordinary as he looked about himself at the crowd around him. No, certainly not considering the foot traffic around him.

A bit over five hours of very boring and uncomfortable travel finally brought Oharu to Kualoa Point. Stepping off the crowded bus she was instantly struck by a cool ocean wind. Closing her eyes she lifted her face to the breeze's touch, letting its gentle fingers ruffle her facial fur. Inside the packed bus it had been hot and dusty even with all its windows wide open. With at least one skunk always aboard, usually

several the atmosphere had been a bit thick at times. Opening her eyes again she hadn't taken two steps before several men were approaching her, their actions setting off alarms within the young woman's mind. Grabbing her case she stepped away for them, but it made no difference as they kept approaching. Turning she started to run, only to have a man in a police uniform stop her.

After a moment looking into her face, somehow understanding her expression he smiled. "They only want your business" he explained. "Their not attacking you. Only your bank balance."

Stepping back from this imposing and very male officer while digging out one of her small notebooks she quickly wrote her thanks, and a question as to where the Split Palms might be found. Giving the note to him she waited, amazed when after reading it he suddenly shoed everyone away.

"You're a mute?" he asked, his deep voice reminding her of an engines rumble at idle. She nodded yes, waiting for his next question. "That's too bad, such a pretty woman. Split Palms is six blocks inland on Dendrobium Lane." He flipped over her note, taking out his own pen and a booklet of some kind. Using his booklet as a sort of writing tablet he made a few marks, then handed her paper back to her. "Taxi will charge you two American dollars. If you don't min' walkin its only a half mile or so. Go that way," he pointed south, "two streets. That's Dendrobium Lane with the fruit stall on the north corner. Turn inland and go six more streets. Its on the right. Anything else I can help you with?"

She shook her head no, accepting the offered page before turning to head quickly in the direction he had indicated. Surprisingly no one approached her until she'd walked almost two blocks, then only long enough for her to shake her head no. It amazed Oharu at the things they offered to sell her. Most of what she saw was of such low quality any self respecting Spontoon merchant would have thrown it away, yet it was offered to her as though each piece had been paw made just for her. *'So this' the reminded herself. 'Is what being a tourist is like. I wish I had someone with me. It has no joy within it when alone.'* A memory of the deer Molly Procyk came to her. For almost a block the mouse imagined the taller deer walking beside her, the two laughing at the shoddy merchandise while gently holding paws. With difficulty she forced that image away. It would never happen. She would make certain of that. For Molly's sake.

Split Palms turned out to be much like the McGee resort. Nearly the same size it was run by a rotund native couple of the NeNe species, a type of goose. They waited quietly while she was signing in, then as soon as Oharu had finished writing Mrs. Kaaloa hustled her to her room while a young male carried her case. As soon as they entered the room Mrs. Kaaloa first shoed off the young boy, then hurried to the tiny bath, drawing a hot bath for her while Oharu slowly undressed. A bath in each cottage Oharu realized with surprise. With hot and cold running water. At the McGee's she shared the family bath, while each cottage had only a cold shower.

"Sandy say you come" Mrs. Kaaloa explained as the water ran. "Explain much about you. She not say you arrive exhausted. You walk all way from bus stop carrying that case? Should have had police call. I send my husband pick you up in truck." She waved a wingtip over the water, as though blessing it and a smell of lavender soon filled Oharu's nose. "You bath long time. I have youngest daughter bring food, leave in your room. Need anything just call." She stopped, abruptly realizing her error. "I have bell brought. You ring that when need something."

Oharu simply nodded her understanding, carefully folding her one obi while the older woman puttered about. She had never had anyone do something for her, not like this. It had always been Oharu's responsibility, especially where her brother was concerned. With that thought she stopped moving, the image of her father and brother abruptly clear in her mind. How were they? What were they doing. Was there someone caring for them now? These were the questions that bothered her, bothered her because she could never truly know the answer. Not with any real certainty. Her father would never acknowledge that they were in any way related. Certainly he would never allow her near him again. Her brother had just enough mind left to follow his fathers lead, though he probably would never understand the why. It was wrong she decided, to take her away from her duties. It was wrong to force her to leave her family.

As those thoughts passed through her mind she took yet another small step away from her country, another small step away from her God Emperor.

It was very late in the evening with street electric lamps fighting the darkness, while certain Pan American Offices still glowed against the night. A very rotund grey furred rabbit stood, paws clasped behind his back as he looked out his office window at the massive seaplane floating far below in flood lamps. Its form was bathed in work lights while figures moved around it. "This is turning into quite the international incident Albert. Its an actual comedy. Of the kind I'd expect the Barx Brothers' to come up with. I'd be laughing my tail off if it wasn't so tragic." He turned to face the well dressed man in his office, lamplight making a halo of his aging fur. "So what have we got anyway. A German businessman from Colonia Del Kenya attacks the wife of a Persian General. Apparently without cause as no one aboard happened to understand German. Said wife is flying with her six year old twin boys aboard an American aircraft, our China Clipper. Flying here to meet her husband who happens to be on a secret assignment to the American Army. Said German businessman now sports a broken right arm courtesy of, we think, a Spontoon native. One whom we can't find, while the Persian lady is in hospital recovering from a severe concussion. Meanwhile a retired English Major and a Chinese Buddhist monk have both lodged formal complaints against said businessman, who has vanished into the German Embassy. Meanwhile said English Major has publically demanded this German meet him for a duel, which is against the law in Hawaii. We have two injured flight attendants, minor, but two of our best, most popular ladies whom the flight surgeon won't let off the ground for at least two weeks. A flight crew with blood in their eyes and a pawful of injured and a large number of very angry passengers. To top that off, by all accounts our Spontoon citizen can't speak, dress's like a Japanese native and vanishes like a ghost. Your opinion?"

Across the room a dapper middle aged fox sat, his legs were crossed in just the current socially correct style. He removed a cigarette holder from his lips, puffing a blue-white cloud into the room. "I say we hire a writer, have him make up a script and offer it to the Barx Brothers" he answered. "I think they are filming in Bora Bora right now. Or Tahiti. Some odd little island away from civilization. Wouldn't take ten minutes and a call to the mainland to find out exactly where. A dollar is a dollar after all, and having the Pan Am logo in one of their movies would be free advertising."

"Albert. That's not what I want to hear right now, though the advertising idea is a sweet gimmick. Remember it for later when this is cleared up. Just try to remember you're the company lawyer for a few minutes, not the empty headed social gadfly your father believes you to be. Please?"

"Forgotten you mean. Very well Bartholomew, if you insist." He leaned forward, stubbing out his cigarette. "Let the local authorities handle this. Turn everything over to them. Give them full access to our people, settle generously with the injured, grant those two attendants a bonus, along with their paid sick leave. They did risk their own lives trying to save a passenger. Have the flight surgeon talk with that crew, a slight warning sweetened with say a goodie and it will blow over within the week. Two on the very outside."

"You make it sound so simple Albert. When the newspapers get a-hold of this our reputation will be badly damaged. We have to control this somehow. Not brush it off like it was nothing."

"Actually Bartholomew, it is that simple. Right now all the anger is aimed at our German passenger. A man whom as the reports all show attacked four defenseless women." He coughed, holding back a chuckle. "One defenseless mother, two defenseless flight attendants that is, and a much smaller woman who made no attempt to harm him then proceeded to clean his ever-lovin clock without breaking a sweat. Now listen. If we try to hush this up certain people are going to start thinking we have something dark to hide. In truth we do not. Not this time. Besides, the local papers already have the story. If we fess up it'll probably stay local. If we start hiding things it will cause a feeding frenzy that will get the story to the states. Now lets say the New York Times picks up this brew-ha-ha. It'll be in Europe before you can make another martini. After that we'll never be able to forget it."

Bartholomew sat on his desk, apparently thinking over his options. "So" he finally decided. "We do it your way and maybe it all blows over. We do it my way and I'm hunting a job within the week. That's what your saying right? What if we..." He thought for a few minutes, finally giving up. "It is down to two choices. Is either of them perfect?"

"No Bartholomew. No matter what we do this could blow up in our faces. What I'm saying is that if we go full open with this, full disclosure. If we suggest that we can't file charges because he's apparently a diplomat, then let the locals do what they want with the story. He is hiding in the German Embassy remember. It is a pretty fair bet the worst we'll see is a twenty point quarter inch in the Times business section. If we hide, and bad luck gets some smart young pup into the truth that this Persian General is actually here to broker a deal with the British and American's for mutual defense then both of us will be pounding the pavement. In today's economic climate that's not too either of our advantages."

"All right then. We'll try it your way then. So what's this bone we toss to our pilots?"

"The navy has a new airplane that came in this evening. XPBY-1. I'm no pilot but dollars to donuts they'd give their eye teeth to see the inside of that ship. If I can pull a very few strings it can be done, the Navy likes showing off their new toys and they owe us heavily anyway. Give that crew this cookie, maybe even a flight on the craft with the provision they put this event behind them. We can charge the Clippers one day delay to police investigation and clean up. Let the main office scream. We dump the responsibility on our local police. No harm, no foul."

He leaned back, his now empty cigarette holder still in his paw. "As I said before. Those two attendants. Lets give them a months bonus for doing their jobs along with two weeks leave, not charged to their vacation or sick leave. We are losing them for two weeks anyway and I think two weeks of Hawaii's pleasures will set better with them than two weeks playing sex-a-terry."

"Sounds reasonable. And our passengers?"

"This will be a bit expensive. Pay their medical bills. We'd ought too anyway, their injuries happened on our aircraft. Then pay every passengers hotel bills for a single night. Meals, drinks, everything. Those going through to San Franc, I think you can figure something special out cheaply enough. Their mostly single men in any case."

"Agreed. Now that leaves our Spontoon girl. The police want to talk with her, so do our own people. I'd also like to reward her for her help. She turned a potential murder into almost nothing with hardly any effort. So how do we find her?"

"She took the Seven bus. That runs from here to Kaaawa. Somewhere along that line she got off. We send the two attendants, with spending cash to find her. It gives them something special to do and it saves us the cost of a host of private eyes. How many Japanese looking female mice wearing royal blue and silver kimono's got onto that bus today? Two, three at most. We have her name, her description and where she's from. Everything but where she went."

"And how she got into China Clipper in the first place" the rabbit reminded his friend. "She wasn't on the Fillyippine manifest."

"That at least I do know. Some youngster at Midway arranged her passage. There were several open seats. He pulled in a favor and used his employee discount. Credited her with her scheduled ticket for an unused seat that had already been paid for. We actually made a tidy profit from that transaction. Give him five more years, he would have gotten her aboard for free. Anyway. If she'd bought a standard ticket she'd have spent three times as much. Normally I'd fire him for that, but if he hadn't we'd have at least one dead passenger on our paws now. From what I can gather so far it just looks like a case of puppy love. Those things happen you know. Did it myself once." He paused, then grinned. "Three or four times

actually. We find her, we arrange first class transport back to Spontoon when she leaves. That should take care of her cheaply enough."

"You make it sound so easy Albert, when it looks so complicated from my side."

"It is easy my friend. It's only when companies and governments try to hide things that it gets complicated. And expensive. Very, very expensive."

April 8th 1936

Oharu was sitting under a large Banyon tree on Oahu, enjoying its shade while carefully sketching the scene before her. Waimea Falls was a great waterfall, falling over forty-five feet into a deep wide pool forming almost a lake at its base. A perfect place for a love story she thought. There were no real buildings within several hundred yards of the falls and those that were seemed to be structures much as she'd viewed on Main Island. Simply poles sunk into the ground with thatch roofs and raised floors. She'd spent a third of the morning simply walking around the falls, soaking in its deep throated roar as tons of water cascaded along ancient lava, to fall with a hissing frying sound into the deep, red tinted water.

Those buildings she discovered had proved to be tourist shops, which was much as she had expected. Like on Spontoon most tourists didn't begin arriving until nearly noon, seeing as it was a long bus ride from the nearest main road. Mr. Kaaloa had let his youngest daughter drive Oharu here, as it was just a little way off her normally planned delivery route. Delivering what the mouse had wondered, noting the oddly shaped canvas covered cylindrical objects in the trucks cargo bed. Her driver, the fifteen year old Kakalina had been evasive when asked so Oharu had dropped the subject. Kakalina would be back around nine pm to pick her up, beyond that their conversation had eventually centered around Sandy, seeing as she was the only person both knew. Another thing the mouse picked up was Kakalina didn't like Cipangans. Even ones supposable born in Spontoon were suspect in her eyes, though the ex-Miko wasn't able to get any clue as to the why.

Trying to make conversation with her driver had been like walking through a rice field filled with Suzume-Bachi nests. Having once been stung by the giant black and yellow hornet native to her country, the mouse thought her analogy quite apt. On one subject the young NeNe was bright and bubbly, another and she closed her mouth as though riveted shut. Only when Sandy's name had come up had the girl shown any real interest in a long conversation. "I want to be like Sandy" she'd admitted. "I want to fly, want to be pilot. Not want to run little hotel for fat tourist. Tourist think everything for sale. Think I for sale." She spit out the window. "No place Hawaii take girl for pilot student. Girl supposed marry, have children. Work till drop bone tired. Do again next day. Not me. I be pilot somehow. I will escape."

That had been in the morning with the sun coming up. Even then conversation had been difficult enough, with Oharu having to write her words on paper while they bumped along the road. Kakalina read them with barely a glance, as though she already knew what they said. '*Her mind is extraordinarily quick*' the mouse had soon realized. Only the distance they had to cover had allowed anything like an involved conversation. Even then Kakalina did most of the talking. Finally Oharu had been dropped off at a small dirt road, one not even covered by crushed coral. To the mouse it appeared as if everything was higgly-piggly. As though projects were started but never completely finished before being abandoned for the next one. From what she'd seen so far Spontoon was a much better place to call home. Still she had only seen the least parts of this island nation, and her father had always said that those who lived nearest a military base were never the best representation of their home nation. Now she felt that she finally understood what he had really meant.

Annette Riverstone stepped from Bus Seven at Kualoa Point no longer fresh. Thanks to the crowded interior her Pan Am Flight Attendants uniform was no longer the crisp starched thing she had donned that

morning. Somewhere along the same route, working her way from the airports end of Seven's route was her roommate and best friend Kathleen Hightower. They were both doing the same thing, hunting for the missing Spontoon woman from their flight. It could be worse Annette reminded herself. They could be stuck in the secretarial pool until Pan Am's flight surgeon cleared them sometime in the weeks following. Trying to type while being hit upon by every low grade assistant to the assistant to the assistant of someone or the other whom they outranked and had seniority too. *'Why couldn't we have been allowed on the navy flying boat like our crew'* she asked herself as she looked about her.

As usual several natives automatically approached her. Much to their misfortune she was an old paw at this. Standing firm she held up one paw, stopping them in their tracks. "First one that can tell me where I can find Miss Osui Oharu gets a kiss" she stated. It was a challenge, one she'd used at every stop so far. Currently she'd not had to pay up, though she wouldn't have minded in a lot of cases. Hawaiian men were so dreamy after all. Annette was much the flirt and as such enjoyed the reactions her body caused. She stood silently, waiting while the men conversed among themselves. Finally she made a point of checking her watch. "Thirty seconds."

"Who is this Oharu you ask about" a deep voice asked from behind her. "That one of your lovely form would offer a precious kiss to find her."

Turning around Annette found herself looking up into the eyes of a *'ope'ape'a* wearing the native police uniform. "Spontoon native about so high" she held one paw to her shoulder as she explained to the male bat. "Polite to a fault, doesn't talk, wore a blue and silver kimono in the Cipangu, style. Or Japanese depending on your school teacher. Would have been here..."

"On the fifth, last run of Bus Seven" he answered, interrupting her. "She is staying at the Split Palms. Now will you answer my question?"

"She was involved in a fight on our China Clipper sir. She's wanted for questioning by the company lawyers. We need her side of the story as there are charges pending. They want to make certain that they dot all the 'T's and cross all the 'I's I would guess."

"Ah, so that's the one my alert was about. My commander gave us a name but no description. Since he didn't say anything about an arrest warrant, only that she was wanted by your company I didn't consider it that important. Will you need my help?"

"No thank you sir. I only need to make a call and.." She stepped forward, reaching up and grabbing the mans head in her paws, pulling his face close enough to plant a very substantial kiss. "Pay my reward" she husked as she moved back. "Wow, what a kisser."

"And very married" the suddenly embarrassed officer admitted. "Please don't do that again. It will ruin my hard ass'ed reputation among all these pickpockets. There is a phone in the station, just over there." He pointed across the street where a local police station sat. "Now I have to get back to work." He strode through the waiting crowd, glaring at them as if to challenge any to make any comment, ignoring the snickers of amusement that followed behind him and several jealous comments upon his luck. Delighted at ending her search so quickly the otter hurried across to the police station.

"So we have her finally" Bartholomew sighed in relief some half an hour later. "I'll have a company car go get her immediately."

"Why" Albert asked. "Wait until the morning. I've instructed young Riverstone to make contact with her. She's to take a room for the night. I'll have her partner in crime join them in the morning with the company car. We may be an up and coming airline my friend, we don't really have police powers after all. Its just a final investigation and our thanks. So as I see it, there is no need to ruin the ladies vacation. After all, she

may have a visitor of her own right now.”

“A lady... Have...”

Albert laughed, taking out his cigarette holder. “Your from Boston, you haven’t been on the islands as long as I have Bartholomew. Things are different out here. If a woman finds a man interesting she often makes an offer. There’s nothing socially wrong with it, and in most places an unmarried woman who’s already had children makes her a better candidate for a wife. It proves she’s not barren and the child is normally adopted into its new family as a matter of course. Hawaii’s getting awfully westernized, but even here those same social patterns still hold sway. Especially when you get away from the cities. Now if you’d just learn how to read a hula, there’s the real fun in a luau. Especially the satirical ones. How about this. Lets go get supper, then find some companionship. I’m absolutely famished.”

Neither could know that the office had been bugged just the day before by agents of a certain injured, and very vindictive ‘businessman.’

In the German Embassy across town a certain porcine was delighted. “So Oberleutnant. They have discovered where the little thing is” a nasal high voice laughed. “Have my team follow that car. Make certain that filthy little mouse see’s no more sunsets. Her misfortune to cross me. It is a long road. Make certain they leave no witness’s.”

“Yes Oberst Unruh” his Schutzhund Oberleutnant answered. “Will there be anything else sir?”

“Yes. Those latest reports on our special group headed for the South Pole. The ones who will deal with the Americans. Then send in the Doctor. My arm aches.”

“Yes Oberst Unruh. Immediately.”

Later that same evening Annette Riverstone sat quietly in the room she’d rented at the Split Palms. She was bored, but with nothing but an old copy of Red Blooded Stories to pass the time there was nothing else to do and she hated western stories. Though normally resorts did not have single night rates, almost all being set up more for long term visitors, her Pan American connection had gotten her a place to stay where most would have been politely turned away. She could have gone across the road to the Burnt Coconut Hotel, but this way she wouldn’t have to rent a room in one place while spending a lot of her time in another. Besides, the food was awfully good at the Split Palms. As to the name of the place, that had been explained when she’d arrived. Several storm damaged palm trees lined the resorts short drive. Each one impossibly split from crown to root. Each impossibly still very much alive and thriving.

‘That’s one for the record books’ she thought as she waited. Mr. Kaaloa had been happy to explain that yes, Miss Osui was staying here. His youngest daughter had dropped her off at Waimea Falls that morning and would not be returning until around ten thirty. Perhaps as late as eleven thirty if traffic or weather was bad. Either time well after supper. With nothing more to do Annette had called her company office again, to discover her co-worker would be arriving with the company car tomorrow morning. “Well” she told her four walls. “Nothing I can do until she comes back, and there is a wonderful pool outside. So lets swim.” Like most young women of her generation she completely ignored the fact she was both unescorted and would have to buy a cheap Resort swimsuit. Not that she liked swimsuits, still there were social niceties to observe.

In Cipangu Taisa Akimoto Heiji crumpled the message in his paws. Burat Maru had experienced a major explosion less than a hundred miles off the South West coast of Tilamooka that very morning. It had occurred just barely a quarter hour after sending her last status message. Several of the crew and some

officers had been killed, the rest were either aboard rescue ships or still missing. Burat Maru herself was slowly drifting back towards the islands, unmanned and burning at the bow. Until the fire went out there was no possibility for a tow or salvage. But the ship hadn't been carrying anything explosive according to its official manifest. She'd just picked up a full load of scrap metal intended for the Cipangu industrial effort. Being a naval commanded ship, even if an unofficial one she was inspected every time she arrived in home waters. His office kept up with those inspections along with the crew fitness reports. They were part of his many responsibilities after all. That ruled out incompetence. After all the entire crew was in reality on-duty naval personal, as reprehensible as their actions several months ago regarding one of his agents had been. What, he wondered, short of a cargo of explosives could have damaged a merchant ship in such a way. It made no sense to him. Picking up his phone he ordered a Captain of Intelligence to his office. It was important to find out exactly what had happened. If sending an official naval investigation team to learn what had happened was required, then so be it. Had he survived long enough to read the report his investigative team wrote, he might have wondered why Burat Maru was carrying an unlisted cargo of five hundred pounds of Ammonia Nitrate in her forward cargo hold.

As before Kakalina had spoken little since picking up Oharu on her return to the Split Palms. Both women were tired, it now being late evening and Kakalina herself looked as though she'd been digging all day. She also smelled of chemicals the artist noted, a sharp scent that made her nose itch. Something burning, but under that something else. Silently she let the matter drop. In the darkness it would prove dangerous for Oharu to pass notes, even if she'd had the strength herself to write. Waimea Falls had proven to be more than just a wonderful waterfall, it was an entire park. Oharu had explored many different paths, finding many different places to add to her sketchbook. By evenings fall the parks entry fee had more than justified itself. Far from being a simple tourist trap she had discovered it was a place of great beauty. She'd even sent another postcard to Miss Devinski and Mrs McGee after lunch.

On the trip back Oharu had managed to get Kakalina to let her pay for a meal. A heavy rainstorm had forced them to pull over in a small village, as the trucks windshield wipers had apparently gone the way of all things many years ago. Other than that the young NeNe fairly ignored the older and larger mouse. When the truck finally came to a stop in the Split Palms parking lot both women were looking forward to only two things. A bath and bed, with the bath being optional. That might have been Kakalina's destiny tonight. Oharu's unfortunately was otherwise. She was unlocking her room when a strange figure walked up to her, startling the mouse.

"Your Miss Osui yes?" a female otter wearing a familiar uniform asked.

Being as her unexpected visitor was female Oharu only nodded, too tired to write. She slipped her key into the doors lock, hoping this strange visitor would simply go away. It was her misfortune that it wasn't to be.

"I represent Pan American Airways" the otter continued, placing her paw lightly over Oharu's own. "My name is Annette Riverstone. I was one of the flight attendants you helped when you were aboard my ship, the China Clipper. Seriously Miss Osui, we need to talk. Now."

Accepting the reality of her situation Oharu simply nodded again, opening her door to allow the other woman entrance first. Turning on the light she shut her door before setting her bag on a table nearby. Reaching into her bag she pulled out her books, setting the as yet unused notebook aside she carried her sketchbook and half used notebook with her, nearly collapsing in one of the rooms three chairs. Looking over to Annette she pointed to the chair next to her and waited.

'*She's exhausted*' Annette told herself as she took the indicated chair. '*I didn't realize.*' Still she had a job to do. "Miss Osui. Pan American Airways sent my partner and myself to find you" she began. "We need your testimony in order to close out our investigation of that incident."

Opening her notebook Oharu carefully wrote, tearing out the page before handing it to her unwanted visitor.

"How is the mother" Annette read. "She's okay. A concussion but she should have been out of hospital today. Tomorrow at the very latest. Her kids are fine, they talked a lot about you. You seem to have impressed them a lot." She laughed softly. "They love the pictures that you gave them. I bet your going to be a wonderful mother." She missed the shocked look that passed across Oharu's face at that thought. "Now that their father is with them they seem to be happy. I imagine he would like to thank you too."

Writing another note she handed it to the otter, not quite suppressing a yawn as she did so. *"Why I need talk to anyone. I did nothing."* Annette shook her head no. "You did a lot, I saw what you did. My oldest brother is in the Marines and he's no where near as good as you. That man swung at you and you hardly moved, but you ended what could have been a horrible tragedy. We talked to the doctor, Elizabeth and I. He was stunned that Mrs. Shariat Panahi had only been hit once. His opinion was that another blow like that would have crushed her skull. I saw what that fat pig was about to do, he'd have killed her if he hit her again. In my book that makes you a hero and I'm proud to know you."

"So. You know this. Then why I need talk anyone else" the mouse wrote.

"Because they want to hear it from your own lips. I mean..." Annette stumbled over her gaff. "In America a full investigation means getting everyone's viewpoint who was involved. It will only take a couple of hours, then you'll be brought back here. I promise." She fidgeted before continuing.. "And if you don't they will probably just wait until you try to leave and detain you then. You'd miss your flight, then all the connecting flights. It'll take your twice, three times as long to get home."

"Then go tomorrow. Or be arrested when leave for help save life. Land of free?"

"Yeah" the otter admitted sadly. "Land of the free. Home of those with the money." She sighed, standing to walk to one of the rooms windows, looking out into the darkness. "I wish I wasn't the one to tell you this Miss Osui. But I'm glad it wasn't Elizabeth. She's kinda, well... Kathleen takes those words seriously. Land of the free, home of the brave. It'd mess her up to have to admit its not really like that. That its all really a sham. Land ruled by the rich, supported by the poor is more like it." She placed her paws on the windowsill leaning forward to feel the cooling night air. "I like you Miss Osui, I really do. But I have a job to do and well. I grew up as one of those poor. I want to be a Doctor. I'd rather not go back to picking beans in the fields."

She shook herself, straightening up. "Anyway I better go." Turning around she was about to say something else when she discovered that her hostess had fallen asleep. "Before I overstay my welcome" she finished softly. "Oh dear, I really stepped into it this time did I?" Walking into the bedroom she pulled down the bed covers. *'Least I can do is help her into bed'* she decided. Returning to the main room she woke Oharu just enough to explain what was going on. Nodding her acceptance the exhausted mouse let her visitor help her to the bed. When Oharu fumbled at her obi Annette instantly helped, in few moments later sliding Oharu out of her kimono. "Saucy wench" the otter laughed. "Nothing but what? A loincloth underneath?"

Oharu smiled softly, covering herself with one arm as she sat on the bed and yawned, automatically covering her mouth with her free paw to hide her missing teeth. Finally grabbing the bedcovers she rolled to her right side, preparing for sleep.

"Come on then my hero" Annette laughed. "Lets get you under the... Oh my dear sweet Mary mother of Jesus" she gasped as Oharu turned in bed, her ruined back now facing the otter. Her voice became harsh, demanding. "Who did this to you" Annette demanded.

That woke Oharu enough to turn her back away from the otter, pulling the thin blanket up in order to cover herself from view. She'd forgotten in her exhaustion that this woman had no idea what her back looked like, unlike Butterfly and her family. Fearful now of the woman in her bedroom she curled up into a ball as though to protect herself.

Annette, seeing the fear in the mouse's eyes backed off. Both stepping away from the bed and lowering her voice. "Was it your parents" she asked softly. Oharu's negative movement of her head answered the flight attendant. "Police?" she continued. "Criminals? An old boyfriend?"

Knowing that this would continue until Annette found the truth Oharu gestured for her pad, for once grateful she wasn't supposed to be able to talk. This story still brought her tears, though not as badly since her visit with Molly. Molly... her image instantly filled Oharu's memory. Only with some difficulty was she able to push that gentle woman's memory aside. When Annette handed her the notebook Oharu began writing the entire 'official' story. Best to get it over with now she decided, than have this woman chasing her around for two weeks.

April 9th, 1936

Miss Devinski was sitting at her desk, flipping through the pile of mail that had arrived that morning as it did twice a day like clockwork. Most were aviation related, the rest applications from families who wanted their daughters a place here. There were get rich schemes as always, those sham money making materials would be used to light cook fires. She smiled at one thought, that occasionally there was an application for a boy. There were some high society families who simply wouldn't, or couldn't understand what 'All Girls School' meant. Especially in France. At this rate though Songmark's waiting list was already approaching twice their enrollment list. If only they could afford to open the school to larger classes, but larger classes would mean a greater chance for the wrong type of girl to slip in too easily. It would also mean either more instructors or less one on one instruction. That simply wasn't allowable. It was hard enough now. It would be impossible with twice the enrollment.

A postcard came up in her stack. Intrigued she sat it aside, postcards were always personal. Personal mail really wasn't all that common this time of year. Seeing as it was from Midway, perhaps an old student. It certainly couldn't be her niece. Their flight path didn't pass that way, not with the new America presence in the area. Her nieces rare communications were always sealed letters anyway. By the time she'd finished with her sorting there was only a very small selection of personal mail. Picking up the postcard first, an image of a goony bird futilely attempting to land on an electrical wire emblazoned on its front, she turned the card over to read.

It was from Oharu Miss Devinski realized with surprise. Why would... She read what was written carefully. Though nothing more than a note telling where the mouse was at that moment, and a hope that her school was doing well, the '*especially your second years*' line caused the hound to smile. "In short" she told the card. "You want to know how Molly is, don't you. But your too careful to say that." She leaned back in her chair. There had been times before when one of Songmarks girls had an admirer who wouldn't, or couldn't approach the lady in question. Usually for social reasons, only once before for this reason. Letters would come, almost always to the faculty members. Sometimes even presents. This though was the first time that someone was so hopelessly enamored by one of her girls. "Ah young mouse. You walk a thin line. One I wouldn't want to try." She looked out her window a moment towards the second year dorms, all currently empty. Setting the card on her desk she picked up her own pen. With a delicate paw she quietly wrote on the card '*Molly is fine.*' Letting the ink dry she then slipped the card into her desk. Into the drawer that she kept her personal, very private correspondence.

Chapter Twenty

April 9th, 1936

Pan America's huge black company car moved through the morning traffic of route 63 with ease, its driver was an old paw at these roads having grown up driving on them. Behind him sat one of the company's pretty young flight attendants. He had picked her up a short while before, after she had woken from her nights entertainment. Even now the young otter held an ice pack to her head, moaning none too softly at each sudden bump or change in direction. '*Kids*' the driver thought. '*No sense of moderation.*' It would be at least another hour before they made their destination so he was being very careful in his driving, making certain that he hit every large pothole. Besides, she was posed so seductively lying there on the back seat as she fought her pain. So intent was he on his game the badger never noticed that he was being followed by another black sedan. Much less that the sedan had four very serious looking men sitting in its interior.

Annette Riverstone sat alone in her rented room in the Split Palms, still stunned by what Oharu had begun writing the night before, then completed this morning after only a little sleep. When she'd woken the Pan Am flight attendant had fully expected the mouse to have vanished. Instead she had found her quietly eating a breakfast of Poi and hot tea. Poi, a purple sludge that the otter had never managed to find a taste for. Yet there sat Miss Osui obviously enjoying the taste as she ate. "Your of Cipangu birth" she told the mouse in greeting. "I expected you to prefer rice."

'*Rice expensive. Poi taste better and cheap*' she read a moment later. "You may think so. I think its engine sludge" she glanced over at a still tired looking young girl acting as waitress this morning. "No insult intended" she told the waiting Kakalina. "I'm certain you would find my favorite breakfast, boiled oatmeal and milk with sugar and butter just as disgusting." From the look that passed over the young girls face Annette was certain she was right. "Just something European and coffee. Black please." Returning her attention to the waiting mouse Annette took a deep breath, then laid several pages on the table. "Personal questions Miss Osui. One's I wish we could talk about, but with your" she touched her own throat, having only noticed the rope mark after Oharu had pointed it out in her writing the night before. "We can't. But I'd like to know, if you don't mind. For myself. No one else. Please, you don't have to answer any of them."

While Oharu quietly worked to read through the pages of careful block print Kakalina brought french toast and coffee, setting them before Annette. "This okay Mam?" she asked. Her voice soft, cultured. Nothing like the voice she had used with Oharu the day before.

"Wonderful and thank you. I'm sorry if I insulted you about the Poi" Annette continued. "Its about the only Hawaiian food I don't like and I've tried a lot in the last few years."

Kakalina giggled. "I understand" she answered. "With honesty I can't stand it either. It surprised me when she asked for it. Its not what we normally serve visitors. Certainly not for breakfast." With that she stepped away, moving to another table that had just become occupied.

While Annette ate Oharu quietly wrote on her pages, continuing long after the otter had finished her own breakfast. Finally she handed them back, then stood to leave. "You'll be available for the drive back today?" Annette asked as she picked up the pages. Oharu simply nodded yes, then turned to return to her own room.

That had been three hours before. Three hours in which Annette had carefully read what Oharu had given

her over the two days. Read, and lost her breakfast. Read, then spent the next hour crying into her pillow. Now she was working out all that she knew. *'My hero'* she told herself. *'Anyone's hero, to live through all that and still be as kind as she is.'* She remembered the party that Kathleen and she had talked about giving their hero. *'That has to be revised. No male dancers. Especially not the fire boys.'* That Oharu considered herself nothing more than a woman who had survived, who was learning to live again. One who had learned she still had something to offer the world never crossed the otters mind.

Fifteen minutes later the company car arrived. With it a now somewhat sobered Kathleen, who though apparently sober still had a bit of trouble with sunlight. "Food" the new arrival demanded. "I'm starving."

'And well you should be' her badger driver thought with a smirk, *'You tossed your cookies three times on the way here.'* Well he'd had his fun. Now for the pleasure of driving two very pretty otters and their prey back to Pan Am's waiting paws. When he finally saw Oharu he revised his thought. Three very lovely ladies. There were worse things he could be doing today. While he waited he carefully adjusted the cars interior rear view mirror. No need to miss the view after all, even though it would mean not being able to see any cars behind him.

That would prove to be a fatal mistake.

A hundred or so yards behind the waiting driver sat another large black automobile. Within it sat the four very serious looking individuals. "Your plan Unteroffizer is?" one of the four dark figures asked, speaking German.

"We wait until the mountains Obergefreiter" a German Shepard wearing rough clothing answered the black furred man behind him. Studying the compound through a pair of very powerful field glasses he couldn't quite resist a whistle of appreciation at what he saw. "There are several places an unwary driver might have an accident. Several side roads rarely used. It will be tragic. Quite tragic. Fortunately it appears all three are quite attractive. Perhaps Kanonier Knopf might find a location where they would survive. For a time. It has been some while since we have enjoyed the pleasures of female company. Or the hunt."

"Unteroffizer, is that wise? Their driver appears quite fit."

"I agree. It is dangerous to fight a trained badger. Even more so an untrained one." He patted a bulge under his left arm. "Which is why Knopf will pull up next to them. I have never met a badger who could survive a bullet to the head."

Behind the sergeant his men laughed darkly. It had been a long time since they had hunted. Everyone knew how all Doberman so much loved the hunt. And the bloody kill that came after.

Near Frisom and at three thousand feet Sandy Doecan gritted her teeth against the pain in her foot. Of all the dumb things to happen Mindy had to drop a case of oil on her foot. Her good foot. "Someone's trying to cripple me" she groused, holding an ice pack against the swollen appendage. An appendage that throbbed more for every thousand of feet that they climbed.

Even Deckard had laughed about the accident. "You should join us at the pole" he'd offered. "All that snow and ice would keep the swelling down. All you would have to do is walk bare pawed." He'd laughed all the harder when Sandy had told him where she'd put the first frozen penguin she found. Now they were headed for Tahiti, their last stop for the full crew. All three planes would later return to Honolulu, only a pilot on each. Sandy would be the fourth member going back as the groups navigator. Everyone else would be on a Navy tanker headed south to Nunui Hale, then by private ship to Antarctica.

She looked at her charts, checking her last sun shot against what was plotted and what was real. "Deck" she yelled. "Three point five degrees Starboard. We've picked up a cross wind." Deck looked back from the cockpit, lifting three fingers and a half, then pointing right. Giving him the thumbs up Sandy leaned back to rest. In a half hour she'd take another sun shot. Patterson on the Blue Swallow, their number three craft, was doing the same thing but Sandy was now senior. Senior since she'd caught him trying to navigate them to Soma via way of London. That tiny mathematical mistake had taught the young man to double check his figures, but it'd cost him his senior slot anyway. One he had held simply because he was male.

Taking out her navigators log she opened it to today's page. "I wonder how Oharu is doing" she asked herself, not worrying about anyone hearing her over the engines roar. "Probably having the time of her life in Hawaii. Getting her fur sun bleached, all those cute hula girls giggling around her. Feeding her fresh cut pineapple. Ah, the life of a secret agent. I'd love to be with her right now. She's fun, now that she's given up trying to off herself we wouldn't be casing each other's guy either." Pushing her thoughts aside for the moment the bobcat began writing her current numbers down.

Somewhere off the Likelike highway, deep in the Ko'Olua mountains Oharu was currently running for her life, following behind the otters Kathleen and Annette. Some ten minutes behind them were the four German hounds who had run their car off the main road onto a disused side road. So too behind them was the body of their driver, shot in cold blood just after getting out of their car. "Fifteen minutes. Then we start hunting" the face scarred Shepard had told them. "Fifteen minutes. Then we come after you. And kill you. After some fun for us of course."

So they had run, but none of the three were up to a non-stop run. Oharu could have pushed herself a little further, but when the two flight attendants suddenly collapsed in front of her she knew they hadn't any choice. This road was becoming wilder she noted, as if though used only on rare occasions. It certainly hadn't been used in some time. It was time to drop the pretense that she couldn't speak. If they were to have any chance to survive at all. "What road" she husked, her voice ragged, vocal cords resisting use after so long.

"You can talk?" Annette asked, surprised.

"Extreme pain do so" Oharu lied, though in truth it was painful for her to talk after having been silent so long. To her own ears her voice was horrible. Then she remembered what she used to sound like. "What road?"

"Probably a logging road" Kathleen answered as she fought to catch her breath. "Why?"

"We find wide spot. Soak with scent. Trap killers" the mouse explained.

"Trap... Trap them?" Kathleen asked, her voice filled with disbelief. "Your crazy."

"Maybe not Kat. Remember how she handled that guy on the Clipper? If anyone has a chance to save our hides it's this woman." Annette stood, still a bit wobbly. "What do we do."

"Walk" Oharu answered, starting up the trail again.

So they walked, and as they walked Oharu gave them a chance to live. It would take their attackers less than half the time to cover the distance between them, so in her mind they had no more than twelve minutes to get ready. Some three minutes later they walked into a crumbling lumber yard. Immediately the three split up, jogging in random patterns around the yard, filling the open area with a web of their scent. Finally, with only a few minutes left in Oharu's schedule the two otters started hunting weapons while Oharu carefully undressed.

"Are you insane" Annette asked when she walked up with an iron bar in her paws. "Standing there with nothing on but your shoes?"

"Can defend better this way" Oharu answered. "No man use Oharu again. Not while alive. Now hide."

Apparently their assailants were in no hurry as they calmly walked into the clearing well over fifteen minutes later. "This will be the place" the Shepard announced in German. "They will hope to ambush us here. Be careful, even a mouse can take down the tiger when given an edge." He sent his men hunting, the four splitting up to cover the most area as quickly as possible.

Unteroffizier Nieman's first indication his decision was correct was when one of his men yelled. Even as he turned towards the noise a sound of a melon being hit came to him. *'I have lost a man. No matter, it is now one to one'* he thought. True to their training his other two men remained in the open. Each watching for movement, not closing as he investigated. It had been their driver the German discovered. He examined the body from a short distance. Kanonier Knopf had been thrown some distance and his right arm had twisted badly underneath him. His impact into a pile of rubble hadn't been what had killed him, it had been something very hard impacting his face. Had he not known what Knopf had been wearing, he could never have identified what lay before him. "So" he said softly. "These American's do have fire in their blood. This will be a worthy hunt after all." He turned away, dismissing the dead man. "As will the meal afterwards."

Oharu now stood just inside a row of vertical poles, their wood gone grey with weathering framing her dark brown fur. Kathleen's action, though necessary had upset her. She did not kill. Even now she felt that those remaining could be dealt with without killing. Kathleen however seemed to have changed. There was a fire behind her eyes now. A fire the likes Oharu had seen before. It would be impossible to control her so she wouldn't even try.

Obergefreiter Pfrommer was next to feel the women's wrath. Though trained his training had been under controlled conditions. He turned a corner low, with the sun behind him. Before he could realize his mistake Annette used his head as an overlarge golf ball. The section of weathered narra hardwood lifted him to his toes. Stunned he tried to fall into a fighting stance. Only to have his still ringing head used as a baseball this time. Blood fountained from every opening of his head as he spun away, falling unconscious into a small shed. Immediately it collapsed around him, trapping him. Its door falling, spinning slowly to land over his body, the tiny opening in its face allowing a half-moon of sunlight to shine on the dobermans quickly swelling left eye.

With the sudden loss of Pfrommer Unteroffizier Nieman called his remaining man to him. "They are too dangerous. Kill each as we find them. We will save the last one for our shared pleasure" he ordered. Working together the two slowly started working the site. Being a small collection of buildings it wasn't long before the two flushed all three women out. Nieman laughed upon seeing Oharu's undressed state, though the blood on Kathleen and Annette angered him. "Kill the otters" he ordered. "We play with the mouse. After all she has made herself so ready for us." It would be the last mistake he would ever make.

Late that evening Albert Flintstine stood in one of the Kaneohe hospitals rooms studying the girl in bed and her friend sitting next to her. "You are both in severe trouble you understand" he told them, his voice hard. "Those were diplomatic assistants to the German Envoy here. Then there is the Spontoon woman next door. The one you were supposed to protect. Now tell me exactly what happened." He sat then, appearing to be listening as his company employees each gave their version of events. He'd already read the police reports though, and he had already discussed events with Miss Osui, though listening to that ruined voice try to struggle out of such a beautiful face had left him near to tears. No wonder she didn't talk, it must be hell trying to make sounds others could understand. That Oharu was acting, was forcing her throat to make such guttural sounds as she tried to talk, this never occurred to him. Not that her real voice was that much better. In any case he'd already made his decision, which would be the company

decision. Still it was best to let them think that they had some say in the matter.

Finally the room fell silent. Obviously both women had run out of words. Albert honestly had little idea what had been said, as he had been deep in thought himself. Still now to lay down the law. "Kathleen Hightower" he said, locking the bed ridden woman's eyes with his. "You will remain in this hospital until the doctors allow you out. If I even hear a peep out of anyone that you tried to sneak out your fired. Understand?"

"Yes sir" the bandaged otter answered, her un-splinted paw moving up to cover her bruised lips as she talked. "Am I under arrest?"

"That. Later. Annette. Your to stick with Miss Osui until she leaves Hawaii for Spontoon. Considering events I'm going to suggest" he said the word more as a certainty than as a hope, "that her vacation here be completely on the company books." He lifted Oharu's sketch book, recovered from the company car that had been pushed off the trail, ending in a ravine several meters below the secondary roads surface. "From what you told me Annette, and what's in here she apparently has an interest in aircraft. Your going to insure that she gets as close to as many of them as you can find. I'll have the clearances by tomorrow lunch." He dropped the book into Oharu's bag beside him, then onto Kathleen's bed. "See to it that she gets this back. A car will be waiting to take both of you to a hotel, the police will be there." He stood, picking up his hat. "No ladies. None of you are under arrest. In fact thanks to that rather talkative survivor an arrest warrant has been issued for a certain German pig. He'll probably sneak out of the islands but I am assured that it is good in America too. So he's going to have a tough time of it. Take care of yourselves. You're the kind of employees we need." Hat in paw he walked out the open door, turned right and vanished. Leaving the two very relieved flight attendants behind him.

"Did you see her move" Kathleen asked in a whisper. "I've never seen anyone move like that."

"I saw" Annette admitted. "And I saw what you did. Kat, you scare me now. I never dreamed you had that kind of demon in you."

"I didn't either. I guess when the choice is life or death, you kinda want too keep on breathing huh? Anyway, you better get over to Oharu. She may be a heck of a fighter but I'll bet she's shivering in fear right now. Not knowing what's going to happen to her."

"Kay. Take care of yourself." She picked up the bag, weighing it. "Remember girl. You still owe me a week of bar tabs."

Kathleen stuck out her tongue. "Only you would remember that" she huffed.

"So would you, if you'd found her first. See you soon okay?" Stepping to the door Annette gave her battered friend one last look, then stepped out of the hospital room, past the two rather large police officers and walked into the next room. This one also guarded by two rather large police officers.

"Hello Oharu."

Oharu looked up, smiling when she saw her bag in Annette's paw. She stood from the chair she had been sitting in, bowing to the otter.

"No" Annette ordered. "If anyone needs to bow to anyone its Kathleen and I to you. You saved our lives back there. We won't ever forget that." She offered the mouse her bag, holding her eyes onto the mouses dark brown ones. "I saw how you fought. So how did a bunch of swabs take you out?"

"Small room. Many men. No place move" Oharu croaked in admission as she dug for a notebook and pen. *'I'm getting good at this bad voice'* she admitted to herself as she found what she needed. Carefully

writing her question she handed the pad to Annette. All this writing, though difficult was improving her English as well.

"What happens now." Well that's simple. Your stuffs being picked up at the Split Palms. My companies picking up the tab for your entire stay including your bill at the Palms. I'm your escort until you leave. We'll be under covert police protection until you leave, but knowing the police and their feelings about darkies and slant eyes I wouldn't depend upon them. Anyway there's a car waiting to take us to a restaurant for supper, then to Honolulu and the best hotel in town." She grinned. "While I get to escort you to every plane we can get permission to go to. Sound good?"

Sound good Oharu thought. It sounded like heaven. Nodding yes she quickly she retrieved her pad, returning it to Annette. "You want Poi? At a five star hotel, you want POI? Your out of your mind. Certifiable. Nuts. Come on, the cars waiting. Loony as an gooney, one card short of a full deck..." She continued rolling off the terms until well after they were in the car and underway. "And did I say I think your loco in the cabasa?" she finished.

April 10th

Oharu woke slowly to the greatest pleasure she'd felt in her life. She was dead. She had died and passed beyond the veil of mortal flesh. There was nothing in mortal life that could possibly approach this level of feeling. Stretching slowly she let freshly cleaned silk sheets caress her body, her tail sliding through clouds of gentle, cool fabric. A smell that could only be food from the Gods own kitchens caressed her nose, filling her brain with rich yet subtle scents. Yes she decided, this was the afterlife. It felt pretty good she decided.

"Waking up sleepy head, or should I send this back to the kitchens?"

Annette's voice broke the dream, waking her to the reality that she was not dead. That this was simply how the very, very rich lived. "Can stay forever" she croaked, pushing away bedcovers who's price, even used would have bought a peasants house in her homeland.

"Try not to talk" Annette suggested. "It hurts you. I don't want you hurt anymore." She took a sip of some brown beverage. "I do wish I had met you before your voice was destroyed. I'd love to know what you sounded like then."

"Same anyone else" the mouse answered with a cough. "Can stay forever?"

Annette laughed. "My pay for an entire year might cover a week here for us" she replied. "You have no idea how important you have to be to get the Presidential Suite. And for two whole weeks at that." She held up an envelope. "Came this morning. Your tickets home to Spontoon. Roman all the way."

"Roman" Oharu asked as she forced herself from the beds luxury.

"Firstious Classious. First class to we lower life forms." She smiled, dropping the envelope. "Come here and eat before I bring it over and feed you." She watched Oharu slip out of a bed that would easily have held four people her size. *'Or two very friendly ones'* she thought to herself. "Management called up, they will be sending a lady up to measure you after breakfast. New clothing. Nothing but the best for our China Clipper hero." She laughed at Oharu's puzzled look. "You have absolutely no idea what my bosses think of you right now. If you did I think it'd ruin that sensibility I like. Now I've finished eating so you eat while I go get dressed." She stood up, walking across the lush carpeting to an adjoining room where a second bed waited. Her orders were directly from the Hawaiian CEO. Stay with her at all times, if she wants anything get it for her, damn the cost. If she gets hurt... Annette wondered just how much of a head start she'd get before the Pan Am hunters came. She had a sinking suspicion that unlike the

Germans, they flew airplanes.

Wearing nothing but a pale blue silk slip that the hotel had supplied the night before Oharu walked to the table. Breakfast in a plush hotel, in her own room and still hot. She settled into the somewhat uncomfortable Louis the XIV style chair, doing nothing but letting her eyes savor the riches waiting her stomach. *'Molly would love this. For the first time in my life, I wish I were rich'* she thought, just before she reached for a delicious looking roll smothered in real butter.

At the Pan Am headquarters later that morning two very important officials were debating the truth of all things. "Albert. You know that the head office is going to scream about this one" Bartholomew Matthews laminated. "Two weeks at the Hawaiian Hilton? That's..."

"Don't say insane my friend" the fox warned. "I saw it in my grandmother when I as a child. I've no intention of making a visit of my own. Even should she buy everything in the hotel, it is less than the cost of a months advertisement in California. Now to serious matters. Have you seen this mornings paper? 'German thugs attack Pan American Airways car. Driver dead, two flight attendants badly injured.' I've read the article twice. It is quite critical of our German friends and, with a slight adjustment of the facts, places our driver and flight attendants in a very good light." He folded his paper, tossing it on the rabbits desk. "I understand that the Times has picked up this story, though not the previous one. We need good press, especially here and now. You know Bartholomew I thought about this last night. Considering the islands position, it might be useful to us to approach the Spontoon government about landing rights. This is one of their citizens after all so it does, in a way, give us a wedge into that door. Besides, those islands are starting to become a tourist and movie lot mecca. If we could get a weekly scheduled flight just passing through. It'd be a feather in your cap."

"We've got a flight going there during the tourist season" the rabbit reminded him. "I checked last night myself."

"Three flights actually. One each month. It's an afterthought on their way to Cipangu. Float the idea, see what comes to the surface. In the meantime we show our goodwill by treating one of their own as a hero should be treated. There's no telling what kind of trouble we'd be in right now if that young mother had been killed. I don't want to think about the repercussions of two female flight attendants mutilated and murdered on their own aircraft. As it is we've goodwill from that husband, which might easily translate to air rights in their country. Good word of mouth from all the passengers as well. That translates to thousands in advertising, maybe as much as ten thousand dollars worth. A paltry pawfull of cash spent on one woman is nothing compared to that."

"So we milk the situation to its fullest. Albert you should be a business manager."

"I like the law better" the fox admitted. "I can be honest and not worry about a knife in the back later. Sometimes, like now, I get to see the bad guys get what they deserve. Its just too bad that one Doberman survived. Annette should have hit him harder."

"Albert!"

Looking up the fox gave a blank look. A look the rabbit had learned to translate as 'I'm deadly serious about this.' He instantly dropped the subject.

"Don't say a word" Annette warned that afternoon. "Just turn for me. Oh my, you look beautiful."

Oharu however, thought she looked ridiculous. Dressed in brown silk that almost perfectly matched her fur the dress was in the latest French style. It had taken nearly an hour for Annette and the seamstress to

get her correctly tucked into the outfit. Even though it was the height of fashion the dress's plunging neckline made the mouse feel undressed. Why a simple lavalava covered more. "Get used to it, you know how long it takes to sew a kimono. That lady Hikaru says two days. Maybe three. Your not going to take me to dinner in that cheap blue kimono of yours."

Oharu pointed at herself, then to Annette, a questioning look on her face.

"Hey. You're the one with an unlimited spending account. I'm just a simple flight attendant. However we go I have to stick with you, company orders. You might not mind eating in the room but I want to see how the better half live. Capish?"

Slumping her shoulders in defeat, an act that garnered her a quick slap on the buttocks from the seamstress reminding her to stand straight, Oharu nodded her acceptance. "What you wear" she croaked, noting a shudder run through the seamstress's frame at the terrible sound of her forced voice.

"I've got a nice green frock. One of my friends is delivering it this afternoon. I'll be quite fine thank you." She snubbed her nose, turning to head for the bathroom. "At least I know what a fork is for."

As soon as Annette had left Oharu leaned over, grabbing her pad and pen. Writing quickly as she could she handed to page to the waiting gopher. Reading it the woman smiled. "Love to hon" she answered. "Let me have my help. What color?"

Black the mouse wrote. *Very. Very risque.* What was good for one goose Oharu thought, misusing one of Butterfly's favorite sayings. Is good for the other goose.

Grinning from ear to ear the gopher hurried to the rooms phone. When Annette returned from the bathroom it was to face half a dozen women. "Huh?" was all she managed to get out before she was smothered in measuring tapes.

At the hotels formal dining room that evening Annette hurried to sit as they were shown to their table. Grabbing her menu, she gave Oharu a dirty look. "You know I can't wear anything under this, and its so thin that I can feel every breeze?" She glanced at her menu, her eyes crossing. "Its in French. I can't read French!"

Oharu took her time sitting. She'd worn her new dress all day, getting used to it. Getting used to being in it. Her companions dress had barely been ready for dinner, even though most of the hotel's seamstress's had worked on it. Annette's green gown had been sent back, with a tidy sum slipped into a certain vixens paw to insure she wasn't unhappy about the waste of her own time. Carefully picking up her own menu the mouse saw that Annette was right, it was in French. French she thought, the same as their dress designs. At least she could read enough to order. Certainly her French was much better than her English.

When the waiter arrived, a very handsome young fox both women noted, Oharu handed him her note written on the paper she'd found in a desk upstairs. He started to say something when the mouse lifted her neck, running one finger along the snow white scar there. Nodding in understanding he read the note, glanced at Annette and smiled. "*Of Certainty*" he agreed in French. "*And the wine?*" To that question Oharu added a line to the note. "*Very well, I understand.*" Bowing to Oharu, then to Annette he quickly vanished with their menus.

"What did you order" Annette fairly hissed.

"Poi" Oharu lied.

"Not here. They wouldn't serve it. They'd throw both of us out first. And where did you learn to write French."

"Home." Oharu coughed, grabbing her water goblet to clear her throat. She was truly damaging her throat with this acting, talking would soon be impossible for a prolonged period of time if she wasn't careful. As she set her half drained goblet down their waiter returned.

"Château Durfort Vivens '85" he announced as he held the bottle for Oharu's inspection. Wondering what she should do Oharu looked helplessly at the bottle, to notice a note held at the bottles base by the fox. Smiling she nodded yes after reading what it said. She was amazed as the note vanished as though it had never existed. A moment later he had carefully removed the cork, holding its base for Oharu to test the aroma.

It was heavenly, so many different scents. She was unaware of the smile that came as she inhaled the wines scent, nor the delight of their waiter. He had been afraid that, having admitted to no knowledge of wine this oriental mouse might not understand what he had selected. Instead he found that she had a wonderful natural appreciation of the wine's bouquet. Without a sound from her ruined throat her expression told him she would appreciate this more than most of the high bred snobs he usually served. This he decided, noting how the exotically dressed otter seemed to be submissive to her mouse companion, was a couple he was going to enjoy serving. Retrieving the cork he half filled each of the two glasses he'd brought with him, re-corking and placing the bottle into a waiting carrier of ice.

Annette watched as Oharu sniffed the cork. Whatever the waiter had brought it sounded expensive. As soon as he had left she asked "How do you know how to act. I thought you were raised on a small island."

"*Good manners same everywhere*" the mouse wrote. Picking up her wine goblet she tasted its contents, a moan of pleasure coming from deep within her chest as its taste reached her pallet. She was unaware that those nearby had been joking about the two. A joking that subsided as those who felt they were better simply due to right of birth, money or both realized that yes, these may be commoners. Yes, the mouse was certainly a base oriental but no, she was no hick. Only those who were born to understand wines would have felt that way about a single small mouthful. Conversations soon moved to other things, though the two would still appear in certain conversations. After all, it was not often that two so attractive women dined alone. Even if they were both base lower class races.

"That was a fun movie Oharu. I'd never had a chance to see Bonnie Scotland when it came out last year" Annette laughed as she threw herself into one of their rooms overstuffed chairs, kicking off her high heels. "Floral and Hardly really outdid themselves this time. Enlisting into the Scottish Army. It's a wonder the Empire didn't fall." She had leaned back, giggling at some remembered part of the movie when there was a knock on the door. Before the otter could more than sit up Oharu had answered.

A young hound wearing one of the hotels bellhop uniforms carefully pushed an ornate cart into the room. He stopped by the rooms best table, handing the mouse a card and pen while he both cleared the table and started setting delicate pastries on its surface. A final addition were red roses and a bottle of wine, one which he opened before leaving. Silently taking his cart, card and pen with him he left without a word, closing the door behind him. A door Oharu carefully double locked.

"What the" Annette managed as she pushed away from the sofa. Taking an envelope from the roses she opened it, removing a single sheet of paper. "It's from Mr. Matthews" she explained. "I guess he thought you deserved something more. And we have a tour of the naval hangers tomorrow morning from ten to four, so we have to be ready by nine." Picking up a sugar coated pastry she not so delicately bit into it. "Mmmmmmm..." was all she could manage with a full mouth. Unheaded traces of white sugar cascaded onto her black dress, sticking to her own rich black fur. With a raised eyebrow Oharu joined her, suddenly acutely aware of how she would very much like to clean those traces of sugar.

April 11th

Oharu woke to the sound of a phone's insistent ring. Confused she started to hunt for it, only to realize that something.. No someone was wrapped around her. Not just someone she discovered as she opened her eyes further. Annette. Last night. So much wine, something about this morning. With a groan Annette finally woke, automatically answering the phone beside her, her eyes still closed. "Eight. Midway up call. Uh huh. Clothes ready. Okay. Ten minutes." Fumbling she managed to hang up the phone. "Eight" she mumbled. "Car comes at nine. Whole hour to sleep."

Suddenly the otter sat up straight, her movement causing Oharu to tumble to the floor. "AN HOUR!" she yelped, her eyes wide open. "Oharu we.. Oharu? Hey, this isn't my bed." She looked to her left, catching sight of the mouse sitting calmly on the floor, her arms crossed under her bare breasts. "We uh.." She pointed to the bed, swallowing when the mouse nodded yes. "Uh.. I um... I"

Oharu giggled, carefully getting up from the floor she grabbed the otter's tail, pulling her off the bed. "Ow hey that hurts" Annette cried. Stumbling to her own feet she followed her companion into the bathroom. "That hurt" she complained again, only to have anything else she was going to say ended by a very delicate kiss to a very delicate place.

At Pearl Harbors Hickham Air Field two rather delighted naval pilots finally guided their visitors back to their waiting car at the main gate, having spent most of the day showing off everything they could that seemed to interest their visitors. Though the oriental had proven unapproachable, actually moving away whenever approached her reasons were easy to understand. Once her delightful and very delicious assistant explained her muteness that was. They had so been angered by the truth that they had both ignored several protocols. Thus it was that Oharu Osui. Sandy Doecan's newest spy, had seen, had touched, had been allowed to draw things. Things master spies had killed for and still failed to get near.

This day Annette was wearing a tight dress that couldn't have been redder, nor acceptably shown another patch of night dark fur. Oharu, again in brown wore a much more respectable but still form fitting dress. Annette was certain now that Oharu was getting back at her for the Western style dress. Though she herself liked the extra attention she was getting, knowing the why was upsetting. *'Would they have been so kind, so helpful if I'd worn my Pan American uniform'* the otter asked herself. Of course that answer was no. But then, like now, they would still have been trying to see the fur under that dress. Oharu on the other paw, whenever she was looking at her held her own dark eyes full on the otter's eyes. Not her chest or legs. *'Least I know now I like both sides of that bed'* Annette admitted to herself, though last night was still foggy in her mind. Tonight, she vowed, wouldn't be.

April 12th, 1936

Miss Devinski was unsurprised by the next post card. This one showed a photograph of a well known Hawaiian waterfall. It was one that she herself had visited on vacation many years ago. Setting her other mail aside the hound took a moment to sip her morning coffee, reading the carefully block printed words only after she had swallowed.

"Miss Devinski" Oharu wrote. *"Apology if bother you. Like write, not know who but you and Butterfly. Weather here wonderful, much warmer than Spontoon. Nice people. Bad tourist items. Luck found seat on China Clipper. Beautiful aircraft. My hope all things well and safe your school. Friendship. Oharu."*

As before the card's meaning was less than obscure. "Oh yes dear little mouse. I'm still keeping an eye on that young lady" she told the card. "China Clipper, how lucky you are. I think half this school would gladly kill for that kind of luck. The other half would just run over anyone in their way." She let her mind wander to what a certain group of students were up too at the moment, and how they were adapting to 'authentic shipboard life.' "Of course" she continued. "Dear Molly may not exactly be enjoying her current

situation.” With a soft laugh that card joined the first.

Things were getting interesting the hound decided. In a way that had not occurred in two or three years. There was now a pool between the school's four faculty as to wither or not Oharu slipped up and spilled the beans before break. So far it was up to ten sodas to the winner from each of the losers. Miss Devinski being the only one who still maintained Molly would never hear it from the mouse. Not initially, though even she had to admit this was the kind of secret that could never be kept for long. Too many already knew the truth, too many eyes were on both women.

April 13th, 1936

Both woman still shared the same bed in their luxury hotel, as it had been the last two days. One, a young otter was sound asleep. Her face currently turned towards the moonlight coming from a nearby window. Her companion, an oriental mouse sat by her side. Oharu was drawing. Not sketching as she was wont to do when trying to get a scene down quickly. She had been drawing for over an hour now. Time in which the moonlight had changed from a sliver barely touching the bed to a full wash of pale blue-grey light upon her subject. She was drawing Annette as she slept.

Oharu had woken from one of her darker dreams, sweat matting her facial fur tightly against her face. Now she spent her time relaxing from that encounter with her old self, drawing from the emotions of that experience. Annette however was her second drawing, on the page opposite was one just as detailed of a certain, forever unattainable younger doe. Finally she sat her pen aside, closed her bottle of ink, set the book on a chair open for the ink to dry fully and laid back on the bed she shared. Staring up at a too ornate ceiling the mouse tried making sense of her last dream.

“You are changing” old Oharu, the Miko had said in greeting. *“You are understanding.”*

Looking to the red over white dressed form that had once been hers, new Oharu, the artist bit her lower lip. *“Then I am correct? That the God Emperor asked too much.”*

“Not quite correct my older sister. Yet close enough that I may clarify. Our life was the God Emperors to spend as he desired yes. As it always has been, it always would have been his. No matter how great or trivial the cause. Our life was always simply coin to pay his bill, no matter how base the cause. In that he made no error. So you are correct, yet incorrect.”

Setting beside her younger sister-self, artist Oharu spread her blue kimono, allowing blue fabric to overlap red. A soft glow came from where both fabrics met. *“This I could not do before”* she observed.

“It is only because we begin to reach an understanding my sister” her younger self explained. *“Our battle calms, peace begins to form between us. One day we will again be one, should our physical body live long enough. Have you yet found that piece of the puzzle?”*

“Our life was coin to be spent. Our honor, never. Only those greater that we serve may ask for such coin.” the blue clad woman answered. *“By spending our honor even by mischance, he overstepped his right as God Emperor.”*

“Yes. Then in truth you do have the answer.” Miko Oharu smiled. *“And the one who sleeps beside you. Have you made a decision of her? As I remember, there is still Moh-lee waiting.”*

“Moh-lee is forever and always beyond our touch” artist Oharu admitted. *“To express my.. Our love for her. To even allow her to understand that depth of love we feel. This will harm her. She, as we, has seen enough harm. That our heart blossomed for her is not her responsibility. She owes us nothing. I will not stain her honor with our feelings.”*

"And this one? Does she not show interest in us?"

In her dream state Oharu viewed the bed from above. Her own form laying next to Annette's, the otters right arm laying across Oharu's side in sleep, cupping one breast. *"We are spy, even now"* she reminded herself. *"Nothing but harm can come to her from allowing this one to enter our life."*

"Dear sister. Speak with your heart. Not your mind."

Artist Oharu fell silent, truly looking into her heart for the answer. Finally she looked into the eyes of her Miko self, the self that could never have lied to Molly, or Annette. *"I would have Moh-lee, even though I may never allow her to know my true feelings. Given the choice, it must be Moh-lee."*

"As I also would choose." Miko Oharu reached out to take artist Oharu's paw within her own. *"We are fools we two. This one can offer all we could ever want, could ever need. We have already seen it within her eyes. Her words. Yet given a choice we must choose with our heart. Such fools we are."*

Artist Oharu squeezed her sister self's paw, feeling tears fill her eyes. *"Not fools younger self. One must accept that which ones heart has opened for. Though Annette was the first to taste our freely given gardens, our heart is not for her. Though had she been before Moh-lee, then it is she whom our heart may have opened for."*

Miko Oharu sighed with understanding. *"This we can never know. And this Spontoon. What have you decided here?"*

"When I return to those islands my books will be sent to box nine with a note of warning. I will wait five days, that he may make his escape. Then I will admit to that government what we are."

"They will kill us."

"Yes. Moh-lee will be safe. Annette will be safe. Spontoon will be safe. We may only hope that death will be quick."

Miko Oharu removed her paw, turning away from artist Oharu. *"Your thoughts are noble my sister. Your decision is wrong. It cannot be."*

"It is honorable."

Miko Oharu's head lowered. *"We have no honor sister. That road may never be open to us again."*

That truth send a shudder of stunned reaction through the blue clad figures frame. *"I.. Forgot"* she whispered. *"Then. Then what?"*

"I cannot say. I am what was. I am our before. I cannot decide for us that path which will bring our hearts together again. I only am able to say this. Until our hearts are one nothing we do will return us to honor."

"Then I must think some more" the older decided. *"If the possibility of our heart being healed still exists, then there is a path available other than death. I will search. I will find it."*

"And that one?"

"Annette? I pray that our paths do not cross again. We cannot be one, as deeply within her hidden heart she so desires."

"Though you can be a pair" Miko Oharu reminded her sister. *"Our heart can easily hold two."*

"Yes. In her eyes I see that unfolding that is her hearts slow bloom. As ours so quickly bloomed for Moh-lee, we had no chance to still its opening. It will not be fair to allow Annette's rose to bloom fully. When I leave I will cease all contact. Her heart will close. Slowly, but close as does the flower at night. Another will bring a sun to awaken her."

Miko Oharu laughed turning back to again take her sister's paw. *"Oh my poor fool sister. Even in your denial you admit that we are attracted to her. Must we destroy all possibility of love forever?"*

"Until I know we will live and where. Until I know our path" artist Oharu admitted. *"It would be shameful to accept any other within our life."*

"Then my time with you is done. For now. Until our next meeting my poor crippled sister." Miko Oharu smiled once again, fading as Oharu had woken from her sleep.

She blinked, again seeing nothing but an ornate ceiling. So much she was able to understand in her dreams. Things that in the light of day passed her by. Carefully she removed herself from the bed, ignoring Annette's sleepy complaint as her body warmth vanished again. *'I must find a way to close her flower'* she told herself, keeping her back to Annette's sleeping form. *'I cannot allow her to feel the pain I feel. To love someone who can never be a part of her life.'* She swallowed, feeling tears come to her eyes. *'Why does the correct path hurt so much. When will I be allowed love.'* Fighting her tears she walked into the suites main room, away from her companion. Into silence where her tears could harm no one. Not even herself.

April 15th, 1936

Near Tahiti's delightful shores Sandy Doecan lay on the port wing of her assigned aircraft blissfully sunning herself. Almost everyone else was away, studying 'ancient forgotten temples.' She could hear Robert working on his number two engine. Jacob though would be sitting in the cockpit of his assigned craft, diligently watching out for pirates attempting to steal their planes. She however was enjoying the sun, for once neither of her feet hurt and she had no agents this far South. One more week of the group stumbling through jungle then they would head for Nunui Hale, while their planes were flown back to the safety of Hawaii. She'd probably get back around the time Oharu left.

Hawaii Sandy thought, bringing images of certain rather well developed natives to mind. Six to eight weeks to wander lower paradise, Spontoon being the real thing of course. Then back down here to pick up the safari. After that returning home just by the end of tourist season. Rolling onto her back she allowed the sun free access to her nude body. Home. No more spying, no more dodging enemy agents. Just home and one last chance to grab the prize she really wanted. "Course if I miss" she whispered to the sun, "I'll have to leave. Not a native, couldn't stand being near him like that anyway. Back to America. Even though I don't want too."

She stretched, feeling long abused muscles now sun warmed move with her. Tension's slipped away as she approached sleep. "Hawaii. Oharu's probably finished by now. Wonder what she's up too. Chasing the native girls? Now that would be worth a roll of film." She giggled to herself, her mind shifting to their current situation. Just how many of those ancient forgotten ruins were finished just last year she wondered. Between the suns warming rays, her position and the waters gentle rocking of her craft Sandy slipped into a delightful nap.

It was the stench Annette decided, not her thick boots saving delicate pads from sharp volcanic shards. Not so much as how difficult it was to walk, or that their guide wasn't in any way handsome. It was that rotten egg smell that soaked into her fur so deeply that even two baths couldn't get it out. And here they were for the second time, this time approaching a live volcano. For Gods sake her mind screamed. This

is dangerous. She could feel soft undulations under her feet as temperatures adjusted. Why, just a bodies length below her could be a river of molten rock thousands of degrees hotter than her boots were rated for. Fearful of sudden death within such a hell born river her fur remained stiff under her protective clothing. Why just two years ago this place had been erupting and it could start again any second.

Oharu though seemed fearless. She listened carefully to the warnings of their guide, especially when approaching vents. Never straying a step away from the path he chose. Once the mouse approached a fuming vent so closely that Annette started plotting her escape from Pan Am's fictitious hunters. A whole day yesterday, and most of today still hadn't quenched the mouse's interest. Or fill in her brand new sketch book. *'Go ahead, fall in the lava'* Annette thought. *'See if I care.'* A moment later Oharu did stumble and, against all thoughts of self preservation the otter was quickly by her side helping her up. *'Sure I won't care'* Annette told herself as realization flooded over her. *'I'd just probably die of heartbreak in a day or so. If I didn't just jump in with you.'*

Steam and worse billowed a few yards ahead of them, followed a moment later by the sound of rock shattering. Ahead a section of the thin crust just vanished, a plume of superheated air billowing into the sky. At their feet opened a window into Hell. Liquid rock rushed by, its form like that of water yet the heat rolled over them like a blast furnace.

"Go now" the guide yelled, pointing back the way they had come. "Too much. Too dangerous. Run." They ran, the bear's huge frame shaking as he lead the way out. They ran until their guide yelled to stop. Only then did all three collapsed to the rough ground, gasping for breath.

"So you've actually got a limit?" the otter asked, holding her companion in her paws. Oharu only nodded, shivering in reaction to their near death experience. Or something else Annette realized at the mouses next words.

"Beautiful" Oharu whispered, her voice even worse after inhaling so much gas. "Liquid rock. Beautiful. So many colors" she managed before she started coughing again.

Only then did Annette realize that their guide was shaking as well. Something bad had just happened and the well educated otter was upset with herself that she had no idea what it was. That how bad she discovered twenty minutes later while they were walking out. Behind them, where they had encountered the collapse a fan-like fountain of liquid rock abruptly sprayed thirty feet into the air. All three watched the mini-eruption for a few minutes. Then Annette turned to Oharu. "Don't you ever... ever do anything stupid like that again" she warned her companion. Her answer was a look of puzzlement from the mouse. "Dammit Oharu" she cursed, more emotion in her heart than she'd ever felt before. "Dammit... I don't want to lose you."

"We friends only Annette" Oharu husked, coughing as her torn vocal box rebelled from the acrid gas's effects. "Do not think more. Can never be." She coughed again, pulling herself from the otters arms to stagger away, those tears in her eyes not only from the acrid gas's effects.

Chapter Twenty-One

April 15th, 1936

Annette Riverstone sat quietly in the afternoon sun, gently stroking her tail with a brush to remove excess Kekaha Kai Beach sand while she watched Oharu working on her sketchbook. Meanwhile around them tourists clad in eye murdering colors and locals in much more survivable designs streamed about, on the whole ignoring the two. There was a heat building within the otters heart. A heat greater perhaps than the molten volcanic rock that had come so close to claiming them both. Upon the slopes of a volcano she came to know her heart, and upon returning to sanity, understanding that she was not wanted. *'I should hate her'* she thought. *'Or be angry. Or be hopelessly trying to get her attention. Something like that should be what I feel now. Not this emptiness. Not this vacuum inside my heart.'* To calm herself she had been listening to the waves as they washed ashore. Waves quite a bit higher than what she was used to in the States. Waves that made the Hawaiian sport of wave riding popular today. Even so the time came when finally the otter could stand it no longer. "Oharu" she asked softly.

Looking up from her badly singed notebook, physical proof of how close both had come to finding an answer to that greatest mystery, the mouse turned her attention to her companion. Her dark eyes were hidden by one of the cheap wide brim plain straw tourist hats that she wore. Annette felt those eyes upon her even so. Absently Oharu reached for her writing notebook.

"I don't think you'll need that" Annette said, her voice barely audible above the general noise. "What you said back there. On the volcano. That I shouldn't hope for more. That there was no chance. Your in love with someone aren't you. You in love with someone else and you don't want to hurt me."

Oharu nodded yes, turning her sketchbook back to the pages with both Molly and Annette's pictures side by side. Silently she held out the book to her companion, waiting for the otters reaction.

Annette accepted the book, noting where volcanic heat had turned its edges dark brown. *'My hero. So close she came. I came'* the otter thought. Quietly she studied both pictures for some time. "She's beautiful Oharu. She so beautiful that she makes me look like a two bit street walker." Returning the book she turned her face to the sea, watching happy couples playing at its edge. "Figures. I find someone who's fun to be with, inventive, and worth having. Someone I think might be my dream companion. Even though she a woman. And of course it happens that she already has someone else."

Oharu's paw on her arm a moment later caused her to turn. To look under that odd hat the mouse had chosen. There was sympathy in the mouse's eyes. Not pity the otter realized. Oharu handed Annette a note. *"There is always someone for everyone"* Annette read. "Yeah, I guess there is. I always thought he'd be tall, handsome, deep voiced and heavily muscled beyond belief." She snickered. "Don't forget rich. He'd have to be rich wouldn't he. Once I thought I'd found my knight in shining armor. An action-adventure actor even, signed with Mettiewin Goldshark Mayfly. I even left residency for him and what did I get? Dumped. Dumped four months later and left to make a living as a stupid dimwit Flight Attendant. Some knight in shining armor. More like a loser in tinfoil. Then I do find my knight. I find you. Too late." She took Oharu's chin in her paw. "How much too late?"

"Month, maybe little more" Oharu husked.

"Damn" was all the otter responded, releasing Oharu's chin, breaking eye contact and turning her back on the woman. "A month. Thirty days. A moon's turning plus one. I was in San Frisco a month ago Oharu. Wondering wither or not to join the navy. They offered. I already had the education, and the bills. They'd

let me finish residency my first enlistment. I'd have had to guarantee eight years though. Eight years is a long time when your twenty-five. Isn't it?"

"Seven" the mouse managed before she coughed from the artificial stress she was putting her throat through.

"Don't talk. That doctor said not too even try to talk for a week. Now let me think. Let me just tear myself apart for a moment. God knows you've protected me from enough already. Just... hold that thought. Please?" She felt more than heard her companion change position. "A month" she whispered. "One lousy month. What's her name?"

"Moh-lee" Oharu answered, ignoring Annette's order to remain silent. "Student. Songmark."

"Moh-lee? Molly. Yeah, great. She even has a pretty name. I've heard of Songmark. Everyone who flies in this hemisphere has. Even we air babysitters have heard of Songmark. Most successful and dangerous all female air pirate group in the Pacific came from there. Some of the best damn women heros too. They don't go for halfway measures there I understand. I'm no pilot though and I'd never be able to afford their fees. So Molly is rich right? Rich, beautiful, has you. What else could any woman want right? Not much I think. Kids maybe, but you'll have them for her. Have them so her beauty won't be marred by childbirth.."

"Not rich. Not have me" the mouse forced her voice to answer. "Moh-Lee not like woman."

Annette turned, shock showing in her face, her long tail whipping the sand as Oharu's words sank in. "She doesn't want you? But.."

Oharu held up her paw, stopping anything further from the otter. In the silence that followed she carefully filled a page of closely block printed English words with the story, then waited for the otter to finish reading it until finally Annette folded the sheet into a small square. "Your right. No one can control who they fall in love with. But if you can't have her why deny my affections." She waited until Oharu handed her another page, reading to herself the answer.

'There are things I not speak of. My life no longer my own. Not at this moment. I am still lost. Lost I cannot ask another to walk such a path. I am osui to my people. To shame another by letting her join my life not something I will do. No matter the love they hold for me. To be truthful. I not love you strongly enough.' "Osui, that's your last name right? So why is that a bother. Does it mean something important?"

Oharu flattened the sand with one paw, writing a single word in English before standing quickly and running away with her sketchbook in paw.

"Filth... Oh my God we've been calling you... Oharu, wait." Shoving their few items into her own bag, then grabbing the mouse's abandoned bag Annette stood, chasing after her companion. Her foot trampling that ugly word in the sand as she ran. "Damn-it WAIT!" she screamed at the departing woman's back, ignoring the looks of tourists and locals alike as they wondered what was going on, and who would use such filthy language on a public beach.

Sometime later they were again sitting, now much further down the beach and under a different palm's shade. "How long" Annette finally asked. "I won't ever call you that again but how long have you been wearing this name anyway? Was what happened on that ship what made you take such a name?"

Oharu thought back, back to when she'd first been asked what her last name was, when she'd accepted what she had become at all those mens paws. How they had used her, all of her. As toy, as plaything, as anything they desired. In any way they desired. Any way. She almost vomited at some memories though.

"Barut Maru happen" was her only vocal answer before the flames within her abused throat made further speaking too painful even for her control. *'Many months ago. Maybe half year. Maybe day only. This my mind will not remember clearly'* she wrote.

Annette slowly crumpled the page in her paw, fighting a desire to kill the next ogling male that came within reach. That anyone, her mouse... Yes she decided, HER mouse. *'Oh dear God I've turned Sappo'* she told herself, then pushed that thought away. Men obviously still interested her, still attracted her and last she'd heard it took one to have babies. Those she wanted by the ton. An image of birthing a baby weighing two thousand pounds blossomed in her mind. Well. Maybe not exactly that. She picked her next words carefully, fitting them just so before speaking them. "Oharu. We will be together maybe another week. Until then your last name is Riverstone if anyone cares to ask and to hell with what anyone thinks. Now I'm going back to the room. I'm going to brush this sand out of my fur. When your ready you come back and I'll brush you. Then I will tell you how life growing up for a half-darkie was in Mississippi. After that no more bad thoughts. Just you, me and Hawaii. Agree?" Oharu's smile was enough of an answer. Standing slowly the otter looked around her. So many happy people. Well for the next few days at least she was dragging Oharu into happiness. Even if she had to do it with the mouse kicking and screaming every inch of the way.

In the German Embassy on Oahu a very terse conversation was being enacted. "Explain why you won't give me another team" Oberst Unruh demanded, his legendary temper barely under control.

"Simple" Ambassador Ischinger answered, his calm exterior matched only by his much calmer interior. "You were assigned one team while you are here. You have wasted that team. There are no more available" He pushed his glasses up his nose, studying the Oberst as though he were some lower life form. Which in the Ambassador's eyes he certainly was. "It was rather difficult to explain away those mens actions. Only due to Obergefreiter Pfrommer's dedication to the fatherland was a serious diplomatic incident averted. It was, after all, completely Unteroffizer Nieman's orders they were following. Apparently he had been assaulted by one of the Americans. Kathleen I believe was her name. That the other ladies were involved was simply. An accident."

Oberst Unruh stood straight, his anger seething just below the surface. "A single Cipangan did this" he snapped, tapping his plaster covered splinted arm. "And took out all four men..."

"Not exactly" Ambassador Ischinger corrected the officer. "I believe that Obergefreiter Pfrommer states that he was beaten by an otter, not a mouse. Their scent is quite distinctive as even you should know. No mouse scent was found on either of the weapons used to kill my men. MY MEN Oberst. Not your men. No Oberst. This matter is ended. Should you pursue it further this embassy will have nothing more to do with you."

"I will report this to Germany" the pig warned.

"Oh please do. My report went out in last nights diplomatic pouch. I'm certain that Berlin will be delighted to hear your side of the story." The Doberman leaned back in his leather chair, his black suit impeccable even while seated. "You were only supposed to be here one day. To drop a copy of your report and be partially debriefed. Then you were to be assigned to the wine fields of America. To study. Two days at the maximum you were to be here. Two days. There is a German military transport leaving for the homeland at, as you say, oh four hundred. You will be on it. That, Oberst is an order directly from Generalkommando. I assure you that you will find a copy of the order waiting on your desk. This matter is now closed. Good day Oberst."

His face red with anger Oberst Unruh stormed out of the Ambassadors office. Zero four hundred. He checked his watch. That gave him over a full nine hours to deal with these females himself.

Annette greeted Oharu's return with a smile. "Good news. Kathleen called. She's finally out of the hospital. I asked her to join us. That's okay, right?"

Oharu smiled, nodding her assent then with a questioning look on her face waved to the single bed in their rooms.

"Silly girl. I got a room for her too. Just be sort of straight around her okay? She kinda feels threatened by girls with girls. I think its because she's been hit on more than a few times in flight." Annette accepted Oharu's writing pad seconds later. "Hey. I told you you're my first" she stuck out her tongue at the grinning mouse. "I wouldn't lie about a thing like that. Kath'l be here in two hours so get out of that swimsuit and let me brush that sand out of your fur." She grabbed a waiting brush, leading Oharu to the bath where a paw woven mat in a wooden tray already sat ready to pick up the sand. "Say love" the otter asked as she started brushing, knowing Oharu had brought her pad and pen with her. "Considering what interests you. Just what do you really do for a living anyway."

"I maid" the mouse answered. "Sometime artist. No more."

Back on Spontoon a certain grey furred ferret was troubled. Very troubled. His loving and apparently very talented foster daughter had persuaded him into stretching several government regulations in order to grant a certain non-native a Spontoon passport. Now things were warming up around him. He leaned back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling of his office. "Spontoon native saves Persian mothers life on China Clipper" he repeated, a reprint in the native language version of the Daily 'Elele. At least he'd gotten them to bury it in the native edition. That of course had cost him a favor owed. One he was not too keen on repaying. Whenever that favor was called in it was going to be a bad day in Black Rock, to use a line from an American Western story his secretary was currently reading.

Now the latest wires from Hawaii were in and Oharu had stepped into the limelight again. Didn't anyone ever tell her spies were supposed to keep a low profile? That was, he corrected himself, officially not yet completely proven. Even if his dear sweet foster daughter had confirmed it there was still a tribunal to decide. He hadn't yet informed the Allthing and there he walked a ragged edge. National security verses the equally important national religious leaders. A dicey position to be in. Oharu was a spy, a rank amateur to be truthful but a spy. She should be dead by now, dealt with as he'd dealt with so many other spies. Especially after the Forsythe debacle. Damn his weakness for pretty women. Hadn't Oharu been trained at the least that spies were not to run around saving pretty girls. Or was that too ignored in someone's haste to get anyone out here as fast as possible. Who did she think she was anyway, some fictional adventure story character? In his mind he saw the mouse sitting at a table, drinking expensive wine while across from her sat a beautiful but innocent Navy girl, trapped like a fly in amber within the mouses snare. "My name is Osui. Oharu Osui." He giggled, stopped himself, then giggled again. Only in the pulp fiction novels.

At least this latest story had been an afterthought, a fill in for empty space. Then too the mouse's name hadn't been mentioned. But how many 'young pretty Spontoon ladies' could two Pan Am flight attendants have saved from assault. "I am so going to take this out of your hide when you get back" he warned a picture on his desk. A picture of a certain young bobcat. "God's help us if the movie industry gets hold of this."

That they eventually would of course, was a foregone conclusion. Though he wasn't aware of that at the moment.

While on Big Island Kathleen was just a tad upset at her friend. "So your escortin her all over the place? Livin tha high life ahn I still have to pay your bar tab for a week?"

"Bingo" Annette answered, examining her claws. Claws that had been so delicately manicured just that morning. "You're the one who had her wrist dislocated, then decided to be a German's punching bag until Oharu could get to you. Not me. Besides, doesn't six days in a hospital being waited upon day and night count for anything?"

Kathleen stood to her full height, her tail straight behind her as she threw her shoulders back. "Have you ever tasted hospital food?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"Actually, no" Annette admitted. "But Oharu has." She laughed, pulling on one of Kathleen's arms. "Sit down. We have a hotel sponsored luau to attend tonight you know. They already know Oharu is from the Northern islands so maybe they won't be treating us like unwanted guests with too much money and too little sense. That should confuse all those tourists."

"There's a difference?" Kathleen asked, confusion evident in her voice.

"Oh yes. A very decided difference. I'll even be your hula interpreter for the special dances. As best I can, some of those dances are fast. I bet that your going to bust a gut laughing though. You haven't seen anything until you've seen the 'Sunburned tourist on beach' dance. And they do it right in front of the tourists. Sometimes they even teach tourists wives some of the moves. It's priceless."

"And how" her partner asked. "Did you find this out?"

"Kath" Annette answered seriously. "I've been taking Hula since we were assigned this route. That's what, eighteen months now? I learned the dance myself, before I knew what it meant. My instructor is a very nice woman. When she realized I was really serious about learning, not just an on again off again student with too much time and money on her paws she opened up about a few interesting things."

"Ah, going native are we" Kathleen laughed. "What's next, grass skirts and coconut shells? You'll never find a hospital that will let you finish your residency dressed that way."

Annette popped her friend on her good arm, sticking her tongue out at the slightly older otter. "Maybe I will one day. Somewhere. It's sure going to save on cleaning bills. Look Kath, they were treating us as normal tourists when we signed in. It was only when the hotel people saw Oharu's passport that things started changing. It was like a switch turned on somewhere, everyone got a lot friendlier. They even asked her if she was married yet. When she said no, well offers started rolling in. And not just from the guys. They've been treating us like long lost cousins every since. Its been a ball."

Kathleen, ever the proper American Midwest town girl sat silently, confused again. Turning her attention to the mouse she opened her mouth, several breaths coming before she finally found the words she wanted. "Oharu" she began. "Why would Hawaiian's treat a Spontoonian better than Americans?" Her answer came several minutes later, written on the hotels expensive stationary. *'Would you treat a stranger as warmly as a relative'* she read. "I don't know" Kathleen admitted. "I'd hope that I would." She read the next note carefully *'Even when that stranger was trying to destroy your way of life, your religion, your social values? Treating you as a child, not an adult?'* "Is that how you see us?" the otter asked in a soft voice. She quietly handed both notes to Annette. Waiting as Oharu laboriously referring to her battered tourist dictionary, wrote another, much longer answer.

'When the Europeans come to any land they bring following. Illness, oppressive religion, oppressive laws, oppressive social customs. These they try to force upon natives of that land, often with guns in paw. Hawaiian, Spontoon, China, Kuo Han, Tilamooka or Cipangu. Ancient ways life are destroyed in attempt to make this new land their own. Those who lived there are treated second class citizens or slaves. No one likes Europeans. Occasionally individual arrives who understands. Though they usually keep own ways, occasionally adopting native ways, they treat all equal. Respect native rulers, respect religion. Respect customs. Even though don't usually follow same. Those treated as sisters, brothers. The rest. All rest

are laughed at. Pockets emptied of money then sent back home thinking had wonderful time. When islander travels to European nations they treated badly. Even rich or royal. As though they were children who not understand what was important. Kathleen, importance is love, life, caring, helping. Not taking or owning. How many languages you speak? I speak Cipangu, English, French, Spontoon. That make me better than you? No. Only live land more languages. I once Miko, temple maiden. That make me better? No, only different way life.'

"I..." Kathleen swallowed, fighting tears back. "I never thought. And I only speak English" she admitted. Dropping the last page she started to get up, only to have Annette hold her down.

"It's a pawfull to accept all at one time" the younger otter admitted after reading the note herself. "Did you know what Oharu meant when she wrote that she used to be a Miko? Its hard for her to lie, so far she hasn't to me even when its hurt our friendship. That doesn't mean she's told me everything, that mouse knows when not to say something. But when you ask her a question, her first reaction is to tell you the truth, the whole truth. Bluntly. I found that out the first night I met her. I made the mistake of asking her how she got those scars on her back."

"Wondered about that" Kathleen admitted, having seen the crisscross pattern of Oharu's back when the mouse helped defend them against their attackers. "What exactly is a miko and does everyone look at us this way?"

Annette shrugged. "Miko is hard to explain. As best I understand it now something between nun and priest, with shades of sainthood tossed in for spice" she answered. "Along with she had to be a maiden. For the last at least. At certain times when she spoke it was with the voice of real Gods, not a simple woman. People from one country have always looked down on people from other countries. Just look at Europe today. Just the English and French situation. I don't have all the facts but they are in any library. Or even American and Mixtexa. Even how my kind is treated in our own country. Or ask any native. Just make certain that he or she knows your serious about learning the real truth." She looked over to Oharu who still sat quietly, pen and paper at the ready. "No more please" she begged the mouse, placing her paw over Oharu's. "I told you Kathleen was serious about this. Learning a truth she never suspected. Well it's hard for her."

Oharu nodded, then stood and walked to the bedroom, leaving her two otter guests to sort things out between them. As the door shut behind her Oharu took a deep breath. *'I'm not a Spontoon citizen'* she admitted to herself. *'But I want to be. Moh-lee or no Moh-lee. I like Spontoon. Maybe one day I will love it fully. Anyway. I've no place else to go, no one else to turn too. Do I.'* Setting down at the bedrooms tiny writing desk she carefully began crafting a letter to Mrs. McGee. One she would duplicate once, to Mrs. Devinski, though with changes. There were few people on Spontoon that she trusted. It was better for her to ask her questions now than later in the heat of a wrong moment.

Oberst Unruh had quickly found the place he wanted. Discovering when a certain hotel sponsored luau was being held had taken no more than a call to the desk. Finding out where was even easier as the site was even now being prepared. Slipping through the falling night had been easy even with a broken arm. He'd done it often in the latter stages of the Great War and even at his advanced age the pattern was simple to recreate. Finding his preferred spot, almost five hundred feet from the site the fat Oberst dug a depression for his belly, ending up being nigh near invisible by anyone at ground level by the time he'd set up his highly modified Mauser 98. He had even taken time to wrap his cast with a cloth that matched the sand nearly perfectly.

Kathleen though was drunk. So very, very drunk. She was also having a wonderful time with the handsome fox next to her, even with one of her paws still in a light splint. The older man had been surprised at his luck to be paired with such a young pretty otter. Luck had nothing to do with it, Annette had managed to arrange it with the hotel staff. Even a few extra minutes alone with her mouse was worth

the effort. Oharu was schedule to return to Spontoon very soon. Spontoon was so far away, where lived a woman Oharu was still ashamed to admit out loud that she loved. *'Well' the otter thought as her paws held one of Oharu's between them. 'I always wanted to experience an island romance. Now I have. Something more bittersweet I couldn't have imagined.'*

Oharu however wasn't thinking that far ahead. Restricted from anything alcoholic due to her still raw throat she had been devouring non-acidic native fruits with abandon. Not only did the cool sweet juices sooth her throat, they were foods she'd tasted little, or none of in her life. Silently she was upset that pineapple was forbidden in her temporary diet, its acidic juice would have her throat screaming in seconds. Pineapple was something she couldn't get enough of, as if her body craved the fruit for some reason. Still there were other foods and there was poi. Her love of poi had surprised their hosts. Most tourists tried it, then laughed while leaving most of it to spoil. Oharu though had eaten two full bowls before her stomach had rebelled, warning her that between the poi and fruits one more bite and it would most likely explode. Of the offered meat Oharu declined all but one tiny bite, having learned from Butterfly McGee that rich foods, especially meats should be eaten in moderation until one determined how their body would react. Though the smell made her mouth water, an underscoring scent of rich, unknown spices warned her that there were things in or on that meal she had never experienced. Though she so very much wanted too.

When the 'native dancers' started their act, one dancer whom Oharu recognized as the bellboy who had delivered their meal yesterday she was stunned. Nothing Butterfly had shown her so far could have prepared her for the energy these 'native dancers' exhibited. Beside her Annette was trying to explain some moves to a nearly helpless Kathleen. Though Kathleen might not remember much, Oharu was certain she would. *'If only I had my sketch book'* she wished.

"...fingers over their heads means rain" Annette was saying when Kathleen suddenly giggled at a whisper from her companion.

"Mind if I go" Kathleen asked. "Albert is soooo interesting."

Annette smiled in return. Her plan had worked perfectly. "Go ahead, I'll see you in the late morning. We three fly out together remember." She watched as her friend, aided by a much less inebriated male fox stood and headed back towards the hotel. Or at least in that general direction. Privately Annette was certain that at least one bed would go unused all night. Turning to Oharu she gave her best villainess impression. "Now I have you my pretty" she whispered. "What will you do?" The mouse stunned her by turning her face towards her, then kissing her fully on the lips. Her hunger was undeniable.

Meanwhile, snuggled in his little nest on the beach Oberst Unruh cursed softly under his breath as he tracked the swaying otter Kathleen and her companion in his scope. There was never a clear shot, the drunk otter having accidentally placed her companion between her and his weapon. Even had he fired it was doubtful he could hit both with a killing shot. Finally too many palm trees came between them. Sighing in exasperation at a chance lost he swung his weapon back on the party. Though his real target, the mouse, was still there too many figures shifted between them. He'd chosen the best position he could find. There were simply too many people around at the moment. Still he could wait. He had until 0100 when his waiting chartered flight would return him to Honolulu and the military transport waiting for him.

Ambassador Ischinger woke to his bedside phones insistent ringing. Unlike many officials, and more than one officer he didn't harangue the person as he answered. That was time lost that, if it were a life and death situation might not be recoverable. Besides, chewing out a night orderly in the middle of his own 'night' was a great deal more enjoyable.

"Yes? Oberst Unruh. I see. He is where? You are certain. Very well there is nothing we can do this late. I would appreciate it if you would notify me when he arrives at his transport. Yes, I understand. There will

be repercussions. Please wake Kapitanleutnant von Worst. Have him greet our returning hero warmly. Yes, tell him that. He is to greet Overst Unruah warmly. Thank you, you have done well. Good night Kapitanleutnant.” Hanging up his phone he laid back in his bed. Certain now that this problem at least was already being dealt with. Unfortunately three women’s lives would most likely be the cost. Still they were not German, therefore they were in all reality not that important to him.

Sputtering torches flickered in the early morning on-shore breeze. All the guests had finally left or passed out somewhere between the luau and hotel, to be located and eased to their rooms by others. Annette was looking forward to what was left of the night with Oharu when the mouse did something unexpected. She began to help clean up the mess. “Whoa, we’re guests” Annette reminded the mouse.

“Good guest help clean up mess” the mouse answered back, her voice not as bad as before thanks to all the juice she’d ingested. “Politeness.”

“Ah, I get it. You visit, you help clean, you get invited back. Like granda’s family reunions on his farm. Okay lets get too it.”

Their actions at first caught their hosts by surprise. After all rarely had a hotel guest more than wandered off with a few glasses usually to be found in their rooms later on. That the mouse and otter began picking up leftovers, cleaning plates and even helping with the messier problems delighted the Hawaiians. Though they made certain not to allow their guests near clothing damaging objects, objects like ‘authentic native tiki (kerosene soaked rags bound in bailing wire) torches.

Meanwhile on the beach Oberst Unruh couldn’t believe his luck. He had napped, an accident of course caused by his age and injury. Waking he had been afraid his targets had already left but no. Both of his targets had remained behind after everyone had left. With so few figures about and a clear view of the entire site there was no way either was going to escape. Sighting in on the otter, who was furthest away, he slowly squeezed his trigger.

Something knocked his weapon aside, causing his round to fly off target by dozens of yards (and thus ruin one poor pineapples entire night completely.) “What?” he snapped in German as he turned to see what had happened.

“Major Thomas William Hawkins, Retired. Of the Royal Hampshire. Met you hun blokes in Ypres” a rather large bulldog announced in English. His words were not what impressed Unruh. It was the rather large Weberly Mk VI in the hounds paw that had his full attention. “Delightful addition to your rifle. That’s what? A silencer? How unsporting of you. Then aren’t you the bloody bastard that attacked a helpless mother aboard my flight? Yes. I do believe you are. Leave the rifle behind Hun and get up.”

Carefully Oberst Unruh stood, leaving his weapon laying on the sand. “And what do you think your going to do Englander. Shoot me? That weapon will bring the authorities in minutes.”

“While you will be quite dead” Hawkins agreed. “After seeing your weapon, this little nest of yours. I don’t believe I’ll have much to worry about. Now to the beach.”

Accepting his situation for now Unruh headed for the beach, his paws held against the back of his head while he waited for the older hound to make a mistake. Carefully keeping several yards between them the bulldog followed. Close enough to retain control of this situation, far enough back that no attack by the German porcine could be effective before he would be very dead. “How did you find my position Englander. Were you hunting me?”

“Truthfully, not in the least” Hawkins admitted. “I was watching the beach with my field glasses. Its quite the view from four floors up. There are so many delightful young native ladies wandering the beaches

near sunset.”

“Meaning you were looking at the women in their uncivilized state of undress.”

“That is a hun’s way of putting it yes. I prefer to say I was enjoying the native landscape. Stop here, by the waters edge. Your position was quite visible even in the gathering dark, from my position. Turn around.”

Oberst Unruh turned around, his paws still upon his head. “Now what? Kill me in cold blood?”

“Actually I’d love too. But that would be too easy. Undress.”

“WHAT?”

“Undress. Your next complaint will be answered by a bullet in that black heart of yours. Now hurry.” Hawkins waited silently while the injured man struggled out of his dark clothing, until finally Unruh stood before him completely sans clothing. “Well, the Sergeant Major was correct after all” Hawkins laughed. “Bigger the gun is, smaller the man is. Now turn around and start swimming. Your float plain is out there somewhere waiting with its lights on I assure you.”

Unruh cursed as his feet touched the water. “I will kill you one day Englander. For this insult I will kill you slowly” he warned.

Hawkins however simply watched silently as the fat German swam into the waiting darkness. For some time he waited, until an engines sound broke the night. Of course Unruh would have had to untie his waiting pilot, but that shouldn’t have taken long even with a broken arm. Slipping his revolver back into its holster the English bulldog walked back to Unruh’s sniper pit. Sitting down in the sand he started collecting items, gently brushing sand off the freshly oiled Mauser before unloading it. “Now just what am I going to do with you” he asked the weapon. Dismounting its scope he slid the deadly rifle back into its carrying case. Then to satisfy his own curiosity he used the scope to examine the luau site.

Saluting the waiting pilot Oberst Unruh handed his bag off to another waiting airman. No one was aware of his humiliation by the Englishman several hours ago, certainly no one would find out from the dead charter pilot. Having carried a change of clothing with him he had been saved that humiliation in the least. While he waited to board his flight a Kapitanleutnant walked down the dock towards him. Unruh instantly recognized the man as an Embassy officer, one who had been friendly from the start. It would be nice to leave these decadent islands on a high note so he waited for the foxes arrival.

“Oberst” the fox called out in their native language as he neared the waiting porcine. “von Worst, Karl von Worst. I wanted to say goodbye. I will miss you. Your visit has been most educational.” He stopped a few feet away from the porcine, a smile on his face. “To be honest, this is a most boring post. Nothing but plants, mindless backward natives and enemy agents. Your war with those three has been most exciting. I understand you have ended that war tonight.” He winked. “Three less non-German’s is a plus. I am honored to know one with drive enough to see a battle to the end. Did you take their ears as well?”

“Unfortunately I was ambushed by an Englinder officer” Unruh admitted. “My prey was allowed to escape.”

von Worst expression quickly changed to one of disappointment. “That is unfortunate. It is rather quiet here, perhaps I should try my paw. I do have so much free time currently.”

“You would do this? Why?”

No longer smiling the Kapitanleutnant held up his left paw. "One, one woman is Cipangan, the second lowest breed. Two, I very much hate the English for what they forced our country into. Three," his smile returned. "I do need the practice and four... I have always wanted an otter slave. I will allow the prettier one to survive. Minus her voice of course."

"Major Thomas William Hawkins" Oberst Unruh answered. "My thanks."

"My pleasure. And Oberst" the younger hound pulled a bottle from his jacket pocket. "Napoleon brandy. For the trip. I am sorry it is such a small bottle. My pay is not that great as yet."

"Such a gift" the porcine gasped as he accepted the bottle. "I hope that we shall meet again. I would like to return these favors."

"Perhaps in the next war Oberst. Your plane." He stepped away, watching as the Oberst entered his transport. Waited as the aircraft taxied out, lifted off to eventually vanish into the night sky. "It is a very good vintage Oberst" he whispered to the night, then turned smartly back towards his waiting car. His bed waited and he certainly had no intention of killing anyone. At least not this week.

Forty minutes later the unconscious body of a rather large porcine hurtled out of a night sky, slamming into an uncaring ocean with bone crushing force. Soon after a second, much smaller splash occurred as a drugged bottle of brandy followed.

April 16th, 1936

Oharu sat alone in the hotel suites minor bedroom. Several sticks of incense were slowly burning in front of her while she guided herself deeper into her own soul. Outside the room Annette sat reading a book, waiting. Though the otter had been carefully warned not to enter no matter what, still Oharu had locked the door between them. Most Europeans simply didn't understand privacy she'd decided long ago. Especially when they were enamored by someone.

Her minds eyes saw again the meadow Saimmi had created so many moons ago. To her left was the great grey wall, its loaned strength still holding back her madness. As she watched a smoking stone fell, bounded across yellowing grass to land hissing into the waterfall. Setting down she waited, waited for her younger self to arrive. Here there was no real time, no stress, no pressure other than that of the gradually failing wall.

"*You must never face that alone*" her Miko self said in welcome. Oharu felt a small pain at the sound of that gentle voice. Her voice, before cruel hemp rope had forever made ruin of her voicebox.

"*If we do not face it together, it will come for us separately*" she agreed. "*I have decided.*"

"*Your decision*" Miko Oharu asked as she too settled down, her red hakama fluttering down to cover much of Artist Oharu's right leg.

"*I will turn away from what was, what I can never have again. I will ask forgiveness of the Spontoon government. I will ask their religious leaders if I may train.*" She took a breath, letting it out slowly. "*I will ask to stay forever. There is no place for us within our own society, not even a Shinto temple. For as I have learned we no longer believe the God Emperor infallible. Yet I wish to continue, not only to live but to serve others. I cannot do this by simply living. I must serve.*"

Miko Oharu simply watched her older self for some time before answering. "*They will kill us. There will be no new religion. No future life. No serving others. No healing. We will be a forgotten coin tossed among*

troubled waters by a foolish man. A man who understands not quite fully the economy of Honor. Haven't you stepped too far down this path to turn back now?"

Artist Oharu leaned over, reaching down to grasp the red cloth in her right paw. Light flared from the point where flesh touched cloth. *"Our life was the temple and family"* she whispered. *"I have dwelled upon this greatly since coming on this trip. It has become not only a journey of body but of soul as well. I know now why I was running. Running from nothing but my own fears. What happened was not of our making, was not within our ability to control. What has happened since..."* She released the cloth, sitting back up smoothly. *"I have allowed the winds to push me where they would. By standing up to those four men I rediscovered myself. I will no longer allow fear to guide my life. I must warn those of Spontoan, even should it cost us all. They do not deserve the gathering typhoon. If they kill us then it shall be, but even so I think better them than even our own people. I believe that they will give us one chance, should we beg for it."*

Miko Oharu stood slowly, brushing yellowed grass petals from her bright red hakama before she answered. *"You have little time my sister. We must be one to face what stands behind that wall, and as Saimmi warned, it will not hold much longer."* As if to underscore her words another stone fell, tumbling across yellowed grass to cool hissing in the waterfall. *"Neither of us will stand long alone against what we have woken there."*

Artist Oharu turned her attention to the wall, noticing for the first time a great glowing crack along its facing surface. *"I woke"* she corrected. *"I struck at you, not understanding. Doing so you lost control of our demons. Now it is the truth we must face. Truth and fear. We will face it together my sister. We will stand or fall together. I will not allow you to face such alone."*

Miko Oharu laughed, a gentle sound even in this place. *"You return to what we once were. Did you really believe I would allow you to face such alone? We will be one again, should time permit. When you come again my sister bring saki. It has been some time since we have tasted that drink. Moh-lee. Annette. You must find a way to protect both from our heart. We can not allow ourselves to hurt either. We can not allow ourselves to bring pain to either. It would be dishonorable. Annette is not for us, yet like you my sister I much wish that she was. There will be another for her. This I have been told. Should we survive. Moh-Lee, though our soul sings for her has no interest in us. I fear that our song will remain unheard forever by her. If only she would smile upon us, for like you my sister all I am longs for her. Perhaps, as I have been told there is one, though even I cannot see. It will not matter though, as long as we may become one, and the one help others."* She faded then, slowly. Drifting away as smoke in a soft summer wind.

Standing Artist Oharu approached the wall, feeling the heat billowing from its surface long before she stood next to its face. She felt no fear now, having regained her center. Yet she could tell even now that her current crippled abilities were not a match for what lay just beyond the stones protective surface. *"Facing you"* she said to the stones face. *"I must become one again with my younger self"* she continued. *"Only in doing so will I not destroy all of what once was. Yet all of her will become but shadows, memories. I will loose her, loose her and she is important to me now. Yet if I do not do this deed you will crush both of us, leaving nothing but madness behind. That would be a greater evil than what I must do to survive."* She closed her eyes, feeling tears begin to fall. *"I would rather she live than I, yet it cannot be. You have well seen to that."* Turning away she walked back across desert dry grass to the thinning stream. Her face felt as though she had stood next to a furnace, her fur dry, her skin itched. Miko Oharu was right. It must be faced. It must be put down forever. Yet alone, that would be beyond either.

Annette said nothing when Oharu returned, noting however the tear trails in her delicate facial fur. Instead she continued reading. If the mouse wanted her to know she would tell her. Until then it was none of her business, even though she desperately did want to know.

April 17th, 1936

Annette was looking at several papers in her paws as they walked out of a brilliant white hospital building on Hickum Field. "Thank you Oharu. I guess inside me I'd given up. Its been a long time since I was in a hospital. Other than last week and once for a checkup when I signed onto Pan Am" Annette explained to her companion.

Oharu nodded, looking back at the stark building behind them. In so many ways it had been exactly like a hospital in her homeland, yet in many more ways different. Everything was stark, inside painted soft military colors of a shade that slowly turned ones stomach. Nowhere had she seen the touches meant to allow a patient to meditate, to turn their thoughts away from what ailed them. "I remembered you wished to become Doctor" she husked. She held up a cloth bag filled with pamphlets, a few spare books and even samples of the newest drugs. Though none of the mentioned magical sulphates had been available. Still much too expensive to give even a single sample away. "These I take to Spontoon hospital. Spontoon low on list places for new things." She ended her words with a cough of her still raw throats complaint.

"Yeah, I guess so" the otter agreed. "Your probably short of doctors too aren't you?"

"This honestly not know" the mouse admitted. "Both doctors I know Spontoon are friendly. Sometime look overworked. Still know more missionaries on Casino island than Doctors and nurse entire nation." She coughed again before lowering her eyes. "Simple maid not often see hospital, but I ask when get back. Send you letter if want."

Annette took Oharu's chin in her paw, lifting her head. "Don't look down when you talk to me, your doing the best you can." She released her companions chin, satisfied when it remained up. "Wasn't that the neatest, when that sailor stopped breathing and the native nurse saved his life by breathing for him? I've never seen anything like it. It wasn't in my school books either."

Oharu's mind snapped up the image as if replaying a movie. A sailor who had overheated while working on the flight line, brought in, iced down. Everything seemed to be going well until he suddenly stopped breathing. She mentally slowed her minds playback, paying attention to details most others would have missed. Everyone seemed stunned, as if they didn't know what to do when a native nurse had grabbed the mans head, tipping it back while opening his mouth. She had breathed for him, sealing their mouths together with her own lips, exhaling her breath into his lungs, forcing him to accept what oxygen her own body hadn't used until suddenly he had coughed. It was her next action Oharu remembered most, turning the sailors head aside a moment before he expelled the contents of his stomach onto the floor. After that he had breathed normally, if a bit shallowly. And... Everyone had seemed so surprised.

"I do not think anyone else see before either" she warned the otter. "Maybe you best talk with native healers. Something they learn from wave walker accidents."

"You mean wave riders" Annette corrected. They had reached their waiting car, Annette entering first as was her habit. "Might be a good idea that. Doing anything special this afternoon?"

Oharu nodded her thanks to the native company driver holding the door open for her as she too settled into the car's backseat. "Nothing" she admitted after the door had closed. "Wanted Otter for lunch. Can wait."

"Then lets go find some of these native doctors" Annette suggested, fighting to keep her blush from exploding.

Oharu studied her paws for a few moment as their driver settled into his seat. "Dress like this?" she asked seriously."

"Point taken" the otter laughed. "Hotel" she ordered their driver. "We have to change. Then any native medical clinic that you think will talk to us... to me. Seriously."

April 18th, 1936

Somewhere in Hickham field, in a secure series of offices a superior was talking to one of his best subordinates. "I don't think that I am very happy about how your report came out" Major William Forrester admitted, dropping a folder marked Top Secret on his desk. As he tapped the closed folder with one finger, the panthers long narrow tail snapped out from anger. "We know she's a spy for the British. They told us. She told us. We know she works for us too, but now all paths lead to her being a Cipangan agent as well. A triple agent? Unbelievable. No one can juggle than many balls without flubbing somewhere." He took a breath. "And now you tell me she's spying for this what? Spontoon Island group? Come on Captain. That's absolutely impossible. They can't even afford a warship. Much less spies."

"Sir" the slightly younger Captain began, his black and off white husky fur remaining flat only due to years of training in self control. "I believe that this woman makes Pfalzgräfin Schwarzkopf look like an amateur. I know it seems like a wild idea, especially when the last false data never surfaced where we expected. But I've taken months tracking her travels sir. She's been making the same circle for over three years. Every time she arrives somewhere things seem to happen. Agents move, disruptions occur. Sure, we and the British bank roll a lot of our agents through her. Even some Chinese from what I've read. That's expected as the Chinese sometimes give us pretty good intel through her. But she's spending time in Cipangan areas too. Too much time, often weeks. Information follows her like a dust devils tail in high summer. Hints are Cipangu knows exactly what our force level is. To the man. And we know they got the British naval codes last year somehow. If its her, that last could only come from General Harper. And Harper has been having, um, relations with her for long over two years now." He held up a much larger folder, this one also stamped Top Secret. "Then there's all this other data..."

"I know, I know. Have you any idea who her local Cipangan agents are yet? Pre-supposing she is some kind of super-agent. Which I have serious reservation about, officially. After all she may be a woman but she's just an islander. That pretty much restricts her education in these things."

'Meaning sir, your boss and Washington don't think she's intelligent enough' the Captain thought, too smart to verbalize that thought. "Yes sir. A few sir. A Cipangan agent was killed a few weeks ago in Kuo Han. Strange thing is, our little bobcat received a rather nasty foot injury at the same time. In Kuo Han. I only know that last because she came here for treatment. We are certain we know who in Midway are working for her. Still no idea who her contact here is. I thought her contacts were the Split Palms resort people. But it dead ended as nothing more than a son and daughter involved in the local Goddard club. Everything else checks out. Then our agent in Spontoon thought he'd spotted her newest Cipangan agent in those islands, but that was a dead end too. Just some brainless fluff-bunny artist she picked up for entertainment he reports. But he reports that she's having an affair with the Spontoon Chief of Intelligence, or whatever that ferret calls himself. We aren't getting any useful intel about Spontoon other than what that last British agent got out by the skin of her teeth and a foot ahead of death. If its true she's having an affair with the top man on Spontoon, even though we have them from other sources I'd expect at least the latest Rain Island codes from her. There are just too many paths leading to the same answer."

"And" Forrester tapped the report again. "On this thin ice you want me authorize you to set a trap. A trap to catch an agent apparently so good she plays four paws of cards at a time, hiding nothing but aces in her blouse as she does so. Captain..." He stood, his black fur shining in the morning light. "That's what we do here. Run with this. If your right then it's a promotion in the least. If your wrong no one will know it wasn't just practice. Besides..." He picked up the report, opening it. "There is just enough oddity here to peak my own interest. I'd like the chance to talk with her myself, in private. Contact the British. Let the General know everything you suspect without naming names. Then if he's willing to go along have them

seal him off. False reports, fake information. If she takes the bait we already have a very good firing squad. That doesn't mean they don't need practice. By the way Captain, what makes our agent on Spontoon think this bit of fluff, as you call her, isn't an agent as well?"

"Several things sir. For one, she's some kind of Priestess he found out. Cipangu has never in their history used a Priestess as a spy. At least outside their own borders. I can't find any reference to a real priestess ever being a spy, though some spies have camouflaged themselves as such. Mainly those assassins they call ninjas. Its something about their honor system. For another. He um, he stumbled across them one afternoon at a waterfall. His exact words were. 'If that's a secret code I want in on it.'"

"Was he seen?"

"Not likely sir. Two Red Stones is one of our best at this kind of job. He's full blooded Apache after all. Cougars are rare outside the U.S. but I've been told by those who should know that he's no fool. Finally she's actually here on Hawaii at the moment, very much under the close personal supervision of a young Pan American lady whom I suspect is a special Navy agent herself. One of those rare ones we don't get told about, and get seriously reamed for interfering with. This mouse may be working for her as well, which would explain what Stones saw. Seduction is very much a woman's way of getting information. "

"Meaning reduction in pay or career ending letters of reprimand" the Major admitted. "Fine then. Ignore the other. For this bobcat do your duty Captain. If she bites, reel her in. I don't want to hear she's slipped your net and is hiding somewhere on our island. We'd never find her before she slips away on some native boat. Plug this leak. If she's guilty I'd rather have her alive, but her pelt covering my chair and her head mounted on my wall just like the French did to Schwarzkopf will be just as acceptable. If she's innocent, there's still an awful lot about her actions I'd like seen explained. In detail. Dismissed."

April 19th, 1936

Annette was returning from the hotels beauty salon when a stocky bulldog bumped into her. "Excuse me miss" the man apologized, then continued with "May we talk, privately?"

She paused, stepping back to study her strange visitor. "I know you?" she asked.

"We met very briefly once aboard your aircraft. The altercation" he explained.

With that clue memories fell together. "Your one of the two men who held down that German. What can I do for you?"

"In private?" He indicated the bar, where few people were at this time of day. "It involves the three of you of course. Your co-worker and current um... shall we say companion? I shall buy of course?"

"One drink then" the otter agreed. "My companion as you refer to Oharu, is waiting for my return. We have a serious afternoon planned."

"Waiting quite eagerly I might think. You are quite ravishing." Leading the way he took her to a private booth, ordering a pint of dark ale for himself. "And you?"

"Any red wine" Annette answered. As soon as the waiter had vanished she leaned forward. "What is this about" she asked.

"First let me introduce myself. I am Major Hawkins, Thomas William Hawkins. Retired of course. Now, as to my request to speak with you. On the fifteenth, that was four days ago of course, the three of you

attended a native beach picnic.”

“Luau. You should try it” Annette corrected.

“Luau then. Perhaps I shall on my next visit. Were you aware that a certain German was watching you at the time? Ah, our drinks.” He signed a cheque, nodding to the waiter before he left. “Ah, Ale. I am so tired of the colored water these American’s call beer.” He took a drink, one eyebrow lifting at the taste. “My goodness, this is rather good.”

“You were talking about the luau” Annette reminded him.

“Yes, yes I was. Delightful taste this. Anyway” he reached into a pocket of his shirt, drawing out of it a long shiny brass casing. Setting it on the table he rolled it towards Annette. “This was fired at you, or your rather delightful companion that night. Only by accident did it miss it’s intended target.”

Annette captured the expended casing with one paw, lifting it to the light for a better look. “I don’t understand. I’m basically a baby sitter in the air. Oharu is a maid who draws. Why would anyone want to kill either of us?”

“That is as the American’s put it, is the question of the day. Why would anyone want to kill either of you.” He held out his paw until Annette returned the casing. “It really doesn’t make any sense. I have spent several days trying to puzzle it out, and I think I may have an answer.” He took another sip of his ale, obviously enjoying its taste.

“And that is” Annette asked before she sipped her own drink. There was definitely a chill in the air, or was that fear she wondered.

“One of you is a spy. Or both” Hawkins answered. He held up his paw, stopping the otters complaint. “Hear me out first. I am not saying either of you is a spy. It is simply what the facts say. Now lets start at the beginning. For the last eighteen months you have been flying from here to China, occasionally even America though rarely. Now Germany has several interests in China. Interests that a certain tourist has visited at least twice. With camera in paw.”

“How do you know that” Annette asked, interested. She knew she wasn’t a spy so what did it matter she liked to take pictures.

“I still have my contacts” the bulldog admitted. “Do not bother asking, I certainly wouldn’t tell you the truth even if you did. As I recall there are several photographs of a harbor with German ships in it. Are you aware that two of those ships are suspected Q-ships?”

“What” Annette asked. “Is a Q-ship, and how do you know about my photo hobby?”

“Very good answer my young lady. To answer your second question I’ve been through your things.” He ignored the look of shock on the otters face. “Second, for the sake of argument lets say you honestly don’t know. It is a merchantman converted into a light warship. Very nasty work that, especially when your opponent is surprised. They have been known to sink light warships using the element of surprise. You have also taken pictures of other interesting sights, several that the German’s are more than a bit touchy about. As are a few other nations.”

“I have never taken a picture unless I was with friends or a tourist group” the otter complained. “And I’m not a spy.”

Hawkins merely smiled, drained his mug and waved to the water. “Another please, and strong brandy for the lady” he ordered. “I wouldn’t have expected any other answer from you Miss Riverstone” he

continued after their drinks arrived. "You do keep up with the world political scene don't you?"

"Not really. Medicine is my bag" she answered. "As soon as I can find a place to finish my residency I'll be a doctor."

"Yet you have twice approached your own navy. Quite generous terms you've been offered. Why haven't you accepted them?"

"Eight years is a long time sir, and your no retired Major."

"Touche. Very astute observation you have. War Miss Riverstone. War is coming and not too far in our future. It will make the Great War seem like a sideshow. You should prepare I think. Strange though isn't it, that until a few days ago you haven't shown much interest in medicine since marrying um.."

"Sincere. Nesbeit Sincere" Annette admitted.

"Yes. That action adventure star. Strange isn't it, that as soon as he married you a certain part became available. A part for a movie made outside of the United States? Triumph Of The Will as I recall. Then when you left..."

"Left hell. He booted me out."

"When you left, there were no other offers?"

Annette rubbed her face with one paw. "First, that part was available to him before we met. He only took it after we married. I think it was to get away from me. I don't think he ever really understood just why he'd married me. I'm half darkfur you see even if I can pass as a whitefur with cosmetics. If I really try. I married him because I thought I loved him. Boy was I ever off base. Second, he didn't like the way he was treated so he swore never to take another European movie part. Third I've been kinda down in the dumps these last two years. I haven't really been doing anything except running on auto-pilot."

"Really. And this younger lady Oharu, she disconnected your auto-pilot? Lets take in your companion shall we? Spontoon is a rather small island nation. I understand that it comes under the Rain Island Naval Syndicate umbrella by treaty. Why would Spontoon send a maid all the way to Hawaii just to draw scenes they plan to sell to movie companies. Movie production is one of their growing incomes. Why try to send it elsewhere. Not having seen any of the ladies art in person it seems strange to me that she would be most interested in aircraft. Why is this do you think?"

"Oharu wants to be a mechanic" Annette explained. "If you ever saw her face when an engine is running you'd know why. She gets off on them. It's probably the vibration, some people are extremely susceptible to certain vibrations. Oharu happens to be addicted to the roar of a piston engine. Not that she understands that of course."

Hawkins nodded as if understanding. "A very good story, but you've been the one to ask for these visits. You've been the one to select just where you went and I think you've been seen with a camera quite often. A camera Miss Riverstone, where your companion only has a pen and paper. Odd don't you think? Not to forget that rather racy, and very expensive clothing you've both suddenly acquired." He pulled a photograph from one pocket, dropping it to the tabletop. "How much is she paying you Miss Riverstone?"

Annette picked up the photograph. A female bobcat in rather racy swim gear looked back at her, a smile on her face. "Don't know her."

"Really? Sandy Doecan made a point of making friends with your little mouse, or the other way around. I've seen an American agents report on that woman's arrival to Spontoon. She isn't a native though they

have obviously accepted her. Soon after Sandy left Spontoon she arrived here for medical treatment. Not long after Miss..” He made a face. “I won’t call her that. Miss Oharu arrives, on your aircraft no less. You see Miss Riverstone. Spontoon is one of those very rare places where you can’t bribe an official. Trust me its been tried by professionals. Her possession of an authentic Spontoon passport means she’s been accepted as a native. Considering what happened to her she’d be extremely open to affection and guidance by a stronger personality. Tell me Miss Riverstone. Are you still an American agent or have you become a Cipangan agent for Sandy Doecan. Was Oharu a messenger for Sandy, or simply a present from that woman to you for a job well done. Tell me Miss Riverstone, does she know she’s in deadly danger as long as she’s with you, or are you playing cards with her life for the excitement. Her death would have been a warning to you. A warning that no one you cared for was safe.”

“I told you I don’t know this Sandy whomever, and I’m not an agent for anyone but Pan American Airways. Oharu and I met by accident the first time. Kathleen and I were sent to find her later. We just happened to hook up.” She dropped the photograph, staring at the bulldog as if daring him to accuse her again. Instead he picked up the photograph, then pulled out the shell casing again.

“Yet somehow you found her first. I truly believe you will make a great actress Miss Riverstone, maybe even a good Doctor. If you ever finish this residency of yours. Tell me a few things though Miss ‘I am not a spy’. Why would a known German agent risk his mission and his life just to kill you. Second, just how did this seemingly harmless woman just happen to be on your flight. A flight she was not scheduled for, nor as I discovered were you. A flight carrying not only a known German spy but the wife of a very important Persian Officer. Himself on a secret mission. Her death would have ended that mission, a crippling blow to certain nations. How did she just happen to save that woman from certain death at the German’s paw. Then if you would be so kind, explain how three nearly helpless woman not only survived, but killed three out of four highly trained German military men. Leaving the forth so injured he’ll never be able to function fully on his own again. It doesn’t add up Miss Riverstone. It certainly doesn’t add up.”

Annette had had enough. She downed the fiery brandy in one gulp, so angry that she didn’t notice how strong it truly was. “Lets start at the beginning shall we? Hi, I’m Annette Riverstone. I’m an Air Hostess for Pan American Airways assigned to the China Clipper. And you are?”

Smiling the bulldog stood. “Just leaving” he answered. “I see now that your not foolish enough to break cover even when the evidence is so heavy against you.” Dropping the cartridge case into her empty glass he touched his forehead with one finger. “Your very good Miss Riverstone. Very good. I shall enjoy sparing with you again next time we meet. I wish we had women in our forces half as good as you. Until then...” He took her paw, barely letting his lips graze her fur. “You are a natural, please be careful.” Annette could only watch in disbelief as he walked out of the bar, leaving her alone in stunned amazement.

“Will there be anything else Miss” the waiter asked, breaking Annette from her thoughts.

“No. Nothing. Just the check please.”

“There is no check Miss. Your friend paid for everything.”

Standing she brushed down her dress, embarrassed for some unknown reason. “Thank you. I best go then. Wait, have a bottle of Scotch delivered to my room. I’m going to need it.” Almost as an afterthought she snatched up the casing, then hurrying she made her way back to her room and the waiting Oharu.

Later that evening Annette was up alone, Oharu having turned in early. Half drunk on the Scotch she was busy slowly paging through the mouses sketch books, searching for what she wasn’t certain. Oharu had simply handed over all the books when the otter had requested to look through them. Simply handed them over, as though she had absolutely nothing to hide. *‘How dare he accuse me of being a spy’* the otter thought in anger as she turned another page. Lava shown up at her, carefully drawn in a detail that

allowed Annette to visualize what she had never seen, what she hoped never to see. Living rock flowing like water less than two meters from her eyes. No wonder Oharu's eyes had been so bright, she had almost been flash cooked standing less than a body length from Annette and lived to talk about it. It explained her energy that night as well. Near death experience tended to concentrate ones look at life.

Such detail though. In her landscapes, her portraits, everything she saw. At first Annette had taken it as one of those rare natural gifts she'd experienced in her own life. People who could leaf through a book then quote any page, people who could quantify enormous sums in their heads so fast a slide rule barely had time to move or duplicate anything they had only seen for a few seconds. That had changed as Oharu had taught her the beginning steps to such a memory. *'With so many rituals to know, so many prayers it is best that a Miko learn to remember as much as she can as quickly as she can.'* So should a spy Annette decided.

Opening another book she soon ran across a drawing that shook her. It was the pilots station for the XPBY-1 they had been shown. Oharu had spent less than ten minutes seated at that station. She'd never opened her books, yet there it was in front of Annette. Each dial labeled, even a chip of paint Annette remembered was faithfully reproduced. *'I could learn to fly that aircraft with this picture'* she thought. *'If I understood her language.'* Her mind closed an open loop, added one more factor into an equation half a day into the making, made a quantum jump across half the universe and presented three answers that made her physical ill for a moment.

Oharu was a spy.

She was in love with a spy.

A spy that had saved Annette's life twice, Kathleen's once.

April 21st 1936

It was time and Oharu was packing to leave. Though it was still dark outside her flight was supposed to depart just after sunrise. Missing it would be a shame. Though she still had the tickets for her originally planned return trip tomorrow, being flown first class aboard the China Clipper to Midway was a chance she didn't want to miss. It meant, by the schedule she'd been given another overnight stay, but then a straight flight aboard a chartered aircraft from Spontoon. She'd be at the McGee's before supper on the 23rd instead of breakfast on the 26th.

Annette walked in as the mouse was stacking her filled sketch books, an envelope in her paw. "I don't believe it, they did exactly what you asked" the otter announced as she offered the envelope to her mouse friend. "How did you know?"

"Did not" Oharu admitted. "Asked. Not hurt to ask. They only can say no." She coughed softly, even after this long her throat was still a bit sensitive from the volcano's acidic fumes. Forcing it to sound worse than it was simply inflamed it more. Accepting the envelope she slid it into one of her now filled sketch books.

"I envy you" Annette continued. "Flying home first class. I wonder if they know their carrying a spy." She sat on a chair facing Oharu, watching the mouse for her reaction. What she got surprised her.

"How long you know" Oharu asked softly, sliding her books into the suitcase she'd brought with her.

"What? No denial? No threats? No bribes? No attempt to slit my throat then hide my body in a closet until you've made good your escape? Come on girl. Spies are supposed to be tougher than that."

Oharu simply shrugged, nervously taking her tail in her paws, picking at the hairs at its tip. "What you do now Annette?"

"Nothing. I love you Oharu. I can't do anything about that. I owe you my life at least twice. But if you ever come back I won't have a choice will I. I probably won't love you by then will I?"

"Because I can not return love for you. No. Your love not that strong yet." Oharu admitted.

"Because you wouldn't let it grow." Standing the otter clasped her paws behind her back as she turned away from the mouse. "You won't let it grow. I should turn you in. I'd be a hero, get a promotion maybe. A least a reward. It'd cost some people their jobs but I'd be in the cream. I might even enter the Navy, return to medicine. All because..." She turned around, facing her companion, her eyes on fire. "I only have to cut the heart out of the first woman I've ever loved. Probably the first person I've ever really loved." She sighed, bringing her paws in front of her as her emotions battled, staring at her fingers as though they held the answer she searched for. "I guess I don't love you as much as you love Molly. I won't die for you. But I will lie for you. Once. At least once."

Closing her suitcase the mouse gently sat it on the floor before answering. "You have advantage Annette. You still have country to love. I not have anything. Molly fill all gaps so fast I not have time to defend. Like volcano throwing burning cloud at village. It happen so fast no time even to close window. If I let, you would love me as much as I love Molly. I not let. Now you know why." She stood, but did not approach the taller otter. "How did you?"

"Find out? I stumbled across it" Annette admitted. "I'm no Sherlock Hound but you made it so easy for me. The things you wanted to see, how you reacted when you saw them. What you drew, the detail you put into each drawing. You make a really lousy spy Oharu. When your looking at an engine, even in parts there a light in your eyes I think I'd call love. In the least lust. But anything else it changes to cold calculation. Like a doctor deciding what has to be done to save a patient. You don't do the detail work on your drawings until your back here, then you put in things even I missed. Your memory is unbelievable. I've never encountered the like before. Honestly woman. Any intelligence agent that see's those books would have you in irons in a second. You'd be skinned alive, slowly. Then your head stuffed and mounted on a wall exactly like what they did to that Prussian vixen in the Great War. I've seen her, hanging there in the great hall, her head mounted on a slab of burl oak as a warning. She was beautiful and the French are barbarians for doing it. At least the Prussians gave her body a state funeral. But I won't let something like that happen to you. So who do you spy for anyway?"

"Cipangu"

"Cip... But your exiled. Why?" Annette stepped away from Oharu, her face a mask of confusion. "Those scars, that story. All settings for a cover story right?"

"No. Not supposed to happen. Exile lie yes, letter from Emperor in Hiroshima now. Waiting return if successful. I supposed to be dropped offshore one mile, on wreckage. Crew do this their own choice." Oharu tried to hold Annette's gaze, only to have the otter turn away again. "I truly exile now. I turned against my Emperor. Annette. I want children even if not want be any mans wife. You think I let self be ruined so probably never have children. Just on hope exile be rescinded? I am not mad Annette. I am not."

"Sure your ruined" the otter laughed. "That's easy to fake with a bit of surgery. No your right, your not mad. Misguided yes, abused yes. So you go back and turn over your work. What then? On to San Diego where our naval bases are? Washington? England? France? You'll be the well traveled poor victim by the time its over. Your head mounted next to hers. I couldn't stand that Oharu. I couldn't."

"I surrender Spontoon government five, five days after return" Oharu admitted. "You help me to make up my mind on this. To decide. To understand there is no future for me. No future anywhere but Spontoon." She stood straighter, releasing her tail. "I no more victim Annette. I am Oharu. No more Osui. Just Oharu. I will accept what Spontoon government decide."

Annette stared at the mouse as though she had suddenly grown antlers. "I take it back. You are mad. They'll kill you."

"Maybe" Oharu admitted. "Always chance worst thing happen. I am ready for that, if must be. Even with Emperors's letter Cipangu will kill me if they invade. America will too, when they find out. Same British, Russian or Kuo Han. Spontoon..." She took a deep breath, releasing it slowly to block a cough. "Spontoon is different. I fall in love with Spontoon. Maybe they let me stay. I have some useful skills. I can learn to be priestess."

"And there is still Molly" the otter reminded her. That brought a rough laugh from the mouse.

"Molly. That impossible Annette. If I met you first. Yes I think maybe Molly not affect me as badly with you already in my heart. Maybe. Molly ever find out my feelings she kill me, if I am lucky. Molly leave Spontoon when finish school. She will fly away. I never see again. Maybe soon after my heart will not blossom so fully. Maybe then I will find room for another within it. If so I wish it had been you. Too late now I think. Trust broken." She walked over to their breakfast, silently selecting two unused implements from its surface. "You are doctor in all but name Annette." She turned, handing the implements to the otter. "You examine me, then say if I am ruined or not. Either way" she swallowed. "I sorry I ever hurt you."

Ten minutes later Annette, cursing, slammed the door of her unused bedroom behind her, leaving Oharu alone in their shared room. Left the mouse alone to hear deep sobs of pain the otter released. None of the things Oharu had told her the otter discovered, were a lie.

Late that evening on Spontoon's South island ancient grey streaked black fur reflected the evening firelight. Huakava opened her eyes, having finished her nights task early. Grey clouds were growing over her chosen one. Grey clouds the mouse could not yet detect. Not until she had truly regained her balance. Yet there were good omens as well. That black cloud that had obscured the mouse's inner sight had faded to near nothing. Though the precious time Saimmi had given Oharu was fast running out, there had been enough change to believe that she would prevail. Decisions had been made, a path chosen. Standing slowly, groaning softly as old joints complained the panther rubbed her muzzle with one paw. It was time to talk with a certain ferret. Time to begin readying certain events. She looked up again into the nearly cloudless sky for the answers those stars would give her.

Though she had not been Saimmi's teacher, perhaps that one would help her again. Leokau, Huakava's last student, had her uses. But she had chosen motherhood early. In the choosing, and in the illness her own mother had been struck with while carrying her she would be useless for the battle ahead. Gathering her wrap around her the panther started walking down a narrow path. It was over an hours walk to the Hoele'toemi household from here in daylight. With her aged eyesight it would almost be twice that in the dark. It was not often that the High Priestess of Spontoon spent a night alone on South Island.

As she walked Huakava reflected over the last years events. Though she had nothing to do with Sapohatan's path, or the Songmark school when two of that school's students had chosen to learn Spontoon's religion they all came under the umbrella of her responsibility. Amazing she thought as she trod down a path not taken by her feet in over a year. Though many times one leg of this triangle had overlapped another, never before had all three expressed themselves so strongly in a non-islander. Things were changing, and from what she had heard the two young women were taking their teachings seriously. Not simply learning just enough in order to marry a native boy as others had done. Now this

new woman from Cipangu. Damaged, yet still strong in her faith. Not hiding behind her pain and fear. Already trained in a like religion, her own gods offering her to Spontoon's service and she too was beginning to fall under this new three staved umbrella.

Was it a sign? She thought not. Still she had not discussed it with anyone else. Saimmi's teacher would have been her first choice, but that aged woman had passed on two years ago. Huakava herself had only a pawful of months remaining, perhaps no more. Saimmi might be High Priestess after her, she was one of those the panther was considering. But who would be her second? Not Leokau, she hadn't the ability. Not with her mind and heart now turned towards motherhood. One of the new girls perhaps? Though she hated to admit it, the Songmark girls held so much promise. Oharu though was still an unknown. Even if she applied herself how much could she learn, how much could she accept before Huakava herself passed across the waves. No, it must be one of the Songmark girls, unless Saimmi had another choice.

Near midnight the panther stepped into a clearing. Before her was the Hoele'toemi household. It did not surprise the old woman that two figures stood waiting. This late none waiting would be tourists, not here. Tourists were not often welcome here, certainly not this late. "May one visit for a time" she asked the waiting figures. "To speak of things?"

April 22nd, 1936

"I have everything" Oharu informed Annette for the eighth or ninth time that morning as they stood close together in the Honolulu airport. "You will not stay see me leave?"

"I hate goodbys" the otter admitted as people flowed around them. "Francine will take good care of you. I wish I had clipper duty but they want me back in San Frisco for something." She grinned. "Maybe I'm going to have to explain all these expenses."

"Maybe. I am good maid" Oharu reminded her friend. "I not spend much money. You tell me. I will help with what can should they demand repayment."

"If your still alive."

"True. That possibility awaits" the mouse admitted. "I feel that things not be as bad as that. You return to medicine. You will make good doctor."

Annette looked away, as if searching for someone in the crowd. "I'd rather be with you" she finally admitted.

"No. To be with me. Danger. Maybe lose life. Annette you are friend. I will not let friend be put in any danger. Even less when I love her."

"I know. You'll just stand naked in front of killers to distract them, then toss them at our feet to deal with as we want." Reaching out she took the mouse's paws into her own. "We had fun. You and I. Maybe we will have fun again. But if we never meet again, promise me you won't live a lonely life. Promise me you'll find someone else to... have fun with."

Looking up into the taller otter's eyes Oharu suppressed a blush as best she could. "Won't make you promise I can not keep. Maybe I find another life companion" she answered roughly. "Maybe not."

"I understand. In fact I'd prefer you don't lie. I like you better that way. Now go get on the plane, that's second call." She started to release the mouse's paws, only to have Oharu pull her forward into a searing kiss.

"I will remember you forever" Oharu whispered, pressing her forehead against Annette's for a moment, ignoring the looks many were giving them. "Always place in my home for you. Always. You will become Doctor. You will make me proud." She coughed as fire flamed in her over stressed throat, making further speech impossible.

"And you keep working on your English, your getting better." With a final hug Annette released Oharu, quickly vanishing into the crowd. Vanished to where her tears couldn't be seen by the mouse.

Late that afternoon on Midway island a tired young cocker spaniel looked up from his stack of freight at the sound of an aircraft approaching. That low deep thrum warned him that it could only be one plane though. With a sigh of resignation he returned to stacking cargo, his punishment for violating company policy by getting a certain mouse passage on that same aircraft. With luck he'd be doing his old job within a month. Running messages, finding passengers missing luggage. It had all seemed so exhausting when he'd been doing it. Now, after so long in the baking sun Eddy knew he'd be happy to get stuck in the information kiosk. At least it had a fan.

As always the China Clipper grew from a speck in the sky to a massive aircraft in just minutes. Circling the landing area once, as was standard procedure, its pilot lowered the craft ever so gently onto the waves. Minutes later, its once roaring engines now silent it floated next to the dock. If one listened the pinging of cooling metal sounded much like tiny hammers striking tiny anvils.

Oharu stepped out of the craft almost first. Having traveled in first class (much to the obvious disgust of several other first class passengers) she had decided that travel, at least European style travel, was something she preferred to avoid when possible. It wasn't so bad, the looks she was given as she boarded. It was the high society poodle from Boston who had sat behind her. Apparently she didn't believe any but Americans and Europeans knew how to speak English. Pausing as she reached the gangplank end Oharu bent down as if to check something. Over her somersaulted the haughty poodle, ending up lying flat on her back in a tumble of torn clothing. Standing, Oharu walked up next to her private hell for that entire trip. "For record" she said loud enough to be heard by anyone who cared to. "Both my parents were married to each other." She couldn't help herself from the next, having been around Annette much too long. "Unlike your daughter." Walking away she left the white furred poodle still lying on her back screaming obscenities towards her. It didn't make her feel any better, in fact it made her feel worse. Her actions had been completely out of character for her. That warned her that her time was quickly ending. If she didn't heal soon her emotions would destroy her forever. Walking quickly into the relative coolness of Pan Am's terminal building she went directly to its information Kiosk. "Eddy please" she told the tired looking female mongoose.

"Eddy? No last name?" the young woman asked. She had probably been pretty in the morning, now she looked more like a wilted flower.

"Work as runner here. Cocker Spaniel. So hi..."

"Oh EDDY." Her eyes lit up in a way Oharu knew meant that, to her at least, Eddy was more than just another employee. "Um, just a minute please. He's working in shipping this month." She picked up a phone, speaking into it. Looking up she managed to paste a tired smile on her lips. "His supervisor wants to know why you need him" she asked.

Drawing an envelope from her kimono, the same envelope Annette had handed her just last evening Oharu opened it. Had it only been last evening the mouse thought. Annette was now in her past. A feeling of loss crossed her heart. She didn't try to shake it off because it meant that the otter had touched her. Had been real. Silently she withdrew a letter. "Mr. Bartholomew give me this to give Eddy, for being so kind." She handed her letter to the mongoose who instantly recognized the company's official stationary.

"Mr. Bartholomew, of the Hawaiian Main Office" she gasped, fumbling her phone before she could get it back up to her head. More words passed between her and the person on its other end. Words Oharu made a point of not catching. Finally she hung up, offering the letter back to Oharu. "Eddy will be here as soon as they can find him Mam" she explained. "Are you leaving with the Clipper or waiting for another plane? Would you like to wait in the VIP area? Its air conditioned. "

"I would be happy to wait" the mouse admitted, having experienced the new mechanical air cooling while watching movies with Annette. Though it was slightly cooler here than in Hawaii, her time in the air had left her unused to the heat. A few minutes to allow her body to adjust would be a tiny bit of heaven. "Your Air Hostess Annette Riverstone reserved room for me at hotel. My trunk can be delivered there?" She took the woman's stunned nod as an assent.

A moment later a young man of indeterminate species arrived, picked up her bag without a word and led her to a room well away from the terminals daily bustle. Setting her bag down in the room he left, still without saying a word, leaving Oharu alone in a sumptuous room who's temperature setting could have made ice cubes. At least that was how it felt compared to outside. Setting in a overstuffed chair meant for her class of species Oharu relaxed even though her fur fluffed in response to the cold. "No wonder Europeans think they so god-like" she whispered to herself. "Have places like this."

It was a good fifteen minutes before Eddy arrived. It was also evident he had washed and if those were his work clothes he had lost a great deal of weight. Obviously his current supervisor had decided he needed to be presentable 'to the Lady.' "I remember" he said in greeting. "I got you that flight on the Clipper. How was it. Was it really like a palace in the air?"

He stopped talking when Oharu laughed. Pointing to a chair across from her she reached into her kimono again, withdrawing the envelope. "Kiosk lady like you a very lot" she remarked. "For other, you find out I think" she answered with a sly grin. "I ask favor. You tell me." She handed the envelope over to Eddy, noting his slight blush as he felt the warmth of her body still in its paper, caught her private scent from its surface. Opening his letter he read, a look someone being pole axed growing on his face.

"This is real" he gasped, turning each page over as if expecting it to vanish instantly. "Its real. How can I ever repay you?"

"I repay you" Oharu reminded him. "When does Clipper leave."

"Um.. Cargo transfer, passengers. They were talking about a miss. Maybe an hour."

"Number three engine, cough often last half hour" Oharu explained. "Engineer nice man. Tell me he think maybe clogged fuel line."

"Hour ten minutes tops then. Albert knows his stuff. Hour.. Oh my God I've barely time. I have to run." He stood, started to move towards Oharu before remembering her original reaction to him.

"You kiss Kiosk girl for me" Oharu laughed as she made shooing motions with her paws.

Eddy grinned so wide she thought his head would split. "Thank you. Thank you for everything." Backing out of the rooms single door he took off running, a loud howl of excitement following him.

A few minutes later as she stood to leave Oharu congratulated herself. Eddy would fly first class to China, stay with the crew for its three day layover then fly back first class. That had been the best gift she could think of for the boy who, enamored by a strange woman had helped put her back on the path of recovery. Opening the rooms door she found herself face to face with the still rumpled poodle. Stepping out she refused to give way, forcing the angry woman to move aside and wait until she'd passed with her bag. More angry words, hateful words fell from the poodles lips but Oharu ignored them this time. People like

Eddy, Molly and Annette existed. They more than made up for people like the self centered poodle. Besides, if her schedule went as planned she would be back on Spontoon soil by late tomorrow night. She would be home.

For some reason that thought made her heart beat just a little bit faster.

Chapter Twenty-Two

April 22nd^h 1936

Butterfly McGee silently laid down her letter from Oharu, turning a bit to look out the window of her resorts tiny office. Oharu was facing her destiny. She hadn't said so in so many words but the warning was clear. *'I have decided upon that path which I must take'* she had written. Biting her lower lip the bovine hunted through her thoughts. No matter what those words really meant, it was certain that she would be short an employee soon. Within days, no more than a month most likely the mouse would have moved on. Of course though the mouse would never have suspected, the McGee's had always known that one way or another the mouse would not be around long.

Butterfly remembered when she'd told her own mother almost the same words so long ago, when she had decided to marry Taza and start this resort. It meant simply one thing. Oharu had rediscovered herself. For good or ill she had found her heart. Mr. Sapohatan would have to be made aware of this, though there was still plenty of time. There was no way that Oharu could return by tomorrow afternoon, as no flights were expected from Midway before then. Not at this time of year. In another week, two at the most there would be daily flights of course. Folding her letter she returned it to its envelope. She would give it to her husband tonight. He was better equipped emotionally to take the news to their new friends decision. He was also better placed to move the information to Spontoon's always watching ferret.

At nearly the same time Mrs. McGee was folding her letter from the mouse, at Songmark Miss Devinski too was reading a near duplicate of that letter. Classes were in session and as this was her off period, she normally spent it reading her mail. Oharu's letter had come as a complete surprise as the hound had expected a postcard like the other four. Leaning back in her own chair she was more interested in another line of the missive. *'When my life has settled, if I am still capable, I would like to offer my services teaching my style of martial arts. As well as my philosophy, should you have need.'* "When your life is settled Oharu... That means. Oh dear gods. Your going to surrender yourself." Standing almost too quickly the hound grabbed her wrap and purse. Unlike the more mellow Butterfly Miss Devinski never wasted a minute when she didn't have too. It was one of the many reasons that Songmark was such a good school.

Annette Riverstone turned her two bags over to the ships attendant, accepting her claim check before walking on to the waiting area. Theoretically she would find her bags in her cabin. If they were missing that was what her claim check was for. Unlike an aircraft, boarding would be allowed hours before her ship departed. Why was she being called back to San Frisco the otter wondered. Was it because that odd man claimed she was a spy? That was ridiculous, she hadn't even done well playing Cowboys and Indians with her brothers. Usually those games ended up with her tied to the old hackamore in their backyard until her mother would relent and come out to release her. In real life she'd probably be a worse choice than that mouse from Spontoon. Annette refrained from using Oharu's name, as it's sound still made her heart ache to think of the smaller woman.

Then what? Her last performance review had given her high marks. She'd preformed the mission she'd been assigned more than adequately even when facing unexpected odds. Though truthfully her mission had been a bit more expensively than expected she'd been informed. Nothing made sense. She still had five months before rotation, a rotation she'd been looking forward to as Pan Am's Carribean route was shorter and would have given her time to find a residence in some hospital. Since nothing seemed to fit this puzzle she decided to just wait for her companies next move.

"I'm sorry Miss Devinski" the plain looking rabbit admitted. "He is not available at this time. May I take a message?"

"In not available Kjellfrid" the hound asked politely of Sapohatan's slightly older secretary. "Is that simply unavailable to me, there is someone visiting him or he's really not here."

"He's really not here" the rabbit laughed. "He's somewhere on South Island. I don't expect him back today and no, I can not tell you where on South Island. Even if I knew."

Lowering her head in defeat for a second the yellow furred hound nodded in agreement. "I would not expect you to tell me, you're too good of a secretary and friend. All right then. Paper and envelope please. You'll be certain that he gets this as soon as possible?"

Kjellfrid smiled. "If you say its that important, yes Mam." She held out a sheet of stationary and a simple white envelope which the hound accepted.

"Its that important. Maybe more." She wrote for a few minutes then folded her note, inserting it into its envelope before sealing the envelope itself, turning it over to the waiting rabbit. "Have him contact me as soon as he has time please. Day or night. And how's your husband."

"I'll pass that along Miss Devinski." She accepted the envelope, setting it aside in a waiting basket with other sealed envelopes. "Still drinking, still chasing anything non-native with skirts. Still a lousy fisherman but I love him." She smiled. "He has his finer points. He's a wonderful cook for example."

"Thanks Kjellfrid. Maybe I ought to start thinking about a husband myself. After all I'm not getting any younger." Picking up her purse the hound left, not as happy as had she been able to talk to her prey, still knowing that when Sapohatan was 'unavailable' it wasn't because he was taking a nap. Or reading comic books. He'd let her in before when he was reading comic books.

'Charter flight' Oharu was thinking as she tried for the forth time to read her book. *'A load of European Missionaries hunting converts.'* It could have been worse she knew, her original flight home had been inter-island hops that wouldn't return her to Casino Island until several days from now. At least this Kart-Tombs flight was near direct, via way of a very few stops before Spontoon itself. One of the major stops though was some little place called Krupmark Island. Oharu had never heard of that island so she'd have to ask Mrs. McGee about it. Even the mention of its name had put her flight crew on edge, though they hadn't the time or inclination to explain their reasons to a simple passenger. Because of a rudder cable problem they had left Midway Island late, which meant that they would be landing at Krupmark at night. This was dangerous in a flying boat even if they had a full moon. Thinking of the new island Oharu knew that she would love to wander its paths in search of landscapes to draw. *'That will have to wait for another trip'* she decided, turning her page. Left alone for now she enjoyed her text, finally having convinced the large and very smelly Briard in black sitting beside her that she didn't speak English. It had taken only minutes for the hound to discover that of the five others aboard, not counting the two of them, only their pilot knew Cipangan and she had no intention of leaving her post just to play interpreter.

Listening covertly over the roar of a single 310 hp Junkers L 5, its growl of power comforting to her as the engine pulled them through the sky, she slowly turned pages without reading. Oharu had quickly discovered just who her fellow passengers were. Sitting beside her, the overly inquisitive hound seat mate who seriously needed a bath, or at least a scented brushing was a Church Investigator of some kind. He had been sent directly from some place called the The Order, in order to inspect missions in and around the Spontoon Independencies. From what she gathered there was concern where he came from that 'not enough souls were being saved.' Did that mean this The Order was a soul bank she wondered. This was one subject the mouse had to admit her knowledge was weak. That being most European religious beliefs.

Since their aircraft only carried a maximum of six passengers, with one seat empty that left the trio intended for Krupmark Island. Two young looking nuns, probably only a few years younger than Oharu herself and an elderly monk. Apparently, as she soon discovered, their last mission to that island had abruptly stopped sending reports just a little over a month after arriving. That had been over a year ago. Now it was their mission to find out what had happened, report to this Investigator if need be and reopen the mission. Odd she thought, she had always thought all European Nuns to be old, overweight and rather stern of face. With voices that would call up demons simply by their use. Yet the two aboard were an antithesis of that, being young, talkative and with sweet voices. Though for chipmunks they were rather plain of face. Of course being twins, as she was somewhat shocked to discover, it made sense that they would remain together. They kept their bodies covered in heavy black cloth as was apparently their orders rules. A mistake they would, as Oharu had herself learned, discover in this environment. In any case it was impossible to determine their figures, though from their faces she thought they might be a bit on the thin side for their height. Wearing a kimono herself Oharu understood just what they would be going through. Though in her case since Hawaii and Annette, it was the only clothing she wore other than her shoes. A scandalous style of dress for her upbringing, yet one required in order to avoid heat prostration. That style of near undress, though it had at first greatly embarrassed the mouse, Annette had proved to her was much cooler than her normally thickly layered underclothing. A bit risque of course, however her kimono covered more than any normal Spontoon outfit. Even more than most of the current European dress styles.

It was the monk that bothered her. He was a star nosed mole. She knew from long training that the breed could sense lies, thus her reason for not speaking English. Even so he kept looking back at her, as if by force of will he could learn something about her. That she was determined would not happen. Though she had few secrets now, none were any which she desired any missionary to discover. Turning away from her ease-dropping she returned to her book on tea ceremony. Perhaps, she thought, it was her lack of ornamentation or makeup that bothered the mole. Dressed as she was it had proven impossible for him to place her social position or occupation. Now had she still been a Miko, and in full regalia he'd probably only mistake her for an expensive saseko instead of a cheap one she decided. With this thought Oharu let her thoughts drift back to the time waiting at Midway for their repairs.

Four hours late due to a snapped rudder cable and a frayed backup, repairs had to be made by the co-pilot before they could be airborne. While waiting for repairs to be completed the pilot, an older female dalmatian, had pulled Oharu aside after having spoken with the Church Investigator. "I thought you spoke English" she had said, her Cipangan somewhat oddly accented though still better than most.

"I do. I do not wish them to know that" she had answered. She elicited an odd lifting of one of the hounds eyebrows. "A Songmark student I know warned me not to talk to G-men, income tax agents or missionaries. She said that no good could ever come of doing so."

That had brought a giggle from the pilot. "Good girl, smart head on her shoulder. I'm a Songmark girl myself. I was in the second year." She had grinned at Oharu's sudden concern. "Katherine McMaster. Not all of Songmark's girls turn air pirate. Least none of the second class did. I still keep in touch with the faculty. You never know who you might need help from. Listen. Don't get out at Krupmark. Just move to the front of my plane and be ready for a fast takeoff, and I mean a fast one. Krupmark is pirate territory. You can expect those two chipmunks to be sorry they got off within the week. And do not trust that monk. From your dress he believes you are a low grade night woman. As if he could tell the difference." She had left then, leaving Oharu feeling bad but knowing from experience that one who made their own choices must live with the results of those choices. Good or ill. Being thought of as a woman of the night would have insulted anyone else. It did bother the mouse a bit more than it would have just a month before, yet she took it in stride.

Now they were airborne with the sun already well below their horizon. Night fell rapidly in the islands, thus darkness soon filled their windows. Oharu, with many things on her mind stared out her tiny window at the

stars. They were so bright, had the interior lights been fully out she could have seen the wide brush of what Europeans called the Milky Way. There would be time on Spontoon for such viewing, though she would have to be away from Casino island for the best viewing. As she'd recently discovered during tourist season there was simply too much artificial light to view the skies well. Yawning abruptly she relaxed and soon fell asleep. Her dreams that of a swimming scene from *Tarzan and His Mate*, a scene banned in the United States. It had been the last movie Annette had taken her to see. However in this scene she was Tarzan, and Molly was Jane.

Bartholomew Matthews was relaxed for once in his office, stretched out in his office chair staring thoughtfully at the ceiling while he gently puffed his imported Cuban cigar. On his desk next to his feet was a letter straight from Pan Americans Miami Headquarters. Though unsigned he could tell from the writing style, having fully half a dozen letters like it already, that it had come from the head man's secretary himself. Closing his eyes he mentally re-read his letter.

Mr. Matthews;

I wish to convey Pan American Airways appreciation for the timely way that you and your associate handled what might have been a public relations disaster. Although it is true that your actions, specifically the first class treatment of a Spontoon native, insured that Pan American Airways did not make a normal profit on the China Clippers latest run, in the long run it will serve as money well spent. Already we have tracked a twelve percent increase in ticket sales due to word of mouth advertising alone. Your actions, which kept this event out of the major papers was a stroke of genius and will be brought to the attention of our other area managers.

You and Mr. Flintstine have done a great service to this company. It is our hope that you will continue to do so in the future. In appreciation for your efforts a block of one hundred shares of preferred stock in Pan American Airways has been transferred, without fees, to both your and Mr. Flintstine's accounts. In addition both of you have received a ten percent raise in pay. It is hoped that you will continue your fine work with Pan America Airways for a very long time to come.

Sincerely;

Offices of Pan American Airways

A ten percent raise in pay, simply for making the right decision. Bartholomew grinned before taking another puff of his cigar. Now if only he could keep his wife, who was still living in Boston with her battle ax of a mother, from discovering this all would be well. As Albert had lately proved to him there were a great many more things to enjoy in Hawaii than just good work. Especially one specific other Air Hostess who had come to his attention because of that self same event. He was still daydreaming about last night when someone knocked on his office door.

"Come" he called, lifting his feet off his desk. He was still returning to a more dignified position when his new secretary, a pretty little Swift Fox from somewhere in Nevada entered. He noted not for the first time that she filled out his newly modified version of the company uniform quite well.

"Sir. Mr. Flintstine to see you" she announced.

"Send him in of course." He was sitting normally by the time the dapper fox entered, himself noting how Bartholomew's secretary looked.

As the door closed behind him he made a motion with his eyes. "Pretty."

"Very. Since I've started taking the town with you I've come to the decision that ability really should be balanced by looks. Besides I've never much liked moles anyway."

"Specist?"

"A little yes. Nothing like my dear wife, may she live comfortably with her mother forever. Still we all are somewhat I believe. For example, though I very much appreciate what that young Spontoon woman did for us, you may have noted I made a point of not seeing her more than once. She... smells."

'I didn't notice a disagreeable scent' the fox thought as he settled down in his favorite chair. Then, he couldn't much stand moles himself though he tried not to let it show. Especially when on business. "And how is Ellen."

"Same as ever. I wait patiently in hope to receive her demand of a divorce, yet she continually disappoints me. Still one does hold hope. So what brings you to me today."

"Spontoon" the fox answered, withdrawing his ivory cigarette holder from his vest. "I believe that you also received a letter from our Miami office."

"Right here" the rabbit admitted, holding up his letter in one paw.

"You recall then a specific line? As I quote from my letter, *'It is our hope that you will continue to do so in the future.'*

"What of it? Are you thinking there will be more actions like this?"

Smiling Albert gently placed a cigarette into his holder, lightly tapping the end he was about to light before doing so with a solid gold lighter. "Not in the least my friend. Not in the least. " He took a puff of his smoke, blowing out a nearly perfect ring before continuing. "I have been informed by certain parties I can not, at this time, mention, that what occurred was planned. Any chance of it reoccurring are infinitesimal. Certainly since Miss Riverstone was recalled to San Frisco."

"Riverstone? Kathleen's partner? What did she have to do with all that."

"Ah, yes, you have taken up with the rather volatile Kathleen haven't you." He puffed again, running his left paw down an immaculately pressed pants leg. "A ten percent pay raise, quite a sum. I certainly must see about a new suit."

"Albert" the rabbit almost hissed.

"Oh yes. Dear Miss Riverstone. Tell me Bartholomew, did you ever truly read her personnel file?"

Groaning the rabbit dropped his face in his paws, his action causing the fire on his cigar to fall. It bounced onto his blotter, slowly beginning to burn into the green felt. Noting the event he groaned again, lifted his head, grabbed a heavy company manual and dropped it unceremoniously onto the burning ember. "Now see what I've done Albert. Please stop running around the bush and get to the damn point."

"Hum? Oh yes, of course. Say Bartholomew, your secretary. Does she..."

"ALBERT!"

Laughing the fox leaned back. "Very well Bartholomew, off to the point then. My sources tell me that not only was our graciously departed German apparently a spy, one of our ladies was as well. In this case I am afraid that Miss Riverstone became their primary target. When her situation became known she was

apparently recalled to the San Frisco offices of course. No longer useful in our sphere of influence I would guess, once she was out in the open." He took another puff of his cigarette. "Apparently she had been discovered by a major enemy spy. Now normally this would result in one or both suddenly having severe difficulty breathing. At least in the novels I have read this occurs. I have been made aware throughout my short career that the addition of lead to one's body decreases one's ability to breathe for long periods of time."

"Thus" Matthews prodded.

"Thus, my dear friend. One wonders how this Miss Osui fits into the pattern. Doesn't one?"

"Albert. As you well know I have made it a point not to get involved with upper management's games. Which is why I was sent out here. I don't stick my little nose where it doesn't belong. As long as I don't have to have that mouse in my office again I don't care where she fits in."

"Ah Bartholomew, I always wondered why you came here. I first thought you had wanted the position in order to get away from your wife." He delicately pointed at the large desk between them. "The one you never have pictures of. Now you tell me it is simply because you keep your nose out of other people's business." He smiled. "I don't believe that one either."

Grinning himself Matthews re-lit his cigar. "Actually, to be honest Albert it's some of both and more. That and I don't have to pay as many taxes on my income while I'm here. This is only an occupied territory, not a state after all. Next year I can apply for Hawaiian citizenship." He took a puff of his cigar. "No taxes unless this drive for statehood goes through. Which I intend to fight of course. Where were you. Oh yes, that smelly little mouse. So what was she, a go-between?"

"I believe that she was both a bodyguard until the otter could arrange to be sent home, and a warning."

"A what?"

"A warning my friend. I believe she was a bodyguard simply because the two were quite inseparable. It is my source's informed opinion that Miss Osui, which in her language means filth..."

"That explains the smell then" Matthews shot.

"Which is not a name anyone of worth would use" the fox continued as though nothing had been said. "Was sent to gently notify our young otter that her days were numbered. Unless she left the islands immediately. I've done some investigation. A bit of, shall we say nosing about? Slavery is still known among certain of those islands. Krupmark and Kuo Han certainly. That mouse most likely was property of this other spy, sent to help Miss Riverstone with the German then to warn her she was known. That it was time for her to seek other venues for her work." He puffed his cigarette. "Or simply put. Get out now or die."

"Slavery is illegal."

"Of course it is my friend. Of course it is. As so it should be. Unfortunately the making of a law does not come with automatic compliance. Oriental as well as Arabic societies see slavery as a way of life. Only Europeans have publically turned away from this practice. At least as far as your average citizen is aware. I am quite certain that, given a day in any major city of our United States I would be able to introduce you to at least one slave. Especially in Boston."

"Disgusting concept. All right so I will accept that this mouse is a slave and used as a warning. By who?"

"That, dear Bartholomew, my source would not say. Nor considering what occurred during those events while she was with us do I think I wish to know. If the slave is so able to defeat such trained foes as that German hit squad, I shudder to think what her master or mistress is capable of. You see, I so much prefer to keep breathing. You do understand that little weakness of mine I hope."

"Hrump. I do Albert. I fear that I share the same weakness. Quite a tail you spin here though. What has it got to do with us?"

"Not much really. I simply like to keep you informed of certain things. Now do you remember when I suggested that a scheduled stop at Spontoan might be in the companies best interest?"

"Of course I do. I also remember we spent a night at the Grass Skirt putting together a proposed schedule that was sent to Miami. Along with putting down quite a bit of the local rum. Have you heard something? I certainly haven't."

"A um, phone call" the fox admitted. "From an old friend. It appears that our idea has some merit."

"Really? That's wonderful. Who are they sending to discuss this with the Spontoan government."

"That I am afraid Georgette was unable to tell me. Yet our idea was taken seriously. Perhaps that explains our increase in pay, though it will mean more work for your staff should things go well."

"I'll hire more. Say, this deserves a celebration. How does the Grass Skirt sound to you Albert. My treat this night. In celebration of our new found income."

"Intoxicating my friend. Simply intoxicating."

Oharu had been more than impressed by their pilots ability to land on water near Krupmark island in the dark, their Junkers F-13 having just kissed the waves before settling suddenly and heavy. Though deceleration had pushed everyone forward their pilot had increased power just as quickly, lifting the crafts nose, partially compensating for the rough landing. With landing lights on they turned right, though from her seat the mouse couldn't see Krupmark island or anything but the occasional splash of water. Still the craft nosed slowly through the waves until suddenly coming to a stop, its engines at fast idle. Moments later their co-pilot came back, a large revolver in one paw.

"You two to the front now" he ordered as he passed. Having been warned to expect this Oharu hurried to comply while her Briard co-passenger seeming to want to argue the point. "Move forward or get out here" was the co-pilots only explanation. Sputtering in anger the black clad hound did as he was told, taking the opportunity to speak with his monk companion a moment while the co-pilot opened their aircrafts hatch. He was so upset that he never noticed that Oharu had understood the commands exactly. Commands spoken in English.

"I want weekly reports Kension" the Investigator whispered, believing that Oharu could not understand his words. "What happened and why. As soon as you have a claw-hold here I'll inform the The Order. We'll flood this area with missionaries. Its time these heathens learned to fear God and not their worthless idols, no matter if we have to beat it into them with clubs. Especially that Spontoan group. Once we have enough native followers we can dispense with that obtrusive government and put in one of our own. Then burn all those filthy shrines they seem to hold so dear."

A nod from the mole was all he got in response before the monk and his two nuns were exiting the aircraft, their luggage having been passed out into the night before them. As soon as they were out the co-pilot slammed their hatch, yelling to the pilot even as he was securing it. In seconds the Junkers engine roared to life, spraying anyone outside with horizontal saltwater rain as it moved forward. Oharu

wasn't certain but she thought that they might have already been in the air before he regained his seat in the cockpit. In all they couldn't have been out of the air more than ten minutes.

"Crazy pilot" her remaining companion growled. "Why all the hurry. It will still be night when we arrive."

Not understanding the pilots actions herself, though with some idea considering what she had been told earlier Oharu kept her council to herself. It would be a much easier flight to Spontoon as long as he didn't know she could understand English. His intermittent vocal reading from his bible was irritant enough. To have him try to convert her would prove maddening. To home she reminded herself. Home she repeated in her mind. It made a strange feeling in her heart to use that word. Yet it was right. She knew it was right. She was going home.

Annette Riverstone couldn't believe her fall from grace. As a Flight Attendant she should have been afforded passage on one of the companies daily flights. Instead she now found herself on, of all things a sugar freighter named the Gummy Rose. Leaning over a railing the otter looked back at Honolulu's lights astern of her transport, slowly falling away as the ship chugged towards the mainland. At least it was one of the newer craft. Built in the late 1920's it had been designed with four passenger cabins. That meant it at least afforded some amenities, but it also meant a voyage of a week or more. "Someone doesn't like me" she told the night.

"Actually. Several someone's don't like you" a female voice answered her. Spinning in place and putting her back against the rail Annette found herself confronted by a middle aged female raccoon. The other woman was dressed rather conservatively she realized quickly. "You wouldn't believe the trouble we went through to get you alone for this debriefing."

"We" Annette asked. "Who is we."

"The United States Navy of course." Walking to Annette the raccoon also leaned on the ships railing. "And the English Navy, both armies and several rather agitated diplomats. Then there are the people seriously interested in you. People you really don't want interested in you. Us for example. Remember that rather plump German businessman on your last flight?"

"I'll never forget him" the otter admitted.

"You might as well. He was found floating on the ocean yesterday, absolutely by accident. A practice search and rescue flight with our new XPBY and some English lads. A practice which proved its worth by picking up his body." She yawned. "Or what the fish left of it. Supper?"

"What's your name" Annette countered.

Smiling the raccoon took Annette arm by the elbow with a rather strong grip. "Trust me honey, you don't want to know. You really don't want to know."

"You'd have to kill me right?" the otter joked.

"Lets just say that this ship will arrive with one less passenger than it started with, and no record of her ever having been aboard. With your little mouse play toy away I'm quite certain your not capable of defending yourself. Are you."

Annette swallowed, allowing herself to be guided towards the galley. "No" she admitted in a soft voice. Suddenly she wanted Oharu back. Wanted her now.

"Then call me Alice" the racoon told her as they walked towards a beckoning hatchway. "Its as good a name as any for now. After all. Isn't Hawaii sometimes referred to as Wonderland?"

Oharu stood on the many times repaired wooden dock of Mildendo island for a moment, taking an opportunity to stretch her sore muscles before deciding what to do. Ahead of her the priest had already vanished into the town of Toonabo, headed out to check up on the local parish he'd informed their pilot. "He'd better hurry" Katherine McMaster commented in English as she stepped next to the mouse. "We take off in two hours. With or without him. Let me guess. You seriously need the ladies room and hot food wouldn't be refused right?"

"On both points. Yes" Oharu admitted, also in English now that their irritating priest was gone. "You have special place?"

"Only food worth eating this time of night if you fly a lot. Come on. I'll introduce you to some friends of mine. Don't worry about Paul. Someone has to stay with the plane and as pilot and co-owner of Kart-Tombs Charter Service I get to eat ashore. I'll bring him something hot when we come back." She started walking towards the shore, Oharu falling in behind her.

"How many planes you have" Oharu asked.

"Three, if you count that old clunker we use for parts most of the time" Katherine admitted. "Times are getting better. I've my eye on a Romano R-5 that crashed late last year at the end of the Schneider Trophy competition. Seem's the French gave up trying to raise her from the bottom since she's sitting on her back, about sixty feet down. Some boys at Spontoon have an idea or two. She'll need a workover but the divers claim she's still sound. You have probably seen one of those ideas of theirs. That tug using recovered aircraft engines."

"I have heard it" the mouse admitted. "I have not seen it as yet." At the end of the dock they were stopped by an old mongoose wearing what once might have been a uniform.

"Custams. Know tha Captm" he drawled, taking a moment to spit out a gob of tobacco juice into the sea. "Who yah."

Pulling out her passport Oharu handed it over. "Spontoon native. Going home" she answered. She followed the rough kempt man as he walked to a small lighted shack at the docks end.

Opening her passport the mongoose took his time studying it. "Don look lik no dress girl" he muttered, his gaze shifting from her passport to Oharu then back.

"I see you've been talking with our other passenger" Kathleen said from her new position, currently leaning against the customs shed. "And he told you she was a hunter?" she asked.

"Said kne was. Said tah noh let her on tha island."

"Billy. How long is it going to take you to understand that most Priests don't care about anything but themselves, gold and stealing souls." She laughed, rapping the shacks weathered wooden wall with one paws knuckles. "Stamp her passport, we're hungry. She's an artist for Buddha's sake. I've seen some of her work. Darn good too."

"Yah sure. Ah mean, he..."

"Gave you a few America dollars or British pounds right?" She shook her head at the mans nod. "Billy. For all he knows or cares she's a Priestess from Spontoon comin home after visiting her own kind in

Hawaii. Stamp the book or I won't give you that bottle of bourbon I owe you when we leave."

Moving quickly the customs agent stamped Oharu's passport, wrote the time and date in then offered it to the mouse. "Sor, somtime people lie" he offered in apology.

"I understand. My thanks" the mouse replied, giving the old man a slight bow before hurrying off to catch up with her rapidly walking pilot.

Minutes later, after both had visited the loo they were seated at a surprisingly well kept restaurant. "Pilots Palace" the dalmatian admitted. "Not many visitors find it, and those only when shown or rather good at spotting trends. Just stay away from the stew. Its way too greasy if your going to be flying far. Otherwise pick what you want. Its all pretty cheap here." She leaned forward, putting a finger on Oharu's paw. "Don't worry about Billy. He's uneducated but nothing else is wrong with him. Other than he tends to believe people to easily."

"I understand. Is the poi here good" she continued, gaining a strange look from her companion.

"Poi? Why Poi. You can get that anytime. Try the corn fritters. They're awfully good."

"I just used to poi" the mouse admitted. "Will try the friffers then."

"Fritters, with two 't's not 'f's" Katherine laughed. "Tea I assume? I think the hot tea here is supposed to be pretty good. I prefer coffee myself. Oharu" She paused, seeming to be thinking of something. "Remember those bad rudder cables? I helped Nikki replace them just three weeks ago. They weren't frayed. Someone put acid on them."

"Tea yes" Oharu agreed. "Someone not like you then. Maybe someone want you to break down at this Krupmark?" she asked, but her companion refused to answer. With that unspoken answer between them they relaxed until their meal arrived. True to her hostess word those strange corn fritters 'with two 't's' Oharu reminded herself, were excellent. She even ordered a small bag of them to fly out with. All in all by the time they were airborne again Oharu, now with a full stomach was ready for a nap. As they reached cruising altitude she easily slipped into a light doze.

Ships Stoker Bunrakuken couldn't believe his luck. First he had been off shift when the Burat Maru had exploded. Having survived only because he was above decks enjoying a smoke on the fantail instead of shoveling coal to feed the voracious appetite of his ships boilers. Then today he'd been accepted as second fireman aboard the Kio Maru which left Tilamooka's Blue Bay harbor for home the next morning and now he'd even picked up a very pretty little siamese who'd just staggered out of a bar. Yes his life was certainly blessed. He would have to give an extra offering at his favorite temple when he returned.

"Here" bubbled the drunk woman in his native language. She giggled. "Paul's ah jerk" she continued in English, a language that Bunrakuken knew very little of. Most of what she had been saying simply sounded like gibberish to him. It was to be expected though. After all she wasn't a true civilized creature anyway. Only a mixed breed low born barbarian of little worth. They had walked some distance and were now in a part of town he'd never seen. He turned the way she pointed, down a wide well kept alley access towards a well lighted door. "Third floor" she whispered as one paw slipped into her dress for something.

Whatever was on the third floor Bunrakuken would never know. As they passed a dark opening, one he missed because of the bright light before him something pressed against his neck. For a moment he thought his companion had clawed him by accident, until the pain struck.

In the morning a street sweeper stumbled over the Cipangan sailors body, his neck slit from ear to ear, his money missing. A torn scrap of very expensive green silk lay wadded in one half-open paw. Though

there would be an investigation the death was easy to classify. He'd been seen with a drunk young lady, one who's clothing screamed of high social birth. Obviously he had gone too far and paid the price at some servant's paw. Unless a complaint was lodged the case would be quietly closed. After all, seamen really shouldn't be in that part of town anyway. Certainly they shouldn't be trying to tear off the clothing of a young lady. Privately the police all agreed. Another low breed uneducated sailor had passed to Davy Jones' locker where all his kind belonged.

In Cipangu however another name was silently crossed from a certain list. Only three names now remained. Soon there would be none. When that was true a contract would be fulfilled.

April 24th

It had been a long flight and Oharu's legs were complaining. She had an ache in her left leg that simply wouldn't go away, an ache resulting in having slept with that leg pressed against the Junkers' cold metal skin for much too long. Even her knee felt like it was frozen solid. Managing an acceptable hobble the mouse made her way down the pier to a waiting customs official. Withdrawing her passport she offered it to the heavily furred and sharply uniformed hamster.

"Declare?" he asked in a soft voice while studying her passport. Her silence caught his attention. "Value. Bringing anything back of value you didn't take with you."

"The large trunk. All its contents" she answered as softly, embarrassed by her own misunderstanding.

"Total Value?"

"I not know. They were gifts from Pan American Airways company." Again she reached into her kimono, withdrawing a second letter. This one written by Annette, though Oharu had been assured that the signature was of Mr. Bartholomew Matthews himself. Not that Oharu fully believed Annette, there didn't seem to have been enough time for that. Still, the otter had never lied to her. There would have been no reason for her to start now, though she may have stretched the truth like a taffy in summer.

As he reached for the offered envelope something about her passport caught his attention. Withdrawing his paw, leaving Oharu with her letter, he quietly flipped through the booklet's pages until he came to a certain one. Although it too was blank he seemed to read something in it. A sharp nod of his head as though understanding something important was followed by stamping her passport, giving the mouse a smile as he returned it. "Welcome home lass."

"Thank you" Oharu answered, puzzled by his sudden action. "My trunk. You will want to inspect. I have key here."

"No need lass. Your already cleared. I'll get a boy to haul your trunk to the taxi dock. Take care of yourself."

Even more puzzled Oharu absently slipped letter and passport back into her kimono. When she arrived at the water taxi dock she was unsurprised to find a certain wolf waiting with a boat. Though this time it was a cargo boat, not a bright gaily painted water taxi. Giving the wolf a knowing smile she waited until her luggage was loaded, then carefully settled down in the boat's center. How had he known she wondered. Perhaps Katherine had given her passenger list while on approach. That would have given time, but barely enough. It was very late, her aircraft was off schedule and even though the odd tourist was about there could only be one reason this specific wolf was waiting for her. She was being informed, and quite suitably that the game was not yet over. *'But it will be'* she told herself as she watched the wolf work. *'Very soon.'*

Annette Riverstone had found herself led after dinner to a much larger cabin than her own. She was now sitting under a traditional card dealers light, its hot bulb making a mess of her fur as sweat began to trickle down her neck. Somewhere in the darkened room was the raccoon who'd apparently abducted her. Alice was quietly reading something while her two companions, both bulldogs unless Annette's nose was seriously out of wack, stood in the darkness with her. Neither made a sound. It was unnatural. So far there had been no threats, no yelling, nothing. At least an hour of absolutely nothing. She would have gotten up and left if it hadn't been for those bulldogs. She had a fear of them since childhood when three had beaten up her brothers and herself for daring to enter their purebred part of town. Finally the raccoon she knew only as Alice cleared her throat.

"Annette."

"Yes?"

"Who really killed those German men?"

"Kathleen" the otter admitted. "I hurt them. She... she seemed to like killing them. It upset..."

"Just answer my questions for now. Later we can get into what you do and do not think. Acceptable?"

"Yes." Annette shivered a bit. She was alone. Alone on a ship with three admitted government agents. They had shown her their identity papers, let her read them carefully. Along with that the letter from Mr. Bartholomew Matthews releasing her to them 'for an indefinite period in order to clear up a few pertinent details.' For the first time since she entered medical school Annette Riverstone was afraid for her own life.

"So the mouse known as Oharu didn't kill anyone?"

"No Mam."

"Odd, considering her owners history." She apparently turned to face one of her companions. "You know more about Doecan than I do. She's dealt the ace of spades enough on her own. Would she have a servant who would never kill?"

"It'd be safest" a deep rumbling voice answered. "That's how I'd do it."

Turning back to the frightened otter 'Alice' settled into the seat across from her. "Annette. Were you aware that Oharu was a spy?"

"No Mam. Not then."

"Ah, but you were later. How later."

"The night before she left."

"I see. Considering that you knew she was a spy and you had opportunity. Why didn't you turn her in?"

"Two reasons Mam. I owed my life to her."

"The other?"

Annette swallowed. To admit this, it'd end her employment with Pan Am if it got out. There was a morals clause in her contract. She decided to lie. "I owed her Kathleen's life too." Across from her the raccoon crossed her legs. '*Could be pretty if she wanted to be*' Annette thought.

"I don't quite believe that one. Lets try again, or Franklin will start asking the questions." A half grunt, half giggle came from the darkness at that threat.

"I'm in love with her" Annette admitted, her eyes lowering at her admission.

A sigh of acceptance came from the raccoon. "I see. Bob? The lights please." As the lights came up Annette found herself sharing a room with the raccoon and two very large bulldogs, one who looked as though he'd been through the mill and enjoyed it. "You two take a break. I think I can handle things now."

"But Mam" the giggling voice asked. It was the ugly one Annette realized.

"Don't worry Franklin. My grandfather was a star nosed mole. I can sense if she lies. If she does she's yours. You do understand your position Annette. Correct?"

"Yeah. Tell the truth or end up like Oharu, if I'm lucky."

"You won't be as lucky Miss Riverstone. You have two choices. Tell me everything, every tiny detail. Or spend the rest of your very short life with Franklin. I'm afraid that dear sweet Franklin breaks things. Slowly."

Annette had never really been the brave one of her family. One last look towards the leering bulldog and she crumbled. "Yes Mam."

"Go away boys. For now." As soon as they were alone Alice propped her feet up on the table between them, in the process allowing her skirt to slide towards her hips much more than would be socially allowable in mixed company. "So your in love with the mouse. Interesting. Well that does explain quite a bit. All right Annette, we are going to do this all night until I feel that we have everything. Start from the beginning. From when you first saw Oharu. Everything you thought, everything you felt. Give me what I need and you'll be allowed to continue your life. Lie, even once and you'll never see the United States shores again. Don't hesitate to ask for water." She reached over, triggering a recording device. "Interview one with the suspected collaborator Annette Patricia Riverstone of Pan American Airways. Annette, start please."

Annette felt a tear fall from her eyes. Why couldn't she be brave like Oharu. "I.. We landed at Miway, Midway...."

Oharu stopped just outside the McGee resorts main gate, reaching into her depleted purse to pay the old man who had carried her trunk to the place for her. He smiled to her upon receiving the coin, removing her trunk from his cart before heading back to the taxi pier. Tourists were arriving and leaving at all times it seemed. At least they had passed dozens of faces she had never seen before. Faces that obviously rarely saw the light of daytime. She'd have taken them for vampires or other creatures of the night, except she had dealt with such before. As many Miko do. No such taste entered her soul as those pale ones wandered about. Taking a breath to steady herself she grabbed one of her trunks leather handles and lifted. To stagger forward, falling across its surface. Surprisingly the trunk had hardly budged. Immediately she realized that it was going to take more strength than one paw could afford.

She honestly hadn't realized how heavy the thing was, having been treated as a first class passenger all her luggage had been handled by others. '*Just what is inside this thing*' she wondered. She knew for a fact that the clothing she had obtained couldn't be that heavy. Her trunk felt like it weighed at least a hundred pounds, perhaps more. Quickly placing her smaller suitcase well within the resorts gate she went back to her trunk, soon staggering back under its weight. Obviously Annette had added something to her luggage when the mouse hadn't been looking. Probable an aircraft engine the mouse thought as she slowly made her way inside, none too gently setting her load on the resorts wooden porch before returning for her waiting suitcase. A very big aircraft engine.

When she returned Mr. McGee was waiting for her. "Yer early" he said in greeting. "An tha things filled with pig-iron."

"What is pig-iron" Oharu had to ask as she collapsed on the porch, automatically placing the huge leather trunk between her and Taza McGee.

"Ingots of raw iron. Afore they turn it into cast iron, steel and stuff" the buffalo wolf answered. He lifted the trunk a moment, gaging its weight. "Heavy stuff. What is in this?"

"Clothing, few books. Medical samples" the mouse answered. "Unless Annette stuff something into it. I would not put such past her."

"Yer English in improvin. Annette your main squeeze?" He caught her look and smiled. "Are you in love with her I mean."

"No. An island romance only" Oharu admitted. "Friend yes, love..." She shook her head, staring down at her paws. "I have no place in my heart for two."

"Well, ah romance sometimes gets yer sights realigned. Refuels yer tank. Look, we hadda rent yer room out. Didn't expect yah back till later this week. Storerooms got a bed, wifes settin it up for yah now. That okay?"

"Any small corner will be acceptable." She stood, reaching for her trunks straps again only to be waved off by Taza. She watched in amazement as he lifted the thing with no more effort than she had lifted her purse. Taza had walked several steps before the mouse remembered her suitcase, grabbed it and hurried after him.

In truth the storeroom had more than ample space for the small bed Butterfly had made, along with two electric lights that hung from curled wires. During tourist season it held only what was needed for now. During the storm season Butterfly had explained that it held food not only for the McGee family, but much extra in case of emergency. One never knew when a Typhoon might decide to visit Spontoon's small group of islands so the storeroom was the strongest building in the compound. Thanking the two for their foresight Oharu waited for them to leave. Taza did, Butterfly however quietly sat on the new trunk. Her considerable weight barely affecting the trunk at all the mouse noted.

"We need tah talk" Butterfly announced softly. She kicked at the door with one hoof, causing it to swing shut softly. "About yer future."

"I have no future" Oharu admitted. She slowly sat on her temporary bed. "In most nine days I end. Less."

Butterfly's eyes went wide in surprise. Oharu's words were not what she had expected at all. "Nine days. What do you mean in nine days you end."

"I am spy" the mouse admitted softly. "I turn myself in your government nine days. If you wish, I leave now. I certain I have enough money survive that long. Maybe."

"You're a spy..." Smiling the bovine allowed time for her mind to digest her companions words correctly. Suddenly she laughed. "Girl, we spected that long time ago."

"Now you are certain." She stood, picking up her suitcase as she moved towards the door. Butterfly's leg stopped her. Without looking towards her much larger companion Oharu shrugged slightly. "I am able defeat even your formidable husband Mrs. McGee. Please not force me to harm you. I would not like that."

"You stay with us. Until your ready. Nine days, why that long?" Butterfly lowered her leg though. Something about the mouse's voice warned her that a change had happened while she had traveled. A change that might not have been at all for the best.

"I have something must do. It not affect you, Spontoon or anyone this world. I must make peace with myself, become whole. This takes time. When done I surrender my life without regret. Earlier this and I would fail own passing." She still didn't look towards the bovine, afraid that in doing so she would lose control of her emotions and cry. "How you suspect I spied?"

"Cipangu has been senden spies tah Spontoon fer seven years hon. Your just tha next one. Right on schedule, though I, we hoped you weren't."

"Then you part of this. Please ask your people. I must nine days. Then may do with this body all wish."

"This body..." Butterfly stood, towering over the smaller Cipangan mouse. "You can leave yer body?"

"It how I survived my... Survived what done to me. My training called Misogi. Now I prepare face what was done me. Else never will be whole again. Of course, should I not survive meeting with your government that no longer matter. In this world."

"Under one condition. Yah live here. Yah don run off. Deal?"

"Your condition acceptable" Oharu agreed. She felt tears filling her eyes, fought to hold them back just a little more.

"Why give yerself up noh? No one was certain."

Oharu carefully sat her suitcase down, turning her back to the bovine to stare out the storerooms single dark window. "When on Midway. When on my way Hawaii. I realized I love Spontoon. No more may I cause her harm. Or her people."

Reaching out Butterfly gently laid her paw on the mouses shoulder. "Nine days hon. Tha I can promise yah. Noh more." With a gentle tug she turned Oharu towards her, barely having time to note the tears before Oharu broke down, throwing herself into the bovines more than ample arms.

Aboard the Gummy Rose three figures were leaning on the ships starboard rail, all looking out towards where the sky was brightening. Soon the sun would be up and all three were very tired. Behind them, in one of the ships two portside cabins Annette Riverstone slept in her own bed. One figure, a male bulldog drew heavily on his cigarette. "Diane. How much of what she told us is the truth" he asked, still staring out at the gathering light.

"I'm only part star-nosed mole" the raccoon, whom Annette knew as Alice reminded her questioner. "Even when I concentrate. I can be fooled. To answer your question though, I believe she told the entire truth. At least as she knows it."

"Hrumph. Quite a story she gave. Mark, what's your opinion."

Mark, the second bulldog. The one who had been introduced to Annette as Franklin yawned. "Sir, I learned a long time ago that truth is always stranger than fiction. I believe her."

"Mores the pity" the first bulldog sighed. "Go through the motions, get her to tell her story again and again until she's dry. No, just one more time. Your right. I think she did tell everything she consciously knew. Diana I want you to seduce her for a couple of days."

"Sir?" Diane asked stunned. "Why?"

"Because you'll be able to enter her emotions easier." He noted the raccoon's shocked look. "Did you really think I picked you for this mission just because your part star nosed and a woman? No young lady. I know who your mother was. What she was. I want you in her skin. I want every secret she has, even the ones she doesn't know she has. When we have that, Mark I want you to lose her. She's tainted. Might as well clean this slate before any more evil is written on it."

"Sir. I am not a.. a.. I don't.." Diane shook herself. *'To order me to do that. How dare he'* she thought.

"You'll do it Diane. Cause if you don't I won't be responsible for your husbands next assignment. I understand he speaks German rather fluently. It might be useful to send him to Berlin. Even though he is Jewish."

"Sir" the raccoon gasped, her complexion under her facial fur palling to near snow white. She swallowed, thought over her options then caved in. Her commander well knew the buttons he needed to push. "Yes sir."

Mark closed his eyes. He strongly disliked his commander. He had for over a year, since he had accidentally been made aware of a dark part of the other bulldogs mind. This last only made him hate the man more. To force a woman to do something against her nature was unacceptable. "Sir. It might be best if we wait. Let her get off. Let her think she's safe. More importantly let Pan Am think she's okay. I can do it in the city just as easily, no one will suspect it was us."

"You think that's important Mark? Yes, of course it is. I should have thought of that myself. I'm tired is all. All right you know what to do. Just don't bother me with the details. I have a report to send to Washington. Until tonight's session then." He left the two alone, not caring what they thought of him. He had a job to do, a country to defend. If that meant being rougher than the average controller, then it meant being rougher. If it meant ignoring the Constitution. Well it was only an old scrap of paper wasn't it?

"Mark" Diane whispered as soon as they were alone. "Is he crazy or am I. Didn't we promise Annette her life?"

Still looking out at the rising sun Mark squeezed the rail with his thick paws. "Diane. You couldn't imagine just how insane he is. But he's loyal to America. He's better than good and he gets results. As long as he does that no ones going to care that he keeps... Never mind. Go to bed. I'll take first watch."

Giving the bulldog an odd look Diane left. Her cabin was next to Annette's while her companions had the other two on the ships opposite side. Gummy Rose was a company ship. Their otter companion could be cut down on the middeck at high noon, left for the seagulls dinner or towed behind the ship to attract sharks and not a word would ever be said. Once that power had thrilled her, not that she had ever seen it used. Now. Now she was uncertain. Something about Mark's voice instilled fear of their commander within her heart. She would seduce the otter, though she had never been with a woman in her life. She would ride the waves of her emotions. Then she and her husband were getting out. He wanted to rejoin the army anyway. With paw to her cabins door Diane again looked back at Mark. The bulldog seeming like an old man now. Being an Army officers wife wasn't that bad of a life after all.

Oharu was at the moment sitting on an old stone wall set in the west beaches of Eastern Island, not much paying attention to those about her so deep in her thoughts was she at the moment. Unlike before she wasn't carrying her sketch pad. It would have been worthless to her anyway for her mind was no longer on her art. Just a few minutes ago she had mailed a package containing all her travel books, with only those few drawings containing Molly and Annette removed. Along with that package had been a short

note. *I am surrendering in nine days* it said. *Perhaps less. You must leave now.* It would take, she thought, a few days to reach him. Who was Sandy's male friend she wondered. That he must be one of the bobcats people went without asking. Within a day her package would arrive at box nine, within days after that they, and whomever Sandy's love was would have left Spontoon forever. It was her gift to the bobcat, the only gift of any real value that she was able to give anyone now.

It was a time when people were getting back into the pattern of a waking day. Fishermen would be setting out in their boats, hotels and resorts would be preparing for their visitors to wake. Wake and demand everything from a hearty breakfast to hair of the dog. Around Oharu it was mainly those who made their living with or around aircraft who wandered about. She had discovered the wall just after sunrise. It's position allowed her an unrestricted view of the flying boats tied up against piers, or drifting next to old fixed pilings in deep water. To her right was huge building, its use obvious. Superior Engineering she had read. This place she had been instructed to penetrate. Though her interest was personal, there was still a nagging feeling that she was derelict in her duties by not having her books with her.

A soft morning wind slowly came up across the water, ruffling the mouse's facial fur. It tickled her nose playfully as it heralded those stronger morning winds yet to come. It was a silent time, though voices of dozens of nations drifted on the wind they did not bother her thoughts.

"You are having second thoughts?" Miko Oharu asked within her mind. Artist Oharu nodded as if to herself. To those around her she appeared to be daydreaming, yet it would be far from the truth.

"Perhaps" Artist Oharu admitted. *"It is difficult. I had been so certain I was on the right path. Yet my new dreams tell me I may possibly be on the wrong path."*

"Those dreams are from our darkness. From when it slips through the cracks of Saimmi's failing barrier. They will darken more as her wall falls."

"Our time ends soon?"

"Very soon. You must seek out one to help us. We cannot do this alone in the time permitted. We cannot join alone. We must have but a little more time once healed before we face those demons as one."

"Then I shall. Today." At her decision Miko Oharu drifted away, returning Artist Oharu to reality. She was surprised to discover not only that the morning sun had cleared the islands, it was now reflecting brightly off morning waves, sending sparkling diamonds of colored light into any viewer's eyes. A group of voices came to her, women's voices she noted. Not but a dozen steps from her was the coast road. Along its surface walked several young women wearing Songmark uniforms. A few weeks before she would have watched them carefully, sketching each face well enough that others could identify them no matter what clothing they wore. Now, now she would no longer do that. She watched as they walked by, paying her little heed as she made no move to catch their attention. There was one with them Oharu thought might have been from Cipangu, yet in today's world she could just as well have come from Hawaii or America.

"Murderer" a man's voice suddenly screamed in English, his words slanted towards a thick Chinese accent. Turning to see what was going on Oharu was stunned to see two young men, one a fox the other a rat, looking at her with pure hate on their faces. Both were standing only a few yards away from her. Still not understanding what was going on she slipped off the wall, automatically stepping behind it. Thus placing its aged surface between her and the two men. "You kill our families. We kill you one day."

"I do not understand" she replied as softly as her voice allowed, keeping her voice level as she had been trained to do in these situations. For she had killed no one in her short life. Not even on Hawaii where the opportunity was so close at paw. "I was Miko. I do not kill" she explained to them, unaware that all the Songmark girls had stopped and were listening. Listening and watching closely.

"Miko" the rat snorted. "What that, painted woman? Just mean you not have chance yet. Your people invade our country. Your people murdered our families. You wait. One day we murder all you. I kill you myself one day, watch light fade from eyes." He spit at her, only the walls intervention causing him to miss. "Then your spirit serve our families for eternity. As lowest slave." Both men spat towards her again, then turned their backs and returned to their battered aircraft floating several dozens of yards away.

"I do not understand" Oharu whispered, unaware that the Songmark girls could hear her clearly. It wasn't that she had no understanding of their anger, for she was well aware of her birth nations invasion of China. Though she had heard rumors of slaughter no one had brought to her any evidence of such events. So for her it was simply rumor. But to hate someone simply because they were born of one race or another, that their fur was one shade or another or their beliefs different. These were events they had no control over. That hurt her. It was also more than a bit of a shock to be hailed as a hero and a heartless villain within less than a pawful of days. Turning away she caught the Spontoon girls staring at her. Bowing respectfully to the young women, as a lessor to a greater Oharu herself then turned away, quickly making her way back to the docks and one of the many water taxies waiting there. Perhaps a circle of the inner harbor would return the sun to her soul. It would be expensive, yet she had no further use for money.

"Yes, Oharu lives here" Butterfly told the young vixen standing before her. "Left afore sunrise. Talked about finding herself."

"I understand" the Miko Urako answered. "I will wait for her at the main taxi pier." She bowed to the bovine before turning to walk away.

It was now early afternoon, many hours after the start of her harbor circuit and Oharu's water taxi was finally approaching Casino Island. This time from the Main Island side rather than the Eastern Island side from where she had hired her ride. During her voyage Oharu had worked carefully through her thoughts, her needs and more importantly her desires. Desires. That was a word she hadn't used since being accepted for Miko training.

"I desire to become a Miko" she had told her mother, standing self importantly in all her young age of nine.

"You are too old" her mother had warned her. "It will be difficult even if they do accept you."

"It is what I desire mother. May I speak with the Temple?" Her mother had simply smiled, stood, taken her paw and walked her the quarter mile to their local temple. It had been the last time she had lived at home until her mothers death. Now she desired another position. That of Nisou. Priestess. Though Cipangu was forbidden her there were many other Shinto temples in this world. She had visited one in Hawaii at Annette's instance. Annette had wondered what the differences between their beliefs were and had been amazed at how differently they did believe, yet how very much their core beliefs were the same. Perhaps the local temple. She had seen it once, and avoided it. Certainly all Shinto Temples could not be closed to her. Not all.

Now she was a grown woman. Her life well beyond normal marrying age. Yet she had never before been interested in such. Until lately she hadn't understood why. Now fully understanding the why at first Oharu had wondered if becoming a Miko had been her way of escaping marriage. During her boat ride this had been one of the questions she had asked herself. Her answer was a firm no. No matter how her heart had blossomed, no matter for whom Religion was her life. Would always be her life. She was returning to Casino Island. It was time to place her soul in order. To settle her accounts.

It was a slight shock to see the figure in red over white waiting at the dock. Even more so when the younger vixen had bowed to Oharu. "We must talk. You will come with me?" the younger Miko asked, her words were spoken in their shared native language.

Without a word in answer Oharu followed the young vixen.

Chapter Twenty-Three

April 24th, 1936

Following the Miko Urako, Oharu eventually found herself outside the gates of a single Shinto temple, it was a small very traditional temple. Small of course was relative, it being larger than Hakko Shrine in Osaka, yet not as large as the shrine she had trained in. While the vixen walked calmly through its open gates Oharu stopped outside. This was a place she knew was forbidden her, this was the temple that she had several times yearned to enter, yet had not. Entering a temple as an unknown was one thing. Known was quite another. For much as a nation considers their embassy in each country as national soil, she was well aware that her God-Emperor considered all his shrines as one. Kneeling she bowed towards the shrine, then straightened up. Waiting.

Urako, as if sensing Oharu's actions stopped, turning smoothly to face the mouse. "You will not enter what is yours by right?" she asked, her words that sweet sound Oharu knew as her native tongue.

"Exiles may not openly enter what they have been denied" she answered as softly as her shattered voice allowed. "Our Emperor has decreed me exile from all Cipangu. This will include these temple lands. Perhaps another temple, in another land?"

Urako giggled, her voice a soft sound in the silence. Much, Oharu realized, as her own voice must have sounded to those who had come to her temple before her throat was ruined. "You are no longer a Miko, this is true" the vixen conceded. "You may not take the place of a Priestess here, or in any temple. This too is true. Yet you are aware that there are those much above our mortal God Emperor. Those who have asked that you be seen by my humble self. Will you two not enter at their behest?"

"You have..." Oharu swallowed, fighting tears as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her. Moving slowly lest she stumble the mouse shook herself. Brushing off her Kimono she took one hesitant step across the gates threshold, as if fearing a sudden bolt of lightning to strike her down. Or the earth to open, swallowing her, forever denying her the sun. Urako waited patiently, her bushy tail held in one paw as though it were a scarf, the act giving the Miko an odd yet pleasant appearance. Still hesitantly Oharu walked carefully up to the waiting young woman. "I thought never openly to stand such again" she admitted. "I had hoped, but never believed."

"Nor would you in our homeland" the vixen admitted. "Here though the Gods still may overrule a mortal, living God, as there are only a rare few willing to take arms against this temple. These are old men who's words hold little weight among our people now. For they have been proven wrong too many times." Stopping at the temple doors both women removed their shoes, walking into the building in unshod feet. This of course had nothing to do with the buildings holiness, only that tradition created in order to keep as much of the outside dirt as possible off polished floors (be they a simple home or grand Imperial castle) one left ones outside footwear at the door. "Fumiyo. Tea" Urako called as they entered the building.

As they settled onto waiting pillows in an inner room a younger vixen entered, carefully carrying a tea set with two cups. She placed the tray beside Urako, bowing to both women with honest respect before turning to leave. "Remain" the older vixen ordered softly. At her command the younger woman settled herself comfortably, her back against a nearby wooden pillar. "Shirane Fumiyo is my assistant, she will one day take my place" Urako explained, a smile coming to her face. "Though not soon enough I am afraid to admit. She is rather slow in her studies. Nor has she yet found one to be assistant to herself. That is true Fumiyo?"

"Few hold interest in the temple my Lady" a soft yet very earthy voice answered. "As yet none have come forward. Still I hold hope that young Wazuka will retain her interest."

"Wazuka is only five as yet" Urakyo explained to Oharu. "Thus even should she retain her interest, should she study diligently. I am forced to admit that I will find myself holding this position as yet another eight or nine years." She sighed. "Unless something unforeseen occurs requiring an urgent change in direction I will be an ancient old lady of twenty six before I may give my position to Fumiyo." She picked up the tray of tea materials, settling it between herself and Oharu. "Such an age. My own Sensei was only twenty four when I took her place. She is now a happily married woman, with her second child due soon. Ah well, perhaps it is for the best. Fumiyo is such a slow learner." Her words said one thing, the smile she gave Oharu told the mouse otherwise.

Carefully she began making tea, though not in the highly ritualistic style one would expect had they been in the tea house just a few yards away. "I have looked into your life my sister" the vixen admitted. "Yes, I call you sister. For though you are no longer Miko yet you have not advanced to Nisou. It is Nisou which calls you, is it not?" She offered Oharu a mug of hot green tea, beginning the preparation of her own.

"It is" Oharu admitted as she sniffed deeply the aromatic scent drifting up from her cup. She well remembered these same audiences, with her in the position Urakyo now held. It felt somewhat odd to her to be on the receiving end of such words. "Yet I am exile. I can not yet see how I would be accepted by our people."

"You would not be" the vixen admitted as she sat her tea whisk aside. "You are exiled. No longer is Cipangu your country. No longer are its people your people. You may not serve the Emperor in his home. Thus Nisou within the Shinto path is forbidden you. This you must accept, else you cannot continue on your path. You cannot heal. This is your life by writ of the God Emperor himself. To even admit you exist, to in any way affect your life through their own action or inaction is forbidden. Were you starving outside their own gates they would ignore you. Likewise should they be dying, any aid you might offer would also be ignored. Exile is a two edged blade remember. And there is another path available for you." Urakyo used the tasting of her own tea as an excuse to pause her words.

"Nisou calls me as well. Yet as I said, for you there is another path" she mentioned softly as she lowered her cup. "As a path to Nisou there is yet one more gate open to you. Those who await you on its other side await you with open hearts."

"And yourself" the mouse asked. "You speak to me, treat me as a sister. Yet the Emperors words..."

"Do not in their whole equal the weight of one of Benzaiten's own" Urakyo finished. "It is she who feels this path is for you. Yet you must make the decision. Not she, not I. Not any other creature in our world may influence you further than to offer this." She sipped her tea again, artfully using the action to pause the conversation. A moment later she lowered her cup. "Not even Molly Procyk may be factored into your decision." She nodded at the expression upon Oharu's face. "Your love is too great a power for such as I, or those who wait to ignore. Your decision regarding her I feel is correct, for this moment in time. She is too injured as yet to understand. Wait, and friendship is possible. Should she survive her own test. Who can know. Perhaps even love in years to come. Hearts change with experience, do they not?"

Oharu missed those last words, having begun to look within herself by the time they were uttered. Was it possible for her to step aside from Shinto, to learn a new path? Yet Shinto was her belief, to the deepest core of her soul she knew there wasn't any possibility of turning away from her belief. Setting her tea aside the mouse took a moment to steady herself. "I cannot turn away from my belief" she admitted. "Then how might I be of use to another way?"

"There is little real difference between Shinto and this islands Gods" the vixen explained. "I have in my short life made a study of their ways. I find much to praise about their ways, almost nothing to scorn."

That of course being their morals regarding men and woman.” She sat her own cup aside. “That however has nothing to do with belief, but with social custom and local law. Both of which we all must abide by while on these lands. It is in Benzaiten’s words that you were wronged, that by the God Emperor. Who in his youth was advised by lesser beings. Thus he erred most grievously. This might be rectified, at high cost should you demand. A cost I believe you should not ask to be paid. Yet it is your choice.”

“To return to that which I was? No Urakyo. I was already close to stepping down. A week, two at most and Arisa would have stepped into my sandals anyway. She was well ready, her own assistant well trained. I had spoken with my Priest. I was to replace him in the Winter. Though my actual falling was great I would have stepped away anyway. My heart had begun to quest, and as we both know when that happens it is time to give to others that responsibility we hold. I will not ask such.”

Moving slightly, an adjustment more for comfort than any other the vixen nodded in agreement. “I must tell you this. Had you demanded such it would have caused great difficulties, even for the Gods. Yet it would have been done. At the same time all you have met, their lives would have changed. You would never have lost your heart to Molly yes, yet Molly would even today be in great stress, perhaps even have fallen. Annette would be crippled for life. Kathleen dead as well as a certain young mother. A young boy would have never achieved his dream for flying aboard his company’s flagship. A certain bobcat would not be warned of a trap and these islands would lose a future doctor. In these ways at least you have already influenced the paths of others. In such a little time you have done so much. Yes my sister, I would be proud to bow before you. Be you Nisou Shinto or any other path. There is a greatness about you that cannot be ignored. Though you will not be the greatest this island has ever seen, your actions will affect its survival in the upcoming storm.”

“Your spies are very good” Oharu laughed. “You pay them well?”

“Her” Urakyo admitted. “I pay her nothing. You are an interest to many, I being only one of those. One day you may meet her, should you live. You will know her by her eyes. Though she is not Shinto she is a student of all religions. She has spent much time with me discussing religion. We are friends, no more. Neither of us share your tastes, which simply means” the vixen giggled, “You will have less restricted access to your choices. I will be a great disappointment to my father when I do step down, for I find the native men much more interesting than those of my own village. Now I feel it is time we tend to your problem.”

“I do not wish to lose her” Oharu admitted, knowing from her own experience as a Miko what problem the younger Miko before her spoke of. “She is a sister to me now. Yet I must, else all beyond will be madness.”

“Fumiyo, prepare what we need” Urako ordered. Setting her now empty cup on the tray it had arrived with the vixen stood. “There is little time. I have explored your future as best I may. We must today, or not for a month. A month you do not have unless we do so tonight.” She shrugged as Oharu stood. “In short. We must do this now or you will fall forever.”

“It is the way of life” Oharu agreed. “Time. There is never enough, or too much. Lead. I will prepare myself.”

Annette was feeling sorry for herself as well she had a right too. Two days of interrogation aboard the Gummy Rose had left her bone tired and more than a bit confused. Her beliefs had been shaken off their foundations, yet with time she would understand what had been done. In time she would recover from the skillful lies offered to her. She had no hint that her captors’ plans allowed her not to be given that time. All she was certain of was that Alice was happy with her results and had decided that nothing more would be gained by further sessions. *‘So I get to spend the rest of my voyage looking at the waves, wondering which one my body will hit’* she thought. It was a long way from her job with Pan American Airways. A long fall from her time with Oharu, where money didn’t matter and... Silk sheets. Her body trembled at the

memory of how freshly laundered silk sheets had felt. Warm fur against her own.

"Remembering better times?" Alice's voice asked. Annette turned her head just enough to see that the racoon, her tormentor of the last two days, had changed into a bright yellow sun dress. A rather thin and brief sun dress with nothing under it the otter realized with unexpected interest. Interest she shouldn't have yet did. This too confused the otter.

"Wondering which wave will be the last I see" she answered somewhat truthfully. One thing she had learned was that unless Alice was concentrating she could be successfully lied too, if the words sounded right. It had been practice Annette had never thought she might need.

"None of them. You'll get off at San Frisco, return to Pan America and continue your life. We're done with you."

"Nice lie" Annette snapped, even as she leaned against the same rail as the racoon. "I've been trained to sense lies too. So when do you whack me?"

Alice laughed, turning to put her own back against the rail, leaning over enough to stretch her dress's thin fabric just so. Her movements were catching Annette's attention even though she wanted to ignore it. Oharu had wakened a part of her that would simply not go back to sleep. Not ever. She found herself wishing that yellow fabric was not there, but why she wondered. Why interest in a woman she should hate? "There's no reason to bother with you anymore Annette" Alice laughed. "You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. They used you to get the German." Shaking her head the racoon seemed to lean just a touch closer to Annette. "Look. I'm sorry about the last two days. We were all just doing our jobs and you did everything anyone could ask.

"Yeah, shafted someone I love. Or at least, someone I thought I loved."

"This kind of stuff happens a lot in my profession" Alice admitted. "Look. It was a good plan they had. A touch complex, and you will note that the mouse never really was in any danger. Just you and Kathleen. Along with a few around you. Heck girl, if I'd been in the same situation." She fell silent, looking opposite of the otter for a while. "Its called survivors syndrom" she suddenly explained. "Life or death situation. You survive, your body wants to mate. Its how nature insures the strongest survive. She used you Annette. Oh I don't think completely. She had to have felt something for you. But in the end... Sandy Doecan is her owner. She gave the orders. It wouldn't matter what the Chip felt. She couldn't possible give her heart to you or anyone else. Not unless Doecan gave her orders too."

Annette sighed, nodding in acceptance. Alice's words just fit too well together. They explained too much. "And this girl Molly" she asked, trying to ignore how the bright fabric stretched as Alice breathed. How Alice's scent, carried by the wind was so intoxication. How so suddenly she wanted to... Shaking her head she tried to clear her thoughts as Alice answered.

"Little Miss Procyk?" Alice shrugged. "I can show you her records. We had them photo-wired to us last night. It's a interesting, tidy little package. She's wanted for tax evasion, racketeering, gun running even murder. About three or four dozen other types of charges in various amounts. If she ever returns to U.S. territories she'll probably spend the next three hundred years behind bars, if they don't give her the gas chamber. Its very likely that someone of her low calabur, her viciousness would happily help capture a slaves heart."

"I'd like to see those records Alice. If you don't mind."

"Then I'll get them. Meet you in your cabin?"

"Fine." Annette watched as the racoon walked off, unaware of the expression of triumph on the other woman's face. All she knew was that she was hurt, lonely and vulnerable. She was completely unaware that 'Alice' intended to use all that against her. And the Raccoon did have such a delicious sway to her hips.

Three aircraft settled as gently as feathers onto the Honolulu harbors surface, landing as one in a near perfect formation. That the pilots performing this maneuver had spent half the morning some fifty miles South of Honolulu practicing this maneuver many times wasn't known by those who witnessed the event. They only were aware that three civilian Sikorsky S-43's had performed a maneuver that even the best military pilots spent months of training to attempt. And had done so flawlessly. Those on shore watched in admiration as the three aircraft turned as one, their engines roaring as they approached the piers where they would be tied until needed again.

Sandy Doecan herself was impressed, which in her now jaded life was something difficult to accomplish. It had been Jacob's idea and after all they weren't paying for the gas. 'Lets impress the locals, girls love snazzy pilots' Jacob had suggested over the radio. So nearly two hours of practice landing and takeoffs later they had arrived at their destination with nearly dry tanks, but huge smiles on their faces. Jacob was right the bobcat knew. Displays like this around women who were interested in aircraft, and their crews, was just like a peacock unfolding his feathers. Every unattached girl on the shore and more than a few attached ones, would be easy picking for the three middle aged pilots. Herself, a few weeks at the Split Palms to relax while dulling any watchers nerves, then a little snooping of her own. A certain rather delightful if dense English General came to her mind. Her foster father needed to know what England's plans were for Spontoon in case of another war, and her last trip had yielded nothing but suspect, thus useless data. America's plans were so obvious no one needed to tickle their files, but England. Of the two America would be easier to control than the stiff necked narrow minded English. Right now though all she wanted was a long hot bath and to sleep in a real bed.

Oharu opened her eyes slowly, letting the single candles light enter her eyes just quickly enough for them to adjust. She was exhausted in both body and soul. Yet again she was one soul, no longer split into old and new. Across from her Urako's young assistant tended to her Miko. It had been a long and very dangerous thing that they had done. Even to patching Saimmi's wall enough to give the mouse just a little more time.

"*Do not go yet*" Urako whispered through her exhaustion. "I have gifts yet." Struggling upright the vixen accepted a cup of hot tea from her assistant, motioning that one should be given to Oharu as well. "I thought myself well able to do this" she admitted as Fumiyo prepared tea for the mouse. "Yet even after so long you come from it the stronger. Is this what I have to look forward too?"

"I am simply older. Simply stronger with experience and practice" Oharu admitted. "It is not the body which determines what ones soul may do, it is what we are within. What we believe." She accepted her tea, bowing slightly from her sitting position to the young assistant. "Perhaps it is also training, for I feel I have gone further than you as yet."

"Perhaps" the Miko admitted. "When it came time you were strong enough to accept that what you most wished not to occur. To accept that it must occur. You will miss her. Yet she is within you, part of you always. Fumiyo. The packages please."

Oharu held her cup tightly in her paws, allowing its heat to warm spirit world chilled flesh. "I will miss her. Perhaps she will come in my dreams. I would much like that." She took a long sip of her tea, pondering what had occurred. "You have explored my near future and my near past. Yet you have not told me the how. This requires more than a simple lank of fur. Then how?" She looked with interest at the three wrapped items Fumiyo returned with. One long, one boxy and a tiny white wrapped thing that could be no

larger than two fingers. These the young assistant carefully placed beside her Miko.

"Your question is simple to answer my sister" Urako answered. She reached down, taking up the smallest rice paper package. "While you lay in hospital I visited many times, even after I became aware as to who and what you were. I was the one who translated what you brought, and certain fever words that often spilled from your lips." She began slowly unwrapping the paper. "Some time after your arrival a section of cargo crate washed ashore. What evidence was found there supported your words." She finished opening her package, holding it to the mouses inspection. A single claw lay upon the papers surface, dried flesh still attached to its root. A claw much the size of Oharu's own. "It was found lodged in the wood. Most likely when you hit the water it was torn from you. I return it now. For I no longer need it." She held out her paw, offering what she held to Oharu.

Reaching out Oharu gently picked up the claw. "I had thought never to see this again" she admitted. "Yet I have no need for it. Perhaps you should keep it."

Urako smiled, leaning forward to use her paw to close Oharu's over the claw. "Have it turned into jewelry. Give it to the woman who has stolen your heart. In this way you will know when she needs you." She leaned back again. "At least that is the legend. I have no experience with such things myself."

"Folk tales" Oharu agreed. "Some say the grinding into powder then slipping into a desired ones drink will turn even the hardest heart, to make one who hates with a bloodlust become your truest love. All tales told children. They are all untrue. Molly. She is forever beyond my reach. I wish only to forget her."

"In this life she is your heart, I think yes. Forget her? No my sister, no more than you may forget what you are. Tell me sister. How much do you truly love her. Would you give up your life for her?"

"My soul is hers, all else is nothing" the mouse admitted, lowering her head. "Though it shames me to admit this. For I was trained to stop such feelings from happening. You said I had paths before me, that soon I would face life or death not once, but several times."

"Truth. There is no shame in loving, only in forcing oneself upon one who does not desire you. Before very soon you will live or die. You will decide wither or not your love is true, or simply less than true. This may cost you your life, though I doubt it. If your love is true it will win out. After, you will again face the reaper. Yet it will be your mind that decides your fate." She paused, setting the empty rice paper aside. "Should you survive that you will face a test of body. In this test you will not survive undamaged, yet this damage may not be of your body. This is too far for me to see even with your claw in my paw. That you face these tests sister. It is because you have already faced a test of Honor and Belief. That you have succeeded in those tests warms my heart. It is my hope that when my tests come that they do not come as quickly together as yours have."

Slipping her returned claw into her coin purse Oharu nodded in agreement. "Honor, Love, Loyalty, Belief, Body and Mind. Six paths not often held so closely. One would think I am a Samurai Warrior, not simply a samurai. Life has been interesting of late. Now I should go. It is a long walk and I must avoid our people, lest I shame them."

Laughing the vixen covered her mouth, her eyes twinkling in merriment. "They shame only themselves, should they notice you. Remember that. Your gifts. Then yes, you should leave. But not because I want you to leave sister. There are things you can teach me I so much wish to learn."

"Teach? A Miko? What have I to teach you that you have not already learned."

"Misogi."

Oharu started. "Teach. That? Do not be a fool. I died, or should have. It mattered not to me. Had I, there were others to take my place. There is no one here to take yours."

"Fumiyo is ready and I must know this path to continue to serve my people" Urako answered.

Swallowing Oharu sat stunned. Her Sensei had been ancient, had walked her through each step half a dozen times. He had been the one to decide if she was ready. A minor mistake and she would be ashes long ago. To hold another's life so close to death, by the thinnest of threads then return it. Or had he returned it. She could never know, for at that time neither life or death held any interest to her. Had he allowed her to pass, then called her back? Or was she a new soul inhabiting a discarded body? Such had been known. Yet she could never know that truth, for she could not see her own soul. No miko could. "I am not ready to teach such" she finally admitted.

"Then when you are, I am ready to learn." Picking up the box with both paws Urako sat it between them. "Incense, the other things a shrine alter must have. I have seen what you have built." She smiled in amusement again at Oharu's reaction to those words. "As your religious leader it was my duty after all."

"And Butterfly looks on me as a daughter" Oharu agreed. Understanding who would have had to allow such a visit.

"You have done well. Having spoken with those who await you, I give you what you will need for your new studies. Should you choose them." Reaching beside her she picked up the longer object. It clattered with the sound of wood upon wood. "And what is a Miko or Nisou without a bow" she asked, using both paws to offer the package to her guest.

Stunned beyond thought Oharu could only stare at the black cloth wrapped package. "Does a local Priestess need such" she asked.

"I do not know. I have never seen one with such" the vixen admitted. "Yet my dreams tell me that one day you will need this. Not soon, but one day. Perhaps even many days. I would be remiss in my duties if I did not offer you this choice."

"Then I am honored" Oharu admitted, taking the package in her paws. She giggled suddenly. "I feel it will be with some difficulty that I will carry two packages, therefore..." Standing she unwrapped the bow, catching its arrow holder in one paw she flipped its strap expertly over her shoulder. A moment to bend the bow and it was strung. This she slipped across her body. Fumiyo quietly held up the box, the bows black fabric case already folded delicately on top, which Oharu took with a word of thanks. "I believe that I will much frighten the tourists" she admitted, but there was a smile on her face.

"They will use a great deal of film this evening" Urako agreed. "Visit again, please. We" she indicated her assistant as well as herself "have only a very ancient priest to keep us company, and he much keeps to himself of late."

"Then I shall. Until then" she bowed to the Miko and her assistant, stepped back three respectful steps, as though removing herself from the God Emperors presence itself before turning and leaving the temple.

"She will do well" Fumiyo commented while she cleaned up. "Am I truly ready?"

"This position will be yours, as soon as you train your assistant" Urako answered. "For I wish, as does Oharu, to become Nisou. So hurry up little one and find your girl." She swatted her assistant playfully on one ankle with her fan before finishing her tea. Oharu's she noted, had barely been touched.

Setting aside a paper with many names upon it, another which he had just marked off, a certain aged ferret leaned back against the body of his servant. She was a middle aged doe who had served him for

years. She was deaf, an accident of birth. Her mother having been struck by scarlet fever after the visit of a European missionary. Thus the child within her womb had lost her hearing, though in other ways her senses had been compensated. "There are two names left now. I have spoken to the Emperor Sui" he announced, knowing full well that with his back to her she would understand nothing of his words. That there was half a dozen sets of ears about him in the darkness mattered not. They were sworn to him, and had heard worse. Much worse. "He is of a mind with me. This falling was a mistake. Yet losing this servant simply to atone for his error is unacceptable to him."

He yawned, showing his exhaustion. It was in the early morning hours after all and he had walked miles to and from the Imperial Palace today. "I am not certain wither my nephew is enamored by the woman, or if her skills are truly that important to him. Yet it matters not, her life or death would grant me nothing in the Imperial Court." He sighed. "She is too honorable for my nephew, he does not deserve one so dedicated to him."

He fell into silence, his mind working over the events of today's private audience with the God Emperor. Sui answered his silence by rubbing his neck, something he gained great pleasure from. Of all his 'assistants' Sui was most talented in ways to please him. In truth the ferret was certain Sui had fallen in love with him, a plus in his advanced age. For Sui had been of exceptional looks even for a mere carpenter's daughter. Even now, in her forties she was quite pleasant to behold.

"He will stop her. I am to notify him when she will receive this paper. He will indebt her further to him. Honor" the ferret nearly spat that word. "It does nothing but end one's days early. It is a good thing we care only for our vows and gold." He looked out into the darkness about him. "I remember you all" he suddenly announced in a much stronger voice. "You have served well, your families have benefitted." A chuckle came from deep within his throat. "There will be more work soon, more gold. New enemies to deal with. I remember those who follow our code tightly. I reward them for their service." Turning to face Sui he smiled gently. "Bed" he whispered. A command Sui much enjoyed seeing on his lips.

It was very late on Meeting Island when Mr. Sapohatan sat the thick, cheaply mimeographed Oahu Goddard Club newsletter on top of a small stack of more expensive sketch books. His eyes burned with fatigue for he had spent the day going over all the material in Oharu's package. That she had assumed he was one of Sandy Doecan's agents had amused him. That she had taken the chance of warning him simply for Sandy's sake had warmed his heart. "Eight days more" he said to no one. "Eight days. I best start talking to people. In the very least this should prove interesting."

Her books had, as he termed it, proved interesting. With them he now had most of the details he needed, even a rough idea of how many fighters the new American Lexington's could carry. That provided by a model the mouse had dutifully drawn to scale, with notes. Unfortunately every note was in the Cipangu language. Kjellfrid was going to have a headache translating everything. He'd been stunned at the detail presented him. There was a two-page spread that was the new X-PBY's main control panel. Another that was the engineering panel, with most of the instruments carefully noted. "If an American intelligence officer, heck any half-trained pilot had seen those books they'd have her pelt for the officers room bar right now" he admitted. That several pages had been carefully cut out didn't bother him, enough paper had been left that a tiny series of Cipangan words could be written on them. Explanation most likely he decided. Private drawings. It made sense after all. Sandy had chosen her servant well. Now all he had to do was to get her home.

He still hadn't decided wither to deport Elizabeth Kathleen Brighton or marry her. Either way, Sandy Doecan had to die. Quite publically. In the most tragic of matters. Drowning was the normal choice but there couldn't be a body. Perhaps sharks he thought. Yes, sharks. A nice public bloodbath for the American agents. He knew just who to contact in order to arrange such a messy death, should that be his choice. But sharks would frighten the tourists and that simply could not be allowed. No, he would have to devise some messy end that would not frighten the weak-stomached self-centered average tourist into

thinking that they might be in even the tiniest of danger..

Calling in his secretary he indicated the stack of material. "Start translating the books, number four first, then in any order. That Goddard Club newsletter. There are equations for designing stable rockets in there. Propulsion tests as well. Get them to the S.I.T.H.S. club priority. You know which group. Get a message to Sandy, she should be staying at the Split Palms as usual. Tell her I want a copy of every issue of that clubs newsletter she can lay her paws on, and nozzle examples. Anything, everything. Its priority one now. Drop everything else."

"Guess tha mouse lit a fire?" Kjellfrid asked. "Seriously though. I am puzzled. Are we disposing of her or crowning her Empress."

Looking up in surprise the ferret suddenly giggled. "Between her and Elizabeth, I mean Sandy, I don't really know. I want to kill them both. At the same time I want to hug and kiss them both."

"Liz would like that. I think the mouse would break your neck."

"Then you can kiss her."

"I quit."

Dropping his forehead on his desk the ferret moaned. "Why me? Why do I get all the abuse."

"Because your such an easy target" his secretary answered. "I get on these right now." She gathered up the stack, turned and with a flounce of her hips walked out.

"Women. Can't live with them. Can't live without them." the ferret admitted. Picking up another large envelope he started opening it, wondering what his agent visiting Denver Colorado had sent. He'd rather go to bed but certain packages had to be gone through first. Such as this one. Maps fell onto his desk. Dozens of maps. "And the day becomes even longer" he sighed, reaching for his magnifying glass.

April 25th, 1936

A mouth watering scent of breakfast filled the mouses nose as she returned to the McGee resort. Since coming home Oharu had taken to early morning walks. Her favorite place on Casino Island had become Luakinikia Park where there was a large stand of cherry trees. They were losing their flowers now, still the scent was overpowering. It was the only natural thing on Spontoon that reminded her of her previous life. She preferred visiting it early in the morning, as by now the last tourists had either made their own way to their rented beds or had been helped by natives paid for such work. At this time of day she had the place almost completely to herself.

Walking through the main building she located her outside broom, beginning the daily job of brushing sand and gravel smooth so that the tourists would wake to a new day with no mark of last night to bother them. It would be an hour yet before Butterfly completed breakfast. By then tourists would have woken, thinking themselves bright and early. Never suspecting that during the off season any native who slept this late would be suspected of illness. Why, the fishermen had been out with their nets over half an hour already.

She had put away her broom and begun setting the tables when Butterfly called her over. "When yah gonna show me all those pretty dresses yah brought bac" the bovine asked.

Oharu thought for a moment, running the daily schedule through her mind. Once the tourists woke things would be busy, but the cooking was at a point where Butterflys two oldest children could finish. "Now, if you like" she decided.

"Reiko, Paul, yah got this? Good." Butterfly wiped her paws on a towel, following the much smaller mouse to her temporary quarters in the storage room. There she found Oharu waiting, a key in her teeth as she struggled to lift the heavy trunk onto one end. With relative ease the bovine assisted in the action, stepping back as Oharu, retrieving her key, reached to unlock her property. "Two keys once" the mouse admitted. "Annette borrow one, forgot to return. That not important." With a heavy click that indicated an expensive and well made device the lock came open. It was another short struggle, aided again by Butterfly, to open the trunk into two parts.

"Left side my clothing" Oharu explained as she started turning catches on the inner liner. It pulled away to display the dresses and a single richly ornamented kimono that Pan American Airlines had footed the bill for. Clothing that, other than the kimono would never hold up to daily wear. Nor would most be acceptable on the public streets of any American city. Taking down each hanger the mouse carefully laid each garment on her rough bed, until only one garment remained. "This belong Annette" she whispered in surprise. Pinned to the dress was a short note which Oharu removed gently.

'I will only wear this for you. Love Annette' she read. With a soft sigh of regret Oharu laid the note down, lifting to her nose the remaining garment. An otters scent was still strong within its folds, bringing back memories of a hotel restaurant and an embarrassed airlines attendant trying to survive a dinner that included escargot, among other odd foods. A smile bloomed on her lips at those memories as she withdrew her nose from the fabric.

"Fun time?" Butterfly asked.

"She try to embarrass me" Oharu explained. "I try same. Think perhaps we even. It fun dinner. We had snails, not very nice to eat. I did not like much but acted as if did. Almost lost dinner later, when dreams of snails wandering in tummy came. Not eat again."

"And your friend, how did she do?"

"Annette like snails. My joke turn on me. Maybe it not good idea to play joke on someone you care for. She is good friend I think. Island romance bittersweet. Not soft dreams people claim."

"Could ah told you that hon. So, model those dress's for me?"

As the sun rose tourists woke, wandered to their breakfast then out to whatever their day held. All ignoring the little well built storage room and the two women inside, the next hour was spent with Oharu carefully wearing one outfit after the other. Except for her kimono. "I only wear this to get married in, then after. I hope" she decided.

"Which means never" her bovine companion warned.

"No. Spontoon allow women marry. Molly hold my heart, maybe even soul. Marrying for companionship often better than marrying for love. Often love finds way to blossom even under such condition. Molly never see me in this. She would be shamed."

"You've your eye on someone then?" Butterfly asked. "Come on girl, yah can tell me. I won't blab."

"No. Know someone one day. Not yet know who." Oharu reached over, running one paw along the other woman's chin. "Maybe even old cow?" She giggled at Butterfly's reaction, which was to stick her tongue out at the mouse. "Maybe nice yellow hound teacher then. No Butterfly. Honestly. I have none in mind."

Setting the last dress back into her cedar lined trunk and back in her daily kimono Oharu started opening the trunks other side. "This few books, some samples for hospital" she explained. Opening the second side she was stunned at what she saw. Dozens more books than expected were carefully packed in the

space where she had expected only three. Along with them was a long black box shoved in at an angle as it was obviously a little longer than the trunk. Its markings instantly bothered her. "What is that" she asked as if Butterfly herself had hidden it in there. Taped to the black box was an envelope. Carefully she removed the envelope, sitting on her bed to open it.

Another note came out, two sheets this time of different paper and the missing key. Opening the note she read slowly while Butterfly gently removed both books and box. It was a love note from Annette. Written in block script because the otter knew how hard reading English was for the mouse. Softly she began to read the otters words to Butterfly.

'Oharu;

I found a doctor with books he didn't need, pre-publication editions some company sent him. Give them to your doctors. I think they might enjoy them. There is also something I know you won't like, but I can't stand it either. When we came back from that last movie I found it on my bed, and the note with this one. In short this English Major thinks I'm a spy. Would that he knew you were, I think it would stun him. That German man tried to shoot us at the luau on Big Island. This is the gun he used. I don't like guns. I don't know many doctors that do. I don't think you do either but, well, from what little I know of spies you always have someone around you that likes guns. So give it to him, or her, or it.

I plan to come to Spontoon and apply for a position as soon as I finish my residency. That's five years if I have to start over. So look for me around 1941, maybe November or December. We can do New Years together. I'll try not to gain so much weight that I can't fit in that dress again. Take care of yourself my dear. Until I see you again.

All my love forever

Annette Riverstone'

"A gun?" Oharu repeated.

"In love with you?" Butterfly added almost at the same moment. They looked at each other, giggling suddenly. "What does the other note say?"

Slipping Annette's letter behind the second sheet, a much finer class of paper than even the hotel material, Oharu struggled to read the fine script. Finally giving up she offered it to Butterfly. "Too hard to read" she admitted.

Turning so sunlight struck the paper Butterfly first scanned the sheet, then read;

'My dear American Spy;

You will remember our talk in the bar of course. After some thought it came to me that I already have an example of this weapon in my collection. Of course though I could ship it home, there is the weight to consider. My funds are not as extensive as your Navy obviously allows you. This then leaves me with three choices. Return it to the German Embassy, where it one day may be used against us again. Turn it over to my Embassy, where some self important official will end up returning it to the German's in a foolish display of diplomacy. My last choice would be to give it too you.

I am much weary of turning equipment over to Embassies who's people have little idea as to their value. Well dear lady, you do not appear to me to be the kind that is familiar with such heavy weapons. Yet your assistant, that very attractive mouse is certainly built to manage it. Therefore I turn to you this weapon, who's last mission had been to end both your lives. Best that it should serve you instead. My only request, which I dearly hope that you will honor, is that you do not use it against an Englishman unless

you have no other choice. It would be highly embarrassing to be shot by the very weapon I gave as a gift. Most embarrassing.

Miss Riverstone. Having made as extensive an investigation of you and your assistant as time allowed I must say this with all humility. That is, that the two of you are the most professional agents I have come across on this side of the world, and young lady I have met many, many agents these last four years. I watched with interest as you distracted those American men, allowing your assistant time to memorize what she saw, to make sketches of some very top secret equipment. Your country is well served by you, for you have shown them with her notebooks the weakness's in their security. I have decided that upon returning home I shall approach Whitehall with a suggestion to create a team exactly as yours. In order to test our own security, only our artist will not also be a spy for a third country. You have opened my eyes to something I had not thought of.

Finally. The next time we meet please accept my offer of dinner at my own embassy, wherever we happen to meet. I would also be delighted to introduce you to my wife should she be well enough to join us. It will be a good thing that your assistant will not be with you. My God Miss Riverstone, she is able to turn a mans head with nothing more than a glance from her eyes. I would lose the entire Embassy. That would be quite difficult to explain to Whitehall.

My best to you.

Major Thomas William Hawkins, Retired'

"Seems tah mea you two made some importan impressions" Butterfly observed before returning the paper to Oharu, who by now had rehung the last of her fancy clothing. "So lets see this thing yah have."

Taking the black case with its German military markings they laid it on the bed, looked at it, then turned it over with shared nervous laughs. "Would help if either of us read German" Butterfly admitted while opening the latches. What greeted them turned Oharu pale, causing the mouse to step back away from her bed. "Mauser" Butterfly observed. "Pretty much modafied tah the hilt." Reaching in she carefully withdrew the weapons telescopic sight, examining it carefully. "Very pretty."

"It is evil" Oharu whispered. "Destroy it."

"Nah Oharu. A tool in itself canno be evil. Only those tha use it." Butterfly returned the scope to its place, reaching over to withdraw an even larger scope. "Meant fer ah team. Spottin scope. Beauty. Bet yah could se tha volcanoes on tha moon with this." She turned to face the mouse, noting her complexion. "Oharu, yah, its ah killin machine. But well... Its not evil in itself."

"I do not wish such a thing" Oharu gasped. She couldn't quite force herself to touch the weapon, but she was able to calm down. "I do not kill."

"An iffyn say Molly were tah die if yah didn't?"

"I would join her in the afterlife."

Butterfly raised an eyebrow, her tail curling somewhat at such a claim. "Yah love her, but yah wouldn't kill for her. Your certain."

"Hawaii. Four men. They said would ravish us. Kill us. Even so I could not take life. Though was within my ability to do. I was Miko. I will be Nisou if live. I cannot kill. Even to save another's, or my life."

"Then we better find ah home for this" the bovine decided. "Taza would want it, buh I don't want it in mah home either." She sat in her chair, cradling the spotting scope in her lap. "Songmark" she suddenly announced. "Your friends with Miss Devinski right?"

"We speak" Oharu admitted. "Not think really friends. Why?"

"Think about it. Songmark teaches their girls everything, and I mean everything bout survivn in tahdays world alone. I'd bet shells tah poi she could use it, or know ah girl that could."

"Then I shall take it to Songmark today."

"We will. Havn't been off Casino in over ah month. We can maybe do some cloth shoppin on Eastern Island, where yah got tha pretty blue stuff. Drop off by tha main hospital, dump those books an stuff. Then Songmark. Comn girl, lets go."

"But the tourists... They will be expecting..."

"Food an off they go. Already done. We'll be back soon afor lunch an tha kids can clean up. " Standing she pushed the scope in her paws back into its slot, for the first time noting there were several selections of rounds packed in the case, with one polished lead colored round missing. *'Explains that note'* she thought, shutting the case. "'sides" she continued. "Yah can't carry this case and those books at tha same time."

Miss Blande was in the office of Songmark when its phone rang. Picking up the phone she spoke into the receiver. "Songmark School for Girls, Miss Blande." Hearing the others voice a look of amusement came to her eyes. "Oh Hello Mrs. McGee, it is nice to speak with you again. Miss Devinski? Yes, she has an period off in um..." Looking over at a schedule posted next to the desk the woman refreshed her memory. "An hour and fifty minutes. You wish to speak with her? No? You wish to meet with her. Is this about a prospective student.. No? Personal. I see. I will give her your request. If you will stop at the gate Mrs. McGee. Who else? A woman named Oharu will be with you? Yes, yes, I will tell her. Thank you Mrs. McGee. Good-by." Setting down the phone Miss Blande started to write a note, then thought better of it. That name, Oharu. Wasn't she the woman... Her memory clicked and with a smile she leaned back in her chair. Currently the betting was up to twenty-five sodas each. If Oharu were to slip within the next... She checked her notebook, eleven days. "I will gain much too much weight" she told her notebook. In any case she'd see her partner Miss Devinski well before the allotted time and they always had a short pass along chat between classes.

Butterfly returned her phones receiver to its cradle, giving Oharu a smile. "Two hours. We can take tha books by tha hospital fist, then have time fer ah quick water taxi. Plenty o' time. Go get ah taxi-porter."

As always Oharu bowed to her employer before following her orders, as was the mouse's custom. Half a block from Butterfly's main entrance was a small area where porters and guides often waited. All worked with or were related to various water taxi pilots of course, though none would ever admit it to a simple tourist. Taking her time she walked to the lines head, employing whomever was first in line. It was a young panda she had seen but once before, still that probably meant he'd just gotten old enough for this kind of employment. Or more than likely tired of sitting in stalls smiling at the tourists while playing the same song over and over until he went mad. In the least he was more than well enough muscled to easily carry their load to the docks, exactly what Butterfly liked the mouse remembered. When she returned Butterfly seemed delighted in her choice, quickly loading everything into the pandas modified rickshaw. Rickshaw Oharu thought. A lazy American missionaries design brought over from China. Settling into the vehicle she held out her paw to Oharu, who politely refused. "I walk. Servant walk. Besides, need exercise" she explained. Shaking her head in amazement Butterfly instructed their hired help where to go,

it wasn't like the mouse's added slight weight would have been a strain to the panda after all. It would simply make him expend more effort, and watching the young man work seemed to please the bovine to some great amount, at least Oharu's occasional glance found Butterfly's eyes firmly glued to the panda's back.

It was an easy ride by native water taxi from Casino Island to Meeting Island where the main hospital was, native taxis having none of the embellishments of tourists taxis, and being not quite as powerful. Still they were the workhorses, and quite economical, though Butterfly couldn't stop giggling after their young porter, who had suddenly become their taxi pilot when the original had suddenly been 'needed elsewhere' had offered a flower to Oharu. When they reached the Hospital Butterfly paid the panda off, shooing him away when he tried to give Oharu 'the eye' again after having hinted she would make a fine wife for someone. '*Wasting yer time boy*' she laughed to herself as she turned to follow Oharu, herself carrying the heavy black case while Oharu nearly staggered under the combined weight of a box of books and a drug case. '*Young boys, they don't know the signs yet*' she thought. It was the roo Doctor Kiwi who met them at the receptionist desk, it being his turn to be on duty at this time.

"Books?" he asked while Oharu carefully opened her box, removing one volume after another. "No medical emergency? Just books." He grinned. "We don't treat books here miss" he informed Oharu with humor even as he started paging through a volume.

"American Navy Doctor thought Spontoon might want these" she informed him as the last books, a heavy very thick five volume series titled 'Atlas of Species Anatomy.'

Kiwi almost dropped the book in his paws at the sight of that series, snatching up the top copy. "This is brand new. We've copies on order but they will be months getting here, ours is five years old." He laughed then. "Miss, you have just earned a free physical any time you need. Now what's in that fat black case you have."

"Medical samples. Nothing restricted he promised me" she answered, pushing her bag over to Dr. Kiwi reach.

Dr. Kiwi rummaged among the drugs a few minutes, making odd noises in his throat as he examined each bottle, box or tube. "Quite right, nothing we don't already have. Still its always nice to have extra. I could have wished for the new sulfa drug." He glanced over at the large black luggage Butterfly was holding. "And that?" he asked, interested.

"For someone else" Butterfly answered, turning the case just enough that Kiwi caught sight of the German emblem. A look of distaste came to his features, vanishing just as quickly.

"Your quite right. Wouldn't need something like that here. Well, would you two like to visit or are you on a schedule."

"Schedule" Oharu admitted. "Thank for time." She bowed somewhat deeper to the Doctor than she had to anyone else today, turning to join Butterfly as the two left.

"I could only wish all our tourists would bring presents like these" Kiwi told the receptionist before snatching up the other four volumes of 'Atlas of Species Anatomy' and vanishing to his office.

As they walked back to the waiting water taxis Butterfly gave Oharu a crash course in native customs, specifically those between men and women. "Mean taxi boy wanted date?" the mouse asked.

"I mean" Butterfly corrected. "Taxi boy, or pilot as we call them, wanted much more than a date. He was interested in you as the mother for his children." Oharu's blush of embarrassment caught the bovine by surprise, she'd expected laughter.

"Long time since any boy approach me that way" the mouse admitted. "Boys always approach Miko's. Boys soon learn which Miko's approachable, which not. Mainly by age." She reached out, placing her right paw lightly against Butterfly's arm. "How I say thank you no, without hurting?"

"That's one way, another... Just admire tha flower and tell him it is beautiful. His girlfriend will love it. Somethin like that, just try not tah slap his face ahn you'll be fine. Just because some boy fancies you doesn't mean he owns yah, not like in some societies. Women arn't property. We're equals, and if some boy decides ah woman is his wither she likes it or not, well tha other boys an girls deal with him. Spontoon doesn't let people rule other people, its why there was never real slavery here. Even when tha colonials tried tah introduce it in a social context. Them bein better cause they had tha guns. A knife at night's deadlier than ah gun in daytime, so some of the worst found out. Sure, there's social sla... Oh dear, he's still waitin."

True to Butterfly's remark the same water taxi was waiting, a smiling young man at its helm with a flower in his hair. Butterfly shook her head in disbelief, Oharu though simply turned, walking to another taxi. "Oharu, she's not first in line" Butterfly reminded her.

Stopping on the pier Oharu remained silent a moment. "I can not hurt him" she whispered. "He is a nice man. I am not ready to face this. Not yet. Perhaps... If things do not go well, perhaps never."

"Your madness?"

"Barely under control" the mouse admitted. "I cannot face yet man who I know find my body attractive. Who want me. It too much stress, too vivid memories. My wall strains. I will fail. Please Butterfly. I need time. Please."

"Stay here then. I'll talk with the boy, then we'll take another taxi to Eastern." Setting the heavy black case beside Oharu the bovine approached a now confused water taxi pilot. What she said to him Oharu didn't know, but when Butterfly returned he had pulled his taxi out of line, allowing another in his place. A well known wolf now waited for them. "He'll be okay ah think. Told him ah bit oh tha truth. May not stop him from trying later, but there are things here we understand as babies tha are taken lightly elsewhere. Come on. Contary tah popular belief Songmark waits for no woman. 'Cept Huakava. Everthing waits for her."

Laying on her bed at the Split Palms the bobcat known as Sandy Doecan was half dozing, half thinking over her new orders. What, she wondered, could be so all important about a hobby that she had been told to drop all interest in the military? Oharu's adventures had been surprise enough, Mrs. Kaaloa had been quick to inform her of all the mouse's adventures. Adventures that though downplayed in the islands English papers were more than detailed by the native language ones. It wasn't bad enough that she had saved some woman aboard a Pan American Clipper ship. No that wasn't enough. Native reporters had spoken of the four German's the mouse had supposable dealt with by herself, though the English clippings indicated that it was the two Air Hostess's that had saved that day. No, not enough. Then she had hired a local to escort her and her Pan American escort over live lava beds, as though she did such each day. That the Spontoon native, possibly even a Priestess in disguise from her respectful ways towards certain island customs had then 'been spoken too' by Pele herself bothered Sandy. *'You were supposed to have been low key'* she screamed at Oharu within her mind. Well what was done was done, there wasn't anything she could do about it now. More than likely the mouse had failed at the task she had been given anyway.

Now she was supposed to gather every last item of information she could about Kakalina's hobby, the OGC. All Sandy knew was it took a lot of stinking and dangerous chemicals, a lot of work and usually ended up in spectacular fireworks or explosions. Mainly explosions, though Kakalina referred to such events as CATO's. What could her foster father be thinking. Kakalina though had been delighted to give

her copies of OGC's newsletter, since she was the editor (Split Palms owning a rather new mimeograph machine.) From all the bobcat had been able to ferret out, OGC was a club of a little more than a dozen youngsters devoted to the work of some American scientist named Goddard, and they had plans to put a object in orbit around the Earth by 1945. Wouldn't it just fall down she had wondered.

As it turned out there was a ton of math involved. Rube Goldberg class devices meant to automatically correct each vehicles flight, most of which were so involved that they were instantly doomed to failure. Yet under the OGC title of every newsletter was a quote from Dr. Goddard himself. *"Every vision is a joke until the first man accomplishes it; once realized, it becomes commonplace."* Apparently his response to a Times reporter in the 1920's. Well aircraft were less than thirty years old, forty if you listened to the French but the first proven flight had been American in December of 1903. These rocket things were probably about in the same level of development as that first flight. So maybe by 1966 she could take a vacation on Mars and ice skate the canals. Or watch dinosaurs wander the swamps of Venus. That, Sandy decided, was real excitement. She hadn't yet realized that she had been bitten by the space bug. Or that its bite was absolutely incurable.

"She hasn't left Kualoa Point since she got there?" Captain Edger 'Bill' Merryman, USN-INS at Hickham Field asked.

"Other than visit those kids rocket pad off Makali Point once, not an inch sir" his Ensign admitted. "I've got two men watching the place, each in their own car. She hasn't budged."

Flipping through his papers the young husky grimaced. "This isn't going right. General Harper has been awfully understanding about being cut off, but even an Englishman's got to have a limit to his patience. What's the chance you can flush her out of there."

"How sir? I mean, legally she's a tourist. I've triple checked her papers. They are in better order than my own. We even inspected those three aircraft she arrived in. Other than needing a good straightening up we couldn't find anything."

Merryman groaned in disgust. "Then make something up. Anything. I don't care what it is just as long as you can find a way to drag her in here by Friday."

"I'll try sir."

"Never mind, I'll do it myself. Dismissed." He waited until the dalmatian had left, then called in the clerk he shared with the rest of this floors officers. "I want transfer papers for Ensign Parker written up within the hour" he ordered. "Something he can do well in, like tugboats. Or supply ships." As soon as the clerk had left he pulled a book off one of his shelf's. What local law could he use he wondered, beginning to work his way through the pages. As he read he made notes, perhaps this... or this... It would be late in the evening when his perfect plan would come to him.

"Ah thought you'd gotten over that" Butterfly commented as they rode together on a water taxi headed for Eastern island. She was looking back towards Meeting Island as she spoke, looking to where a certain disappointed young water taxi pilot probably still waited for a customer.

"He look much like one who..." Oharu shut up, looking forward, away from Meeting Island.

"Like one of the sailors? I'm sure he does have some Cipangu blood in him, though I don't know his family. Oharu. He is simply attracted to yah. He's not gonna... Well. He won't."

Oharu however remained silent for most of the trip, a silence Butterfly tried to break several times without

success. Finally, with the pier just in sight the mouse did break her silence. "You never understand fully" she explained. "I have less one month face my demons." She sighed. "I not completely stable yet Butterfly. On edge sometimes. He touch my.. He.. I may be okay, I may fall apart. It still hard to be close Taza. To him I could not be. I have much anger within my heart. I must calm it, but I can not today."

"Thought yah were doin so good" the bovine admitted. "So busy myself, yav'e been gone guess I missed tha signs. Things like that, thay don't just vanish in tha mornin light do thay?" She stood, causing the boat to rock, an event which brought a gasp of fear from Oharu. "Nothin tah worry about little mousie" Butterfly confided. "Nothin inside this harbor'd dare take ah nibble of someone I like. A'hd cruse it ahn serve it fer supper." She then made her way to the bow, though more carefully. Soon lost in her own thoughts.

"Sir. Important message for you" Mark announced as he entered his commanders cabin aboard the Gummy Rose.

"Have you decoded it yet?" the older bulldog asked.

"I don't need to sir, its in the clear."

"CLEAR?" the older man asked as he stood. "What idiot..." He grabbed the paper, unfolding it. After a moments reading his tense stature eased. "Fine, all right. Leave a message in Diane's cabin. We're meeting a warship in the morning. They will have our real orders. While your at it, pack up our little otter as well. She's coming with us wither or not she wants too. Dress her right. I don't want anyone knowing she's a civilian."

"Yes sir." Mark backed out of the cabin, closing its door after he had exited. Their third member was currently with the otter, having gone through several bottles of wine so far. He swallowed, could she go through with her orders without training? He'd heard rumors that those few empaths who entered someone's emotions too far without their permission had troubles later, and 'paths were rarer than ice on the Sahara. Having once trekked through that burning desert he knew well what that meant. Their racoon was the first 'path he'd met in more than fifteen years of service, in more that thirty years of life. She would probably be the only 'path he ever met.

Where a star nosed mole, simply by their birth could determine if you were lying by your voice, mannerisms, even your scent. They still had to know the language you spoke to be completely effective. 'paths, or empathic minds to use the scientific term, circumvented that. They could feel emotions just like he could feel the heat of a winters fire. They could, it was rumored, delve deeply within someone's soul to determine their true feelings. He also knew that scent was involved, importantly involved but not too much more. He lived on a need to know bases after all, and if he didn't need to know, he never asked. At least they couldn't read minds, that in itself was reassuring. To date no one had been found that could really read minds, though dozens of confidence artists appeared almost every month claiming that ability. Apparently the brain was simply too complex for such actions, a fact Mark was delighted to believe existed. He'd have certain thoughts lately about his current commander that might have gotten him into hot water. Very hot water.

"How'd it go wih Devinski?" Butterfly asked as the two walked towards a dozen or so color splashed cloth stalls on Eastern island.

"She say Molly might like" Oharu answered, pausing to look around her. "Place I go to no longer here. Was there, that closed building."

"Thasa warehouse Oharu. Close fer tha tourist season mos likely" Butterfly explained. "These are mostly tourist stalls, we whan tha ones further bac. After tourist season tha warehouse's all open, so we locals

chan pick up remainders fer our nex year costumes. Yah gave it tah Molly?”

“Was Miss Devinski’s idea” Oharu admitted, stopping to admire a blood red metallic cloth the like she had never seen before, an image of her wearing it flashing through her mind bringing a deep blush. *‘Well, one day. For someone special’* she thought. “Let her think okay. I not care anymore. Molly past history.”

Wisely the bovine shut up. In her heart she knew that the mouse was in a lot of emotional pain. If she needed to cut herself off for a time, then she would let her. But Butterfly was no teenager. One did not just forget their first love, ever. Why, she could still vividly remember... She shook off that image for the moment.

Chapter Twenty-Four

April 26th, 1936

A sharp knock on her door woke Sandy Doecan from her sound sleep. It was very early and she never, ever took visitors when at the Split Palms Resort. Slipping out of bed wearing nothing but what nature had given her, the bobcat pulled an automatic from under her pillow as though it were a natural action. In her paw the Model 1911's weight felt comforting, knowledge of what its clip of cross-cut .45 caliber soft lead slugs could do to even the most arrogant of attackers made that even more so. Pulling back the hammer and releasing the deadly little weapons safety she stepped to her doors side. It was still dark outside, so who? "Yes?" she asked in a sleepy sounding voice.

"Kakalina" a well known voice answered, the others voice was wide awake and fully of a teenagers energy. "You wanted tah go see todays flights. We gotta leave now or we'll be late."

Lowering her weapon the bobcat sighed in relief, automatically safeing her weapon as she did so. Of course she remembered, she had asked to go. But was it the 26th already? "Give me a minute or ten, I need to get dressed" she responded.

"I'll be in tha truck" her young ne-ne friend agreed. Again with that sickly sugary voice only a true teenager could manage. "With breakfast, hot egg an ham sandwich for yah, an a mug of fresh coffee."

That news energized Sandy. Within her self-allotted ten minutes she was dressed and sitting in the truck's cab, sipping one of Split Palm's greatest secrets. Fresh brewed island grown coffee. A few seconds after they had pulled onto the highway a cars headlights fell into place behind them. Sandy noted them, but ignored them. She had spotted both watching cars two days before. It had to be military intelligence, no one else was that stupid after all. But which military she didn't know. Any of the locals would have continually traded out vehicles, not just the drivers sitting behind their wheels. She wondered how far they would get before each particular car's fuel ran out, leaving it helpless. She had punched a tiny hole in both their tanks the same night she'd spotted them, fuel dripping one slow drop after another. Considering how many cigarette's those people were smoking it was a wonder one or both machines hadn't gone up in a fireball long ago. She remembered that one tank had sounded fuller than the other, so one car would be with them a bit longer. She hoped for no more than five or ten miles travel, with five being preferable as it would get them out into sparsely inhabited territory. Four miles down the road their first follower suddenly turned off, its headlights fading as they drove away from it. *'Pretty good timing'* she decided. Within ten minutes the second pair of headlamps performed the same maneuver.

Unknown to the bobcat, in the pickup's bed behind her sat several tanks of gasoline and two of liquid oxygen. Oxygen freshly picked up from a local welding shop just that morning. She sat in the middle of a massive bomb, one just waiting for even a single bullets impact. Blissfully unaware of her true situation Sandy quietly enjoyed her breakfast. Especially the coffee.

U.S.S. Gummy Rose was barely making steerageway in the light of a false dawn while the warship USS Downes beside her sent over a line. Within minutes a strange seat-like contraption was moving from the sleek warship to its fat civilian counterpart. By the time true sunrise came both ships had separated, one continuing its plodding, none too stately course towards the mainland. A course now much straighter than before while the other hotfooted it back to Pearl Harbor at flank speed, now carrying four new passengers. Aboard the warship Annette found herself limited to the single cabin she shared with 'Alice.' Although confused by the sudden change in plans, Annette had decided that everything was out of her paws for now so she might as well lay back and read a book.

Alice/Diane though was livid as she entered her commanders borrowed stateroom. "I won't share a cabin with her. Even for a day. She **LIKES** me."

"That's good, it will make your later work the easier" her bulldog commander replied.

"Work? What work? If you mean another session bearing with that lovesick otter trying to make a home run you can just shoot me now."

Her commander snorted, fighting to keep from laughing. "How far did she get anyway" he asked.

"Second base, then I sort of passed out from the wine. I don't know if it was the alcohol or my humiliation, but I don't think she took advantage. I hope she didn't. What's this work we've been recalled for anyway?"

"We've been called back because Sandy Doecan has unexpectedly returned to Oahu. As you may recall she is our primary target this season. They want us to flush her out, then bring her in alive. Alive enough to answer some rather intensive questioning. I can't let that happen, too many peoples tails are on the board. She knows way too much, too many important career's will be ruined if she talks. That's where your little girlfriend comes in. You're a fair hypnotist as I remember. Or something. I want you to get her ready to shoot this bobcat. No questions need be asked if she does and if an assisting civilian loses it while turning this woman's skull into a sieve, so much the better."

"All right. I'm not as good as some. I can't make her kill if its against her nature. You'd need someone like Miller for that kind of behavioral modification and weeks of time. Still that'll mean she goes to jail. I'll take that."

"Actually, while trying to stop her from killing our enemy agent I want you to accidentally... ice the young lady."

A feral grin lit the raccoon's face. "With pleasure."

"But your going to have to get her to trust you more" he continued. "I don't think second base will do that. It doesn't have to be a home run, but somewhere between third and home should do nicely. Remember, you get to pick where you shoot her first. That second round has to be terminal though."

Alice/Diane's feral grin faded to a sickly shadow of itself. "I have too?"

"We need her off balanced. Confused, unable to make decisions on her own for at least for a day or two. Just keep her confused and under control. If anyone can do it, someone with your talent should be able too. At least until we don't need her anymore. Now I've reports to study. Dismissed,"

Walking slowly back to her shared quarters the raccoon mulled over her commanders orders. *'We need her'* she thought. *'Meaning he needs Annette. Why are we killing this agent if we have orders to take her alive? Who does she have the goods on anyway.'* She stopped to allow several sailors to pass by, blushing slightly at the wolf whistle one of them gave her. She was married yes, but still being considered attractive at her age was something most women loved. Moving again she stopped suddenly as it hit her. Sandy Doecan knew something about her commander or his bosses. Something he was more than willing to ignore written orders to cover up. Something he was willing to kill two people to cover up. Swallowing in fear she felt her fur crawl. Maybe three, if he caught that mistake he had just made, and he would. *'What am I going to do'* she asked herself.

No answer came to her.

Oharu found herself standing silently before a strange native shine, one slightly different than any others she had yet found. She had finished her work at the resort well before sunup. It was now well after noon and she still hadn't found the panther known as Huakava. Already dozens of tourists had taken her for a native, asking for her photograph or simply taking it as though she were a stone or plant. She had been badgered, bothered, even taken for a gaishou by a pawful of older Europeans. Through it all she had held her poise, allowed the photographs, politely declined the crude offers, ignored the bumping and grabbing. Huakava had said to come to her when she had made her decision. But come where? Casino Island was certainly not the place where she would be found, nor Eastern Island. In her mind Main Island seemed to be the correct place to find the elusive panther but those she had asked had either not known, or pointed in vague directions. And strangely she had not been required to hire a guide as all others did.

As she stood by the odd shrine working out her next path a young tourist couple came towards her. Italian from their accents she thought, or some place near there. Somehow they had slipped the ever present native guide and were alone. As they walked past the mouse the young woman spotted the shrine. "My picture" the young bovine called out in heavily accented English. "You must take my picture Jaun. Help me clear this mess off. I will then lay on the stone like a sacrifice." Even as she walked forward the young woman started unbuttoning her blouse.

Almost without thinking Oharu stepped forward, placing her smaller body between the two bovines and their intended destination. "No" she said as softly as her torn voice would allow, turning to face the two. "This is holy place."

"Holy?" the male Jaun laughed. His accent wasn't as thick as his ladies. "Only Christo is holy. All others are false idols. Move away little one, I would not want to hurt such a pretty woman. It is only a for photograph"

Oharu stood her ground. As far as she knew this could be one of the many fake shrines or a real one. She felt nothing from it, yet that could simply be because she didn't know what to look for. No matter, she would not let these two deface it. "I not argue religion with you. To this island, to us, this Holy. Go lay your woman on altar at own church. "

Gasping the woman stood taller. "Defile Gods House? Never!" She looked hard into Oharu's eyes, as though by force of will alone she could have her way. Abruptly something in the mouse's eyes seemed to frighten her. She stepped back, shivering as though a cold wind had suddenly blown through her soul. "Jaun. Let us find another place. This witch frightens me" she whispered, real fear spicing the edges of her voice.

Oharu however made no move, made no further sound. Quietly she watched as the two, the male looking behind him with angry expressions now and then as they soon vanished down the path. Turning to the shrine Oharu slapped her paws together three times, bowing to the spirits of this shine, if any truly resided here before continuing on her quest. It wasn't five minutes later that the grey-black form of Huakava stepped out onto the path before her.

"I was called to another island" she told the mouse after greeting her. "It took some time to return. From your actions I believe that you wish to speak with me. Have you a chosen place where we may speak?"

"Chosen place?" Oharu asked.

"A place you find calming. I must ask you many things my dear mouse. This asking will take some time." A strange sound caused her to look further down the path, a woman's scream of dismay followed the sound and a mans curse of anger came to them, though weakly. "I see. It appears your two tourists have located a bit of mud. Perhaps a bothersome vine laying forgotten across this path. That is unfortunate."

"Perhaps the old waterfall" Oharu suggested. "Was I right to stop them" she asked, having no illusions that Huakava hadn't watched the entire encounter. Or somehow arranged that 'troublesome vine.'

"It is a tourist shine" Huakava admitted. "Meant for tourists such as those to be fools upon. The symbols carved upon those stones are, I am afraid, none too pleasant for gentle eyes. They were taken from a rather unsettling American fantasy magazine. Their meanings, as far as the carver was able to determine, rather unpleasant for the one laying upon the altar. We insure that it never becomes truly Holy to its strange God by leaving flowers and fruit upon it. These things repel its called one, though the carvings are incomplete. Thus even should we ignore it none would come if called. There are several of its type in unexpected places. This way then." She stepped into the five yard jungle with Oharu close behind her. "Tell me dear mouse. Would you truly have used force to stop them from defiling what you believed was a sacred shrine?"

There was no reason to lie to the woman leading her, so Oharu told her the truth. "Only as much as needed to turn them away" she admitted.

"That then shows me the difference then between you and my student Leokau. I have long known that she could not truly replace me. That she could never even be Saimmi's equal. My dreams warned me long ago that I must find another to aid in the great healing. Yet I never quite understood why. I see now what my dreams meant. Leokau would never have resorted to physical violence. That, for her is not possible. She hasn't the spark that allows such."

They cut right suddenly, following a ridge that Oharu eventually realized was the bank of an ancient riverbed. Of course the now dry waterfall had to drain somewhere, she just hadn't worried about it at the time. Eventually they broke through a thick stand of bamboo, coming out into the secluded depression that had once held the pool of that ancient and once very large waterfall. There was only one real path out that Oharu had found, a path only natives and a very curious tourist might find. Now overgrown with bamboo and other plant life, only the center of that ancient pond remained clear. An area perhaps a dozen yards wide butting up to the cliff that once watched cascades of water pass by. Settling on a lichen stained flat stone Huakava waited for Oharu to follow suite.

"Tell me Oharu. Why do you truly wish to be a priestess" she asked.

Inside his office on Meeting island the ferret known as Mr. Sapohatan (which may or may not be his real name after all) pushed his latest reports aside. With tired paws he picked up his coffee mug, taking a moment to inhale the rich Hawaiian beans scent. It was a scent that his special bobcat agent had introduced him to over a year ago, and he always enjoyed its scent before sipping his drink. He was tired, physically tired. But his mind kept spinning like a locomotive's wheels on greased tracks. He hadn't been given this job as a favor after all. Once he'd been Spontoon's leading police detective, occasionally he wondered if he had made a mistake accepting this position. He pushed that thought aside, past was past and right now he was enjoying the taste of his drink while he let the day flow away for a moment. Later he would deal with his problems, but for now... Paradise.

Outside his office his secretary, a mature rabbit of Scandinavian decent Kjellfrid by name, had just signed for a radiogram. Standing she walked into her bosses office, unknowing of what the envelope held she allowed herself no interest in finding out. She too had been carefully selected for her position. Not only for her excellent organizational skills, her remarkable memory and her knowledge of six different languages. But her ability to hold back her own natural curiosity, along with being quite capable of keeping her mouth shut about anything she might accidentally overhear. When the Allthing had decided they needed an intelligence community their choices hadn't been off the cuff or political in nature by any means. Both rabbit and ferret would be extremely difficult to replace, though the ferret more-so considering the islands current population.

Annette Riverstone, wearing a grey business dress that had somehow materialized on her bunk followed the two bulldogs as they made their way down the destroyer's gangplank late that afternoon. Behind her came her raccoon 'nursemaid.' While the Gummy Rose had taken forever to make a few hundred miles (Annette never realized they were making great sweeping -S- turns at night) the destroyer had seemed to fly back to Pearl Harbor. That they had returned at 'flank speed' Annette never suspected. She wouldn't have understood the term anyway. A large grey military car waited for them, large enough that all four were comfortable inside along with two other men. One a rather attractive husky the other... a what? Annette asked herself. He was of a species she'd never seen before. As she racked her mind for the males species the vehicle smoothly moved away from the docks.

"What's the scoop Captain" the older bulldog asked politely as he sat back, withdrawing a cigar from his jacket though he made no move to light the offending weed. "Another plan down the drain?"

"No plan survives contact with the enemy" Captain Merryman quoted to remind the speaker. "In this case nothing at all happened, and something has. Arthur?" His new assistant opened a small case, withdrawing a folder which he carefully offered his commander. Annette notice his action, something clicking in her head at the smoothness of his movements. A ratel was not a creature to mess with she decided. Especially unarmed and in a small enclosed space. Opening his folder the husky pulled out a large photograph, it was the traditional eight by ten glossy Annette noted. "Your aware of her" he stated, not asked as he held out the photograph. "She dumped her tail this morning easy as you please. Somehow she not only slipped out from under the watchful gaze of two military agents, but drained both vehicles petrol tanks."

"They were asleep?" Alice/Diane asked.

"Most likely" Merryman admitted. "It is so hard to find good professional help in the military. Not that I can prove anything of course. Their incompetence is one reason why I called you back."

"Hrumph" the older bulldog answered, tossing the photo back. "I understand we are to capture her, not terminate?"

"As long as she will live and can talk you may bring her back in a concrete block up to her neck as far as I care" Merryman answered. "Broken arms, legs, a few injuries. If she resists arrest your free to do whatever it takes short of killing her, or injuring her so badly she won't recover. This has gone up to the War Office. They want her in Washington. I'll be blunt, she dies your through. All three of you. Vanished forever. No excuses will be accepted, they know your all far too professional for that."

"Threats?" the older, still unnamed bulldog asked.

"Promises. I don't have the authority to make threats and a certain Lieutenant General never bothers too."

"Harper? That old... No. Your right, he doesn't threaten. He smashes. All but his friends. We will do our best Captain."

Smiling the Husky offered the bulldog another paper. "She's here. We've finally determined that the family isn't part of her web, she just happens to like the place. Lately she's started spending a lot of time with the oldest daughter." He looked at Annette. "It fits her profile young lady. Any port in a storm, no matter the geography, or age." Looking back to the bulldog he asked him "Why did you bring her with you."

"She has a grudge to settle" the bulldog answered. "And we can't let her out of our sight until this is over. Of course we could have iced her, but I made her a promise so I thought it a bad idea to break that promise. Besides" he grinned. "Doecan's going to be stunned to see her. It'll give us an extra moment

when we close the trap."

"Interesting" the husky admitted. "Bring her in tonight, without fail. This civilian goes back to her airline when your done. Alive and well. After this I think you might like a little vacation. I hear that the Northern Pacific is rather delightful this time of year."

"I'd like to see that race. We have a car?"

"Two. Both completely civilian. I personally rented them from local families. Not in the best condition, but its what you've asked for before."

Very soon they pulled into a large hanger, the sudden darkness taking Annette by surprise. Stepping out the husky pointed to two battered old Dodge's. "Your rides await. I'll be in my office all night waiting for your successful report, or to call up the firing squad. Its that rough this time." With that the military car eased off, slipping carefully between two fighter aircraft before vanishing out the back way. A jerk on her arm caused Annette to stumble towards the older vehicle. She barely had time to notice that it was the raccoon who'd pulled her before she regained her balance.

"When I was many years younger I brought a visiting European here" Huakava informed Oharu in the mouse's native language as they entered a hidden glen. "He told me that, were the waters bitter this would be a Fen, were there more waters it would be a Glen. I have always liked the sound of that word, Glen. So I have always called this the Great Stone Glen, after the holy stone over there" She had pointed towards the tall splinter of stone as she talked. "Have you thought of a name for this place?"

Oharu managed a small smile, herself leaning against a large stone. They had been talking half the day, or she had at least. "No. I only thought of this as a calming place. Your name sound well. It should be used."

"Then we will call it Great Stone Glen" Huakava agreed with a chuckle. "It is as good a name as any the Guides have given it. You would live here?"

"I would die here" Oharu admitted. "Living would better be."

Huakava sighed, "I must have time to think. You should care for the needs of your body now. We passed an old sand bar a little back, you know where water is." She waited while without a question or comment Oharu stood and left. *'Well trained, observant'* the ancient panther admitted to herself. She sat for a while, silent, eyes closed with her face to the setting sun. She had spent the afternoon speaking with Oharu. Asking questions, learning more about this would be Priestess. Eventually the mouse returned, settling again in the place she had taken when they first arrived. "There are still many things I would know of you Oharu, yet my presence is needed elsewhere tonight. Perhaps tomorrow we may finish."

"I am most willing" the mouse admitted. "Should I be here at sunrise?"

Huakava almost smiled. "I am interested in not only what you may say, but what you may do. It is my wish that you remain here overnight, to be available when I may have time tomorrow. Would this be a problem for you. Is this something you might fear to do?"

"To remain overnight, or many nights. No Sensei. This would be of no difficulty for me."

Huakava pressed. "You have an imbalance within you. I would be most satisfied should you not have it when I return."

Oharu swallowed. She knew what Huakava was speaking about. She had been putting it off, day by day. "Tonight Sensei?" she asked.

"Tonight" came the answer.

"Then tonight" the mouse agreed, much against her own desires.

"Then one last question. I am aware of your love for the doe Molly Procyk. I am aware that you accept that there may never be even friendship between you, that you accept this fully. What I am not aware of is how you fell so deeply in love so quickly. Could this not be simply desire for her form? She is, as I have observed myself, one of the most beautiful does to ever grace this land in my lifetime. Perhaps the most beautiful ever to walk these shores.

Oharu looked away, turning her eyes to the great splinter of stone near the ancient, now dry waterfall's cliff for a moment. "I have thought of this" she admitted, her whiskey dry voice soft in the beginning dusk. "It is true she and I share a great harm. I thought, perhaps it is simply because I understand. That I share. But no, that was not why. Then I wondered, she is beautiful beyond compare. Though I have never found interest with her species before, perhaps it is because for myself I find her look exotic. Could my love be simply physical desire? This I dwelled upon for even longer, before I understood that no, this was not why my heart opened to her. My fall began when I first looked into her eyes. That I know."

Huakava leaned back against the moss shrouded form of an ancient buka tree, its soft wood long ago wrapped by an enormous jade vine. "It is said by many that the eyes are windows to one's soul. Is it true perhaps, that your heart was captured not by beauty, nor by one hurt and vulnerable, but by the pure power of this one's soul?"

"I had not thought of this" Oharu admitted. "It is something I must meditate upon, before I may give an honest answer."

"That is what I hoped to hear Oharu. You must realize that when one's heart is taken by another's soul, it cannot ever return to you without powerful aid. If this is so, your life may be a lonely one. I have become much aware of this doe's feelings of any woman wanting her. It would take perhaps a miracle for her to love you. Perhaps more than a miracle. Have you earned such?"

Oharu laughed, a gentle, soft sound even from her once torn throat. "Sensei, I would not want such even were I owed a dozen miracles. Should one day Molly find me to her liking, that would be joy beyond joy. I will not ask this of her. I am much aware I have no future with this one. I have become aware that I may find companionship with others, so long as I never ask for love." She looked down at her paws, even after washing in the cool pond they were filthy from her days' efforts to find this Priestess. "One cannot rule one's heart, only allow it to find its own way. Upon doing so, to find a way to deal with the results in such a manner that no other is harmed. I wish to serve others, to aid those in need. I will expend my hungers in such matters rather than allow them to grow within me until I may no longer contain them."

Huakava stood slowly, looking down upon the Cipangan who was once a temple maiden, who now wished to become a Spontoon Priestess. In her time with the mouse Huakava had discovered that in many ways a Miko's training was more than her own, greatly more. Yet in some ways it was less. That Oharu would have to relearn much was a given. That she knew more than Huakava herself in many areas was a wonder to the Priestess. "Then I charge you with this. Look deeply within your heart. When I return tomorrow have for me the reason your heart so much calls to this woman. I will be honest with you, in order to fully train you I must know your heart. For should I send you down the wrong path it would be impossible to recall you to another."

Oharu nodded her acceptance. "When you return, then shall I have this answer" she agreed. She watched in silence as Huakava walked away, to quickly vanish into the surrounding forest. It would not be

difficult for her to discover the truth, this Oharu knew. What the mouse also knew was that, no matter the true reason she would need much time to absorb, to understand and accept it. Yet first she must deal with the demons within her own heart. This truly frightened her.

Sandy Doecan as most people knew the bobcat, was busy packing a night case. She was leaving the Split Palms, in the morning she planed to visit her special British General, then return here in time to watch the last launch attempt on the 30th before leaving for home. She had intended upon remaining for weeks, but an odd feeling had come over her this afternoon. A feeling as though someone were digging into her grave, with bare paws. Not so much a superstitious woman Sandy had still known that it had been some kind of warning. She had never felt such before, but she had never taken the chances she had this year either. Snapping the small case filled with Kakalina's OGC materials along with several used test nozzles, a couple of fins and over two dozen paw written letters addressed to the non-existent 'Spontoon Goddard Club' she stepped back. Yes, two cases. One her clothing, one the precious material for her foster father. Her overnight case she would abandon with the general, as a souvenir.

A gentle knock came to her door. Looking up she realized that it was past dinnertime. Most likely Kakalina with a plate she thought. Opening the door with a smile on her face she started to say hello. Her last conscious sight was the heavy bulldogs fist coming towards her chin. Vainly she twisted, but the impact tossed her across the room, slamming her into the table holding her small case causing both to tumble across the room. A moment later the rooms door was closed, four figures now standing within. Only three were armed.

"Looks like we got here just in time. She's packed, someone coming for her" the leader observed, seeing in the wreckage only the large case holding Sandy's clothing. He turned to his two female companions. "Diane, you know what to do. Mark, bring her case with you. Diane, turn the light out when you leave. We'll wait outside in case her assistant arrives."

Stepping aside the raccoon waited in silence until both men had departed. As the door closed she turned to Annette, reaching out to turn the rooms light off. "I'm dead, aren't I" the otter asked.

"Oh very dead" the raccoon agreed. "I hate what you did to me. Do you even understand that? I'll have nightmares for months. Your kind make me sick to my stomach so I'm going to kill you very slowly." She laughed, a bitter, almost brittle sound. "Third base he said. Maybe a little more. You went farther than that. So much farther. Now I get my revenge. On you and every one of your kind I ever run across for the rest of my life."

Annette backed away in fear. "I didn't know" she apologized. "All you had to do..."

"Was follow orders, or follow you into the next wave. I'm expendable you know. I know too much now. At least he won't send my husband to Germany. Doran is Jewish you see. He wouldn't last a month there, maybe not even a week. " Breathing deeply the woman Annette had first known as Alice giggled again, her weapon lowering. "First there" she whispered. "Then I use my knife. If you scream real sweet I'll put the second bullet in your head. But when I'm through that mouse won't know you."

It was obvious to Annette that the racoon had somehow lost touch with reality. She abruptly felt something enter her heart, as though tiny fingers were crawling through her emotions, triggering fear. Even so she noticed movement behind Diane. The bobcat was waking up. "And what about her" she asked, pointing at the almost awake bobcat. Those fingers within her though she couldn't avoid, fear was building up within her to uncontrollable levels

"She gets my second round" Diane explained. "I want your screams of pain in my ears when I plug her." She didn't turn around, not realizing that the bone crushing force of her commanders fist had been sorely reduced. First by Sandy's turn, second by her throwing herself backwards.

Swallowing her fear Annette stood straight. "You kill me and Oharu will find you. You kill her, Oharu will play with you."

Something about her words caused the raccoon to pause. Caused the fingers to still. "You really believe that" she finally said, understanding upon her face. "Don't worry, she's next on our little hit parade. Then that doe she holds so much store for. A clean sweep. No my..."

Whatever Diane was about to say ended when the lamp Sandy was holding shattered against the back of her skull. "Talkative" the bobcat manage as she pried the gun out of Diane's unconscious paw. "Who are you?"

"You don't know?" Annette asked, confused, feeling the fear begin to ebb. "But she said..."

"Lies probably." Sandy rubbed her eyes, then pointing the gun she fired one round. "They'll get suspicious if..." her words were cut off by Annette's scream.

"You killed her. Why? She was unconscious. She couldn't even protect..." Annette's words were cut off just as quickly when Sandy laid the automatic's barrel hard across the side of her head.

Sitting down Sandy rubbed her jaw. It felt like a mule had kicked her, or the prop of a plane. Glancing out the window she spotted the two bulldogs talking. They apparently had ignored the shot, expecting it. Listening in the quiet she made out some of the words. Soon her stomach protested. They expected the now dead raccoon to do what to the otter? Then they would shoot her as she walked out alone? "What are you guys" she growled. "Fatherland Security?" Standing she walked to the door, turning off her rooms only still working light. In the full darkness she found the raccoon's body, pulled it over on its back, pressed it muzzle against a still warm, still soft stomach and fired another, this time muted shot into the dead flesh. One voices laughter came through the window. "You guys are so dead" she promised.

April 27th, 1936

Oharu shivered in soul and in body, having dealt with three of her horrors already. It was just after midnight now and though her body still leaned softly against the same bolder, within her mind she faced yet another formless shadow. About her the scene Saimmi had made for her so long ago was now nothing but burning sandstorms and a dry sand filled waterfall. From behind a now shattered stone wall her horrors drifted out. Coming for her. Coming to throw her into mindlessness if they were able. Now however she was whole, again one soul. She understood that in truth they were nothing but the memories, and the pain that she had refused to let herself feel. She would have to accept that pain now, though the thought frightened her.

He stood before her, the great tomcat with a missing eye. In his right paw was that huge cargo hook he preferred. With a well practiced move he swung it down, then up. Up, lifting the mouse off her feet as he had done before, while he pulled her towards him, sinking his fangs deep into her neck. She felt his fangs meet and screamed, screamed for her soul. Fighting for reason she accepted the pain, accepted the abuse, the memory. Accepted and allowed it to pass through her, to move on. Slowly he too faded, drifting away while she lay upon the boiling sand gasping. Every pain he had given her, every touch washed through her mind moving from dangerous shadow to merely angry memory. Gasping she fought to stand again, to face what must come. There had been thirteen men, four shadows had she faced, four had she survived. Bracing herself she reached out, embracing another. This one she discovered was the one with that odd knife.

Annette woke screaming as water poured over her face. "Good" Sandy said, setting the flower vase aside. "You wanna live?"

"Yes" Annette admitted as she fought not to scream again. "But not if your going to kill me later."

"Nope. I don't kill less I've absolutely no other choice. I need your help anyway. Scream again." She held her paws to her ears as the otter screamed, then smiled. "You an actress?"

"No. A doctor. Almost."

"Fine. Could be a horror actress with that scream." Sandy took a folded slip of paper, shoving it under the otters thinner than expected bra. "Its after midnight so today is what?"

"The twenty-seventh."

"Right. Before midnight on the 29th you be at that address" she sat her small case on Annette's lap. "With this. I'll fly you to safety. If I don't make it those people will help you. If I'm not their by the 30th I didn't make it."

"Why?"

"Why? Because I'm dead" Sandy explained.

"No. Why help me?"

"Because I need you" Sandy admitted. "And you are Oharu's friend. Oharu from Spontoon right?"

"Your slave? Yes."

"Slave?" Sandy giggled. "Girl have you got that wrong. She's an ex-priestess from Cipangua. She's no ones slave. Now scream again and then lets get out of here. Make it a good one, gurgle a bit at the end, like your throats filling with blood."

While Annette screamed Sandy pushed open a back window then motioned the otter to join her. "We go South two blocks, then due West. There's a fish packing plant at the end of that road. If we get separated look for Fennigins Fresh Fish. I'll meet you there." A moment later the two were running through the night.

"You will bring her here" the younger feline asked. The two were at a certain longhouse on South island, one that housed an old family. Old even before Spontoon had been settled.

"Not unless I have to" the older, grey furred panther admitted. "She is a prize yes, but not one for this household. Not yet. A friend yes, but still too much weighs upon her back for the moment."

Saimmi sipped her water, the usual drink when two priestess's were simply talking. "You wish me to train her though." She turned to look back at her family home. "I have three now. It will complicate things."

Huakava closed her old eyes. "I must go to Krupmark, to see what may be done. I cannot leave her unguided for she is too knowledgeable already. It would be beyond dangerous, and she is searching."

Saimmi laughed. "Too dangerous, meaning she may pick up the tourist side we show. What of her demons. She is already so close to falling."

Draining her cup the panther paused to refill it before answering. "Those she deals with now. Ready or not, she will not be stronger even should she wait to the last moment. By morning she will be cleansed. I have seen this in my fires."

Saimmi hardly raised an eyebrow at the panthers words. Her own teacher had been the more powerful of the two. With her teachers passing that left Huakava as strongest of all priestess's upon Spontoon. Saimmi knew that when the old panther said a thing, it would be. "Krupmark is dangerous for you. Perhaps more so than Cranium" she reminded her friend.

"My time is short no matter the path I take" Huakava reminded the younger Priestess. "One will take my place, sooner than later I think. Perhaps even you. I know that you plan to send those to Cranium, will you go with them?"

"Huakava" Saimmi warned.

Huakava smiled. "I will send Oharu to Krupmark, when it is time. If she is ready before I pass. Should you need her for Cranium, she will be ready enough to assist if you push her hard enough. She is a sponge, she absorbs what one teaches as though born to do so. Though she does not know our ways yet, her own abilities even now are more than powerful enough to face those not of science who wait there. Perhaps even some of the lessor Science monsters."

Saimmi thought those words over. It was true that a pure Miko was capable of standing against anything these islands could offer, as Urako had already proven without trying. It was also true that Oharu was no longer a Miko. Many of her powers had passed upon her defilement, others would have changed. Yet her soul was as strong, if not stronger. Many times it was the soul, not the knowledge that mattered. As Amelia and Helen had proven already. "I will balance that offer" she agreed. "I make no promise."

"It is all one may ask."

Saimmi looked into her cup. "The fragments. Have you seen within your fires what we may do? Will we succeed?"

Huakava emptied her cup again, placing it open side down beside her. "No more than you have seen in your fires. Where the fragments are come chaos. Nothing may be seen within or beyond them." She stood, twisting her back until several heavy pops were heard. "I must sleep, as you must. We both have much to think about today. Thank you for the water. It was sweet."

"Walk in peace" Saimmi replied as she sipped more of her own water. She would not be sleeping as yet. There were things she still had to do first.

"This place stinks" Annette complained as the fish house began to warm. Her head hurt where the bobcat had hit it with her gun. It was swollen and tender, but she didn't think that she had a concussion. Her sight was clear and she had no trouble with her balance, though she would love some pain medication. And she was waiting with Sandy, waiting for what she wondered. Sandy though knew. It would not be long before their escape was discovered and she had to plan. Running here was the first best choice, now she had to decide what their next best action would be.

"North" she decided, leading the otter to a back door. "You go North. Remain on the beach as much as you can, in the wet sand. Your tracks will be washed away. North is Laie where you must go anyway."

"And you?"

Sandy smiled, hefting her weapon. "I'll draw them off, go South until I can cut inland. Don't stop for anyone or anything. If they get me it won't be alive. I know too much to permit myself to be captured alive." Opening the door she pulled her companion out, pushing her down the dock. "Remember North. Sun to your right in the morning, left afternoon" she reminded Annette as she pushed her off the dock onto wet sand. Turning right Sandy jumped as well.

Nearly exhausted Oharu stood one last time. One last shade remained to face her, and it was the least. He was the one who had hung her, though he had given her pain throughout her capture it was the hanging she remembered. Stepping forward she grabbed the shade, staring it down. "We have memories together" she growled. Oddly this shade appeared frightened of her. In fact the last three had seemed somehow frightened. At this moment it made no sense to the mouse. What did matter though was she had become tired with the entire thing. It was time to finish this and get on with her life. She had changed. She had become stronger, more self assured. It would be weeks before she fully understood that.

"Damn" the older bulldog cursed as he was hit by the scent. Sandy had cut power to the rooms coolers as well as leaving the huge loading doors wide open, allowing the fish stored within to warm slightly. If there was one thing that would ruin a canine's ability to track by scent it was the heavy smell of fish.

"Now what sir" Mark asked.

"Through the back, look for tracks" his commander ordered as his eyes watered. He was allergic to fish scent. Not badly but it made his eyes water uncontrollably. For the next few minutes he knew that he'd be fighting to see, even though his eyes would clear quickly as soon as he got into fresh air, for now he was useless. They burst out the back, Mark soon locating both women's tracks. "Headed South and North sir" he reported. Looking North he spotted Annette struggling along with the case in her arms. "I see one."

"Shoot her" his commander ordered. His breath wheezed slightly while he fought to clear his swollen eyes. "Then get the other." Dropping to his knees he ripped out a small water bottle from his pocket, unable to even see more than a few inches. As he washed his eyes he heard a shot, then the sound of a body falling. It sounded close. Much too close. "Mark?" Struggling he turned towards his man, stopping when a blurry automatic was shoved into his face. "What?"

"You never shoot ah woman in tha back" Sandy whispered. "And you don't shoot one for doing what you ordered her to do. I seriously don't like you."

"I'm going to kill you" the bulldog warned as he reached for his gun.

With ease Sandy knocked the near blind mans paw aside, yanking his own weapon out of its holster. "Same as mine, how nice. Then mine used to belong to your dead agent. Seem's I'm outta ammo anyway." Roughly she shoved her gun into the bulldogs holster, looking behind him. "Your men are coming. Explain killing two of your own will-yah?" She spit in the canine's face, slammed her new weapon against the side of his head then took off running.

By the time agents arrived the rising tide had washed away most of both women's tracks. All they found was a second dead agent with a bullet hole in his back, and a bleary eyed commander with a smoking, still half loaded automatic in his paw, its safety off. Sandy had, of course, lied. She always lied.

Stumbling as she ran the otter Annette did as Sandy had instructed, she ignored as best she could the single gunshot while remaining on wet sand. As the tide rose she found herself moving up the shoreline, passing closed business's, tourist stalls, even a few homes. All the things that as a tourist she had taken for granted, had found friendly. This morning though every open window seemed to leer at her, every dark shape was a danger. Her fur was puffed out so straight she felt like it was about to launch herself into low orbit. Annette had only felt this frightened once in her life, when those purebreds had attacked her and her brothers. That time she had ended up bedridden over a week. This time she could be quite seriously dead. Still she ran, following the shoreline. Trying to put as much distance between her and those hunting her as she could before sunup. She never once wondered what was in the heavy case she

carried.

Moving carefully the bobcat Sandy Doecan turned inland, heading back to the Split Palms. All those agents would be running around looking for her so only one or two might still be at the resort. One would be easy to deal with. Two, well two would be a little easier. When she eased up to the parking lot she was surprised to find that there was no one there. How stupid were these people she wondered. Looking into the last car she understood just how stupid. Its keys were still in its ignition. She should leave, but there was one thing she might need. Returning to her room she found the raccoon lying as she'd left her. They hadn't even picked the body off her floor. A quick search located the woman's identity papers, they were as she had expected in an inside pocket of her vest. Taking a precious moment she studied the dead face. What was it about this raccoon that had poured ice water into her system the bobcat wondered. Why had she killed her in cold blood. It didn't make sense.

A noise caused her to spin, her weapon at the ready. Kakalina stood in the doorway, a look of horror on her face. "Who killed her?" the young ne-ne asked in a ghost of a voice. Her voice was thin, as though she would faint or scream at any moment.

"I did" Sandy admitted, not lowering her gun. "She was trying to kill me. Now why are you here? I thought they ran everyone off."

"I was at Arthur's, helping with the new.. Oh Gods you're a murderer. I'm going to die, aren't I."

Sandy stood, moving quickly to stand in front of the young girl. "No. I don't ever kill my friends. But I've got to tie you up. Do you understand?"

"You need to get away. Yes" Kakalina agreed. "But who.. What are these people?" She let herself be guided into the bedroom, still talking. Talking and in shock she never saw the blow come. When she woke the young ne-ne would have a headache that reflected off her beak, down her spine to the tip of her tail. She would also be quite well bound, but not uncomfortable so and laying on Sandy's unused bed.

Oharu opened her eyes slowly, though what her mind saw was nothing more than jumbled colors and shapes. She was still half within herself, not quite returned from her battles. As she pulled herself back into life's embrace her vision cleared until the mouse was again fully within the real world, or as fully as she ever would be again. Thick mist still obscured her sight, nothing more than a few yards from her was visible. Even the tiny cascade of water had muted almost beyond hearing. Breathing deeply she used the cool mist of a morning fog to waken her body, to cleanse her mind. When she had fully woken she stood, her legs wobbly under her. Her tail was as limp as a well used rope, now hanging between her legs lifeless. Slowly she made her way to the half cavern at the Glen's lowest point where fresh water tumbled gently from the roof, all that remained of a once mighty torrent.

Removing her kimono and stepping into the small spray she let cold water brought her back to reality, sharpening her mind, sharpening her older memories. "I have defeated my fears" she whispered. "Or embraced them. Either way I am again whole." She rubbed fresh water into her face, clearing the salt of ancient tears from her fur before opening her mouth to swallow what fell upon her. It was still some time before sunrise, still time for her to work out Huakava's last question. Right now though all she wanted was to rest, to regain her strength. Food would help but she had none and other than the taro root, had little knowledge as to what would be eatable. Poi took time to create, time she could not yet afford to waste. Finishing her bath she returned to her place, settling down as water dripped from her soaked fur. Discovering the answer to Huakava's question would take time, but not require meditation. It was after all a rather simple question.

Nearby the mouse, perhaps only a few minutes walk away two felines talked in hushed voices while a third, younger waited respectfully. "How ill" the panther asked.

"Mother does not believe Molly will survive the Marsh Typhus" Saimmi answered. "Her experience upon the freighter drained too much of her strength, she had not time enough to regain it. Amelia though is much stronger. With care she will heal."

Huakava looked up the trail to where she knew Oharu waited. "Curse all spoiled children who cause such pain, may their dreams be forever filled with darkness. Daughter, we cannot lose this one" she admitted to Saimmi. "It is too late to hope for another, there is no time. Will your mother allow her to help?"

Saimmi nodded yes.

"Then inform your mother. Once I tell this to Oharu not even the Gods could keep her from her doe. Peace or war, life or death she must always somehow be at Molly's side. Physically or in spirit. If anyone can save her I believe the mouse can. Now go, Moeli will guide Oharu to you." Huakava waited until Saimmi had vanished on the run before gesturing to the younger Hoele'toemi girl. "Your family has always served these islands well, you must be proud. Now come with me. See how one not of these islands accepts the news her only love is dying." They walked slowly, for it was not quite sunrise and as much as the panther wished to hurry, there were important things as yet uncompleted.

Was it only twenty four hours ago that she had been swinging over the ocean between two ships Annette asked herself. At the moment she was tangled in a mass of plants that seemed to want her to stay. Carefully the otter moved her supple body in different directions, slowly making her way out of the tangle, though not without some damage to her hair and clothing. Finally free again she looked around her. There were buildings behind her and in front of her, but nothing here. Picking a clear stone she sat down, catching her breath. For the first time she wondered what was in the case she carried. It was awfully heavy but try as she might no shaking caused any sound or even the slightest movement. If it hadn't been for the lock she would have opened it simply from curiosity. If it hadn't been that the bobcat was her only chance of living to a ripe old age she would have dumped it because of its weight. Brushing her hair into some semblance of order with the fingers of her right paw Annette went over the information she had.

Sandy, if that was the bobcat's real name, had killed the raccoon Alice (which wasn't her real name the otter knew, Diane was her real name) almost at first sight. Going over the images in her mind there had been almost a primal fear in the bobcat's eyes as she pulled the trigger. As if the raccoon was some natural enemy, a predator of some kind. But science said that before sentience came, no raccoon had ever preyed on bobcats. Quite the opposite was the truth. Then why had Sandy been so frightened of a woman that she would kill her without thought? "That" Annette whispered, "Is one for the shrinks."

Then there was Oharu. Warm, careful, gentle Oharu. So the mouse hadn't been sent by Sandy. She wasn't a slave and she hadn't been told to attach herself to anyone. Events had simply conspired to bring them together. But Oharu had kept Annette at arms length, doing what she had too to keep Annette from falling completely in love with her. Why? Why was because she was a spy. Being a spy anyone close to her would be subject to hurt, even death. Then there was the doe Molly. Annette remembered the report she had read. Molly was a blood thirsty cold blooded killer with a love of fires. Big fires. That such a gentle woman as Oharu could loose herself to such evil. A shiver ran from the tips of the otter's ears to the tip of her tail. If Molly found out about the mouse's love and got hold of her, Oharu's death would be slow and very painful. Or was that report a pack of lies like the ones Alice had told her about Oharu and Sandy?

Confused and not the least certain of her own future Annette stood again, making her way carefully from the tangle she had fallen into. It was still a long way to the town of Laie and wherever 93 Naupaka Street was. There would be plenty of time for her to work out the tangle her life had become. No matter what

though, she wanted to see Oharu again. Wither to punch her in the muzzle or to drag her behind a rock the otter wasn't certain as yet. Still there was time enough for that decision as well.

Meanwhile Sandy was facing her own dilemma. Getting on to the American Naval base had proven easier than even she had expected. It had been well before false dawn when she had arrived at a side gate, a gate who's young naval guard was more asleep than awake, more thinking about breakfast and his bed than studying an identity card. Besides, Sandy had opened her blouse as far as she could without showing absolutely everything she had, and had been acting more than a bit drunk.

"Identity card please" the rabbit had demanded, still awake enough to remember the drill. The rather attractive bobcat was driving an official naval car, its markings telling him it was a VIP car at that. He took the offered identity card. "Name" he asked, barely glancing at the card as Sandy stretched.

"Diane Ester Reiss" she slurred. "Naval intel...intell... busybody."

"Where will you be going Miss Reiss" he asked, now obviously interested when the name given matched the name on the card.

"Naval visitin officers quarters. An its Mrs, but he's in Washington. Call me Dia. I like it. Say, Ahm lost. You maybe wanna show me how tah get to tha quarters?" She twisted, accidentally giving much more of a view than she had intended, then ignored it. A drunken woman wouldn't notice most times anyway.

"I'm sorry Dia, but I don't get off duty for another" he checked his watch "three and a quarter hours. Are you sure you can find it?"

"Yeah. Been here before." She giggled. "Near tha big red ahn white cement water tower."

"Yes mam, that's it." He returned her card. "Speed limits twenty on base, be careful or you'll wake up in the drunk tank with your CO screaming at you."

"Sure. When ah wake up maybe we can have a drinki... Hum?"

"Uh, yes mam. Look, your blocking traffic, you better go."

"kay. Thanks lots, your swell." She had driven away, one paw buttoning up her blouse while the other controlled her stolen naval car.

That had been two hours ago. Now she was neck deep in the harbor, what clothing she had worn now sunk in the bay under a large rock. It felt naughty, swimming around so many men with nothing on, but clothing would have weighed her down and she could get clothing later. Her first target had been the huge shiny new flying boat. So new she barely knew what it was, a search and rescue craft with the ability to carry bombs. That ship turned out to be heavily guarded and too well lit for any successful theft. Besides, it probably took two people to fly the thing. She had then turned her attention to a pair of aircraft floating a few piers down.

By rights all three craft should have been out of the water but Sandy had lucked out. There was going to be a search and rescue practice just after sunup, with the two smaller craft acting as lost and downed craft. As she arrived at the pier the first crafts engine, a Grumman 'Duck', just started turning over. She slipped under the dock, ignoring a touch that could be anything or nothing as one leg slid across a piling, moving to grab hold of the huge main float the craft sat on.

"Think the L-T will remember his weather briefing this mornin" a young voice above her asked. "Sure" an older voice admitted. "Only takes three, four ass chewin's tha get it through that boys lame brain. Bet he forgets somethin though. Here, help me get number two started. Don't want these boys tah have tah start

their own rides after all."

Quietly as she could Sandy pulled herself onto the float, carefully locating the hidden paw and footholds to let her climb aboard. One advantage of this aircraft she knew was its immense cargo capacity. There was room for a stretcher inside, though when she looked she discovered a large mottled canvas stuffed into that area. This was an older model, probably one of the first twenty or so built. She knew from her own 'research' that the 1935 model had space for an additional two crew members. "Enough history" she whispered to herself after checking the cockpit. Two seats, as per design, parachutes already waiting for their occupants. Across the dock from her the two navy men were having problems with the second aircraft, their curses informing the bobcat she had plenty of time. Slipping back down to the float she released both lines, pushing against a piling with her legs to cause the Duck to drift away from its nest. Climbing back aboard she slipped into the pilots seat, checked what she understood of the instruments, belted in and laid the throttle half way to its firewall stop. As soon as she cleared the area Sandy pushed the aircrafts throttle as far forward as it would go.

She couldn't quite hear the screams of those she left behind.

Oharu carefully pressed her kimono back into place, having dressed after her fur dried. Only then did she turn to face the footsteps approaching her. Though the fog was strangely thick, an unusual event for this time of year she understood, it didn't mask the fact that two people were approaching her. Two figures did break through the fog, one stopping to sit, the other continuing her approach. Politely Oharu bowed to Huakava. "Sensei" she said in greeting.

"I have forgotten" she said in English this time. "Just what does that word mean" the panther asked, settling back into her position of the day before.

"Teacher" Oharu explained.

"Ah. You have dealt with your demons I see."

"Yes Sensei."

Huakava leaned forward. "Sit child. Are you the better, or worse for this."

Sitting Oharu studied the question. On its surface it was simply 'is it better to have done this.' Many years ago she had learned to never take any question by its surface meaning. "Sensei. I am better having returned balance. Yet am worse for memories now hold, even more so loss of she I accepted my sister. I think, on whole, was best doing this. Though I much feared doing. It years may be before I cease having dreams. I never forget her."

"You will never cease having dreams Oharu, nor will they ever be the less for time. I have discovered that time heals nothing. It simply allows the pain to continue should you allow it. Your last shade, how did that go?"

Oharu managed a smile. "I take in paw and say 'We have memories together'. I think shade more afraid than I."

"And the first shade."

No smile came to the mouse's face this time. "I afraid. I was not sure I was strong enough. Defeating it. That took strength I not know I have."

Huakava simply nodded in agreement, leaning back against her tree. "Then you are the stronger. Now to my last question. Why do you love this doe?"

Taking a deep breath Oharu first looked into her paws, clean now after her icy bath. Thoughts still shifted in her head but the answer was not one she could change. Looking up, into Huakava's eyes she held that gaze. "I see Molly's soul. I lose heart to that beautiful soul."

Again Huakava seemed pleased, yet she seemed to Oharu to be troubled as well. "Should Molly die today. What would you do."

"Follow her."

That abrupt answer caused the older panther to tighten certain muscles. "And should, in the future, after you have become a priestess she should die?"

That question forced Oharu to stand. She walked away from the panther, away from the unknown young feline waiting in silence. Walked until her paws were pressed against the massive standing stone that stood near the center of Great Stone Glen. For a long time she stood thus, her eyes closed, her thoughts unknown to any but her and perhaps the stones spirit. If it were interested in such mortal things. Finally she stepped back, looking not at Huakava or the girl, but the stone. "I would have duties then. Responsibilities." She turned, now again locking her eyes with Huakava's. "I would complete all those. Train my replacement. Only then I follow Molly."

"But you would follow her." Huakava's voice cut the fog easily, her eyes the only clear part of her that Oharu could see. "You would not live a long life should she die. Even though she would hate your very soul for daring to nothing more than love her."

"No I would not long live. Yes, even though her hate burn my soul. I am willingly hers."

"Then I will train you. I now know the path you must follow." Huakava stood again, walking to the waiting mouse. "Yours will be a hard path daughter to be. There is much you must learn and much too little time. You must learn everything before I pass, which I am sorry to say will be very soon. Your luck is that you already know much. Your un-luck is that much you know must be adjusted. Your curse is that your heart belongs to one who will most likely always deny you." She stopped a arms length away from the mouse. "And your destiny. Child, your destiny will be determined by wither or not you can save the life of the woman you love."

Confusion blossomed upon Oharu's face. "I do not understand."

"Your sweet Molly has been infected by an extremely deadly illness. We call it Marsh Typhus. She was infected on another island, chasing down a pair of spoiled brats who wanted nothing but fame and gold. She was found with a friend of hers this morning. Only an hour ago. Her friend will probably live, but only that waiting child's mother will aid them. Saimmi cannot, she is too precious to these islands to endanger so willingly. Though she tried she was refused. Of all the people Molly could ask for help, you are her best choice. I have seen that you are her only hope of survival. This I have seen in my fires daughter to be. If you survive this test Oharu, I will insure that your days are filled with back breaking study and mind numbing rituals. You will learn certain hula's, certain chants and you will rarely have time for yourself until you have learned enough to be called priestess. Then your life, as mine, Saimmi's and all others who follow our path, will cease being your own. You, as we will serve the people when they need. Not when we want. Now follow Moeli to the Hoele'toemi compound on South Island. Save the woman who's life is your soul, then fade away before she can claim your life as well as she has claimed your heart."

Standing aside Huakava watched as Oharu first stumbled, then ran after the younger Moeli. "I will ask the Gods to allow you to live" she said to the closing fog. Walking slowly she followed the same path, though

her's would eventually turn aside. There was much she must do, most of it away from Spontoon. Saimmi would teach the mouse whatever Huakava could not. If she lived. Or bury the two together if she did not.

Somewhere West of Oahu Sandy checked the Duck's clock. Twenty minutes South, twenty minutes West. It was time to turn again. Quickly the craft's nose turned North, its 1,050 horse power Wright engine causing the yoke in her paws to vibrate. An hour and a half at this speed would put her thirty miles West of Oahu and about sixty miles North. Give or take a fudge factor or twenty. Once she landed she would plot her position, calculate a rough course back then get some sleep. But first to land.

Oharu had just reached Molly's bed when Sandy dropped the Duck into a rough, bouncing landing. Shutting off its engine she headed for the Duck's cargo compartment. Whatever that canvas had been meant for it was mana from the skies. Search craft were already out, but if her idea worked they would have to be awfully lucky to spot her. Besides, who would be looking for an airplane floating in the open ocean and covered at that. It would be a rough half hour before Sandy finished covering her stolen bi-plane, letting the cloth edges sink into the water around her craft, then finished by setting out a sea anchor and discovered that though she had some water, there wasn't a bite of real food to eat aboard. Only what the American military called emergency rations. As if that could by any means be defined as food the bobcat thought.

At the Hoele'toemi Compound on South island Oharu was looking down at Molly's pale face in utter helplessness. She had dealt with such illness's before but nothing this virulent. Her precious Molly already looked dead, and she had only succumbed sometime that night, even now there really was little anyone could do. Comfort, drip liquids in the patient's mouth, wait for the diaphragm to seize up so that the patient simply died of suffocation. Most would have done little if anything. Oharu however was going to fight death at his own doorstep. To take Molly he would have to take her first, and she wasn't ready to die anymore. Reaching into her obi she pulled out her small purse, throwing it out the guest house's window to one of the Hoele'toemi household. "Alcohol. Rubbing. Use all I have. More in bank if need. See Mrs. McGee" she ordered as she stripped off the sweat soaked blanket, throwing it over a makeshift framework to dry. Molly also was sweat soaked, her fur plastered to her flesh as her body overheated. Grabbing a brush the mouse dipped it in a waiting bowl of cool water, forcing the water through Molly's fur, letting it take the heat away while ignoring whether or not her orders had been followed. Once she'd done that she followed with a dry towel, then a fresh blanket. She would continue with this non-stop until Molly woke, or died.

To save Molly was going to take a lot of work and, if she were owed anything by the Gods, every favor the mouse could drag out of them. Across from her Mrs. Hoele'toemi worked on a British house cat. Amelia wasn't as bad off as Molly, but one trying to save both might cost both. Oharu's arrival had made a spine shattering job all the more easier for the woman, and her family.

Chapter Twenty-Five

April 27th, 1936

Oharu had truly entered hell, or as close to hell as she ever would be while physically alive. Even with the extra rubbing alcohol that had been purchased with her money, it was proving impossible to bring down Molly's body temperature. Her efforts had stabilized the Chicago natives temperature, but it was still dangerously high. Oharu herself had thought that the doe's body was hot enough that her fur must catch fire. Of course Molly would have been long dead before such an event could occur, still the thought was there. Even the mouse's best efforts were barely keeping the doe from experiencing convulsions, which Oharu knew would mean un-repairable brain damage. This was a problem Oharu had experienced before, having already helped deal with several Typhoid and Cholera outbreaks in her lifetime. But never had she experienced anything this severe. From what she could notice of the English feline Amelia's condition this illness was worse than the worst she had ever seen. For a moment the mouse paused, remembering her worst cases. Those who's bodies had never stopped burning inside. Every patient had died. Every last one.

Making a decision she looked down at the fever twisted face beneath her paws. "You will not die" she promised the young woman she was tending. Though she knew that Molly could not hear her the mouse allowed one of her paws to drift across the unconscious doe's cheek. "I will never leave you. I fight death for you." All those things she said were true, were real. Yet Oharu knew that though her heart ached near to breaking that the best she could do would most likely not be enough. This illness was worse than anything she had ever fought, worse than anything she had ever heard of. Only once had Molly woken enough to open her eyes. Her once liquid, bottomless eyes now dull and near lifeless had looked up. Her gaze had been directly into Oharu's own eyes. Only a film of delusion upon the doe's mind had allowed the mouse to answer her husked question with the truth.

"Do you really love me" Molly gasped, one paw finding the mouse's, her fingers interlacing with the fever strength only those approaching death could exhibit. Realizing that Molly thought she was talking to her stag Lars Oharu gently touched the doe's lips with the fingers of her free paw. "Always. Beyond death and again. My heart is yours forever. My soul is your shield" she had answered in full truth. That had seemed to make Molly happy. Soon she had slipped back to her dreams, but for a moment a smile was on her lips. It had been enough for the mouse. More than she had ever hoped to see.

Occasionally one or the other ill women had woken partly. In their fever controlled minds they said things. Things that had nothing to do with reality. Things that had everything to do with reality. Some of their words were painful to both who tended them, most were so confused only Oharu, with her life of temple training fully understood. In her understanding she knew that the one she and the older feline faced was unrepentant. He would take a life if he chose, no matter what power stood before him. To him, Oharu, her love, her dedication, even her abilities were no more than ant to an elephant. Still she fought with all she had, for she could do nothing less when the life of Molly Procyk was the prize.

Hours had passed since she had arrived, hours of back breaking tail crushing work for both women. Though Amelia still occasionally cried out, Molly hadn't woken or made a sound in over an hour. Though Amelia seemed to be stable, it was painfully obvious that the doe's life was on a razor's edge. And even while ill Molly's body, as Amelia's, continued to preform natural functions. Makeshift dypers helped, but both women still had to be cared for. So blood and other things again speckled Oharu's paws as she cleaned the doe's body another time. Finally Oharu finished setting the new cloth in place to replace the one she had just removed. A metal container, one made from an old oil drum sat waiting. Waiting to be dragged again and again by the family to a fire pit, where water would be added and its contents boiled. Boiled until none of the deadly bug could survive. Then the cloth, once cooled, would be washed by those

same family members, dried and used again. That too was a messy job, one the Hoele'toemi family managed as though it were a daily occurrence. Oharu was quietly impressed by this family.

Even the Priestess Saimmi, too precious to Spontoon to chance contact with such a deadly illness worked where she could. She helped prepare food, folded newly dried cloth, swept away the paths, even sang soothing native songs to entertain the two exhausted warriors of life. Then she would pray to the islands Gods to intercede for reasons Oharu did not understand, being as she still knew little of the Spontoon language. Island Gods Oharu wished she too could call upon, for her own would never answer her again. Certainly not for a Gajin's life.

Every chance they had Mrs. Hoele'toemi and Oharu drank fresh water, fresh fruit juice or nibbled the fruits made ready for them. When they could they dipped cloths into fruit juices, squeezing the liquids slowly into their patients parched mouths. Washing her paws first in the alcohol, then rinsing them in fresh boiled water to get the dried blood off Oharu leaned against the foot of Molly's bed. She sipped cool water from a wooden cup while watching as Mrs. Hoele'toemi gently dripped juice into the English housecats open mouth with a clean cloth. "She will live" the mouse decided finally.

"Yes. She is strong" Mrs. Hoele'toemi agreed. "It will be close. She" the feline indicated Molly with a look, "Will not. For she was treated cruelly, her strength already sapped. Now she has no more strength to spend."

"Then she will spend my strength" Oharu answered. "She will spend my life. My soul. Molly will live. I swear that."

Her words caused the older native feline to pause. To study again this strange oriental mouse that her Priestess daughter had brought to her home. A mouse Saimmi had said wanted to become an island priestess. To serve the people of Spontoon as Saimmi herself did. She watched in silence as Oharu turned back to the failing doe, noting certain actions, remembered words said. Yet she kept her silence. Certain things had no need for words. Certain things had no words to define them. Oharu's absolute devotion to the young doe was one of those.

Suddenly Molly's body convulsed, her body bucked, nearly bending in two backwards. A cough escaped the doe's lips, then her body went limp as she seemed to collapse into herself. This collapse the older feline knew meant that Molly had stopped breathing. This illness had finally poisoned her body to much, had sapped her strength too far. It was all as she had told the mouse. Molly simply did not have the strength to survive such a killer. No matter what vows were made. For Death was the final judge of all. It was the constant overheating that had caused the most damage of course. Mrs. Hoele'toemi stood silent, waiting, expecting this odd mouse to lower her head in surrender. Or to wail in agony with her loss. Oharu's reaction however was anything but acceptance.

When Molly convulsed Oharu dropped the wooden cup of water she had been drinking from, it bounced across the mat floor, rolling against a wall unheeded by anyone. Oharu's paw went almost instantly to the doe's neck. Even after Molly had collapsed the mouse could feel a pulse. Weak, yet steady for the moment. There was but one thing she could think to do. As she had promised, she freely offered her life for the doe's. Oharu lifted Molly's torso an arms width, an action which caused the doe's head to fall back, then took a deep breath. What she did next was unthinkable considering the doe's illness. She opened Molly's mouth, covering it with her own while pinching the doe's nose closed, then breathed out into the woman's still warm lungs.

Those awake watched in awe as minute after minute, the mouse breathed for her patient. Molly's chest rose slowly with each breath, while Oharu's free paw pressed on her stomach. Pressed down to keep the air from going there instead of to her lungs. Mrs. Hoele'toemi finally walked over, quietly placing a finger on the doe's neck. She expected to feel nothing, for when people stopped breathing their heart soon stopped as well. Yet under her trained fingers she felt the impossible. A pulse. Weak yes, but steady.

"Her heart still beats" she reported in stunned amazement. Eventually Molly coughed, her chest rose higher than before as she inhaled. Oharu eased the doe back into a prone position, managed to turn Molly's head to one side before the doe coughed out a wad of grey-green mucus. Then she fell to her own knees, fighting to remain conscious as exhaustion slammed into her like a plane into a mountain. She had fought without care for herself, had fought and won.

"Where did you learn that" Saimmi asked from just outside the accepted danger zone.

"Oahu" Oharu gasped, fighting to slow her own breathing. "Use to save sailor. Natives use for drowning, if heart still beating."

"You must teach it to us" the slightly older priestess decided. "You have saved a life."

"Not as yet" Saimmi's mother disagreed. "Her temperature. Unless it can be drawn down and stabilized she will fail again, and again. As long as it will take for that evil within her to claim its prize."

Fighting dizziness Oharu climbed back to her feet, then grabbed another bottle of alcohol. "I win this fight" she promised both women. "Or I die with her." Stepping forward she again began wiping the burning fur covered flesh with cooling alcohol.

Sandy awoke to a bothersome sound, the constant droning sound of approaching engines. She was somewhere North of Oahu and her first thought was that she had been located. An event which meant her capture and eventual, very serious death. Her second thought was to wonder if those were boat engines. Moving carefully so as not to rock her stolen plane too much or bump her now swollen face into anything she moved to one of many tears in the thin canvas covering her craft. It took a moment or two to locate the noise's origin though. Above and away from her were three Boeing P-26A Peashooter open cockpit pursuit craft. They were currently flying in formation at about five hundred feet and moving somewhat towards her. Eventually they passed within a quarter mile of the slowly drifting, hastily camouflaged Duck. Moving on to the Northeast on a steady course. Sandy relaxed as they vanished. Somehow they had missed her. She knew that she was barely a pilot herself. Getting the Duck off the water once had been hard enough, doing it with three enemy fighters harassing her would be beyond the bobcats simple skills. She had almost flipped it over when she landed the first time, slamming her face into something as her ship came to a stop. Trying to outfly even one of those aircraft would have been pure suicide.

Awake she drank a bit more of her water, then slipped out of the cockpit into the cool deep ocean. Her face stung from the seawaters caress, though its coolness sapped the heat she felt from her wounds. She would have to swim to move around her craft but she needed to check for damage. Particular she needed to search for a slowly leaking float, especially as she had but the one. As she preformed her task she prayed that no shark happened to be drifting by. Her face seemed to have stopped bleeding from the bulldogs blow, and the following crash but one never knew when sharks were involved. Becoming lunch for some watery predator wasn't how she wanted to die. Besides, that otter of Oharu's was carrying material her foster father needed. "Though I think I'll blackmail him for it" she whispered to the plane as she studied a seam in the main float. "That box for a tailfast ring."

Annette had finally taken all she could take. Having brushed the worst of the latest clinging vegetation out of her fur she had simply walked openly to a bus stop, then caught the first native bus headed her way. She still had money, and if she were going to be caught it probably would have been before now. Still the otter decided to wait until several miles past her destination before getting off. While Sandy was swimming in miles deep ocean water Annette was backtracking along the beach. She was again headed towards her destination, after having passed it fifteen minutes before. There were no tourist's on the

beach this far away from the major local attractions of course. Not this early. Certainly not in an area with no support for their special needs. Only locals were about. Locals who smiled, waved and occasionally offered a drink or fruit to buy. Who worried about her swollen face. Every time anyone asked her what she was doing she explained that she was an ornithologist and had fallen, but was okay. It was an answer that left most of her questioners giggling in confusion. Those few who understood what she meant pointed out places she might find rare birds. It was a good a lie as any considering her rather extensive, as in zero training as a spy the otter decided.

Oharu now was nearing the end of her strength. Molly had stopped breathing again. This time it had taken over three quarters of an hour before the doe's diaphragm started working again. Exhausted beyond understanding the mouse looked towards Mrs. Hoele'toemi as though she had the answer, and in a way she did.

"This continues" the feline explained to the nearly defeated woman. "As long as her body is too hot. There is nothing more you can do. Her body cannot control its own fire so it runs wild. All you will do is destroy yourself. Your vow will be complete. When she again stops breathing next you will kill yourself trying to save her."

A light seemed to blossom in Oharu's mind at those words. "Fire" she gasped, barely able to keep her own eyes open. "Then I control her fire for her" she decided. In a moment she had stripped down to nothing but her own fur, ignoring the gasps of shock as those about her saw her ruined back for the first time. Lifting up Molly's sweat dampened blanket she forced her smaller body against the furnace that was Molly Procyk. Taking a breath to steady herself she forced her fur and flesh to mold against the larger woman's form. Oharu barely had time to lay her head on the rolled towel that served as a pillow before her own body reacted to the furnace heat. Her own bodies furnace shut down instantly at the shock, her flesh now acting as a heat sink, drawing away the doe's excess heat. Later, when Molly's own furnace would finally crash Oharu's overheated body would return that heat. Keeping the eventual crash from being terminal. Her own furnace would then restart, adding heat to both bodies in a massive calorie burning fire that would quickly endanger her own life. Slowly, hour after hour the two bodies remained in sequence. Oharu's healthy body slowly taking control of the doe's damaged one. It was a terrible strain to the smaller mouse's health, but Oharu wouldn't know or care. Within minutes of joining Molly in the makeshift bed she had fallen into a partial fever sleep of her own.

But Molly, who's body now had some measure of control thanks to Oharu's sacrifice, never stopped breathing again.

93 Naupaka Street the otter read, her tail twitching at the thought of safety. It was a dump, or near enough to normal eyes to stand as one. Annette though had been raised dirt poor. A migrate field worker as a child her eyes saw the place for what it truly was. An ancient warehouse, probably for the copra trade from faded evidence still on its side, that had been converted to a machine shop. Smaller outbuildings had been tacked on later, outwardly none too sturdy looking yet her eyes told her differently. One did not use eight by twelves on a structure that was going to fall down. Certainly not if one planed on entering them. Various sundry piles of scrap and stock metals lay in careful piles on one side of the building. Old aircraft parts gave her a clue as to the machine shops current incarnation. That and a dozen or so bent, broken or otherwise damaged props that hung on the outside front wall. She noticed one twisted prop, wondering just how anyone could manage to turn a four bladed aluminum prop into a pretzel and live.

Walking with a firm stride she crossed the wide road and approached the buildings front door. A simple paw painted sign greeted her. 'If the door is locked we closed. If it is open come in. In Cash we trust, all others talk to bank.' Reaching out with her right paw (the now battered case tightly held in her left one) she grasped the knob and turned it. Contrary to her expectations the door opened silently. It was her first

step into the building that informed her how its owners knew they had visitors. As her foot came down the floorboard dropped, only perhaps a quarter of an inch or so, but enough. A moment later the sound of a massive gong came from somewhere near the back. Stepping further in she let the door close, allowing her eyes to adjust to the relative gloom before approaching a worn service counter.

A few minutes later a rather overweight pack-rat came through one of several doors, one finger in his left ear as if he was trying to dig something out. "Darn gong" he muttered as he approached. "Always goin off when I'm ah walking by it. Oh, hello. How can Wambenger Engineering help yah young lady."

"Sandy sent me here" Annette answered bluntly. "I'm supposed to meet her."

"An this Sandy, she has a plane here? Or.. A note?"

Reaching into her bra, where she had replaced the note for safekeeping after reading it, Annette then laid it on the counter. "My name is..."

"Noh important out here inna open" the packrat interrupted. He picked up the note, opening it. For a while there was silence. "Yep, that's Sandy's writtin all right and those are her code signs. Come around back, you'll hafta duck under tha counter. Were you followed?" He walked off, leaving Annette to duck under the counter to follow or leave as she chose. Annette ducked.

When she followed the packrat through his latest doorway she found herself in near darkness. For a moment she was frightened, then a bright light came on and she was really frightened. A short thin flat chested mouse-fem was standing a few yards away holding a double barreled shotgun. Other than her slightly greying fur she was the blackest mouse Annette had ever seen, blacker than Annette herself and the skinniest. Across from her stood the packrat, Sandy's note in one paw an ancient revolver in the other. Annette instantly decided that both weapons had bores large enough for her to crawl into with ease.

"Ah want yah to tell me how yah know Sandy and everything tha happened to cause yah to be sent here. Oh, tha's my wife Latakia. Formally Miss Wambenger of tha Wiradjuri. Australia. She doesn't much like European's lik you, so don't give her no reason to pull those triggers. This rooms hard tah clean."

With nothing else to sit on and tired to the bone Annette sat on the wooden floor, her case landing with a thump beside her. "Fine. Everything then?"

"Everythin."

She started with Oharu putting down the German passenger.

It was boiling hot under the canvas and her swollen face ached worse than ever. Though there was a fairly strong breeze outside barely a breath of air managed to find its way to the napping bobcat. Three separate flights had come within hearing distance, though no other as close as the three Peashooter's. Sandy had made a noon shot with a sextant she'd discovered packed away. One advantage of laying low, she'd had plenty of time to examine her craft. There wasn't a crumb of food aboard other than ancient emergency rations. Those she didn't want to touch, not if she was only going to be out here until nightfall. Her foster father had long ago trained her not to eat her only food until she was certain more was coming. It was training that had saved her life twice now.

A logbook she had found explained the canvas. Only a few days ago both Duck's had been involved in a game of hide and seek with land based aircraft. Though successful, they had hidden against a coastline hanging their canvas from trees. That explained the rips she'd found, their tactic had been a good idea since it had worked. Just, in her opinion not as good as simply floating out in the open. Her luck had turned again it seemed. Though her face had swollen badly from that sucker punch and the following

crash, nothing seemed broken and she had the perfect camouflage, next to sinking. Of course she couldn't fly higher than five hundred feet or so. Not until her face healed for a few days, but five hundred feet up was a lot better than six feet under. At least in her book. Taking another careful sip of her limited water she settled down to re-read the log with her one good eye. Dry reading yes, but if she let her imagination go it was better than the boredom of sitting and waiting.

Someone shaking her arm woke Oharu. Forcing herself from some rather odd dreams she discovered that Mrs. Hoele'toemi was the one who had woken her. "You must care for her and yourself" the feline reminded Oharu.

With a nod of acceptance she slipped away from the sleeping doe, out from under a now reeking blanket and into sub-zero Winter. At least that was what her body reported. Shivering Oharu dragged on her Kimono, leaving off the Obi as she dealt with Molly's physical needs. By the time that problem had been taken care of Oharu's own body had recovered somewhat, but the shock would be costly in energy later. Taking a few minutes to leave the building and attend to her own bodies needs she returned to find a tray of fruit waiting.

"Eat" one of the older Hoele'toemi boys ordered. "Or Saimmi says she will shove it down your throat with her own paws." He winked at her, then turned his worried eyes to the other sleeping woman. This had to be Amelia's young man Oharu realized, though she had no idea to his name.

Standing next to Molly she ate, splitting her time between dripping cool fresh fruit juices into the doe's parched mouth and gulping down more solid food herself until both juice and fruit were gone. In honesty Oharu felt half dead. Molly was still alive but her fever, as reported by Mrs. Hoele'toemu, was still two degrees above the cat Amelia's. That temperature had to come down and there was only one sure way that Oharu knew of. Walking as close to the young feline as she dared Oharu quickly explained what she wanted. He looked at her, nodded then warned her he would have to check with his mother first. Agreeing, Oharu went back to Molly, pulling off the rank blanket, folding it to drop into that waiting drum then laid a fresh one over her doe's beautiful, though disease ravaged body. In seconds she was again pressed against the doe, forcing her small body to do the work of two large ones.

Sandy had finally pulled out the Ducks local chart book. She'd found it stuffed in all places, in a slot next to the back seat marked charts. Studying those stars and planets already visible to her allowed the bobcat to estimate her position without much difficulty. Navigation was her true trade after all. As a pilot she was barely up to the job. She noted that she had drifted some distance from Oahu, but no where near out of the Duck's seven hundred plus mile range. Having started with full tanks she would still have plenty in reserve to locate the harbor she needed. It was the Duck itself that was giving her problems. After dragging her canvas off and letting it drift away in the current, her stolen .45 automatic acting as a weight to slowly drag it down, she'd run into her first bad luck. Her aircraft's engine simply did not want to start. After more than an hour's search in the gathering darkness she had located a loose wire, probably pulled away by her poor landing. Fixing that problem correctly was beyond her ability without tools so she did what she could with the Duck's survival knife. That the wire would fall off again from her engine's vibration was probably certain. She just hoped that it would last long enough to get to her destination.

At Wambenger Engineering Annette was sitting in a rather large room hidden within Wambenger's main building. She wasn't quite certain but she thought that she was underground. Perhaps even below sea level. Her story had finally appeased the two gun toting owners of Wambenger Engineering. After all, most of the major points were public knowledge already and 'checking her out' by the simple means of comparing her newspaper photograph with her live self had helped. A few inter-island phone calls had verified other details. Whomever these two were, it was obvious even to the untrained otter that they were

part of a much larger organization. She relaxed as she waited, thinking back on the last of her interrogation.

"And that case?" Latakia had asked in nearly flawless English.

Pushing at the battered case she'd dragged across a large part of the island Annette had shrugged. "I don't know" she admitted. "Its locked. I never tried to open it."

Latakia had responded to that statement by putting her shotgun away in some hidden corner. Walking over to Annette she lifted the case. "Heavy, not heavy enough for gold or silver. Do you mind if I open it?"

"I'd rather you didn't" the otter admitted. "It isn't mine and Sandy did entrust it to me."

"But you would not die to protect it."

"No" Annette admitted. "I don't think it is that important to me."

Setting the case back beside Annette the marsupial mouse stepped back. "Then we will wait for Sandy to return. Justin. Please take her to the safe room, in the event her hunters arrive here." With that the flat chested black furred woman walked out through a door painted to look like the walls.

Now knowing the packrat's name Annette turned to him. "Justin? That's not a Hawaiian name" she commented.

"Religious orphanage" her now host admitted. "In case yer wondering, my wife is ah marsupial. That's why you wer' looking at 'er odd, ain't it."

"Not really" Annette admitted. "I'm half black-fur but she makes me look purebred white-furred. Makes me wonder what I'd have looked like, if dad had been black-fur. That red tail of her's is a shock though."

"Tha red tail" her host admitted, "Is wha attracted me in tha firs place. Yer part Aboriginal?"

"Negroid. From Africa."

"Ah, splains yer dark fur. Well come on, times ah burnin ahn we gotta get yah safe. Jus follow me." He waited until the otter had stood and recovered her case before walking further into the huge buildings interior.

Taisa (Colonel) Akimoto Heiji stepped out from the public tea house into the late evening traffic, vaguely aware as the crowd made room for his uniform. It was a privilege he had earned through long years of toil, one he had once dreamed of. Now he hardly noticed it unless someone bumped into him. This rarely happened anymore, as Akimoto had a rather vicious temper where the lower classes were involved. Beside him, one step back and to his right stood a stunning rabbit, her ears curled into the whispering reed pattern he so liked. That it was painful to her didn't matter to the male. Her kimono, though not of the most expensive cloth was well tailored, its design perfectly subtle. This was Akimoto's mistress of the last seven years and once he had thought of marrying her. But time had taken the dew fresh blush of beauty from her. In another few years he would find himself searching for a replacement mistress, casting the old aside as many men did.

This search would never occur. Acting as always the gentleman, for he did still have serious feeling for his mistress, he held the waiting staff cars door open for his companion, subtly admiring her now mature beauty as she glided into the vehicle. Once she was settled he granted her a smile, then turned to tip the doorman. Only to greet death.

Death in this case came from a yard long black shaft that fell from the sky. It struck Taisa Akimoto Heiji in his chest, directly above the heart. On a downward path this allowed the iron warhead to pierce his heart nearly at the center, continuing its path until it punched out his lower back. Caught completely by surprise he fell backwards, the arrows iron point digging into the staff cars paint leaving a bright ragged scar of raw metal behind as he fell to the pavement.

Gasping in pain Akimoto couldn't believe what had occurred. He was in such shock that he barely noticed that his mistress had exited the vehicle, was now holding his head against her breasts as she screamed her loss. He did note that her once beautiful kimono, one that had cost him almost half a years pay was now ruined by blood. *'Odd, who is bleeding so badly'* was his last thought before death held out her paw in welcome.

Of the assassin nothing would ever be discovered. Eventually it would be decided that Akimoto's death had been political in nature. Certainly no other reason could be thought of. Yet deep within a certain compound one last name was marked off a sheet of rice paper. One last name remained of course, but it hadn't been written on the paper. Thus it was not the business of those who held it.

"It has been done" an elderly boa hissed from across a small fire. "Now you will send her to her death?"

An even older ferret looked up from the page in his paws. "No my friend. I will speak with my nephew this evening. If it is death she will have, then upon his blood soaked paws will that body be laid. Not ours. As dark as we are, even we have not done anything in our long history near as to what has been done in his name in China. No. We will not have her fair body laid upon our gate. Not this time." He stood, walking slowly, painfully towards a section of wall. "As always you rule in my name my friend. Until my return." As he reached the wall panel it slid aside, exposing to his view those retainers he trusted enough to travel with him.

Oharu was finishing dripping more fruit juice into Molly's open mouth when she heard the clatter of something metallic being carefully sat down. She finished her work before looking over towards the sound. Over a dozen Spontoon natives were now busy filling a galvanized steel bathtub with spring water. Spring water that tumbled from a small opening in the hillside only a few dozen meters from where she sat. It created a stream that the Hoele'toemi family and many others depended upon for fresh water. Coming from the ground as it did, it was near to freezing.

Mrs. Hoele'toemi walked over to the mouse as Oharu rejoined the burning doe in her bed. "They will be ready in a few minutes" she warned. "I must warn you that this may kill her."

Oharu looked first into the does eyes, open now but unseeing as her fever slowly burned up her brain. Those great depths her own soul had fallen into were gone now, replaced with only blankness. Molly was not there anymore. She had retreated into herself, retreated from a battle the gun moll had no ability to fight. Not bothering to look up at the older feline Oharu spoke to her patient. Her love. "If your illness demands a life tonight" she told the unhearing doe. "I give mine. You will live, or I follow you." Slowly turning her attention to her hostess she managed a small smile. "I too small to full control her fires" she admitted. There was sound of loss in her voice, though the tone was steady. "I was trained this worked as last resort. Only last resort. I take full responsibility."

"Then you better get up. I'll tend to her bed, towels are already heated and ready. You join her?"

Oharu stood, absently folding the sweat drenched blanket while the two young Hoele'toemi boys, wearing dampened cloths for masks, carefully lifted the doe and carried her to the waiting bath. "No" she admitted. "Two reason. I take cold from water that Molly need. I must be dry, warm for her when fever break." She started for the waiting bath, stopping for a moment. Turning to face the feline squarely while holding the blanket close to her she took a deep breath. "If Molly live, remember I never here. I never touch her. If

she knew I what I do it may shatter her heart. She does not need that strain. Not now."

"So I tell her I cared for her and Amelia all by myself?" Mrs. Hoele'toemi laughed softly. "No one could do that, it is too exhausting." She started to say something else but Oharu had turned away, pausing only long enough to drop her blanket into the waiting drum. "All right little one" the feline agreed. "For now, but never forever. You're probably right but you're a fool. A fool so in love..." She stopped talking, taking a deep breath of her own to settle herself before tending to the bed. Amelia's fever had broken hours ago. Though the cat was still very ill she would live. In the morning she would be transferred to Meeting Islands hospital where such cases could best be cared for. Already word had come of one fatality. A life to be laid at the feet of those two Euros who had caused this disaster. That would be laid at their feet. She turned to watch as Oharu knelt, still naked, next to the bathtub. Ignoring the two men who did the work she was unable to. When the sun rose would there be two to bury the feline wondered. Or three.

Oharu knelt by the tub as Molly was lowered into it. So hot was the doe's body that the mouse felt steam should rise as she settled in. Yet nothing like that occurred. Almost as quickly as her body was immersed into the water Molly began to shiver. Although still under the fever's spell she attempted to escape the ice that surrounded her, though in truth there was no ice. Oharu gently pushed the doe's body back under while holding her head above water. It would be some time before the doe's fever broke, broke and brought her to another danger. That being the danger of hypothermia. For that too the mouse was ready.

Looking like a mountain of rusty metal the private freighter Three Moons, a two hundred and fifty nine foot long ship currently flying the Piccupacpac flag, was barely making steerageway somewhere in the South China sea as it slipped through a heavy fog. Aboard not a single light shown as six figures made their slow way to the stern. No voices broke the soft silence, almost no sound came as all things needing to be said had been said below-decks. As the figures reached their goal it was obvious to any viewer, had there been one, what was happening. Two figures, a male and female Chinese snow leopard, both young by their looks were bound by heavy rope. Both were carefully lead to the gunwale by one of their four companions until finally their feet touched the decks edge. "Sorry tah do this" an aged ferret apologized. He stood quietly, guarding the two while waiting for his three mates to complete their assigned duty. Slowly a small makeshift raft was lowered over the side, one apparently built by the crew themselves from castoff materials. A single rusty oil lamp carefully lashed to a battered wooden chest shown like a mournful eye through the fog. "Supplies are in tha chest. Nough fer two fer ah few days, all we can spare. Ah compass too. Yah head North-East, yah gon tah hit ahn islan in ah day or two. Prob Hinah, iff in ah member righ. No Chip's there when we las called. Tha were las week."

He stepped back, pulling a wicked looking knife out of his belt in order to slash the young male leopard's bonds. "Stowaways don' think. We got jus nough tha make ar next landin. Yer lucky, norm tha Captain jus guts yah an dumps tha body for tha sharkies. Buh yer story moved eh. No un liks tha Chip noh more. Yer lucky, don happen often she does this. Nah off with yah." He planted a paw in the young boys back, pushing him hard.

Manchu's body arched out, tumbling for a moment as he fell until cold water hit his face. Under he went, struggling to the surface just in time to hear a second heavy splash. That would be his sister he knew, though why she hadn't screamed surprised him. She was much afraid of heights after all. Perhaps it had simply been the shock. She hadn't seemed well since they had been discovered. Swimming hard he reached the raft, guided by the lantern's glow. Pulling himself aboard he settled down as the sound of Three Moon's engines slowly picked up from within the blanket of fog. Scanning the sea he called his sisters name every few seconds, waiting for her to return his call. Waiting in the thick gloom for her to call to him so that he could lead her to the raft. She was a better swimmer than he after all so he wasn't worried about her drowning and at least they were out of China. With Cipangua invading, their solders killing or violating anyone Chinese they stumbled across, anyplace was safer for his sister than their homeland. Or so he believed at the time.

For hours he would waste himself, waiting for his sister Lien's voice to come through the fog.

April 28th, 1936

It was long past midnight when Oharu woke in fear. Though Molly still rested within her arms the doe was now shivering, her body reacting as though in a winters storm. Fever fogged the mouse's own mind took almost a minute to realize that her patients fever had broken for good. Her water bath had worked. Now Molly's body had crashed, its internal furnace having burned so much energy that no reserves remained. Yet that last burning had finally killed off the bacteria within her body, that evil that had tried its best to kill her. Still unconscious the doe's body realized where its only heat source was. In seconds Oharu felt Molly's arms encircle her, what strength the doe's body still contained dragged the mouse even closer, as though it could merge the two bodies into one.

No longer fighting to cool two bodies Oharu's own furnace relit as Molly's colder body dragged heat from its smaller companion. Quickly the mouse's furnace increased, until it was as raging as Molly's had been but a pawfull of minutes ago. Realizing what had to be done Oharu managed to lift her head enough to find Mrs. Hoele'toemi watching her. "She will live" the mouse gasped.

"Yes" the older feline agreed, having laid her paw upon the doe's forehead. "Though I am afraid that you may die if she remains this way long."

Oharu smiled even as she felt the strengthening doe's body pull her tighter against itself. "Small price" she whispered, fighting for breath. "I was never here." Lowering her head she used the rest of her own strength fighting for breath while Molly's body used her bodies heat to recover the energy it needed. Energy it needed to restart its own, now crashed furnace.

Across the room Mrs. Hoele'toemi's patient breathed normally. Now both women were out of the worst danger. She knew Molly would survive, but even if this love mad mouse survived it would be days before her own body fully recovered from such an ordeal. It was a simple matter that their body mass differences had been too great for the smaller mouse. Raising her paw from the now warming doe's forehead she walked close to her daughter Saimmi. "Will she fight as strongly for Spontoon" she asked seriously.

"I have seen such in the fires" her daughter answered. "Why do you ask mother."

"Send one of the older boys, have water taxis waiting. It is time to take them to hospital. All three of them."

"Then Oharu too has the fever. How badly?"

Mrs. Hoele'toemi looked back at the barely awake mouse. "It has just started for her. She has used herself badly in this, though I do not think for her it will be as difficult. She told me she has had the Typhus before. It will give her a measure of immunity to even the worst Marsh Typhus."

Saimmi nodded. "She is in love mother. Even if tragically a hopeless love. She has done what anyone in love would do. What you or I would do. Rest now mother. Allow your children to complete the remaining tasks."

One thing the bobcat Sandy had proven since sunset was that she was not a pilot. Twice her engine had sputtered, forcing her to land to repair that errant wire. Repairs had never been a part of her job description, that was why Simon had been along. A better engineer she'd never met but now the lynx was somewhere on Antarctica. Wandering in snow and ice looking for evidence of the fabled Rainbow City that some old legend claimed was there. Her second landing was in a failing wind, and though she

turned into it, darkness proved her enemy as she nearly nosed the Duck over into the water. Though she was a good swimmer, by her reckoning she was still three miles from the islands with a strong current against her. That was well outside her best endurance range.

Now it was nearly three in the morning, her ailing engine was still kicking in and out of life and the light cross wind had vanished, changing into a rainstorm. One complete with eye blinding lightning. Picking up the crafts microphone she switched to a preselected channel. "Diamond Jill to Mother Goose. Diamond Jill to Mother Goose do you read over?" She waited as static from a lighting bolt crashed through her earphones making her headache worse. A few seconds later a welcome voice answered.

"Mother Goose to Diamond Jill I read you four by three. Over."

"Mother Goose. I'm about seven minutes out with a sick engine. Can you arrange a tow for me? Over."

"Understood Diamond Jill, ailing engine. Can you make it into the harbor? Over."

"I wouldn't bet on that" Sandy admitted. Her engine coughed again, sputtered, cut out, then roared to life again. "It's the landing I'm worried about. I have a damaged starboard float. Over." She looked out into the darkness towards her right wing, wincing at the image of a twisted float. All thanks to her last 'landing.'

"Do you wish to declare an emergency Diamond Jill? Over."

"Negative" the bobcat answered. "I wish to declare an idiot for a pilot. Over."

"Understood. Tow craft will meet you outside the harbor. Try to remember that your not flying a submarine. Mother Goose standing by."

Hanging her microphone back up Sandy concentrated on flying. Now if it had been a completely calm night she could have just flipped on the landing lights and kept a few dozen feet above the waves. But no, Mother Nature had decided that Spontoon Super Secret Agent Sandy Doecan would earn her wings tonight the hard way. Or her dolphin. Anyway there were no waves, in one of those unusual weather events the rain had pounded the waves into submission. Other than a few slow rolling movements the ocean was flat as glass.

Back at Wambenger Engineering the Australian mouse known as Latakia watched as her husband Justin, with their eldest son as his assistant motored out of their little harbor in the strongest of their two water tugs. It was a converted shrimp boat from Biloxi Mississippi. One that had arrived in Hawaii several years ago, with its crew still stoned out of their minds and completely unable to explain just how they managed the trip. Its design was almost completely useless in Hawaiian waters yet her husband had fallen in love with the strange craft. Thus Whambenger had ended up with the craft. Whambenger's purchase of their vessel had staked the men to just enough money to start a fishing business. To her knowledge Fennigins Fresh Fish was still in operation and growing. Though never meant for Hawaiian waters the chunky craft had often proved tougher than many other larger craft, and would most likely ignore the Spring storm. Gesturing to one of her younger daughters she sent the child to get Annette.

Meanwhile Sandy had finally spotted her destination. Turning left towards the harbor, its lights flickering in and out of the storm she checked her altimeter. One hundred feet. Not bad she thought, until her engine simply stopped. Devoid of power and caught in a turn the heavy craft slid hard left. Sandy was still bringing the Duck's nose back into her desired course when she remembered the altimeter. A quick glance sent ice down her spine. It was already pegged at zero feet. Jerking hard she tried to pull the nose up. It was a rank beginners mistake. In reaction the Duck lifted, shedding speed for altitude. Its main float had just begun trailing the water in what would have been a rather gentle landing. Instead the craft climbed twenty feet, stalled, then fell straight down.

Sandy's tail felt like it had been slammed up her spine when the Duck finally met water. She was still dealing with the pain when her radio crackled several minutes later, the sound of a very young mans voice breaking through her wall of pain. "Opal calling Diamond Jill, Opal calling Diamond Jill. Can you hear me? Over."

Sandy located her microphone by the simple method of pulling its cable until the thing slapped against her paw. Still in tears she orientated the device, pressing on its send button. "Diamond Jill to Opal. I read you. Over."

"Dad wants to know it that was you who just slammed into the water like a dead fish" the young voice asked. "And if it was, turn on your lights. We lost you a couple of minutes ago. Over."

Instead of answering she simply turned on the aircrafts navigation lights and her landing light, then dropped her microphone as another shaft of pain slammed its way up her spine to set off fireworks behind her eyes. Had she dislocated her tail she wondered. That was always a serious injury. A minute later her radio crackled again. "See you now Diamond Jill. Dad thinks your gonna sink after that landing. Better get out cause those old crates go down fast. Over."

Barely able to move the bobcat had just managed to open her cockpit when her aircraft suddenly rocked heavily. With rain pounding in her good eye she tried to drag herself upwards, only to have her strength fail as she was overcome by even more pain. Looking out she barely managed to make out a dark form climbing up towards her when the world blissfully faded away.

She woke sometime later in the same safe room Annette had found herself. Blinking her good eye at the bright light she noticed what had woken her. Both the otter Annette and Latakia were busy setting up some kind of table. "Hey Latakia, how's my plane" she asked, surprised at the hollow sound of her own voice.

"Bent" the mouse answered as she approached Sandy with a glass of water in one paw and some odd looking pale yellow pills in another. "Take these. Annette must operate. She assures me that it will be painful. Very painful."

"Annette" Sandy asked, looking over to the otter.

"Your rather short tail is badly dislocated" the otter answered. "I must set it soon or you will lose all feeling in it. In a worst case you will lose your tail, puny as it already is." She pulled the table next to Sandy's body. "Seriously. Your face is a mess Sandy. I think your left cheekbone is broken. Its at least cracked and your nose is badly torn. I can fix these but not with you awake and talking. Please take those pills. I promise you'll wake up in a few hours."

With Annette's help Sandy sat up, accepting both pills and water. "Before I take these, you have any idea why I plugged that girl? Its been bothering me."

"She was an empath" Annette explained. "Not of the mind, I don't believe one mind can ever affect another. Not like the movies show. I've read of these kinds of people. They are overly sensitive to scent, their minds can process scents and place complex emotions to what the scent is at that time. They can, with training, adjust their own scent to make someone attracted to them, trust them or even fear them or someone else. She was trying to make me fear you enough to shoot you, but you knocked her out. When you shot her your face was a mask of primal fear. Take the pills now."

Automatically Sandy swallowed both pills, drinking only a sip of water. "Why should I be afraid of her? She was down, cold as a mackerel."

"Simply because she was unconscious it didn't shut down her body instantly Sandy. It was still manufacturing fear scent and that was a small room. I've had a lot of time to think this over you know. I think her scent was just right to trigger some ancestral fear. One none of us can control. Now lay down, I need to start cleaning your face." She grimaced. "I'm sorry Sandy but I'll have to shave your face, at least around the damage. Your fur will grow back, but you'll look odd for a few weeks."

Latakia helped the bobcat settle back down, stepping away as Sandy grimaced at the image in her mind. "Okay doc, but will I be able to fly?"

Annette shrugged. "I could graft wings on your back, but unless your some strange kind of life they won't take."

"I mean pilot a plane. We have to get out of here. Oahu, heck the whole Hawaiian chain isn't safe for us now."

"In a week maybe, but not over a thousand feet." Annette took the bobcats left wrist in her paw, sliding a finger along until she found the woman's pulse. "She made me think I wanted her" the otter admitted. "I believed it. She made me think Oharu used me." Her voice dropped. "Sandy... I believed her. After spending two nights with her she could have told me that my best friend Kathleen was my worst enemy and I would have believed her. She couldn't make me kill you because I'm a doctor. I've sworn not to do that and I never could really hurt people anyway. I think that she tried so hard that you didn't have any control, you just did what some primitive part of your brain told you was the only way to survive. Now sleep. You'll feel a lot worse when you wake up."

Sandy yawned, feeling the pills effects. "Doctors always told me I'd feel better" she whispered as sleep rolled over her.

"They lied" Annette whispered. Turning she nodded to Latakia. "I think the tail is most important right now. Thank God she has such a short one so it won't be hard to reset it. But even if I'm successful she won't be able to sit for two or three months, not in anything like a pilots chair."

"Then Justin will modify one for her" Latakia decided. "My husband may not be able to speak English clearly, but he is a magician with aircraft. Her stolen craft will be airworthy in a week at most he tells me." She moved to help the otter turn Sandy on her side. "She has been very good to us. We will hide you until she can fly you away. I promise you that."

Annette simply nodded, her attention on the short, now twisted and swollen appendage that bobcats called a tail. "Should be easy" she said to no one. "A simple dislocation. So we grasp it here, firmly. Then we pull it so while twisting..." A deep thump of bone resetting into its assigned position filled the room. "She may still lose it" Annette continued. "Tailbone dislocations are iffy things, in the least she's going to lose some feeling. That's normal. Okay Latakia. Lets get her on her back so I can start working on her face."

Oharu sat on the bed Molly had once occupied, watching silently as the men in white carefully strapped both women into stretchers. It was a long trip to the beach and modern technology or not, the safest and easiest way to transport them was still by foot. Oharu was tired, so tired. A combination of over work, stress and lack of rest she was certain. As soon as the men were ready she stood to say goodbye to the Hoele'toemi family, for it was a long taxi ride then another long walk back to the place she had chosen to live. Somehow the mouse managed two steps before her knees buckled, her world spun like a top and the silently waiting two white dressed wolves caught her falling body.

Aboard the Three Moons Captain Granite woke the way she always preferred, with a warm sweet body beside her. Looking over at the worn clock mounted next to her bed she noted the time. True sunrise

would be in less than fifteen minutes. They were in the Naguma sea, still a half day out of port. More than enough time to enjoy her new ship's cat before getting up. Lien had fought hard, until a night below decks had broken her spirit. More than likely she had simply accepted, hoping to escape one day. Well she would, when the crew was tired of her. She would escape into the waiting paws of a Kuo Han agent as all but one of the rest had.

Granite turned to face her sleeping pet. That doe's successful escape had appeared to have caught everyone by surprise. Who would have thought a woman would trust her life to a mile long swim against the current. That Molly had reached the shore successfully, even with the freighter hunting her had been a bitter pill for the crew. At least they knew now that the rope locker wasn't as secure as they had believed, not if its prisoner was desperate enough to escape. That problem had been taken care of, a new chamber had been built above shaft alley. Tiny, it was barely enough room for the average prisoner to curl up in. But no one was escaping Three Moons again. Oh course no one would ever touch the heart of Three Moons Captain again. Nudging the Chinese girl awake Granite smiled. "Wake up Furball" she said, using the name her crew had given their newest 'cat'. "Its time to play."

"Still no report on the missing aircraft sir" a Naval Intelligence ensign reported as Captain Merryman arrived for duty. "These are the night reports and cables. You might find the one from Brisingaland interesting."

Accepting the stack of reports Edger Merryman escaped into his tiny office, an office he rated only because he was in charge of this small section of the NIS. Before he had even settled into his chair the same ensign arrived with a large cup of black coffee, setting it on the desk before vanishing without a word. It was a daily routine, one that had evolved over the last two years. Ignoring his coffee (it was always blistering hot in the morning) Edger pulled out the indicated report and read carefully.

Someone was raiding the coastal villages of Vanirge's Northernmost island. Though this in itself wasn't big news for NIS, a small item in the report was. A Great War naval veteran had reported seeing a three stack German small cruiser, accompanied by a strange looking floatplane. He even claimed to have read the ship's name. Dresden. What, Edger wondered, was a Great War era German light cruiser doing in the Abyssal Sea, hadn't they all been destroyed by the English? Then there was that floatplane. He checked the report's date, it had been made early this morning. A quick crunching of numbers in his head informed him that the Duck could have made it down there, if it had met with sea support on the way.

"Is that where you went Sandy. To join the Germans" he asked the empty room. Pushing a button on his intercom he called his ensign. "McKanty, I want everything you can find on this ship Dresden. Right now."

"Blue folder in your inbox sir" the young ermine responded. "She was scuttled off Mas a Tierra in 1915. That's off the coast of Piccupacac sir."

"Thank you Ensign." Picking out the mentioned folder, a rather thin one he discovered, Captain Merryman began reading about the Dresden, last ship of the Graff Spree squadron to be sunk by the English. While at anchor in a neutral port. It had cost the British more than it had been worth, to shell a neutral and defenseless city for one small ship.

Far away on Cranium Island a hard looking native known as Ah-lam sank his machete into a soft stump, pausing to take his bearings. Powerful, his fur still dark despite his age the ratel had no living enemies. Any opponent that he set his sights upon ran or died. A feral grin came to his face as he remembered the girl who had refused him the night before. Her gutted still breathing body had floated out with the tide. No one denied Ah-lam and survived. No one.

There were two wide trails up to the old Buddhist monastery, paths he suspected were well watched. His intention though wasn't to be seen. At least not until it was much too late to organize any defense. Pulling out his canteen he opened it, swishing its contents around a moment as he looked back at the long line of men he'd brought with him. Forty strong men. More than enough to take the American Scientist, his pawful of assistants and the few dozen slaves he'd purchased in the last two years. Slaves purchased with pure gold and silver coins. Coins dating back almost a thousand years Ah-lam had heard. Soon they would all belong to him and his men. Ah-lam was no merchant, no slave trader. More at home on the open sea he was a feared pirate. But gold was gold no matter where it was to be found.

Two hundred feet above him, nearly a mile by trail sat his destination. An ancient three story tall stone edifice so old lava flows had edged around its foundation, eventually cooling into thickening layers. What the ratel didn't know was that hidden by those same ancient layers of lava were at least another full eleven stories, the oldest three of a style no living eye could view with ease. Where the original main entrance had stood was nothing but a cracked wall of stone with the original, now long rotted massive bronze doors still embedded within it. Through this ancient stone water flowed away, draining the lower stories so that only the lowest level was knee deep in oddly colored water. Without this natural drain the lower eleven stories would long ago have been flooded. Their secrets, their treasures long lost.

One of those treasures had been a great glowing splinter of stone laying within a chamber of carved lead. Nearly molten about its outer surface the scientist that had discovered it had been elated. At some time it had apparently been worked, a deadly job as the radiation it projected was almost instantly fatal to any who entered the lead lined room. It had taken ten slaves to break a small chunk of the stone away, to then carry it in a lead bucket up to a special workroom. Another ten or so slaves had died following his instructions. Carefully rendering down the metal and sand-like mix into three deadly rods. Rods no one could touch and survive. Those three rods, along with assorted other strange and common crystals now resided safely within a huge cylinder over twenty feet long, over six feet wide. Over the years he had experimented with the ray this machine could project, going through slaves like one would go through lab mice. He had also projected this ray upon the jungle around his commandeered building. In most places the land lay dead, or with odd sickly looking plants struggling to survive. Below him however were verdant plants, plants that seemed normal but were very different. It was into these plants that the pirate had led his crew.

Ah-lam returned his canteen to its place on his belt, automatically reaching for his machete. Oddly it wasn't there. *'Must have fallen'* he thought as he leaned over to search the forest floor. Still it wasn't in sight. That was even odder as his eyes had been off it only a moment or two. Stepping off his self made trail he moved two vines apart, spotting his machete laying at the bottom of a shallow depression. Growling in irritation he stepped through the vines, kneeling down to retrieve his blade.

"Master?" a voice asked as an older panda bear arrived at the place Ah-lam had stood. "Master?" No sound answered him so he pressed forward, parting the same vines his master had only a few moments before. And so it went for the next six pirates. Until one, drinking from his own water bottle saw what was raised high above the forest floor. With a scream of primal fear he turned to run. But it was too late, much too late. Every man was in the center of a feeding ground. A feeding ground ruled not by animals but by plants. Plants that hungered.

Sandy Doecan woke to a fuzzy world where nothing seemed to focus. She tried to speak but only a groan escaped her freshly stitched lips. At the sound a young boy jumped up, running out. Sandy's first mistake was to try and move her head to follow his movement. Her pillow felt like dry coral against her left ear causing her to whimper in pain. Annette had told the truth, she felt awful. It was a matter of minutes before the otter arrived with a large picture of water in one paw, several white towels in another.

"I see you have decided to rejoin the land of we who breath" Annette announced.

Sandy winched, to her it sounded like the otter was screaming. She held up her right paw, her left refusing to move for some reason. "Nah so loud" she gasped.

"Sorry." Annette sat in a waiting chair next to Sandy's bed, laying the towels on Sandy's stomach. "How do you feel?"

"Wanna drink" the bobcat admitted. "Feel lik hell."

"Warned you."

"Yeah" Sandy admitted. "Drink?"

"No. No alcohol for you until I say so. I'm the doctor remember. Now you want the good news or bad news first."

"Good news."

"Okay. Your going to keep your tail. You dislocated it but there's no sign of discoloration and the swellings going down nicely. Your tip is pinking nicely and the entire appendage is nice and warm. You dislocated your left shoulder, that's why you couldn't climb out of the cockpit. It's fine but I've got it secured for a few days."

"Bad news?"

"Your face will scar." Annette held her breath, waiting for an outcry. Instead all Sandy asked was how badly. "Not very noticeably. Your fur will cover the worst anyway when it grows back. But your husband will see it every time you kiss him. I did the best I could Sandy but you didn't clean it right. Salt water sounds good because it stings, but you went a day without really caring for it. There was some infection, a lot of dead skin and well... You were a mess girl."

"There goes mah movie career" the bobcat sighed. "So towels?"

"Bath time."

"No."

"Yes."

"I'm nah Oharu" Sandy warned.

"I know. She doesn't have such interesting jewelry, or a tattoo there. Must have been painful. Now do we do this the easy way, or the hard way?"

Sandy made a rude noise, whimpered when her stitched lip screamed in pain, then slowly rolled onto her right side. "Easy" she whispered.

April 29th, 1936

Oharu woke in a bed on Meeting island that she well remembered. She was in a hospital again and she felt miserable. Opening her eyes the mouse discovered that it was still night. Night, and how many days? Not many she decided, considering that right now her bladder needed caring for more than anything in the universe. As she remembered each hall had a bathroom in the middle. All she had to do was get there. Slipping her feet from under sweat dampened sheets the mouse made it to her feet. Ignoring the fact she

was wearing a hospital gown she made her way carefully to the door.

It weighed ten tons at least. She put her full strength against the heavy mahogany door until slowly it opened. Not a sound came from its well oiled hinges to upset other patients, or warn any watcher of her action. Now the center of this hallway would be... She couldn't tell. Her eyes reported two of everything, while both her depth and color perception were gone. Making a choice she slowly started making her way down the hall, letting the wall to her right hold her up as she moved one slow halting step after another.

"And now where might we be going?" a gentle female voice asked in her left ear.

A squeak of surprise escaped the mouse's lips while she almost lost control of her bladder. "Bathroom" Oharu answered in a dull fevered voice.

"Okay, bathroom. Ahn you didnah even think tah buzz little ole me did yah?"

Turning her head slowly, so as not to make the world spin again (as it seemed to want to do) Oharu found herself looking at the chest of a female. A large chest she noted. Very large. Kinda soft looking. Tilting her head back, it hurt too much to move her eyes, far far back she slowly brought the face of a Pine Marten. "Your big" she whispered.

Poking Oharu lightly in the chest the nurse, who stood only a little more than a head taller than the befuddled mouse smiled. "Ah kno, yer no slotch in tha department yerself lasse. Noh lets get you to tha bathroom." Before Oharu could complain the nurse had picked her up and started walking.

"Your strong" she commented, fighting to retain contact with reality.

"This ah pickup line girl?" the Maren asked. "Yer wastin yer time. Ahm married. Got six stron brothers. Yah don wanna mess with them. Ah, tha bathroom. Shall we?" Hitting the door with her back the nurse slowly turned into the room, carefully setting Oharu on her feet in front of the first stall. "Be quick noh, I don wanna hav'tah help you."

A pawfull of minutes later Oharu was back in her bed with a stern warning to ring the bell next time. "Don know who yah mighta run inta, and with yer tail hangin out like tha. Tsk tsk." She smiled before she left. Oharu, with her bladder now happy quickly slipped back into her fever sleep.

Far South at Wambenger Engineering Latakia found Annette sitting in a out of the way corner, silently watching as Justin worked on Sandy's 'borrowed' aircraft. "Coca?" she asked, holding out a thick heavy mug to the otter while settling down beside her.

"Thanks" Annette answered, taking a sip of the thick warm drink. "Hawaii. Who would think anyone would want hot coca in Hawaii. Its delicious."

Latakia giggled. "People drink hot coffee, the English like their tea hot, with milk. Some with honey. Why not coca."

"Just never thought about it." A clang of metal on metal, followed by what had to be a curse though it rambled along in at least three languages came from the battered Duck. "Latakia.."

"Why dah ah speak such-ah goot English ven mah husband chan't?" the coal black mouse asked, her inflection obviously forced.

"Yeah."

"Simple. I was taken from my parents a week after birth and raised by a rather rich English couple. It was a social experiment. To 'raise the backward natives to civilized levels.' I truthfully believe that I was their idea of a pet. I went to the best schools, wore the right clothes, mixed with the right society... And I never felt at home." She drank a bit more of her coca. "At twenty-one I left. They couldn't hold me anymore. I left and found my tribe, which as you may suspect was not easy by then. There were so few left. That's where he found me. Busting my tail trying to learn my own language, my own culture." She looked towards the floatplane, a sigh escaping her lips. "By the time we met I was heavy into the anti-European movement. That packrat over there is leader of the local Hawaiian anti-American forces. Neither one of us want to be part of some European nation, though Hawaii still might have a chance to escape that fate. You know they had their own Monarchy when the Europeans came, right? That for greed the American's stole their land, their entire nation?"

"As I recall they have a Queen right now" Annette admitted.

"Liliuokalani died in 1917. She had no official heir" Latakia corrected Annette. "The woman Europeans call the Hawaiian Queen is nothing but window dressing. Her only claim to the throne is by hearsay." She looked away from the plane, out a nearby window that was just brightening with sunrise. "England stole my nation. America is still trying to steal my husbands. If there is a war, and Sandy warned us during her last visit that there might be one, then Hawaii will rise against the American's. We will not become a state."

"We" Annette asked softly. "I take it you've adopted your husbands nation?"

"Certainly. Wouldn't you?"

Annette used her coca to buy time. Time to find an answer. "I think so" she admitted. "Besides. In America I'm hardly even a citizen. I'm half blackfur. That means to most that I'm a trained animal, just maybe house broken. Anywhere in the South you go there are signs Blackfur only, Whitefur only. But I don't have a husband."

Laughter answered her. "I listened to you and Sandy, I heard what you said most clearly. Your in love with this Oharu. Isn't he enough to fill your life."

"Oharu" Annette answered softly. "Is an exiled ex-Cipangan, who is also a woman. She has no country and by now she is probably dead. You see, she was a spy. She returned to Spontoon in order to surrender herself."

"A.. Oh... I guess I put my tail in my mouth that time. Do you believe they will really kill her?"

Annette shrugged, sitting her now empty mug on the floor. "I've never been to Spontoon. I hardly know anything about the country."

"But your going back with Sandy."

Annette nodded her head yes. "My life's not worth a plugged nickle right now. Not here. Not in America. Until things straighten up she's my only hope."

Latakia leaned back against a crate, her eyes turning from the window to Annette. "You're a doctor, correct?"

"Not really. I've had the training, schooling and half a year of residency. But I didn't finish that, so I'm not really a doctor."

"But you knew how to care for Sandy. I watched, you were certain in every move."

"I need to finish a residency somewhere before I'm a doctor. That's the law in America and Europe."

"Could you care for people while you are here? Sick people who can't afford a real doctor?"

Annette turned her gaze towards Latakia, locking her eyes with the older woman's. "You mean Hawaiian's of course. Yes, I'll be happy to do what I can. Without asking questions."

"I doubt you'll be seeing any revolutionaries" Latakia admitted. "They are in the hills. I'm talking about women, children and the occasional fisher."

"Not a problem" the otter admitted. "When do we start?"

"After breakfast." Another series of curses erupted from somewhere within the Duck's guts, followed by a heavy thump and more curses. "Perhaps now. I believe that my husband has just harmed himself. Again."

It was almost sunrise in Cipangu, a bare blush of soft pink just lit the Eastern sky far above. Not even the softest of breezes yet touched those within a tiny courtyard. A courtyard hidden deep within the Imperial Palace where two women had just finished setting out certain implements. "You do not wish my assistance" the young maid asked her Lady.

"This is my destiny Atsuko. I have shamed my family. I have shamed my Emperor. I have shamed my sister. I have shamed my Temple. I will not shame you by having you witness my death."

"Lady Tsukiyama. Please, may I at least hear your death poem?"

A hint of a smile touched the elegantly dressed mouse's eyes. "Of course, I had forgotten. Certainly." She brushed the expensive silk of her Kimono, then reached within for a single folded paper. Gently unfolding it she paused, reading again those words she had selected.

*Water flows
Finding level
Finding ending*

She sat the page aside.

"That was a very bad death poem" Atsuko observed.

"I was never good at writing poems" Lady Tsukiyama admitted. "It was not what our Emperor brought me into his court for. Now please go. I do not wish to sully your soul."

"I will not go. You must have a witness else tongues will say you were forced. You would not like the Emperor to be sullied by such wagging of tongues."

Lady Tsukiyama nodded in acceptance, pulling from her Kimono another page. This one she laid in front of herself. Picking up a brush she dipped it in a small pool of waiting ink, carefully writing her own name at the lists end. Just as carefully she struck her name out, laying her brush aside. "Thus die all who shamed my sister. As it should be."

Atsuko watched as her Lady leaned forward, picking up a blade still hidden within its white scabbard. "This is not the correct path Lady" she warned.

"I have much thought on this Atsuko. Perhaps it is not the correct path, yet it is the Honorable one." Slipping her blade from its scabbard she admired the brilliant polish, how metal reflected the now blood red morning light of dawn into her eyes. It would storm today she knew. A fitting time, the blood red of a storm morning she thought. Pulling her Kimono aside to bear her linen covered chest she closed her eyes, calming herself. Preparing for an action that would end her life. Carefully she moved her mind into that place where life was but a dream, where her bodies action would have no interest to herself. Finally she took a deep breath, reaching for the blades hilt with her other paw as blood red light seemed to drip from its edge.

Something slammed into the blade, striking it from her paw to clatter against stones behind her. "I do not allow this action" ordered a voice well known to the mouse. Beside Tsukiyama her maid became prostrate. Tsukiyama however only looked up. Looked up without emotion to meet the eyes of her Emperor and his ancient ferret uncle.

"Perhaps this is an action even a God may not stand before" she answered, her voice now a hollow shell, a dry whisper of its earlier self.

"You do not bow before your God-Emperor" the ferret asked. "You are disrespectful."

"Then kill this body" Tsukiyama answered. "I have already passed beyond."

"Arrogant child. She is too much like her sister" the uncle cursed.

"Tsukiyama" the Emperor said, his voice the sound of a gentle wind. "It is I who am to blame. Not yourself. Return to me, for I have need of your services." He watched her eyes, watched and waited. Tsukiyama's eyes remained blank. For she had in truth released her soul, yet he knew some small strand still held to her mortal shell. It had too, so that she could complete her ritual.

"We were too late my Emperor" the uncle sighed. "She has passed beyond."

Stepping down into the courtyard the Emperor kneeled across from his trusted servant. "I think not yet" he decided. "Tsukiyama. I need you to go to America. I need you to study the American President. I need this that I may make the correct decisions when I must."

Still Tsukiyama's eyes remained vacant.

"Tsukiyama." He reached out, touching the mouse's nose with one claw tip. "Oharu lives. She has found a new path. She becomes a priestess for Spontoon. I need you to speak with her. I need you to take her my apology. To release her from her vows to me. She is not to spy any longer."

Life flickered in the mouse's eyes. Barely a flicker, yet there. Slowly over a period of minutes Lady Tsukiyama's spirit returned to her body. Slowly life returned to her eyes, yet all strength had apparently left her body. As she began to fall forward her Emperor braced her body with his own paws. "I will speak with my sister?" she asked softly.

"Yes. It appears that my Miko on Spontoon island feels my orders are subject to interpretation. I shall have to send her a stern message about this. A most stern message. You will of course deliver it for me."

"As you wish my Emperor" Tsukiyama whispered. "I shall leave immediately."

"You will leave tomorrow. I feel that it will take that long for your papers to be completed. You will obey me?"

"In all things" the mouse agreed.

“Good. Sleep. Pack, prepare to take your maid with you. Lady Tsukiyama, she was right in one matter.”

“That?”

“You are a terrible writer.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

April 29th, 1936

"And how are we today" the doctor asked after entering Oharu's hospital room on Meeting Island.

His bright, carefree, sugar laden voice was almost more than the mouse could stomach at the moment. She looked up, her eyes so encrusted with sleep that she found it almost impossible to open them. Earlier she had tried to rub her eyes clear, only to discover her strength gone. She had barely been able to move her fingers, even though earlier she had walked to the bathroom. "Tired" she answered, having difficulty even with that single word.

"As you should be" he agreed, picking up her chart to scan the notes. "Off walking to the bathroom on our own were we? I doubt you'll be doing that much today. I'll have a catheter inserted. That should take care of your discomfort." He read further, ignoring the look of distaste on his patient's face. "Humm.. So you've had Typhus before? Small wonder your still alive." Replacing the chart he sat in one of the room's two chairs. "I'm been briefed on your actions young lady. Just what were you thinking by putting your mouth onto another's who was infected with Marsh Typhus. Were you trying to kill yourself?"

"Save life" Oharu answered, finding it difficult to remain awake even with this loud doctor talking to her.

"And you did. I'm afraid you've been infected yourself, though apparently your earlier exposure is saving you the worst of it. It will be several days at least before I let your little tail out of that bed." He leaned forward, taking something from the wall before moving to Oharu's right paw. She felt something cool pressed into her palm before he leaned back. "Now there is a button in your right paw. When you need anything just press it. I'll have the nurse clean your eyes after she does the catheter. Then you'll need a bath and brushing won't you." He laughed softly. "For a woman who spent a night in bed with an ill patient, you stink." He patted her paw. "Rest hon. That's all you need now. Just sleep. I assure you that other than some temporary physical weakness you'll leave here just fine." Standing beside her bed he looked down on his patient, noting the signs of extreme exhaustion, the paleness of having burned oneself's energy almost to the ground. "We're all pretty proud of you. You saved a life when she should have died. That's rarely been done before. Impressive. Quite impressive."

He might as well have saved his words, Oharu had fallen asleep even as he stood. With a shake of his head he walked out. Better to have a nurse do what needed done while his patient slept. It tended to be easier for both involved.

Elsewhere on Meeting Island Mr. Sapohatan leaned forward in his chair. "Honored Mother Saimmi I very much understand your and Huakava's interest in this woman" he told his visitor. "I also understand that she helped save the life of a Songmark student, at nearly the price of her own. But you have to understand my position. She's a spy. A self admitted spy. My choices here are not my own to make. She must be treated as all spies are treated. No matter what I may want. This is something the Allthing made clear many years ago. Not too long after the Gunboat Wars."

Unlike her host, the feline Saimmi was standing. This giving her the advantage of looking down at the man. Even without her priestess regalia Saimmi was an impressive woman. "There are always exceptions" she reminded the older ferret. "She is a gift to us. We cannot allow her life to be thrown away. Do not forget friend ferret, that in certain matters of these islands our voices still supersede your own."

"How could I" Sapohatan admitted. "Considering what is going on with this new voice from Rome and the fact even the Allthing is looking to all of you for an answer, not to the people who really know what to do."

Saimmi smiled. It was the only movement her body made before she spoke. "You would throw them off even Casino island old ferret. Our way is the better way. This too shall be dealt with. In such a way as to forever embarrass those who have pushed too hard."

"Cut their eyes out and watch them stumble about in confusion, cut their throats and ten rise to replace them" Sapohatan quoted. "So tell me dear priestess, whom I respect more than you might ever suspect, just how are you going to save this woman's life?"

Saimmi leaned forward, placing her paws flat on the ferret's desk. "Quorum" she answered softly.

Sapohatan leaned back in his chair, studying his visitor. "That requires her to surrender herself, admit her crimes and accept whatever punishment we decide" he reminded the feline. "Even if she does all that, there is no guarantee she won't be sent to the sea's embrace anyway. A Quorum requires all to agree. One single voice will end her life."

"Do not fight us on this ferret" Saimmi warned just as softly.

"You want her that badly" he asked, surprise tinting his voice.

"We NEED her that badly" Saimmi admitted.

"Then you have my full support."

Saimmi stood, brushing the pads of her paws gently. "That is all I wish. Until the Quorum."

Sapohatan watched in silence as the young priestess walked out. Had Hauakava been the one speaking there would have been more than a simple mild warning he knew. Saimmi was younger, she had the time left to work with people. He was aware of the older panthers's illness, time for her was counted in short moons, not long seasons. Hauakava would never have accepted a Quorum. He knew from previous experience that she would have called the Allthing together in its full voice. Sighing he picked up his morning report, this one from China he noted. With the religious war on one side and a mortal war building on the other he just hoped nothing else would rise to slap him in the muzzle.

In China Several figures slipped along an ancient warehouse's wall. From behind them came a measured sound of troops marching, while before them bright lights illuminated at least ten solders searching boats. "We must not be seen" an ancient voice whispered. "Not until it is too late for them."

Behind him fully a dozen young men and women waited, most holding weapons as old as the building beside them. Some were even older. They were on a mission, a mission that would cost most of them their lives. But an artifact must be gotten out. Someone had to warn the world of what the Japanese troops had almost stumbled across, and the price China would pay if any of it fell into their paws. Of all of them, only one had ever been further than a few short miles from China's border. Only she had any kind of useful contact outside their limited world.

"You are ready granddaughter" the old siamese asked.

Looking to her right Malou nodded to two older men. "We are ready." On her back was a large lump, a lump that weighed heavily not only on her body but her soul. Occasionally she felt the weight change, as though something inside had moved.

"Then we wait. It is past change of guard. We wait for them to relax. You will have but minutes granddaughter. By then the three of you must be away or all is lost." He paused, studying the Japanese solders again. "Your lady. She will assist you?"

"She will."

"Yet she has never replied to your letters."

"No Grandfather. Nor have they been returned."

He sighed as old ones do when confronted with the follies of youth. He seemed to close into himself for a while. "We trust much upon your love young granddaughter. If you must, if the Japanese come to you you must take the box with you into the ocean. Better it be lost forever than fall into their paws." For the next few hours they remained in silence, undetected even by scent by those base soldiers waiting near the docks. Docks coated just that afternoon with an apparently accidental spill of overripe fish oil.

A yellow furred hound looked out across Songmarks grassy field, silently watching students practicing their martial arts. Her view both lifted her heart and saddened her. With full classes and girls on waiting lists Songmark was a success, just as she and the other the original founders had hoped so many years ago. Back when each had thrown every last crowie they had onto a table, knowing that if they failed there was no future for them or their dream. Now Songmark was one of the two best schools on Earth for young adventuress's, the third having been closed due to most un-civil war and in that she felt sad. Each year they had to turn away more and more girls. This year most of the ones they would turn away were better qualified than any of their first year students.

Certainly Songmark had the resources to expand, expand in order to draw in more students. Yet with each success more attention was placed upon them. People like Lars and much worse nibbled at their edges. Others waited like jackals (some were jackals) for graduating students. Expanding would reduce their ability to prepare each student, so though her heart burst to add a larger student body her mind held firm. As did her partners. Then there was, as Huakava had mentioned one night a gathering storm. A gathering storm of war.

Turning away from her window she looked at her desk. Requests to join Songmark, interviews, so many, many promising applicants and they could only select one out of five. Next year it would be three times worse, what with the Spanish school Aero-Iberian closing due to their civil war. South Africa would take most. Ambrosia's School for Talented European Aviatress had an excellent course, if you were European or American and rich. Very, very rich. ASTEA had another problem. They tried very hard to install a species attitude within their students. Girls like Conchita and Saffina would have been automatically refused. Their applications tossed into the trash unread. For that reason alone Songmark had to endure. War or no war.

April 30th, 1936

Sandy Doecan woke to a pounding headache. She hurt so badly her eyes were screwed as tightly shut as a new bottle of pickles. Her soft moan of discomfort had Annette by her side in seconds. "Where does it hurt" the otter asked. "Tail, arm or face."

"Don't you have a life" the bobcat asked. "My head feels like jack hammers are pounding it."

"Right, lean back. I need to check your sinus's."

"Huh? But I'm not allergic..." Sandy felt herself pressed back gently and decided that it was easier to go with the flow.

Light flashed in her face, causing needles of pain to flash through her brain. "Right. Your clogged up. Its blood, not allergies girl. I'm going to help you sit up, then I'll get some hot water and towels to break this

mess up.”

“Thanks. Say Annette? Thank you. I’m gonna fly you to Spontoon with me.”

“Thank me when you’ve healed. Your no where near able to walk yet. Much less fly.”

Hot damp heat did indeed feel good to the bobcat, in fact she felt like she could become addicted to it. Some time after Annette began placing the compresses Sandy felt like her nose was running. Then with the oddest feeling she’d ever had some kind of mass exited her sinus cavity and the pain evaporated. Opening her eyes she was able to see Annette studying a black-grey mass of material on a washcloth. “Bad?” she asked.

“Just your brains” the otter answered without looking up. “Nothing to worry about, its not like you were using them or anything.” She walked over to a makeshift table, laying the half-paw sized mass under a bright light. As Sandy watched astonished the otter began carefully dissecting the mess.

“Uh....”

“I’m looking for infection, now be quiet.” Sandy went quiet, even though her warm heat was slowly turning to cold damp. She found that she preferred the warm heat. Finally Annette dumped the entire mess in a wax bag, then returned to her patient. “Good news or bad news” she asked.

“Good” Sandy asked, enjoying the feeling as her ‘doctor’ carefully changed wraps.

“There wasn’t any sign of infection.”

“So, the bad news is?”

“Your going to live.”

“Oh great, and I already bought a burial plot too.”

Annette giggled. “It better be in Spontoon girl because all you have to do now is heal up. I’m prescribing a steam bath for you. Five times a day. I want you to keep that nose of yours draining until it heals. And eat, eat a lot. Say. How does this feel?”

“EE-Yow!” Sandy screamed as Annette pinched the tip of her tail. “OW! Why did you do that?”

“Good, your tail will heal just fine” Annette answered. “Now unless you need me I need a bath, some food and about ten hours of sleep. There’s a bell on the table beside you. One of the kids will check on you every fifteen minutes regardless. Your okay with this?”

“Yeah. Go ahead” Sandy sighed. “Leave me here in my pain. I’ll just slowly go mad.”

Annette patted Sandy’s good arm. “You mean that your not already?” With a last check of her patient she left the room.

“IJN Tone is a brand new ship my Lady” the maid Atsuko announced while she unpacked their clothing. “This is much an honor.”

“A brand new warship Atsuko, to carry a single diplomat of peace” Tsukiyama reminded the younger woman. “This is nothing more than a display of power. We are but pawns in the chess game of nations. Nothing more.”

Atsuko stopped what she was doing, looking to her Lady. "Lady Tsukiyama, may this one ask a personal question?"

"If not you, then who" the older, taller mouse asked.

"Why do you not use your clan name. Why do you allow yourself to be called only by your first name?"

Tsukiyama sighed, leaning against a cold grey metal wall before answering. "That is two questions."

"Still..."

"Very well. I do not use my clan name because I gave my word to the Emperor. Thus I must be called something. I felt that my first name was sufficient. Will you now pry further?"

"No mylady."

Tsukiyama walked across the small cabin, one originally meant for two lower officers, stopping at the single porthole. They were four hours out of Tokyo Bay, now well into international waters. Her mission was exactly as her younger sisters, though in her case she carried diplomatic papers. There would be no mistake with her as there had been with Oharu. Those who had prepared her way had been very careful not to repeat the mistakes of those now gone. Perhaps a lesson learned she thought. Perhaps not.

Keeping pace with her ship, though exactly one hundred meters to Port was Tone's sistership and the other half of 8th Cruiser Squadron, IJN Chikuma. Both ships had just completed fitting out so this would be their shake down cruise as well as their first mission. They would pass through the Panama Cannel, arriving in New Amsterdam harbor within a month. A peace time display of naval power allowable only because of a special treaty. One only a few days ago signed between her country and America.

Tsukiyama knew that the treaty was a near sham. She, as well as certain other Court Advisors had read it carefully before the Emperor had signed it, though officially only in order to give him their opinions. It had been offered by America in the hopes that Cipangu would not join Germany should war come. Though America must disliked the events in China, it was not their land or their people. Great care had been taken to insure that British and American interest in China remained untouched, though all other countries cries of dismay were ignored. She well remembered a certain army generals words. "America dislikes war. Yet she is joined at the heart with Britain. Should we wish to keep America out of our affairs, then we must insure that we do not anger Britain." That had become official policy, though many high ranking officers found it distasteful. Yet anyone with an ounce of brains knew that America, with her massive untapped resources would eventually decide who won any future war. Thus the sham treaty had been signed. Besides, no living American had ever seen Cipangan warships in their greatest harbor. It would be useful to study their reactions.

A rap on her door. No hatch she corrected herself, caused Tsukiyama to turn her attention. "Lady Tsukiyama" a strong voice called. "May I enter?" Without glancing towards her maid, who was rapidly hiding certain undergarments she gave her leave. A moment later the heavy door opened, allowing a spotlessly dressed Ermine to step in. "Rear Admiral Hiroaki Abe sends his regards. Will you join him for lunch?"

"Yes" she agreed. "Have something brought for my maid please. Nothing elaborate. Plain rice and cold tea should do." She stepped out of her cabin, aware that Atsuko now understood that she had overstepped their relationship with her so personal questions. This Tsukiyama knew would not happen again.

Lunch was set in the officers mess. Present was not only Rear Admiral Hiroki Abe but his most trusted officers. Tsukiyama, as befitted her position sat first, the Admiral second then the rest. "I thank you for

your presence Honored One" Hiroki said in greeting. "Our Emperor is well?"

"His Imperial Majesty Akihito is well as any man his age could hope. Remembering he rides only rarely" she answered, watching carefully as her meal was served by a white gloved rating. "Her Imperial Majesty Michiko is also well. I spoke with her this morning before boarding. She wished me to express her concern for the safety of your ships and crew. I personally thank you for your concern."

"Yes" Admiral Hiroki responded softly. He, and those present now understood that this woman not only represented the Emperor but his wife as well. Or was at least on friendly terms with her. No Courtesan this then. "Might I ask of your mission" he continued.

Tsukiyama had expected this, but to be asked so soon, with such company. Certainly both ships must be straining to know. "I am to assassinate the American President, take his wife as a hostage then make my escape across America hidden in a fuel truck" she answered, her face deadly serious. "Once in San Frisco I will be met by a submarine and brought back home. Once that has been accomplished the American people will be ordered to surrender or watch their beloved 'First Lady' beheaded."

"I see" the Admiral managed grimly. "This you will do alone?"

"Not quite. My maid is to sacrifice herself by throwing damp rice, thus delaying their Secret Service while I make my escape." She sipped her tea, ignoring the sudden silence around her. "No Rear Admiral Hiroki, you may not ask of my mission. No more so than I make ask why you will be flying your scout craft as we pass through the channel, why we will be passing within sight of the East coast of America from the Keys to New York, or why you will be requiring sudden repairs to the Chikuma's rudder after visiting Norway. Thus forcing you to accept repairs at Hamburg." She returned to her meal, selecting a nut to nibble on delicately.

"I see" the Admiral finally said softly, breaking the deathly silence around them. "Perhaps I should notify my superiors of this sudden understanding of yours."

"Please do" Tsukiyama agreed softly. "Perhaps they would like to explain why they did not take all of our advice. Why they did not allow you to stop at Pearl Harbor for rest and relaxation for example."

"Your advice" the ships Captain blurted.

"I am one of Emperor Akihito's two civilian military advisors" she explained. "I am the one who sat behind those screens while your masters spoke of their dreams of conquest. I am one of the seven who urged him to sign this treaty you use. Rear Admiral Hiroki. I have spent my life from the age of three studying military history, our worlds geography and how such might be used against a defender. It had been my dream that my youngest sister would join me. If not she her older brother. However she was called to the temple, though even that did not save her from your madness. While my brother was reduced to the mind of a child through injury of no cause by your own. Now. May we eat in peace? Or do you desire the rest of your probable orders to be explained in rather delicate detail. In public."

"I believe that eating is a preferable pastime to having my officers hear any further information, before they need it. I am impressed Lady Tsukiyama. I had thought you no more than what you seem."

"Thank you Admiral. Your words would please my teachers very much. For appearing as nothing is what they have trained me to seem. This is very good Tonkatsu. You have chosen an excellent cook. When will we arrive at Spontoon?"

"My ships make thirty-five knots Lady Tsukiyama. We are currently cruising at twenty-five knots. As the total distance is about 3,280 nautical miles it will take us around 132 hours, or about five and a half days. However it will be six days as we would desire to arrive during daylight and at high tide. That would be the

fifth I think. We will refuel at sea of course, I do not have sufficient information of that nations ability to bunker us."

"If you made your speed thirty knots, would that stress your ship greatly?" she asked softly.

"Not at all Lady. That would bring us to your first destination in 110 hours. A bit more than four and a half days. We would arrive the evening of the third."

"Then, should you please?"

"As you wish. Captain?" Both watched as a barely younger canine than the Rear Admiral silently stood, bowed in respect then left. A few minutes later there was a change in the ships sound. A bit more vibration. To those aboard both ships appeared to have awakened from a light doze, their hearts beating stronger, their teeth biting into the sea leaving a sharp white foam behind. For these were true warships, and speed was their lives.

May 1st, 1936

Oharu turned to her hospital rooms door as it opened, expecting one of the nurses. Instead in walked Mrs. Hoele'toemi, the older feline looking much better than the last time Oharu had seen her. "Good morning" the mouse rasped in greeting, her throat feeling as though dry beach sand resided within it.

"To you as well" the woman answered. "I was visiting Amelia and Molly, thought I might as well talk with you while I'm at it. I understand your fever has gone down."

"Yes" Oharu admitted. "Doctor says I may leave tomorrow. If am nice."

Mrs. Hoele'toemi sat in one of the rooms chairs, facing the mouse in her bed. "So will you tell me. What are your plans" she asked.

"I was spy for Cipangu" Oharu started when the feline lifted a paw.

"Know all about it. What are your plans."

"Surrender" Oharu continued. "If let live, try to learn how be a priestess. How to help others. Nothing more."

"Hurmph. With your hopeless love your going to have a lonely life" she warned.

"But long one" Oharu continued with a hint of a smile. "Very short if certain doe ever discovers I love her."

"True. Extremely short. Oharu. If you survive your surrender, if they don't throw you off Spontoon. Well, where will you live?"

Oharu struggled a bit, managing to sit up so that she wasn't looking at her visitor from such an odd angle. "Huakava, Saimmi say I may live in old waterfall place. Huakava calls it Great Stone Glen. Is peaceful there."

"I know the place. There isn't anywhere to live there. It has a bad story. An old story. Not many people go there."

Oharu allowed her left paw to flicker a bit above the bed. "I build a small place" she said. "Is not that difficult. There much bamboo around. Need clear anyway. Make much more open space."

Mrs. Hoele'toemi nodded in agreement. "My daughter told me you were a strong one. All right, I'll see what I can do to help you. We need more priestess's. Not as many are being called today. Shells and tourist season excitement call too many now. With the Europeans beginning to push we just don't have the strength to hold our own alone anymore. Tell me. Why do you want to become a priestess of our religion, not of your own."

"I always be Shinto" Oharu explained. "In Cipangu it is common to be Shinto and Buddhist. Even some Christian. There no problem with following two paths. From what Huakava has told me, not much difference between us anyway."

"Cipangu you call your nation. Why? Everyone else calls it Japan."

Oharu managed a short laugh. "When Portugese find us, they make mistake. Japanning is style of finish. Wood or metal, with laquer. They thought Japan was name our nation. Gaijin say Japan, natives say Cipangu."

Mrs. Hoele'toemi joined the mouse in a gentle laugh. "Europeans are a rather thick headed lot aren't they? And what, may I know, is a gaijin."

"Foreign devil." the mouse explained. "It is insult. Here I am Gaijin. In Cipangu you are Gaijin."

"And none of us like the Europeans. All right" she stood. "I've visited long enough young lady. You need your rest. Since Huakava sicced Saimmi on you to train you'll need your strength. Unlike Amelia and Helen, I already know she intends to work you hard."

"I will learn. Goodbye Mrs. Hoele'toemi." She watched the feline leave, waited until her door closed before sliding back into her bed. She knew she needed her strength. Tomorrow she would be surrendering. Tomorrow... Tomorrow Oharu knew that she would finally step back into the light. Even if only until the waters closed over her head.

Malou stared at her paws in the gathering darkness of Dalian. She was as silent now as she had been since making her way back to her grandfathers shop. For all his planning, for all the skill and desperation of those with them Shaiming had been a traitor. They had stepped out expecting resistance yes, but not that every sea going ship would have four or five Japanese troops within its hull. Now all were dead, all but her and that only by the most fortunate of luck. Shaiming, expecting to be welcomed by the waiting troops was the third to fall. Several bullets had struck him in his chest, exiting his back in a fountain of hot blood. His death had saved her life as his still hot lifeblood had covered her from chest to crotch. She had stumbled, fallen, her head striking a stone thus stunning her. Thinking her blood soaked body dead she had been unceremoniously kicked into the water by an angry officer, an officer hunting the man carrying an artifact. How surprised he must have been to discover she had the object he desired, but by then she had regained her senses and made her way to the sewers.

Now she remained in her grandfather's shop with only carefully crafted jewelry surrounding her as company. To survive she must play the fool, for soon they would search here. Hunting a badly injured woman and an ancient box of gold and silver. To hide the box she had ripped a cover off one of her grandfathers design books, glueing it to the slightly smaller golden object then placing it on a shelf with its neighbors over his workbench. All was now in plain sight of anyone entering the shop. Her clothing she had burned, then a long bath to clean the sewer off her. Now she could think of but one way to get her burden to safety.

Standing she walked to her grandfathers writing table. She would send a letter, there were still ways to get letters out to the world if one were willing to pay the price asked. She would send a letter to Spontoon. But not to Nikki. Nikki had never answered even one letter. No, she would write to Katherine McMaster,

the woman who was Nikki's only friend. Katherine would read the letter, though Malou was uncertain as to what would come of her efforts. But the relic must not fall into Japanese paws. Not even if it cost the life of every Chinese in Dalian.

Just after sundown in Oahu Sandy stepped out of the makeshift steam room, a towel covering her body while cooling water dripped from her fur. Although she could breathe easier after each treatment, her fur was beginning to curl as badly as that hack actress Shirley Shrine. "How many more... What tha..." Sandy stopped, blatantly staring at the jaguar mother and small child sitting with Annette.

"This is Mrs. Gomez" Annette answered the stunned bobcat. "Mrs. Gomez, that creature dripping water on the floor is my pilot Sandy. She upset me one day so I hit her with a frying pan" the otter explained, laughter in her voice. "Actually, she was involved in a plane crash. She is very lucky to be alive." Annette turned her attention to the young boy, placing another bandage on his paw.

"Little Miguel here burned his paw last week" Annette explained. "Since the Gomez family couldn't afford a doctor, they have been treating it with boiled fish oil. Fairly effective, but it smells and bothers his schoolmates." She carefully split the bandage while Sandy walked over to watch.

"Carbolated Vaseline?" Sandy asked.

"You smelled it" Annette asked.

"Yes I.. I did. I did smell it."

"Good. Then that fat nose of yours is healing. Carbolated Vaseline isn't a cure-all, it just keeps infection out" she explained. Her explanation more for Mrs. Gomez than her young son. "Miguel here is twelve, he managed to lose control of a boiling pot of water and when he grabbed for it he managed to stick his paw into the water." She studied the mother's reaction as she explained this to Sandy. Too many children had 'accidents' with boiling water. Accidents that were parents' ways of 'teaching them a lesson.' But the boy's father was outside waiting worriedly. He was outside of course because Sandy had been in the sauna, it simply wasn't correct for a male to be in the same room as a naked woman after all. Not unless they were married. Even if she was in a canvas walled sauna at the time. Nor did the mother show any indication that her story was a lie. Apparently in this case the story was truth Annette decided. Especially as her examination of the boy had shown no other abnormal injuries or scars. Accidents did happen.

She stepped back from the now smiling child, turning her attention to the mother. "Change those wrappings twice a day, new coatings of Vaseline each time. He will scar, but not badly."

"His paw. He will not lose use of his paw?" the mother asked. There was true worry in her voice both furs noted.

"Maybe a very little, cold and heat will bother him a little the rest of his life. Other than that I can't see any other problems. Now, here is the bottle of Carbolated Vaseline and a roll of gauze. You watched me treat him. Have him use that paw as much as he can. Mainly I want him to stretch it like I showed you. Six times a day at least, twenty repetitions each time. It will help keep the internal scarring down."

They both watched as the two left, the grateful sound of a man's voice coming through the closing door. "You like this don't you" Sandy asked, her right paw still holding her towel against her body.

"Helping people" Annette asked. "Yes, I really do. Now get up here on my carving table. I might as well take care of your face while I'm at it."

Careful of her injured tail Sandy made her way onto the table, giving up holding her towel when she needed the use of her one good paw to manage the feat. "I know an island that could use a doctor" she mentioned as Annette began removing stained dressings.

"Really? About ten feet square right? At low tide its dry as a bone. At high tide I tread water?"

"Honestly Annette. Spontoon needs doctors. Doctors who aren't species'ts. How many jaguars have you seen in your life?"

"Seven, maybe eight" the otter answered as she removed the last dressing. For a long breath she was silent, then she held the dressing for Sandy to see. "All clear" the otter announced. "No secondary infection. Your going to live."

"That is something always worth knowing" Sandy agreed. "I feel weird with that bandage on my face."

"Better to feel weird now, than the rest of your life" a third voice commented. Latakia had walked into the room, looking around to check on the changes Annette had made of her reading room. "You have done well. Tomorrow more will come." She settled on a battered multi-colored chest that had been shoved to one side. "Annette. Are you certain that you cannot stay? Our people need a doctor. You are the first to come this way in months."

"She can't stay" Sandy broke in. "Once the American's figure out she's still on tha islands they'll turn her into lunch meat onna platter."

"So you have drawn another into your web my friend" the marsupial mouse observed.

Annette sat her things down with just enough force to get both women's attention. "First. No one drew me in to anything, unless you count Oharu. And I'm certain she didn't mean too. Second, no Mrs. Wambenger, I can't. Even if I wasn't in trouble I've already given my word to go elsewhere. To Spontoon." She too sat, looking over the two women before her. "Say Sandy, I've been wondering. Just how are you going to pay for our stay and the repairs to the aircraft you stole."

Looking over to the mouse Sandy grinned. "Latakia?" she asked.

Rising the mouse turned around, popping open the chest she had used as a chair. Moving several stacks of clothing around she withdrew a rather large tin cracker box. Replacing things as they had been she closed the chest then sat again. In her paws were the cracker box. Shaped like Big Ben it must have held hundreds of salt crackers at one time.

"That" Sandy explained. "Is my bank. I am, well was, controller and paymaster for a rather complex web of agents. Some were for tha Europeans, some against, some for other countries." She stood, walking over to Latakia to retrieve the tin then turning to Annette. "Dollars, pounds, shells, yin, yang and francs are in here. Last time I counted nearly twenty thousand American dollars worth of funds, once you do the math." She returned the tin to Latakia, who sat quietly while the bobcat explained.

"Hon. I worked for that Americans, English, French, Japanese ahn Spontoon. I am - was paymaster for some twenty-five or so agents. American, British, French, Chinese, Japanese and Australian. Between them I could tell you when a ship left port, how fast it went, where it docked, what it picked up, dropped off. Hon, I could even tell you how many hairs were on a Captains toosh. Most of my people were not, shall we say, conventional spies. Now I'm in the limelight. Tha whole she-bang is gonna fall apart. But not before I do what I've planned tah. We're taking tha Shells and some dollars. All tha rest stay here. Both tah pay our bill and help the Hawaiian's in their struggle."

"Well..." Annette swallowed. "Swell I guess. I mean, that explains a lot Sandy. Look. I need some supplies, could you..."

"See my way tah advancin you a few dollars? Write out a list. Latakia will arrange for what you need. Just don't make it a big list. As soon as that plane can fly we are gonna vamoose. It is not safe even here. Not for long."

"We..." the otter corrected. "Are not going anywhere until you can see out of both eyes. I've seen the results of a half blind pilot trying to land. Its out there being hacked into little bitty bits right now. I'm the doctor and if you don't listen to me you fly alone."

"I may..."

"You will not" Latakia finished for the bobcat. "You will be pushing your limited abilities hard my friend. I will not allow you to overextend them further by flying unwell. Now. It is dinner time." She stood, again, opened her storage chest to replace the tin, then walked out.

"Eatin's good" Sandy offered.

"Better than my bobbing a certain bobcats already too short tail?"

"Yeah. Lets eat."

May 2nd, 1936

Somewhere Very West of Spontoon a rap on her hatch woke both Lady Tsukiyama and her maid. While Atsuko hurried to answer the rap the mouse simply sat up in her small bed and waited. "It is Admiral Hiroki" the rabbit reported.

"I will see him" her mistress decided.

Stepping aside Atsuko made room for the Admiral to enter, though he stood only just inside the opening.

"There is a problem" Admiral Hiroki explained. "One of our submarines has vanished. All ships have been ordered to assist in a search."

"So you bother me why" the mouse asked.

"Lady Tsukiyama. In all but body you are the Emperor aboard this ship. I may not go against your wishes. Yet the Admiralty..."

Understanding blossomed onto the mouse's face. "Of course. I had not thought. My Lord Admiral. In all things regarding your ship and crew I ask no voice. In these things I am simply a passenger. Please obey the orders you have received. I would rather be a month late to my destination than endanger a single sailors life."

"Thank you Lady Tsukiyama. I had not expected such understanding."

Tsukiyama laughed, a gentle, trained sound. "Not all of the court are self serving idiots" she explained. "Why, it has been said that I may even feed myself without Atsuko's guidance. Is there another matter?"

"None. My thanks." He bowed, leaving her room thus her presence exactly as if he had taken his leave of the Emperor himself.

Closing the hatch Atsuko looked upon her charge. "I do not much like this way he looks upon you" she informed the mouse. "He places you too highly. It is dangerous."

"Nor do I" the mouse admitted. "Yet it is his training. One would as much ask the waves to cease as to ask such a man to ignore his training. Now let us get some sleep. We will have much to observe these next days I think." As she laid back down Tsukiyama felt the ship's hull shift vibrate the harder as the ship changed direction. Like a cat released to hunt, IJN TONE was at full throttle.

Oharu watched with disgust as the nurse removed her catheter. That she would need such a thing. Her thoughts were a confused mass of useless images regarding such an object. She had cared for Molly without need of such an invasive device, why couldn't... Never mind she told herself. It was over and she hadn't died by having it. "May I leave now" she asked.

"Can you walk?" the nurse answered.

Swinging her legs slowly from under the sheet Oharu sat up, waiting for a soft wave of dizziness to pass. "Perhaps" she decided. "I shall try." With the nurse's help she slipped from her hospital bed. Why it was so high she didn't know, didn't care but that long slide to the floor seemed to take forever. Her bare feet touched cold linoleum, her nerves sending feedback as to what was there, how much weight they were supporting, where up and down were and if she was leaning to one side or the other. All the little things ones body does without conscious thought.

For a moment Oharu swayed, then stepping carefully away from both nurse and bed she almost shuffled to the window. There she leaned forward, placing her paws against its frame to look outside. "It is misting" she reported.

"It will all day" the nurses voice answered her from nearby. "Rain tonight. You should stay at least another day."

"You cannot keep me against my will, I have no money to stay" Oharu replied. "What I must do today I will be sitting. I will go now." She straightened up, turned and made her way carefully to the wardrobe where her kimono and obi, freshly washed, waited. What she really wanted to do was return to the bed.

"Would you like some help dressing?"

"Yes. Please" Oharu accepted. It did not bother her to admit she needed help. All people needed help at one time or another. She just wanted to be out of this hospital as quickly as she could. Quickly, before a certain patient stumbled onto the truth. A truth Oharu could not hide from her forever. Besides, live or die Oharu wanted her surrender over with now. This constant waiting was dragging on even her nerves.

Sandy had walked out to the Wambenger drydock to inspect her 'borrowed' plane. At the moment it hung from several chains, hoist off out of the water to allow work to be done on its landing gear. Why anyone would call those tiny things landing gear puzzled the bobcat. Then she was a navigator, structural engineering wasn't in her educational tract. She could see the near wing float Justin had scratch built to match the surviving one. There were places on the Duck's outer skin where work had been done, but overall it seemed sound.

"Yah wouldnah wonder bouh tha iffing yah saw her guts" Justin said from behind her. His silent arrival had its characteristic effect on the bobcat. She barely held her water.

"How do you sneak up on me like that" Sandy asked.

For once Justin smiled, then pointed to his feet. "Noh shoes" he explained, then waved one paw to take in the work area. "Lotta white nois. Yah can' hear me no morn' yah could fly that there plane." He paused, appraising the bobcat. "Sandy, what maks yah think you can do this? Yer lif sure, but tha docs too?"

"Flying is the easy part Justin, as long as I stay away from storms. Its takeoff's and landings I'm bad at."

"Ahn ow' many yah done?"

"Um.." Sandy closed her eyes to think. "In my extended career? Seven take offs, four landings, one crash" she finally answered, opening her eyes again.

"Ahn yah durn near bin porr lass in half wit tha last one tah" Justin added. "Yah were darn lucky that tim' yah were. Ahn tha mericans bult 'er lik ah tank."

"I know. Look this thing has a range of what, 750 miles or so?"

"Bout tha" Justin agreed. "Darn nice biplane. Wanna sell 'er?"

Sandy shook her head, a twinge of pain reminding her of her injures. "American's wouldn't let you keep her. It's a bit more than 1,200 miles from here to Spontoon. If you can rig some extra fuel tanks I might make it. I'll work out my flight path after this session with the steam cleaner. At her cruising speed I might still have fuel left when I get home."

"Sur. Nic ta have ah buffer. Be nice tah hav tha ship tha."

"Maybe in a few years. I'll see what I can do. And thanks Justin. You're the best."

"So mah wif kep's saying. All righ, what yah want 'er painted as."

"Spontoon Pacific Quadrant Rescue" the bobcat answered.

"Ain't one."

"Create one. It's all in your paws. Now I've gotta go. I have an appointment with a steam bath."

Sandy walked back into the living area, Justin's sudden outburst of laughter following her. A Duck was a Duck, there was no way she could hide that unique shape. Though the Loening Air Yacht was fairly well known, a Duck was simply too different from its father for any mistaken identity. Of course, flying around with the letters SPQR on her stolen ship was going to raise some eyebrows. It had been a long time since the sun had shown on the Empires banner for the Senate and People of Rome.

Standing outside the office on Meeting island she had, eventually, been directed to Oharu paused to gather her courage. Under one arm were three fat bamboo tubes, tubes holding her 'special' drawings. Drawings that she had this morning recovered from the McGee resort. That alone was a tale to tell, but unimportant at this moment. Rubbing her left paw on her kimono, as if to wipe away moisture that wasn't there she reached out and grasped the doorknob. It was near noon when she walked in and found a rather unimposing waiting room, a desk at the far end of the room supported an attractive middle aged rabbit who looked up as Oharu entered. "Its almost lunch time" the rabbit warned. Her accent was rather attractive as well the mouse thought. Taking in the lack of embellishment to the room she decided that it made sense she had taken so long to find this place.

"I here speak with Mr. Sapohatan" she replied as she walked up to the rabbits desk. She had read the name off the milk glass window in the door next to the rabbit.

"I see. Well you do have an appointment of course" the rabbit asked as she pulled a clipboard towards herself from one corner of her desk.

"No" Oharu admitted. "No appointment."

"Oh dear I'm really sorry Miss..?"

"Oharu"

"Oharu then. I'm really sorry, but Mr. Sapohatan has a very busy schedule today. Between meetings, reports and such I really don't think I can fit you in."

"Mr. Sapohatan is head of island security. Correct?" the mouse asked.

"Such as it is" the rabbit agreed. "Most of that is covered by our police forces. Mainly he handles customs."

Carefully Oharu sat her tubes, unsealed end up onto the rabbits desk.

"I.. Am... Spy" she explained, saying each word carefully as she sat a tube down with a soft, yet certain thunk of bamboo on hardwood. "I have come surrender." She looked to her right, spotting a chair that would support her species. "Is all right I sit and wait? Not want Mr. Sapohatan to miss catching spy. So I wait?"

Shocked at Oharu's boldness Kjellfrid could only nod in agreement. Many of their agents had been giving the mouse a run around, sending her this way and that, using her physical weakness against her to buy time until apparently she had accidentally stumbled onto her destination. She mentally checked her notes. Her boss had said no earlier than twelve thirty as it was taking a bit of time to gather a Quorum. Though most had arrived, their fifth member was still on a water taxi. Oharu's sudden departure from the hospital had caught everyone by surprise of course. After all, her doctor had been certain that she would not be able to walk very far until tomorrow afternoon at best. *'Swell'* the rabbit thought. *'Another fine mess modern medicine has put us in.'* So she would have to stall.

"I'm sorry Miss Oharu, but we only accept surrenders in the afternoon. Morning executions tend to ruin ones appetite for lunch you see. Its all that blood and gore. All the screaming as a pelt is cut slowly from the body. It's quite upsetting for some. Especially when the agent is then roasted alive on a spit."

"Then I wait."

An eyebrow raised on the rabbits forehead. *'Then I wait?'* All right she decided, who blew intel on this girl. That line should have had her frightened. Instead she sat comfortable, her eyes now closed, paws folded carefully in her lap. Even the thought of a messy death hadn't fazed her visitor. Lightly Kjellfrid touched one of five buttons under her desk, the one that today meant 'your greatly anticipated visitor from the East has finally arrived.' Ignoring the standing bamboo tubes she returned to her work, her own lunch now delayed.

In the security offices of Hickham field a bulldog known only as 'The Commander' stared at a paper in his paws. "I'm bein sent here?" He looked up, staring hard at the rooms only other occupant. Major William Forrester stared back just as hard, if not a bit harder.

"Yes, you are. We have reports of an unidentified seaplane apparently working with the ex-German ship Dresden. Dresden was scuttled on March, 14, 1915 after suffering heavy damage. Obviously someone has raised that ship, repaired her and sent her out. I'm not going to bother to tell you what that means to

the balance of power in this area. In the wrong paws a ship with that much firepower will make hash out of commerce in the Abyssal Sea. Not to forget the Marquesa and Magellan Sea. Reports indicate that the Uavapacal government controls this ship. They haven't been happy campers since England violated their neutrality by shelling that ship while at anchor in their harbor. Not to mention the collateral damage to the city that same shelling caused. They absolutely hate the English. Almost as much as they hate the Spanish I understand."

Forrester stood, leaning forward over his desk. "You are to find out who really controls that ship. Secondary, and very secondary. If that flying boat is as we suspect Doecan in our missing Duck your to neutralize her. You read the reports, from eye witness accounts it seems to be our Duck. For the record, you are to kill her. Then burn that craft. Unless you've suddenly learned how to fly. Understand?"

"All right. Who's my team this time?"

"No one. You lost your last team in highly suspect conditions. In the least you cost America one of the three most effective empath's we had in what can only be explained as dereliction of duty. At the most you killed them yourself, a charge that isn't believed. Yet."

"So I make or break myself on this job" the bulldog growled. "Fine, what are my limits?"

Forrester laughed. "Since when did limitations bother you? Track down that ship. Then, and only after you've gotten conformation we have your report, its Doecan. Kill her. Bring proof back to any Embassy that you've completed the job and you'll officially be reinstated. Instantly. Officially, as of right now you're a rogue agent wanted for murdering your own people. Unofficially your new code words will get you monetary and equipment support from any American embassy, the same for medical or temporary safety. But no manpower. Not one cracked claw." He grinned, an evil look on a panthers face before he continued. "Brasingland mister. Brasingland is where you start. By order of your favorite Admiral your being sent to the boonies. You've embarrassed him. He had promised that raccoon to a rather important project and you humiliated him. Your persona non grata in those halls now. So make you own escape boat, because there's no rescue party hiding in the wings this time. Now get out of my office. Before I have you thrown out."

Oharu stood silently in an unknown briefing room on Meeting island as five Spontoon natives studied her art. She had just finished a nearly three hour long recitation of her mission and how to read that same art. Although these five held the key to her future she was ignoring them. All her strength, both mental and physical was now being used to keep her legs from collapsing and she well knew that she was rapidly losing that battle. Perhaps another day in hospital would have been the better idea, but the point was mute. Right now she was where she needed to be. Right now she was deciding her future, hoping for the best, willing to accept the worst.

A leopard lifted his head, using a finger to push the bi-focals he wore back up his nose. "So. You show a path here that has not been used in thirty or so years" he remarked. "It is a forbidden area."

"Where honored one" she asked, leaning slightly over the table to look while using the excuse to place her paws on that same table, helping to support her body.

"Here" he remarked. "So. Above the village of Southern Cove."

Oharu hardly looked at the drawing, she remembered the path well. "It is hard packed Honored one. Many feet have used it lately, though in truth it is not cut back as most paths are."

"And so" he responded. "You see more than you should. How many years did you train to be a spy" he asked.

"Two weeks Honored sir" she answered, finding it difficult to stand again.

"So and so. Two weeks. Yet you find a path we thought well hidden as though it were marked with large signs. How is this?"

"I am an artist Honored sir" she explained. "At this path's entrance the beach has been worn, as though a gully were beginning. Yet there is not water present. This is very rare in nature so I followed the depression."

"So and so. This depression you speak of, how deep?"

"A few inches Honored sir. Yet in a long line from shore to growth." She opened her mind, bringing forth an image of the location. "When the sun strikes from a low angle, such as late afternoon it is very obvious."

Turning his attention to the room's only ferret the unnamed leopard raised one eyebrow. "So. It seems we have not quite discovered how to hide all clues to certain projects. As two rather inquisitive females proved some time ago."

"Rub it in old fur" the ferret replied softly. But there was a hint of humor in his face.

"It is understood that this woman wishes to become a Priestess. Of our island's native religion" a male red fox announced, breaking into the interchange. "From what little I know, being as it is involved mainly in commerce she was trained as a nun before?"

"Temple Maiden to be exact" the feline Saimmi corrected. "Oharu was a Miko, one who serves the temple only."

"Ah, and not a Geshia. So we will not need to worry about a hunting license in this case." A soft sound from Oharu's throat that caused the fox to look to her. "You have something to say about my comment" he asked.

Oharu turned her full attention on the fox, a rather overweight man, yet high intelligence shown in those eyes. He was trolling she decided, hunting for information. Baiting her. "Honored sir, are your dancers painted street walkers?" she asked softly.

"That's a harsh term young lady" he warned. "For the record, no."

Oharu nodded her head slightly in acceptance. "Geshia highly trained entertainers. They spend their lives keeping abreast of local, national and political news. They train sing, dance, play more than one instrument in some cases. They not pansuke. They not whores."

"And SO!" the leopard laughed, slamming an open paw hard on the table, causing the exhausted mouse to flinch. "I do believe that she just cut your throat."

"With a very sharp knife" the fox agreed. "You are willing to abandon your religious beliefs and embrace ours? Why should we believe that. You've just admitted to being a spy, and a better one than certain people have led us to believe."

"I not abandon Shinto" the mouse corrected. "My la... Where I born is right to have more than one religion. I keep Shinto to self. I serve your religion equally."

"That is possible?" the ferret asked.

"It is" Saimmi supplied. "I have already seen her do so."

"You have not answered the rest of my questions" the fox reminded Oharu.

Again Oharu gave the man a nod of her head, acknowledging that his words were true. "I not ask you believe me. I ask for chance. One chance. I fail. I take own life. You never soil paws my tainted blood."

Saimmi tapped the table with one claw. "Don't get her started, you've all been briefed on certain things that are simply black or white with her and her people. Huakava could not be here today and we all know why. Thus I take her place. Would my word be enough. Enough to grant her one chance?"

"We deal with spies as we have always dealt with spies" an ancient looking canine announced. For the first time he seemed interested in the events around him. "She may swim. Should she make it to Sacred Island I will accept her one chance. Otherwise" he shrugged as if in defeat. "I don't trust any spies. No matter how attractive."

Swim thought Oharu. Across the ocean? She shivered in almost uncontrollable fear. "I can not swim" she admitted.

"Then my answer is to give her to the seas" he said, turning his chair so his back was to the mouse.

Saimmi's face showed no emotion at those words. She turned to Oharu. "You have begun your studies of our belief's. What is your opinion of the difference between them and Shinto" she asked.

"Little real difference" Oharu answered, still leaning heavily on that table for support. "In many cases. Some large differences. Nothing I cannot accept."

"What of your spying" the ferret asked. "Do you intend to continue sending reports to your country?"

"I wish Spontoons to be my country" the mouse explained. "I not like spying. I not like lying to people. I want to serve. Not harm."

Looking around him the ferret known as Mr, Sapohatan motioned both Saimmi and Oharu to regain their seats. Something the mouse did with obvious gratitude as her legs were trembling badly under her kimono. "We have been at this some time now. I think we have asked all the questions we have, at this time. Have any of you another question?" He waited three beats of his heart. "No?" Turning to Oharu the ferret stood. "Miss Oharu, please. We must now consider your position, your admission of guilt and your request. If you will kindly wait outside someone will come to you when we have reached a decision." He waited until Oharu had made her slow, careful way out. His trained eye noticed her exhaustion, her determination. Once the door had closed he turned to Saimmi. "This was your choice. A Quorum requires one hundred percent agreement. Had you chosen a trial, or even the Allthing it would have been easier."

"Perhaps" the feline agreed. "It would also taken days. As everyone has read her letters, looked at her books and heard her history. May we vote please?"

"Certainly."

There was no real surprise with the vote however. Four for the mouse, one against. "Your standing on the test" Sapohatan asked his college.

"Spies die. She takes the swim or we dump her off a water taxi with an anchor around her neck. Same difference" the canine answered, having turned back to face his companions. "I have nothing against this woman. Truth be told I admire her courage. I admire her defense of those she felt she owed such too. I admire everything about her, except her mission and life choice. That last though is unimportant to me."

Yes we need her, but the law is the law. Bending it now sets a bad example. How far will we bend it the next time, and the next. No my friend, she must be tested by them. If they accept her, only then I will greet her with open arms. As I wish I could right now. We desperately need priestess's in these dangerous times."

"Even with her fear of the ocean" the fox asked. "You fear heights, you'll never enter an airplane. Getting you onto a hotels balcony is a major effort in itself. Yet a woman who does not know how to swim must close her eyes to her greatest fear. Could you do it?"

"Fly? Never" the canine admitted. "In fact I'd shoot myself first. But I'll bend in this point only. Take her to them. Let them decide. She will still have to overcome some of her fear, that is a given. I will bend to this point only. We all know that the law says they must decide. Normally we do this by having the person involved swim. Asking a person who can't swim to do so would be like asking a baby to fly a kite. But they must decide."

"SO, and so" the final voice sighed in agreement. "She will be tested by them. As you wish my friend. As you wish. Where will you take her Saimmi?"

"Sacred Island certainly. It is always the best choice. They are comfortable there. In any case she must one day set foot upon that land, must rest her paws upon the stones. Best now, before my mission than having Leokau try to teach that which she herself barely comprehends, should I not return."

"There is always Haukava" the fox reminded Saimmi.

"Who does not expect to return herself" Saimmi admitted. "We do what must be done, in the doing..." For several breaths the feline priestess remained silent. "Many died when this was first done. Now we reverse that. This is very dangerous, though this time we know what we are facing. Not like those women who died to make this land habitable again. Keep that in mind when next you pray at your chosen shrine. Remember well those before who have freely given their souls to serve you."

It was late in the evening and Annette was closing down her temporary clinic when Sandy entered. "How's it feel to play doctor" the bobcat asked as she found a place to sit. A place that kept pressure off her injured tail.

"I enjoy it" the otter admitted happily. "I have always loved medicine. Latalia brought in a local healer. He has taught me many things that are just as good as what school taught me. In some cases I think his way is better. I hope to learn more before we leave."

"Better make it fast then. As soon as the Duck is ready we leave."

"As soon as I allow you to fly you mean" the otter reminded her patient.

Sandy shook her head no, though slowly. "Word is search parties are working their way towards us. You and I they can hide, the Duck though. That's impossible. Can I fly in three days?"

"I don't know" Annette admitted. "How far, how high, how long?"

"Spontoon. It's a little over seven hours North, a little over 780 miles and we'll be in the plane about eight hours total."

Annette smiled. "It's your tail I worry about. That much time with pressure on it. I'm not sure, its going to be awful painful no matter how you manage it. How high?"

"Book we found in the cockpit says 7,000 feet is optimum. That's below oxygen flight level, but it'll be kinda chilly even with flight suits. Problem is right now we've nothing to hook into the ship's heater power supply, so it's our fur and anything we can wrap around us."

Annette closed the last cabinet, finding a chair to sit in. "Your face will be okay, I'm a bit worried about that left shoulder. A few hours at altitude should be okay. It's your tail that will give you problems. Lots of problems. Especially on landing."

"Meaning I could pass out from the pain right?" Sandy asked.

"Meaning you will pass out from the pain if it separates again" the otter agreed. "If it does I will have to remove it. I'm sorry Sandy, but that is the way things are."

"All right. I'll make sure I keep my tail warm then, and be ready when we land. There's a good hospital in Spontoon. My worry is getting us out of here and safely home. Once we're in Spontoon territorial airspace we're fine, but that's the last of our trip. We could be chased all the way up there, or get lucky and see zero air traffic. I'm betting on the last because we are taking off three hours before sunrise. That way we have darkness in our favor the first four hundred miles or so. Then light when we get there."

"Promise me one thing then" Annette decided. "You'll lay on your stomach from now until we take off, with breaks as I decide. That will allow your tail some time to heal."

"Done" Sandy agreed. "I'll get in bed right after I use the toilet."

Annette waited until the bobcat had left before opening a drawer. From it she removed a ledger Latakia had obtained for her. Opening the book she found Sandy's page and began writing. If the bobcat lost her tail, at least a review board would know exactly what Annette had done wrong. After they probably forever banned her from practicing medicine.

"You will be able to do this" Saimmi reminded her newest student as the vessel approached Sacred Island, its current destination.

Oharu sat in the boat's center as she always did, the setting sun's rays washing her dark brown fur with fire-touched light. Around her were those who had judged her. Now they would be witnesses to her success, or her death. Nibbling her upper lip again the mouse looked out into the darkness. "It will be... difficult" she whispered. "Mermen do not like my race much. We have not treated them well."

"You have water natives in Japan?" the old canine asked. "I was not aware of that, but why wouldn't they like you?"

Oharu breathed deeply for a few moments, forcing down her fear. "We have a legend. To eat the flesh of a merman grants immortality."

"Odd legend" the ferret admitted. "Any truth in it?"

Turning her gaze to the man she knew as Mr. Sapohatan, other than Saimmi the only person whose name she had been given, Oharu nodded slowly yes. "These will be aware" she warned. "They may take revenge."

Saimmi laughed, a gentle musical sound in the darkness. "They are as Spontoon as I am" she told the mouse. "My own sister is married to one. Has a child now swimming these waters. Revenge is not something they are known to take unless the crime is personal. All you must do is wade out until you are breast deep in the water. I will be with you at all times. Both to call them and should your fears be too

great to stand alone. One or two will approach you. Then they will decide, as only they may wither your heart is true or not. I expect to return to the shore with you. Not alone."

Oharu remained silent. In truth she was still going over Saimmi's revelation of the Natives of No Island. That in her studies this information would have been her's eventually she understood. But to meet them, in their native element. She shuddered. Even with her training, even moving herself from her body could she really enter the ocean? Enter where something waited to eat her alive, had already tasted her body, leaving it fully unprotected. Could she allow what hunted another chance to take her? Looking about her the mouse decided. After all, her choices were life or death. There was no grey area. She must make the attempt. Slowing her breathing she began partially entering that state which had so saved her aboard the Barut Maru.

Very much later several furs stood around a curled up mouse. They only had a pawfull of minutes before full sunset, and none of them were foolish enough to be on Sacred island after that event. "They accepted her. So I stand by my word Sapohatan. She has her one chance. Just keep her away from your pet Songmark girls or you'll have a sorry mess. She's a looker for certain." Walking back towards the waiting water taxi the canine stopped momentarily, staring down at the badly shaken and still shivering mouse near his feet. "I'll give you this young woman" he said to her. "You've more courage in your little toeclaw than I have in my entire body." Without waiting for a response, one that couldn't be made anyway he joined the other two waiting for him.

"You won't be coming back with us" Sapohatan asked Saimmi.

"No" the feline answered. "She couldn't manage that voyage. Not until morning and one must remain to protect her from those who own this land. It is not her time of testing yet. Have the one she knows well return for us at sunrise." Brushing her dress the priestess looked back at her student, watching her reaction. "She almost could not manage the test" she continued. "So very, very close. I had to hold her paw, underwater of course. When the first arrived she lost her water. When he touched her I thought perhaps she would try to run, her eyes actually rolled up for a heartbeat. At all times she was deathly frightened. Not of them, of something else. Something she fears in these ocean waters more than losing her own life."

"But there isn't anything dangerous in our waters. Sharks on occasion yes, but nothing near here."

"I think perhaps her attacker came from deeper waters" Saimmi decided. "Or another place. There are things out there even the Natives of No Island fear. Perhaps in her drifting one approached her. I don't know, but certain rituals will always be hard for her."

"Not impossible?"

"No, nothing is impossible. I do though much like the name they gave her. It fits her soul well."

"Wei, yes. A fresh breeze. It's much better than the one she chose for herself when she first came."

"And your foster daughter" Saimmi asked, changing the subject. "She returns to us soon?"

Sapohatan shook his head no. "I'm worried. I haven't had a report from her in over a week. It's unlike her. She hasn't made contact with anyone. There is one verified report that has come out that seriously worries me. Like always she stayed at the Split Palms. A woman was murdered there. In Sandy's room. Other than that I cannot discover anything. Those Americans have locked down information too well for our friends to penetrate. Not without certain discovery."

"Then go in peace my friend. I will pray for her." Quietly the feline watched as her ferret friend joined his companions in the waiting water taxi. Eventually even its engine's sound had faded away, leaving only the

wind and waves to break the nights silence. "Come my student" she told the shivering mouse. "There is but one place we may spend the night in safety. Where you may regain your strength."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

May 3rd, 1936

Finishing her short prayer the small oriental mouse stood slowly, her unfamiliar grass skirt rustling softly as she changed positions. Barefoot, so as not to mark the Main islands shrines aged stones with her own presence, she stepped forward and began to gently clean the tiny alter. First of its largest flowers, followed by the smaller and smaller items until she came to a tiny silver necklace. A child's necklace she realized. A simple silver wire chain made in a cable pattern, carefully wrapped around nine red coral stones, each cut into a teardrop shape. That item she left behind, backing away from the altar several steps before walking around behind it. Once behind the alter she began disposed of the items in her arms, softly wishing each spirit, or Kami as she knew them a gentle passing. She had paid very heavy coin for this chance of life, she would not fail.

Had one asked Oharu why she spread the day old plants and fruit so widely she would have answered that this was part of the ritual. In truth, a truth she had learned in her third year as a Miko, the reason one spread offerings so widely wasn't simply ritual, it was practicality. Once the shrines kami, or spirit, had taken from each offering that which it desired there remained a great deal of material that would eventually rot, as is normal for all organic material. Had this material been left in a single large pile then insects would have swarmed about it, while the resulting smell of natural decay would have made even approaching the shrine a test in itself. Thus each priestess carefully spread the material over a large area, sometimes hundreds of square feet or in the case of this shrine the smaller items were gently tossed into the waters of a rapidly flowing stream. Here they would be carried away naturally, spread along the banks for wild creatures to enjoy. In truth nothing would be wasted. For what wasn't needed by the shrines spirit today would be used by nature, eventually being reborn by Mother Earth as new offerings to the shine. It was a circle that as long as the sun shone would never end.

Returning to the shines front she gathered up the necklace, kneeling in order to reach a certain stone she had been shown the day before. All island shrines had these places. A single stone that looked solid, but when turned a certain way slid easily from its sisters. Taking out the stone Oharu said a short prayer over the object, wishing that one who had so gifted the shine would obtain their need. Gently she dropped the necklace into a hollow that the stone had exposed, then replaced the stone itself. Once done she brushed away any dust or debris that might give evidence to its existence. To all intents and purposes there was no difference between that stone and any other, unless you knew its secret. Europeans called these caches treasure troves, as even tiny gifts had a way of building value to them over the centuries. Why even this shrine had an older such chamber, now filled with such offerings. Oharu understood well that there were those who would destroy a shrine simply to steal such gifts. For nothing more than a drink or a cheap woman. There were others who claimed to be historians, or archeologist who came to shatter holy shrines for 'hidden treasure.' There was no hidden treasure here, only gifts to the Gods. Gifts only they would ever see again. These were no great treasures though. A child's ring, a pearl, perhaps a carved stone. They were gifts of the heart to a shrine. Once placed within each cavity they were not meant to be seen by mortal eye again.

Standing slowly, respectfully, she turned to a waiting pile of flowers that she had brought with her. There were ten shrines on Main Island that she had been tasked with caring for while she learned. Her work now taking a slight burden off other priestess's for a short time, giving them time for other needs. It was a small load considering her original duties as a Miko, though there would be many times when that load would be returned to the others. It was the time they had now that made a difference. As a Miko, simply caring for the sacred flame had been as much work as tending all these shrines and there had been many more duties as well. It took but a short time to locate and cut new flowers, or when none were readily available, ferns and such. What took time was servicing each shrine. From ten minutes to half an hour

each depending on each shrines popularity. Or should some barbarian have caused damage. Finishing her duties she made certain to carefully brush away any debris. This was a well visited shrine. Any failure on her part would be quickly noticed by those who came here to worship. Finally standing she gave the shrine one last bow before backing up three steps and turning to leave.

"I could have done no better myself" a middle aged hound remarked from her seat on a fallen tree, some way apart from the main pathway. "Some of that I did not know. You then are the one named Oharu?"

"I am Oharu sister" the mouse admitted, having quickly translated in her mind the important patterns combed in the hounds fur for practice, and the information they contained. "How may I be use to you?"

"You already are. By tending this shrine and the waterfall shrine you take from me certain duties. This has given me time for other things. For this short release I thank you, yet I do have questions. Will you sit with me?"

"I am honored" Oharu selected a place not too close to the older woman, yet not so far away as to be insulting.

"Honored" the other laughed. "I an Natasha, a minor priestess compared to you and Saimmi. Yet you are honored to sit with me. Are your studies going well?"

"There much to relearn" Oharu admitted. "Some of new rituals seem missing something. I do not know if simply my previous training, or I missing a point."

"All our rituals are either from other islands or created in whole by one of us" Natasha admitted to the mouse. "I'm certain that both Saimmi and Huakava have told you this. You are from a world where ritual has become well tested, well aligned. Here we still grope like children in the darkness. We take from others and bend it to our own needs. Sometimes it tries to bend back. For example, you have added to the cleaning ritual. No one ever prays over the material offerings, nor when casting the husks aside. Yet you did. It felt... It felt fulfilling. Yes. It felt right. It did not feel like a ritual that would twist against us at some later time."

"I not wish insinuate that I am better" Oharu apologized. "I am simply one. No better than other."

"There you are wrong young mouse" Natasha corrected gently. "Let me tell you a story, one that no tourist has ever heard or ever should hear. Not because it is sacred, but because we are ashamed of its truth. Once, long and long before the coming of Huakava's first breath, we thought of a school for priestess's. Months of effort we put into its creation. Yet after those months nothing of real use had been accomplished. For no priestess would subserve herself to another. All felt themselves equal or greater than the others. Only by the efforts of two of our truly greatest priestess's was an open battle averted. Yet for a generation each eyed the other with some small hostility. For each thought that in some way that the other was responsible for our failure. None would admit that they might have been in error, even by the slightest point. Much of the work that had been done was undone in this time. Through neglect or abandonment places fell into disrepair, rituals were lost. We thank all that no prestress ever resorted to damaging another's work. Oh of that madness at least we were saved. And while such distrust occurred a European church was built upon South Island, defiling it. Reducing even more work that had been completed towards the ending of our curse. Only now is that church being removed. Soon I hope that its defiling curse will be washed away, purifying again the land. Oharu. You have the greatest pool of pure power within you I have ever seen, yet you freely subserve yourself to Saimmi, to Issile, even to myself. I do not understand why."

Some time passed before the mouse spoke in response to that question. Time in which she studied Natasha's words carefully. She was hunting for an answer both would be comfortable with. What came to her was part twisted truth, but only in the bending of one path. A truth that affected only her. "Only one

who born upon these lands may tap true powers Natasha” she finally explained. “Or gifted by Gods. Though, as have been informed I have arrived I still not true-born Spontoon native. Had I possibility of children, they able to do so. But while in mothers womb my spirit shaped by spirits of my birth-land. Though I learn a new way. Though I re-align my skills, in truth spirit cannot be changed by self. I may serve you, I may never truly understand these lands that I may hope to lead you. It possible that I may never tap full power of these islands. No matter how powerful I be now or some far future. It will be Gods decision to what limits they place upon me. In way, it is like trying fly airplane with automobile fuel. It be done, it will never be effective as aviation fuel.”

“Yet you are obviously more powerful. More learned. You have taught me something today just by observing you in the most humble of services. I can only dream of what else might you be able to teach us all. I should serve you. Not have you bow to myself.”

Oharu frowned at those words. “No one bow to me. It wrong. In my view myself, to place such burden upon another. Tell me Natasha. Is motor more powerful simply because has larger fuel tank? Larger fuel tank means engine run longer. Yet in end it cease functioning without support, just as with smaller supply will. We serve same Gods. We serve same people. That I may understand what about me more quickly than you, that I may affect what about us longer. That not mean that I affect what I understand faster, or form a need better. We are all engines of same size. It simply that Gods grant some larger reserves than another. Yet we perform same work. Should there be need then yes. I able to continue supplying that need longer. Yet does that mean I better than you? Never.”

Natasha too worked those words over in her own mind before responding. “I believe that I understand. I had not thought that there would be such differences, or that you would understand them so well.” She stood, bowing in her own way to the mouse. “I must ask your forgiveness sister. I had come to you believing that you wished to take over our religion. Now I understand you wish only to serve. Will you ever be able to forgive me?”

“There is no forgiveness needed sister. You feared that I, newcomer, may not understand that which about me. You needed be certain I not destroy what is. I not try raise myself above those better than myself. You came for safety of our people. This was not shameful act. It was selfless act, for had I been madwoman you feared you might even now be at knees. Enthralled forever as slave to my whim. It take much courage test one in such a way. I am proud to know you.”

Natasha blushed in response to such unaccustomed praise. “You make me feel like a student again Oharu. ‘Do not apologize for doing what your heart demands’ my teacher told me. More than once, until she finally pounded in into my head with a coconut. I will not doubt you again.”

“Do not say that Natasha. I not any God. I not know all things. I just begin learn. Will make mistakes. I will ask guidance. When do, I pray you and our other sisters are there to help me make them right. Teach me where I wrong. If you have question for me never hesitate ask. As I ask you. For example” she held out her arm, pointing at a spot near the hounds hip. “What does marking mean?”

Natasha looked at the place Oharu indicated. “One of my birth sisters is with child. It is a mark reminding the Gods she wishes a boy.” Natasha lightly brushed the fur pattern with her fingers. “It does not hurt I think, to remind the Gods of what we wish. As long as we do so gently. As long as we do not demand.”

Oharu nodded in agreement. “They too have many things do. I cannot believe they upset by most gentle reminder of birth sisters desire. Sister. Would you have lunch with me? I have very good poi.”

Natasha looked startled. “I have heard rumors of your love of poi, yet to bring it for lunch when so much fresh fruit abounds. Oharu, you are truly mad.”

"I do not own lands sister. It not for me to take what not mine. Poi is good yes, compared cold millet I once live on mud is good. I truly like Poi. Yet is nothing compared to hot corn fritters I was introduced some time ago. Those absolutely wonderful."

"Around the shrines any may partake of natures bounty Oharu. Priests and Priestess's may take what they need anywhere they are, as long as it is only what they truly need. Tell me. Could you really bend my will into base slavery, to your lightest needs? I have heard this in old stories as a child. I have never seen such."

Oharu shifted in her place, clearly uncomfortable. "For one who fought demons and won, yes it is a possible task. For one who defeated own demons too, even more simple task. Yet, for myself..." She looked away, in the direction of Songmark for only a moment before returning her gaze to the hound. "She would hate me even more I ever do such for own desires. All are safe my sister. I do nothing for myself that cause her to hate me more."

"Love. I have rarely felt it so strong. Yet in you it is a physical force, as is that grumbling of your stomach. Then I will treat you to lunch Oharu, as I know a place not far from here that makes just such a food as you like. I do not much like it, preferring something they call hush puppies myself. Especially when they are freshly made."

Bowing to the offer of a loved food, Oharu sat her remaining fronds in a safe place. Then followed her sister priestess down the trail. Behind them they left a freshly revitalized shrine for the people to worship at, as was their true duty.

Back at Wambenger Engineering a certain black-furred otter was visiting her special patient. "Ducks almost ready super duper scooper spy. How is your tail feeling today" Annette asked as she walked in on a still prone bobcat.

"Twinges when I move it" Sandy reported. "Feels funny, like a string pulling or vibrating. You know what? I think I've gone flat chested laying like this."

Gently the otter took Sandy's short tail in her paws. "Wouldn't hurt you to lose some of that overhead" the otter agreed. "Can you feel this?" she asked, tugging lightly on the bobcats tail.

"Yeah, an it feels funny at the base. Like something wants to pop inta place but cant."

"That's normal, and it will pop into place. Eventually. Swelling has interfered with your blood flow, which weakened ligaments, which allowed joints to expand. Now that the swelling gone down, in your tail at least, your ligaments can get enough oxygen. As they heal they tighten up. Meanwhile those loose joints have already filled with fluid. It is a natural action, so the fluid has to be forced out first. Eventually the balance will fail and each joint will pop back into place naturally. But the swelling in your head. No I fear that is terminal."

"Talkative for a doctor, ain't yah" Sandy complained with a chuckle at the jab. "Annette. I am so flappin bored just laying here all day, every day. And having my personal needs attended by you is more embarrassing than I can explain."

"I could get some grubby pawed fisherman off the street to do it for you" Annette offered. Her own tail, unseen by the bobcat flickered about in good humor.

"Oh please don't" the bobcat whimpered. "Please Annette. Not that. I'd just die."

"Then your stuck with me girl. At least it's giving me more practice. Have you ever taken care of a ninety year old fur who's idea of hygiene is moving to another chair after emptying his bowels?"

"No and it sounds icky."

"It's awful" Annette admitted. "And the old fart hadn't lost any of his mating drive so there wasn't a female around safe if they tried to help him."

Sandy lifted her head. "So tell me wise one, how'd you manage?"

"I took all but one chair out of the room, then ignored him for a day. He was fine after that."

"Bet you lost points for that trick."

Annette giggled. "Yes I did" she admitted. "But it was worth it. I still graduated in the top fifteen percent of my class. There were only two other women in it, out of three hundred and thirty." Still holding the bobcats tail Annette pulled very gently. There was a rippling popping sound, followed by Sandy's delighted sigh of pleasure.

"You can do that anytime" Sandy whispered as she seemed to melt into her makeshift bed. "Anytime you want. Ah when yah do I'll even kiss you for it."

"I'd rather not. Its not a good idea to pop those joints too often. You could get nerve damage, then where would all my work be. Besides, your going to pay for it. Your pain is going to increase a bit for a few hours now that the pressure has readjusted. But I will hold you to that kiss. Later."

"A few aspirin and I'll manage. When will I be able to fly?"

"As a pilot or an angel?" Annette asked "As a angel, not for a long time. As a pilot... Well your seats been modified. It has some stretchy webbing added to help buffer landing shock. As long as you skooch around every fifteen minutes or so you should be okay. I don't want you to accidently cut off blood flow to that damaged joint. That would be a disaster. You wouldn't lose it at this late date, just all feeling in it. We can leave tomorrow evening I should think."

"Skooch... Is that a medical term?"

Annette answered by slapping Sandy's bare right buttock sharply, causing her to yelp in surprise but not pain. "Pay attention girl, there's always a quiz after class. Whatever the good doctor says is a medical term, is a medical term. Kapesh?"

"Fine. Just peachy keen fine. Doctor is a dictator. Say Annette? You want to get that bowl. I had too much tea again."

"How about you get up and take care of yourself?"

Sandy's face lit up. "I can? You mean it?"

"Then when your done back here flat on your face."

"Spoilsport." Pushing herself up the bobcat looked down at herself. "Waddayah know. I didn't go flat after all."

Annette shook her head in dismay as Sandy left. Some people she decided, had the absolute wrong idea as to what was important in life. She wondered what the bobcat would say when she saw her borrowed aircraft. Lavender was not a color one normally associated with military craft. Especially when matched to red the color of blood. It was the only color paints that had been available in enough volume.

"Any twos" an aged ferret asked as heavy smoke drifted from the Cuban made cigar in his mouth. This was Customs House on Casino island, and here the perks were important.

"Go fish" his just as old otter partner responded, looking out from under a brand new fedora. Customs had the good life in one way. Charged with disposing of illegal cargos they did so with glee. Yet so lax were the actual rules about how such destruction should be gone about, with the exception of certain items such as catnip oils, as long as nothing left Custom House itself they made their own rules. Their supervisor ignored the cigar smoking, heavy coffee drinking or, in the otters case dressing up like some movie detective. Then she preferred to wear all those counterfeit clothes. Especially the really ritzy glittery ones. Of course as anyone could tell you, crows always did have a love of sparkles and glitter.

"Ten, no dice. Your go" the ferret sighed. Customs was a rather odd place to work. Most of the time you were bored out of your skull, then there was the cargo that lit ones taste buds like cyan pepper. Such as the JU 86D that had come in late last November. There had been enough illegal French champagne in its cargo hold to fill a swimming pool. Too bad it had all disappeared into certain government offices 'as evidence.' Still they had missed the second small crate of Absinth. Several headaches later and they still had enough for one last enormous party.

A sharp sound of shattering glass had both furs on their feet in seconds. Old, slightly out of shape but well trained the otter grabbed the phone even as his partner vanished towards the sound. There was nothing breakable in customs house that wasn't well packed. It had to have been a window.

Less than ten minutes later the place was swarming with police. "Anything taken" an officer asked.

"A salesman's sample case filled with fake jewelry" the crow answered, studying the book in her paws as counterfeit diamonds dripped from her wrist. "And a box of fake religious 'artifacts' supposable from Palestine, though they were made in Sulunesia. There wasn't time for anything else. My men reacted almost instantly."

"Knew what they wanted eh? Make a grab in broad daylight but why? Makes no sense tah me. Okay, soon as my men stop stompin around searching for 'evidence' we'll be gone. You see anything else missin, you call."

"Other than six boxes of Cuban cigars?" the ferret asked.

"Boxes of cigars?" the officer asked, ignoring the one under his own arm. "Your missing cigars?"

"Not really" the ferret admitted. "In fact our destruction of those things is almost complete." He grimaced at the loss of so many wonderful tobacco logs. Still these men were friends and they all had a love of good tobacco. "Just make sure you don't smoke those things in public. There are limitations on how far certain eyes will turn away you know."

"Right, and thanks for these smokes. Remember, anything else missin you call." He yelled to his men and in a few minutes the three were again alone. In the background workers were already replacing the broken glass. "Cards" the ferret asked.

"Why not" his partner yawned. Now that their excitement had ended, it was back to tedious boredom.

No one had noticed that while six police officers had entered, seven had left. Nor that a certain crate had been carefully opened then resealed. One marked with a rather strange new scientific symbol. A symbol warning of radiation.

It was late evening when Annette returned to visit Sandy. "Justin asked if you could come and test fit the seat he's modified" she informed the bobcat. Looking up from the newspaper she'd been reading Sandy grinned, almost leaping from her bed.

"On my way" she answered.

"Dressed like that?"

Sandy looked down, grimaced then started for her clothing. "Forgot. So what's she look like?"

"A Duck" Annette answered. "It's a plane. They all look the same. They all sound the same and they all..."

"Are not the same" Sandy broke in. "Look. Yes it's a utility craft. Its ugly but its tough, it'll get us home. Well, me home. You to Spontoon and a new life. What's wrong?"

"I gotta fly all the way there looking backwards" Annette sighed. "I'm afraid I'll get airsick and there's a gun in my face."

"That gun I can fix. We need the radio directional finder not the gun. This model can have one or the other. Never both so I'll dump it here. I'm sure Justin... You don't like guns do you Annette."

Turning away the otter remained silent for a while before answering. "I'm a doctor Sandy. Or as close to one as makes no difference. I've seen what guns do. I'm here to save lives, not take them."

"Kathleen did the killing right?"

"Yes."

Sandy reached out, laying her paw softly on the otters shoulder. "Something has been bothering me, about Oharu. Rumor here is she spoke with Pele. Is that true?"

"No one talks with her face to face and remains the same" Annette reminded the bobcat. "So the legend goes."

"But she did. Didn't she. Annette. What happened on that volcano. What really happened."

Annette turned around to face her companion. "I saw her" she whispered. "Just a glimpse, no more. Oharu was standing on a plate of stone no thicker than my little finger. It should have failed, she should have fallen in. Air so hot it burned her sketchbook was hitting her in the face like a blast furnace but she was smiling. Talking. When I grabbed her I looked down..." Annette swallowed. "She's beautiful Sandy. Beautiful."

"What happened then."

"I pulled Oharu back and a few seconds later the shelf collapsed. We barely made it out with our lives. Sandy. I've never been more scared or more randy at the same time in my life."

Sandy stepped back, looking hard at the otter. "Annette. You said that shelf shouldn't have held Oharu alone, but it held both of you didn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess... I never thought about that. It did though."

"That's unbelievable" the bobcat admitted. "Your certain about your facts?"

"I staked my life on them didn't I?" Annette asked.

"I never believed... Thank you." Turning away Sandy left Annette standing alone in their tiny shared room. Alone with her thoughts.

A soft sound of bare foot on sand at the Great Stone Glens entrance caused Oharu to look up from her work. Quickly setting her writing journal aside she stepped down from her sparkling new yet tiny bamboo house, bowing respectfully to the ancient panther standing before her. "It good to see you" she said in greeting. "How was Krupmark?"

"A disaster" Huakava admitted. "They truly have built a European church over the cavern. Fools they are, there was fresh blood when I arrived. Signs of struggle. I fear more have found their fate. They have built a stone altar over the caverns entrance. It will take more strength than mine to move it." She stared at Oharu. "Or yours child. You are not to step on Krupmark Island. Or Cranium Island. Not one toe upon dry earth as long as I live. Is that understood?"

"Completely. Would prefer water or tea" the mouse asked, gently changing the subject.

"Tea. I like your green tea little mouse and don't try changing the subject. That's my prerogative."

"Yes Huakava-Shishou" Oharu agreed, only to have a flower bounce off her shoulder.

"And stop calling me that. I'm Huakava, not honored teacher." That complaint though was given in a mild voice. Huakava waited silently as her student prepared the hot green tea that so warmed her bones. So late one had come who not only burned with the need to learn, but had talent and true desire as well. That Oharu had brought with her a beverage that eased old aches was another plus. Not though that she would ever admit this to the mouse. Had she only come a year before. Just a year.

"Your tea" Oharu said a few minutes later as she held out a large mug in her paws. It was a dark green ceramic thing that some American sailor had dropped long ago, eventually finding its way here as a gift to the new priestess. It had its uses though the older woman had to admit. Heavy, thick, it held the beverages warmth long after it was empty.

Taking a delighted sip of the aromatic tea before setting her mug aside Huakava motioned for Oharu to approach closer. "These old bones wont last much longer" she warned her student. "It has come to me that you have found a calling?"

"With you permission yes Huakava-Shishou. I wish to compile religion. Bring together everything one book. That all may learn equally."

"So. This would end the loss of knowledge as one priestess dies without a student. Is this how it is done where your were Miko?"

"Is one way" the mouse answered. "Oral transfer also used, but everything is written down. That others may study wisdom of those who came before at own pace."

"There will be but one book only? Who will hold this great tome."

Oharu touched her kimono covered chest with one finger, her only outward expression of humor. "There one book yes. One book, many copies. Each priestess be given her own book to learn from. With empty pages write down new ideas, new rituals. Also their apprentice one of their own. As new knowledge, new rituals relearned they be added, as they are in.. Where I was Miko."

Huakava reached out, taking Oharu's errant paw into her own. "And thus through the ages your name will live forever as the authoress of this great tome."

"No Huakava-Shishou. My name will never be associated with it."

"Then who?"

"Huakava-Shishou, the name will be Huakava." Oharu didn't even flinch as the panther's long claws bit bone deep into her paw.

"Why am I given such glory" Huakava asked, caution or something stronger hidden by it in her voice .

"If you permit this, it is your right" the mouse answered, her voice giving no hint to the pain that now rippled up her arm.

Huakava slowly sheathed her claws, though she held the damaged paw within her own. "My apology for harming you Oharu, you did not deserve that. No, not my name either. Leave it unnamed. Let those who follow guess. It will be our joke upon them all."

"Then I may do this?"

"Yes. It is a needed task. To start you off I am sending you to Orpington Island. I want you to speak with the Chicken Spirits. Nikki will fly you there tomorrow morning. Your return yet will be slower I am afraid as Nikki's business is only for the day. You have funds for such a trip?"

"I believe so. If not I barter my art for what need."

"I have another question little one. Your love."

"I have, with care, been able place her aside. I have duties to preform. They will fill my life fully."

"You lie very badly little mouse. You have such little practice doing so."

"They will fill my life" the mouse repeated much more firmly this time. "Of other, I forget her. It best this way."

Huakava stared into her students eyes a long time before leaning back, breaking her gaze. "You are mistaken, yet I see within you a determination to attempt this. Oharu. You have so far passed all the tests that were placed before you. Even facing your greatest fear, one which I feel you may never defeat. Very few manage that. Very few. You only have the judgment of those spirits of Sacred Island yet to face and your heart. Tomorrow be at Kart-Tooms by sunrise. Nikki will be expecting you. She will not wait." Huakava snorted in amusement. "As I once found out. She leaves when she says she will leave. Not one heartbeat later." She struggled to her feet, waving to the now empty mug though the mouse had seen her take but one drink. "I thank you for the tea, it was most enjoyable. Until your return then."

Oharu watched in silence while her teacher hobbled away into the darkness, going where the mouse could only guess. Silently she kneeled, picking up her mug, ignoring the blood that now dripped freely from her right paw as she did so. It was a minor wound at best. She would survive.

May 4th, 1936

Sunlight streamed through the buildings east facing windows as both women woke, each yawning or stretching to their own designs. Annette had one last day to train the woman who had come to her to

learn first aid. Sandy had an easier job. Charting their course the nearly eight hundred miles North to Spontoan. They would leave in the early morning, the better to have good weather and arrive in sunlight Sandy had explained. Annette though understood the unspoken truth. They were much less likely to be seen in the darkness and at 150 mph would be far outside American patrol space by the time it was light enough to see them. An unarmed aircraft was a sitting duck for a fighter plane, especially their bright purple and blood red machine. Taking a breath to strengthen her resolve Annette remained silent. Each in their own way they went to preform their tasks.

At Spontoan Institute Technical High School Helen Maggy Whitehall looked up from her desk at the knock on her classroom door. "Enter" she called in her by now typical teachers voice. Quickly a portly groundhog stepped in. "Ah, Mr. H'shoshon. How are you this morning" she asked in greeting. "I've only a few minutes. My next class will start soon."

"Fine fine. This won't take long. I have several offers on your aircraft Mrs. Whitehall." Like most men and more than a few women he found that he had difficulty breaking eye contact with this woman. Even though Mrs. Whitehall was no looker. Her mixed breeding had given her not quite the looks one would have expected from a half afghan half... whatever it was it was in her eyes. She had never said what the other half was but he suspected ground squirrel. Her eyes though might as well have been bear traps. Peter H'shoshon had quickly learned not to make eye contact with his client, lest he forget to breath again. "Here they are."

He carefully placed several pages on Helen's desk. "Note that they run from the aircrafts value new to this one, only a quarter of its current value. I strongly suggest that you accept the Krupmark offer. It is best for your finances."

"Meaning your commission" Helen chided gently. "Whatever I chose, be certain that I will make up the difference to you in your highest commission. Knowing that, and my feelings about criminal activities which offers do you now suggest."

A moments work and several pages vanished. "There are three choices. Superior Engineering offers three quarters the current value. They did the repair work on her as you are aware. They want her for cargo hauling. Spontoan Royal Tourist Flights offers a bit less, but there too I can assure you that no scallywags will ever get their paws on it. Modifying it back to carry ten passengers as it was when the Japanese built her will cost them a bit of course. This third offer is the least, but they are well known if not of the best reputation. Still they are as honest as these other two"

"All three based on Eastern Island where Odin's Eye waits. All right Mr. H'shoshon. Leave these three pages with me. I'll come to your office on Meeting Island after school with my decision. Will you be available to escort me then to the buyer I choose?"

"I would be delighted Mrs. Whitehall."

"Then give your wives my best. I'll see you at your office." She watched the plump Spontoan native make his way out, buffeted by her students on their way in. Such a rotund man, how in the world she asked herself, had he managed to snare three wives? A moment later the school bell rang turning her thoughts back to teaching. Turning her attention to her class she carefully pushed her chair back. Balance was a daily learning curve. Until she delivered Killian's child Helen was certain that she would always be on the backside of that curve. "Page seventy-three. Mr. Harness, your homework please. It is already a day late."

And so her day continued.

Later that day Oharu was sitting on an aged, weathered stone on Main island while watching the tide come in. There were few clouds in the sky, yet those that were promised a soft night to come. This was her chosen meditation time, the half hour she gave herself each day to work out any stress that had built, or too make any serious decisions. She had been invited to a birthday party for one of the native families. Yet she was still unsure as to whether she should attend or not. There was so much she had to learn, thus she must choose. Would it be right to spend hours at a celebration when she could better use it memorizing another ritual? It was true that she had been invited by one of those swimmers who had commissioned her work, yet that made no difference. In truth, was her time better spent in pleasure, or duty?

As a Miko the answer would have been obvious, duty came before anything else. Even life itself. Now she was above that position. As Nisou it was expected that she should relax, to 'touch the hearts' of those she served. Yet had she yet reached that point? It was a difficult question, the second she had been given today.

"Would you ignore those who need you" a male voice asked.

Startled Oharu spun around jumping away from that male voice. Unheeded her feet landed in the incoming surf, her kimono falling into the rising salt water. How had any man... It was a wild priest she realized upon locating the source of that voice. Shorter than even her, his ancient snow white fur was ragged and looked as though it had not been brushed in centuries. Bowing in respect she waited his next words, but there were none. Mirroring her bow the ancient fur only touched his chin with one finger, then turned and silently walked back into the jungle. It was her first meeting of the fabled 'wild priests' of Spontoan. A single sentence, yet in it he had shown his knowledge of her unspoken question and an answer. She would attend the party.

Water striking the back of her calves woke the mouse. In pure terror she ran from the waves, stopping only when she was several yards from the incoming surf. Her unreasoning fear of salt water was a fear that she might never in her life fully defeat.

Helen Whitehall walked in to Mr. H'shoshon's tiny office, sitting to wait while he finished a conversation on his phone. It was a tiny office, smaller even than the bedroom of her own house. It was made that way because it was crammed to the gills with charts, books and papers of all colors. It was a true working office. Yet Mr. H'shoshon's desk held only that which he needed at the moment, in this case a list of available building leases.

"No Mr. Garner. I'm sorry Mr. Garner but there are only leases on Casino Island. It's the law. No sir, Meeting Island is open to visitors yes. Not to live. Thank you Mr. Garner. I hope to see you when you arrive. Good-bye." Hanging up his phone he closed the lease book and sighed as though he had just carried Atlas's burden a quarter of an inch. Gently he dropped the book into an open drawer, then closing the drawer gently he placed both paws together on his desk, smiling to his visitor. "You have decided?"

"Yes" Helen answered, pulling the three papers from her purse. Setting them in his desk she turned them for his eyes. "I accept the top offer."

Mr. H'shoshon barely glanced at the pages. "Mrs. Whitehall, certainly not. That is the lowest offer of the three."

Reaching into her purse the half-afghan removed another, smaller slip of paper. "This will cover the difference between your commission and the commission you would have received had I accepted the Krupmark offer. Yes?" She offered the bank draft to her solicitor, which he leaned forward to accept.

A glance at the numbers told him she was right, to the penny. "This leaves you with only a small profit

Mrs. Whitehall. After all fees are paid, only a few hundred shells. Why?"

"I asked my husband. It was his decision that given the limited choices these people would benefit best from Odin's Eye. Will you escort me to their offices now?"

"Of course, certainly. Please, let me get my hat." Standing he ignored the fact that Mr. Whitehall had been buried months ago. It had been in the papers and it was well known that Mrs. Whitehall visited the graves of her husband and friend three times a week. Once a week she would return to her aircraft and just sit inside it, often for hours. Grabbing his hat he waited until his client had left the office, following her as they walked down a path to the nearest water taxi pier. Like most people on Meeting Island he neglected to lock his door. Only fools stole from Meeting Island. Besides, the buildings guard would lock it for him later.

On their trip over he kept his own council. As with the majority of European educated Spontoon natives, he had an intimate experience with European beliefs. Still he had maintained his true belief and even now spent some time each day at a local, hidden from European view shrine. If Mrs. Whitehall said she had spoken with her husband he knew it was the truth, though European rules would say she 'was touched' and needed 'special care.' They would be very wrong.

They arrived upon Eastern Island to the normal chaos of daily commerce and Mr. H'shoshon instantly understood his companions reason for asking her to accompany her. Together, while passing through flyers and ships crews they assumed that she was his wife. Had she come alone, even in as advanced a condition as she was there could have been problems. Together they walked up the long tract to their destination.

"Whom do you wish to speak with" a rather cute looking calico feline asked when they reached the main gate.

"Mrs. Whitehall wishes to speak with the faculty" Mr. H'shoshon answered. "It is about their desire to purchase some of her property."

The felines ears went up. Scuttlebutt was... But not really believed. She glanced in the direction where the runway for land planes was, out of sight from her position and swallowed nervously. "Please wait over there" she directed, pointing towards the half hidden bench not too far off. As her visitors walked towards the bench she picked up the handset in her 'guardhouse,' barely managing not to bang the receiver into her head in her excitement as she selected the correct toggle switch.

Miss Wildford arrived shortly after the call, hardly nodding to the curious girl as she walked smartly to the waiting pair. "Mr. H'shoshon" she said in greeting. "And this is?"

"Mrs. Helen Whitehall. She owns the item you inquired about" the groundhog answered.

"Mrs. Whitehall. My name is Miss Wildford. Is it true that you wish to part with your property, or is this simply a social call?"

Helen nodded gently to the feline. "I would much rather talk in private, if you do not mind?" She indicated the staring young girl not too far away.

"Of course, but your companion may not enter our gates. It is our rule."

Helen turned to the groundhog who simply shrugged and smiled in understanding. "Very well, but out here though it is a nice afternoon it simply isn't the best place for him to wait." Opening her purse she selected a bill, handing it to her companion. "I noted a soda palace below sir. I think you would be more comfortable there, and the view is much.. Better."

"Ten Shells?" Mr. H'shoshon gasped as he took the bill. "For a short wait?"

"I am certain that you will find companionship" Helen laughed. "Buy her something to drink. Something non-alcoholic. You have enough wives already." She stood carefully, watching her balance as she did so. To fall now, to chance losing Killian's child. She would not allow that. "I will find you when we are done. The papers?"

"Papers.. Oh yes." Quickly folding the ten shell note into a vest pocket he opened his case, taking out a stack of papers. "If the deal goes through simply sign where I've placed red X's. You will be careful Mrs. Whitehall?"

"We'll take good care of her" Miss Wildford replied, turning to lead her hound companion into Songmark's gates.

Songmark turned out to be nothing more than a boarding school like any other Helen noticed, though the security seemed excessive. She could smell the scent of guard dogs, though the scent was odd. Almost... No, that wasn't possible. Turning towards the office building Helen put that thought behind her. China was still affecting her opinions. It would probably take a long time before she could reign in her imagination.

It took three hours before negotiations were over. Not because of any complexity, but because she had to speak with each of the 'partners' as she came to think of them. All four seemed to think that there must be some kind of a trap involved. Finally though she had all four women's signatures on the papers. Still, before she signed her own name there was always those last questions.

"The truth Mrs. Whitehall. Just why are you selling your aircraft" Miss Devinski asked.

Helen leaned back in the overstuffed chair that had been provided for her. All the other women had left, classes to teach. An errant student to track down, a fight in the first year dorm. "That Miss Devinski is a question everyone asks. My answer is so simple no one believes me. I can't stand to own it anymore. It hurts too much."

"Memories?" the hound asked.

"Memories" Helen agreed.

"That I can understand. Yet you are taking a huge loss. I know that we were outbid by everyone else. So why sell to us?"

"That" Helen shrugged. "You would have to ask Killian about. I'm afraid that he only talks to me now a-days. It came down to three bids, bids by people I was assured would not use Odin for illegal means. Killian said to sell to you. I've always trusted him. I will always trust him."

"Killian, your deceased husband" Miss Devinski added. There was no disbelief in her voice.

"Yes Miss Devinski. I am somewhat off center at this moment. My feet occasionally lose contact with reality for short moments. I am assured by a local priestess that in a few months Killian will fade, I will cease talking to him as though he were sitting across the table from me. She explained that he remains with me only because I need him. When I no longer need him he will rejoin his Babbet. Its odd though, my own religion only offered prayers and 'support.' That support mainly being older women who putt-putted about my small home, looking into every drawer. Moving things about. Breaking things and offering to 'find something better for me.' In general making useless clucking noises and not leaving me alone with my thoughts or my work. That help was about as useful as a duck trying to swim in fast hardening concrete. Then this native Priestess Dia-Kura came by to visit, we had become friends after my

trial. Her visits have calmed me and my dreams are less... Shall we say bothersome? I can sit at Ruth's grave now and remember her as she was in life, not death. But yes Miss Devinski. I am, at this moment slightly unhinged. But not such that this transaction will ever come into question."

"Was Ruth your daughter?" the hound asked.

Helen laughed. "No. She was my bestest best friend. A roommate while I was getting my doctorate. An assistant later while she was going for her own Doctorate. She was closer to me than anyone but Killian. I think that I would have spent my life with her happily, had she been the type to do that. She died because she was my friend."

"That was in China? I heard the public version of your grief but not what really happened. Even my sources are mum about it. So just what did happen."

"I'm sworn not to say" Helen admitted. "It was a condition of granting me asylum. They are fools to hide the truth Miss Devinski, but if I told you the full truth I'd be tossed off Spontoon instantly. That would mean I'd be dead before a month passed, perhaps a week. If I have my child here he could arrive as I'm told its called. After that it wouldn't matter really. But I prefer to live. So no Miss Devinski, I will not tell you my story. More than to say that Ruth was murdered within feet of me without my knowing, I was next on the list, Killian saved me and the way I got Ruth's remains out of China would have driven me mad had it not been for Illie's odd abilities."

"And that plane is causing you more pain. You sit in it for hours, reliving parts of your escape flight. Yes Mrs. Whitehall. I've seen the like before. So what would you like to see done with it, if you could."

"What you will do with it. Teach your girls everything about it. Teach them everything you can, and keep them out of China."

"I see. I guess I'm sorry I asked because now I have even more questions. Questions I cannot ask of you. Still I do know someone." She indicated the papers. "If you will sign I will see that the first class gets their paws on it this week. Tomorrow morning in fact."

Helen licked her lips, grabbed the papers and quickly signed where she was supposed to. "Odin is yours now. Take care of him. Now I have an offer. Two actually."

Taking all but one copy of the papers, the copy meant for Helen's own records Miss Devinski leaned back in her own chair. "They are?"

"I have a great deal of money now. Enough to live comfortable for the rest of my life. But that's not the best way to use it. So I am starting a weekly magazine, one aimed at the serious aviation industry. It will be fact only, along with technical data and vehicle reviews there will be stories yes, but only stories involving aviation. Only ones that can be verified by a second, uninvolved party, no There I was stories I think that they are called. Right now I have my first issue filled but I will need everything. What I would like is stories about your girls, written by them. Everything from first flight to technical ones of working on a dead engine in the shop. There has to be entertainment in each non-technical story, every story has to be true and at least 500 words, no more than 1500 words. Technical works cannot be sleep inducing. I'm offering ten shells per article, five to the authoress and five to Songmark. Much more to those who become popular. One of your faculty co-signs that each story is true and I'll accept it. I have an editor who will correct bad spelling and such, he's retired and was bored out of his ears. In fact my entire crew are retired people."

"And if I say no you'll find a way to get Odin back?"

"No" Helen denied. "Odin is yours. If you say no then no it is. This is business deal Miss. Devinski, not blackmail."

"All right. I'll take the idea to my companions. How can we contact you?"

"I teach at S.I.T.H.S. I am there every school day. Simply send a message and it will be passed to me. My printing shop is still being set up on Meeting Island so it'll be a few weeks before I take any mail there. It's on Meeting Island near where I now live. An odd name that, I had assumed Government Island. My error there. I plead old maps."

"All right then. Just what do you teach anyway?"

"Geology and Calculus. There is little demand for Palenotology studies I have found."

Nodding in agreement the hound gently bit her lower lip. "You mentioned a second offer?"

"Yes. I would like to take you to dinner. Anywhere you choose. Will you accept?"

"Me? Dinner... but why?"

Helen stood, preparing to leave. "That answer is obvious Miss Devinski. I happen to find you very attractive."

"I'll have to think about that" the hound countered. "There is a certain mouse who has already twice offered to 'take care of me.' But if you want me too meet you just for dinner, I need the answer to one question."

Helen blinked, "What?"

"Since you so carefully warn me to keep my girls out of China I need to know. What was so difficult about Ruth's remains. How did you get your friend out of China."

Smiling grimly Helen turned and walked to the door. "If I tell you" she said as she placed a paw on the doorknob. "You must agree to dinner tomorrow night at the Coconut Grove, my treat. Eight pm. Nothing else. What you wear is your choice, I will be wearing much the same as I am now. Even though I believe that I want very much more from you, for a very long time. All I demand from you for this answer is dinner."

"All right. That's not much of a price. So how."

"I wore her." With those last three words the half-afghan opened Devinski's office door and left.

May 5th, 1936

Two AM in the morning was a lousy time to wake up. Much less get dressed for flying. Annette staggered as she tried to get the flying suit on, bouncing off one wall as something caught her tail and lifted it in an uncomfortable way. At the sound Sandy re-entered the room they had shared, took one look at the otter and broke down laughing.

"It's not inside out, or upside down" the otter snapped as she let go of the offending clothing.

"No, but its backwards" her bobcat companion managed through her laughter. "Here, let me help."

Within minutes Annette found herself safe and secure, if a bit confined in the strange suit. "I'm roasting" she observed after a few minutes.

"You won't be at seven angels" the bobcat explained. "If we had proper high altitude suits and oxygen I'd take us up to twenty angels. Without oxygen we'd be in big trouble above ten. Seven's a fair trade, its all you'll allow me anyway so we fly at seven."

"What" the otter asked while adjusting a too tight strap on one shoulder, "is seven angels?"

"Seven thousand feet. She can reach around twenty-five if she has too. I've spent the last few days while relaxing reading the service manual Justin came up with. Supposable she can make Spontoon non-stop, but he installed two fifty-five gallon reserve tanks in our passenger compartment, just in case. You'll run those valves if we need them."

"I noticed the extra seats" Annette admitted, "When I was nosing around the plane. Under Justin's guidance of course, a couple of nights ago. What about that gun?"

"Already dismounted and the directional antenna is installed now. Justin has a use for that .30 caliber browning, but I'm being very careful not to ask about it. Here's a secret Annette. We are safe from the American's here, but if we nosed around too much we'd both be floating several miles offshore when the sun comes up. Justin and Latalia are nice people but they are revolutionaries. Like those people who ruined Russia they know when to cut their losses and where. You've done a darn good job here, you've made friends. But if you've seen anything, or see anything before we leave keep your muzzle shut. I want to go home alive, not in a paper bag."

"That's not a problem. I'm blind from this moment on and I seem to have a severe memory problem since my escape" Annette agreed.

"Smart girl. Now lets get on the Duck. Justin and his oldest son will tow us out a couple of miles. After that its just take off and fly home."

Annette grimaced. "Considering your extensive flying experience, I can't foresee more than oh, ten jillion chances to die" the otter shot.

"You make another shot like that little girl and you swim home. Come on, that clocks not in a holding pattern."

Seventy minutes later by some major miracle a purple and blood red biplane broke contact with the ocean and started climbing into the air. "See" Sandy called over the intercom. "Told you I could do it."

"I think Neptune threw us into the air" Annette shot back. "Tired of all your bouncing on his pretty waves."

"Watch it, there's no parachute on this bus. I gave them to Justin. You upset me we find out if otters can fly."

"Sure we can" Annette laughed. "It's just the landings we have serious problems with."

"Ker-splat."

"Shut up and fly. I'm going back to sleep."

Oharu woke as Nikki began her approach for landing at Orphington island. As they dropped in altitude the mouse's ears 'popped', waking her from a sound sleep. She had stayed much too long at the party,

finding herself needing companionship. Whomever that wild priest had been he had nailed one of her problems on the head. Too much seriousness was bad for her now, she no longer held within herself that surety of path she had as a Miko. One day she would again, but right now she was still placing one foot carefully in front of the other.

Besides they had served pineapple, in dozens of forms. One slightly more than alcoholic she had discovered, though she had been careful not to drink more than one cup of the 900 proof liquid. Her hostess, the lupine called Tobonule had more than once insinuated that there were 'more interesting sights just outside the village.' Though sorely tempted Oharu had to decline. It was a long walk back to her small hut, and even longer trip to meet Nikki. Tobonule was a little disappointed but not greatly. Only suggesting that she might visit Oharu's hidden glen in the future. A visit the mouse hesitantly agreed too. Though she had a weakness for rabbits, this one was just a bit more energetic than the mouse believed that she preferred and she was still recovering from her exhaustion after all. It was an observation she accidentally verified as she was walking home and passed by one of those 'more interesting sights.'

Nikki had taken off soon after Oharu had arrived, hardly saying anything to the mouse as she checked her cargo load, signed papers and rushed about with last minute problems. True to Huakava's warning seconds before her scheduled takeoff the mare tossed a clipboard to her partner and climbed aboard. "Co-pilots seat, only one aboard this crate" the mare had informed her passenger when she had arrived. So Oharu was sitting in the assigned seat, waiting with paws in lap and feet well away from any controls when Nikki arrived.

"Belt in" Nikki ordered as she sat, beginning a pre-flight checklist. Following orders Oharu lifted the belts attached to her seat. Yet try as she might she was unable to phantom exactly how each one went. Nikki's snort of amusement was the only warning before strong paws took the belts from her. In seconds Oharu found herself quite securely belted in. It was an uncomfortable feeling, reminding her of a less pleasant time. "Soon as we level out, yank that piece there" Nikki pointed to a worn metal catch. "It'll fall off, but keep the lap belt on. Winds are rough at the altitude we're going to be at, storm front coming in."

A little later Oharu had preformed the procedure Nikki had explained, taking a deep breath as the unpleasant sensation of being confined fell away. "Don't like the belts?" Nikki asked as she slowly turned onto her pre-charted course.

"Remind of time I do not wish to dwell upon" the mouse explained. "I not like to be restrained. It is unpleasant."

Nikki looked over to her passenger, a strange expression on her face the mouse didn't quite catch. It was one almost of disappointment, shaded with anger. Turning a switch Nikki then released her own belts. "Auto-pilot. It'll keep us on this course and speed until I turn it off, or we run out of gas" her pilot explained.

"Sperry?" Oharu asked.

"Yeah, Sperry designed it. You know much about aircraft?"

That had ended up with the two spending half an hour talking about aircraft, with Nikki doing much of the explaining as Oharu's limited education had been both rushed and glossed over on details. Eventually though the crafts steady drone and Oharu's own lack of sleep caught up with her. She barely restrained a yawn, then asked if it were allowed that she sleep the rest of her trip. With permission given she was asleep in a very short time. She never noticed the mare pulling out a camera, or the three photographs she took before putting it back in her flight bag.

In the South-East Naguma Sea Lady Tsukiyama watched in silence that early morning as the nine flag draped figures were returned to the sea from which they had been pulled just the day before. She stood high above the ceremonies on one of IJN TONE's lookout positions. A single female figure in brilliant flowing silks aboard the sleek grey warship. To those below she was as a bright flash of home, a welcome sight as they knew it was not as a woman that Lady Tsukiyama existed at this moment, but as the eyes, ears and paws of the Emperor himself. What she saw, heard, sensed would be what the Emperor saw, heard and sensed. Accepting her presence was exactly as though the Emperor himself watched over this funeral. It was an honor that she made a point of attending. What many noticed, but did not comment publicly on was that the mouse remained at her windy station long after the funeral. Remained unmoving other than the fluttering of her silks until TONE had moved away from the site. Some even claimed to have seen tears in her eyes, though that couldn't be. Not at such distance.

It would not be long before yet another sea legend grew.

Rear Admiral Hiroaki Abe was waiting as Tsukiyama re-entered the ship, his hat held firmly in both paws. "You honor those men" he said softly. "It was a great thing."

Lady Tsukiyama stopped, waiting until the rating who had opened the hatch for her closed it, then vanished. "They died for their country, for their Emperor. I could do nothing less."

"They were murdered" the Admiral corrected.

Bowing her head slightly Lady Tsukiyama found the words she needed. "They were in a warship. They were attacked. Though we are at peace with all but China the act of being within, or upon a warship by itself is acceptance of death. Aboard a warship none are murdered, for they have already accepted that death stands next to them at all times."

"Even yourself?"

Lifting her head Lady Tsukiyama locked her gaze with the older males. "Even myself. Even my maid" she answered. "You have of course rounded up the usual suspects?"

"Usual? Oh, an odd term. Vostokiye has the ability to depth charge a Sensuikan in such shallow waters, though with their current internal problems I strongly doubt it would be attempted. Kuo Han is closer, has the ability and we are at war, undeclared of course, with their mainland. It is possible."

"But not probable. Who then would reap profit by such deaths?"

"Pirates. Even those I do not suspect. Sensuikan 150 was not depth charged my Lady. She was rammed. The waters here are shallow, she would have been running on the surface. From what our divers have reported her air vents were open. She was running on diesel, more than likely recharging her batteries. All her damage is directly behind the conning tower, a Sensuikan's most vulnerable point. That there are no survivors is not unexpected after so long. This is a shark infested area."

"How difficult is it to purposely ram a surface running Sensuikan at night, remembering that the weather that night was very poor. Near impossible I should think."

"You suspect an accident?"

"Admiral. All evidence leads to a ramming. Could you locate and ram a ship that small in the conditions of that night?"

Rear Admiral Hiroaki Abe grimaced, his only indication of an internal struggle. "I would like to think so but I must be honest. To do so would take great luck, and the eyes of a hawk. I-150 would have been

running lights out, and yes, this is a highly traveled area.”

“I would have my agents search for a vessel with unexplained bow damage then” Lady Tsukiyama decided. “Most likely a tramp steamer. Then I would arrange for their accidental loss, with no survivors. Unless of course it could be proved that they stopped and rendered, or attempted to render aid. If so I would record this as an unfortunate accident of the sea and move on. Would you not?”

“That I would. You will join me for lunch?”

“I cannot” the mouse admitted. “I must prepare a full report for our Emperor. It will take a great deal of time. Perhaps tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow then Lady Tsukiyama. May your day be sweet.”

Annette woke dry mouthed and with a dull headache. Taking a moment she sipped some water before clicking her intercom mike, letting Sandy know that she was again among the living. “Thought you’d never wake up” the bobcat’s voice answered. “Lazy otter, should have left you behind for all the company you’ve been. We’re about five hundred miles South of Spontoon.”

“How’s your tail” Annette answered in response to Sandy’s humor.

“I have been ‘scootching’ every fifteen minutes as ordered Doctor. A little numbness now and then, and it tingles when I move around after that. Nothing major.”

Annette reached behind her, locating an access port and pulled out some of the sandwiches they had been given. “You’ll live then. If any numbness vanishes after you move then your okay. How long before we get to your homeland?”

“Longer than I want” Sandy admitted. “We are going to need that reserve. There’s a storm front I’ve been flying around. I honestly don’t have the skills to fly through it. Another ninety minutes, maybe two hours at worst. What’s the view like back there?”

“Wonderful view of a purple tail with a dark blue rudder” the otter reported.

“Enjoy it, I’ve been watching a propellor go around and around. It’s really not much better.”

“Its better than serving unruly passengers for eight to twenty hours” Annette admitted. “But not as much fun as.. Never mind.” After passing some sandwiches to Sandy she started eating, ignoring her companions laughter coming over the intercom.

Twenty minutes later the engine sputtered. Moving carefully while referring to a sheet of paper given her by Justin, Annette opened the valve numbered one even before Sandy called her. She was just starting the electric pump when Sandy’s worried voice came to her. “You are doing what I hope you are” the bobcat asked.

“Supply open, electric pump on. I show full pressure. Cutting main fuel line now...” Their engine really started sputtering. “Opening reserve fuel now.” A cough, then the engine roared back to life at full power. “Checking my setup.” Annette went over the instructions she had been given, walking through each step on the paper with what she had done. Noting her fuel pressure she adjusted the electric pump, lowering its power a few steps until her gauge showed what her paper said she should be seeing. “All done, double checked. We’ve got what, about 540 miles of fuel left?”

"Right, more than three hours and we are well more than a an hour out of Spontoon. Try to pick up Radio LONO okay?"

Annette turned on her radio, waiting as the set warmed she adjusted frequencies until what she saw matched what was on another paper attached to her clipboard. As her amplifier warmed she started turning her directional finder. Five minutes later she gave up. "Not a peep, sorry."

"Didn't expect it. Try every ten minutes. My math says we are on the right course. I got a good sunsight while you were eating. Navigation is my real trademark hon. We are East of the Independencies and about two hundred miles out. Sorry, I gave that storm a really wide pass. Maybe too wide."

"I can swim" Annette reminded her companion. "Though I'd hate to lose this aircraft. Its my stake in a new life."

"Your stake? How? I stole it."

"Sandy Doecan stole it. Sandy Doecan has to die as you explained it to me. So it goes to the other member of that team right?"

"Sandy Doecan dies yes but I don't. And as Elizabeth Kathleen Brighton I fully intend to claim survivors rights."

"Is that smart Sandy? Your face is scarred now. Even in your normal pattern that's something you can't hide. Not against a close up inspection."

"So what would you do with her? Pleasure flights?"

"Air Ambulance. That passenger compartment looks like it can hold two cots. One if with an attending nurse or doctor. You say that there is a dearth of medical help and you're a bunch of strung out islands right?"

"Most are available by water taxi. At least the main ring of islands. Your right though, there's a lot that are an hour out by boat, a few even by plane. So you want to turn this purple and red monster into a flying ambulance? Okay then, its not that I really want this bucket of bolts. I'll put a good word into the right ears. Before I die that is. Then after, okay Doc. I'll do what I can to help. It's a good idea. Really."

"We've got company" Annette broke in. "Six aircraft. Their coming up behind us."

"What kind?"

"Silver Biplanes."

"I mean... get out your glasses out and describe them to me."

Digging out the field glasses that had been in their Duck upon its 'liberation' Annette turned them onto the approaching aircraft. "Okay, this is what I see..." After a few seconds of detailing Sandy broke in.

"They are American Helldivers. Probably off the CV Ranger. She was reported working the Abyssal Sea a few weeks ago. What are they doing now?"

"Getting real close, and I mean REAL close. Look out your right window."

"Starboard Cockpit... Holy..." The Duck suddenly turned, dropping several hundred feet before returning to her original course. "What kind of idiots..."

"They were holding up a paper with numbers on it" Annette reported.

"Radio frequency. Remember the numbers?"

"Yeah. Can we go back for my stomach now?"

"Tune to that frequency, then give me control of the radio. I'll buy you a new stomach later."

"Done, all yours." What followed was a series of blistering words that had the otters ears burning in seconds. Was that even physically possible she wondered of more than one comment. Finally Sandy wound down, allowing the American pilot to get a word in edgewise.

"This is Lieutenant Landers of the Carrier Ranger" he announced. "We are requesting you turn to a course of 173 degrees and follow us to our ship. Your aircraft matches the description of one stolen from Pearl Harbor last week. We wish to investigate."

"Lieutenant the answer is no" Sandy responded. "We are returning from a medical mission and are already critically low on fuel. Doing what you ask will insure we don't make it home."

"Mam. Please. If you don't do what we ask I'm authorized to shoot you down."

"SHOOT.. Listen you snot nosed little brat..." Annette closed her eyes as another tirade of words she'd never heard, a lot of them in languages she didn't know spilled from the bobcats lips. Finally Sandy calmed down, ran down or just ran out of words. "We are a medical aircraft. I have Doctor Annette Riverstone aboard. We are unarmed, en-route home after a medical flight and you want to shoot us down. Oh please please oh great and powerful LIEUTENANT. Then do so. It will look so wonderful in the New Amsterdam Thymes when Spontoon declares war against America for attacking an unarmed helpless medical aircraft. One with two civilian women aboard, and one of them a Doctor. Oh please, do fill our poor nubile little bodies full of hot lead just to prove your manhood. You snot nosed brain dead little jackass."

There was absolute silence from the American aircraft, though all six had closed up tightly on the unarmed Duck again. "Annette. Take off your flying helmet. Lets let them see we are women. It can't hurt."

Pulling off her helmet Annette helped her hair fluff out, carefully replacing her earphones so she could keep up with what was going on. "Are we going to get out of this alive?" she asked softly over the intercom.

"Easily. He's a beginner. Hasn't any real experience and is probably busy talking to his commander right now. If we'd been male we'd be dead by now. So sit back and find Radio LONO will you?"

"Right. Should I take off my blouse too?"

"Lets not go overboard just yet" the bobcat laughed. "Keep that idea in mind though. Just find me that beam, please."

Just before Radio LONO crackled over their intercom link the American aircraft moved away, though they kept in formation not too far off. "Got it. Two degrees to the left of our current course."

"Port hon, Port is left."

Annette felt the aircraft turn just a bit. "I thought Port was a wine."

"It is, if you can't afford the good stuff. On course now?" When Annette confirmed their course Sandy

switched her microphone to the radio again, changing frequencies from her own position. "MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY. This is Spontoon Pacific Quadrant Rescue craft two-EL-two en-route Spontoon with six American Military air pirates on our tale. Captain Alicia Reeds pilot, Doctor Annette Riverstone aboard. Request any and all assistance. Our location is..."

"Those Americans are waving rather energetically" Annette reported dryly when Sandy turned her mike back to the intercom setting, laughing. "I don't think they are happy. Who is Alicia Reeds?"

"Code name. Tells the people who need to know who I am, and that this call is legit. Changes monthly though. After this Alicia Reeds won't ever be used again."

Leaning back in her restrictive seat the otter groaned. "I have fallen in with spies and murderers. My mother always told me I'd come to a bad end. An exciting one though." She looked out. "American's have turned off, guess they didn't want to face whatever is coming."

Sandy snorted. "At this range? I doubt anyone but them and their ships heard us. Should make for an embarrassing time for our little Lieutenant though. How's LONO doing?"

"Nice and strong. Their playing *I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen*, with a ukelele."

"Son of ah.. They heard us. Okay, give me that secondary frequency. This ships got a hell of a radio."

It was a cool night with a soft West wind. Inside the infamous Double Lotus locals and tourists were having a good time. After all, it was the tropics and that meant party time to tourists. At least that was what the tourists believed. How were they to know or care that the brightly dressed woman they were dancing with tonight would be leading a tourist group along some 'overgrown semi-forgotten trail' the next morning. Still no one wandered towards a small alcove, one where a door stood with a sign reading PRIVATE. It was private, to the tourists. For the door lead to Lotus's small outdoor patio. A place where one could step away from even ones friends. To recharge ones soul a bit, siting under a pergola covered with carefully groomed trumpet vines. To relax while listening to the soft sounds of a tiny woman made waterfall. Since it had been built only the very rare male had seen the inside of this place.

Tonight though a small blue scarf hung from the doors latch. A signal of course, one that all the regulars knew well. The Committee was meeting and they were never to be disturbed. Not that anything bad would happen if you did, the Committee wasn't that kind of group. Only that if you did, then if you ever needed their help it would never come. No one spoke the names of those five. Not from fear, but from deep respect. For those five were the only real power outside the Allthing or a Priestess that a woman could come too for help. Especially if their problem dealt with those outside Spontoon's law. As long as a legal way could be found they would go to great lengths to obtain Justice. Never revenge or vengeance, only Justice.

At the moment four women sat in the cool semi-darkness of the Double Lotus's 'back patio.' Between them the four represented Spontoon Island's major areas of public endeavor, with a very large capital on the word public. Ille Silvertow. An aged mephiti who's black fur had begun fading to match her natural white fur owned one of the islands major warehouse's. Through her paws, and the paws of several like her ran most of the cargos that came into or left these islands. Few illegal cargos managed to slip through without her, or one of her compatriots knowing about it. Nothing legal had ever missed their sharp eyes. For the last two weeks she had been busy pulling in favors, assigning her clerks to dig through old records, cross checking in search of certain shipments. This work had brought the skunk to a decision.

To her left, on one of the carved stone 'toadstool' seats sat Tasha Lee Ray. She was a member of the islands one family of *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, and one of the islands best female air traffic controllers.

Almost nothing missed her eagle sharp gaze. She too had been asking questions, mainly of the pilots she tended to date. Tasha, being rather free in her choices of companions missed very few worthwhile dates. Thus her search had missed even fewer clues. She too had come to a conclusion.

To Ille's left sat a small woman. A grey-brown German Spitzmäuse named Elsa Hoffman. A native like the rest, she was one of Spontoon's many Professional Guides. She was also one of the many professional trackers employed by a certain male ferret, as well as a full time private detective. These activities gave her access, supposable limited, to the local police files. Many of her favors had been used as well. In her right paw was a crumpled bit of paper. Her decision.

Beside her, to her own left sat the one person no one would have ever expected to find at the Double Lotus. Perhaps not even a certain ferret, had he ever given his secretary a serious thought outside of her duty. She was rabbit named Kjellfrid, one who's employment gave her access to reports the other three would never dream existed. Reports that sometimes cost lives. She alone of the three seemed out of place, for the Double Lotus society was not aimed at people with her tastes. Certainly none other than her had ever come to this private patio. Yet she seemed comfortable in her surroundings as though she were behind her own desk.

"Where's Nikki" Tasha asked, turning to look towards the only visible entrance to their area.

"Behind yah" a well known voice answered as the patio's hidden door thumped softly closed. Nikki settled down on a nearby bench, her long tail falling onto the patio's ancient fired clay surface. "Haddh put mah latest pet away" she admitted. "No place for her here."

Tasha made a face of distaste. Nikki's likes and habits were well known, so was her side career dealing with certain tourist's and their very special needs. Tasha was one of many who had difficulty accepting just what lengths the woman had apparently gone to in order to save her company. Still that was nearly two years in the past and Nikki hadn't done anything that disgusting since. "Tell me again why we are using up so many precious favors" the eagle asked.

"Our newest priestess in training Oharu" Kjellfrid answered. "For one. Several missing women for another. Thirdly, a sister who does not yet understand what she means to these islands."

"Tell me you don't mean that gangster Molly" Elsa laughed.

"No. Not her. I am referring to the English housecat we know as Amelia" Ille explained. "And her companion we call Helen. Molly is a friend of their's. From what we have discovered, a very close friend. Perhaps closer than we, or they think. Over the last three years Spontoon has lost at least one young girl to this filth and a tourist. She is a shark that plies the seas, taking what she wants without care of the harm she does." Ille stood, walking to the center of their small circle, stopping to stand on a worn yellow-blue stone. "Oharu becomes a priestess. To some of us that this means nothing. To many of us, we understand her the better for it and know we need her. Her love of the doe has already become legendary among the Lotus. How far she will go to hide that love no one yet knows, though she has gone farther than anyone we have known."

Tapping one claw against a post holding up Nikki's bench and the cover above it the skunk set her thoughts in place. "Our last meeting reduced our suspects to three possibilities. Amelia Reinholst, who Captains the Sea Fairy. Annie Wolten, who Captains the Bright Whale. Shiba Granite, who Captain's the Three Moons." She pulled a slip of paper from her blouse, setting it face down on Nikki's lap. "Here is the one whom I say is guilty." Walking back to her seat she settled down, refusing to meet the gaze of those with her.

Quietly Nikki folded the paper, slipping it into the left pocket of her shirt without bothering to read it. Standing slowly the mare took a moment to stretch. "Yah all don't like me for some things I've done" she

said in greeting. "Doesn't matter. I'm ah founding member of this Committee jus like tha rest of yah. Look. I like Oharu. More importantly I trust her." Those words were a shock to the other four present. It was well known that Nikki trusted two people in this universe. Her partner and herself. That she would admit trusting one who had once been a spy against them...

"Flat out girls. Annie would rather gut herself than hurt someone like Molly got hurt. Oh she's tough, but I know her personal like. She's got a soft spot for people on tha lam. Ahn she doesn't share her toys with her crew. Having been there herself she's got rules about such things." Pulling another slip of paper from her pant's pocket she folded it, adding it to the pocket holding Ille's slip. "This woman is guilty." Her words finished, she too sat.

Elsa simply stood, walked to Nikki and held up a slip of paper. "I decided. This woman." Folding her paper she slid it into Nikki's pocket, her fingers sliding slowly across the mare's chest as she did so. Her own eyes holding the mare's eyes. "I still owe you a drink" she reminded the fillypino before returning to her seat.

It was now Kjellfrid's turn. Quickly the rabbit stood, taking her turn at the groups center. "I have chosen as well" she informed them. "Still I must warn us all. These crimes were committed upon the high seas. No matter the filth. No matter the evil done we are bound by our own rules to stay within the laws of Spontoan. Right now there is nothing we may do legally against this woman or her crew. Though I would wish this ship filled with petrol, then burned with all aboard. We have no legal foundation upon which to stand upon."

"When did that ever stop her, my sweet Hasenpfeffer" Nikki asked.

Kjellfrid turned to face the mare. "In your dreams" she laughed.

"I have very vivid dreams" the mare half whispered back.

"Perhaps then, perhaps you should troll Songmark. There is one there you might find ready for your pot." Laughing openly at Nikki's shocked look the rabbit returned her attention to the other three. "I agree with Nikki. Annie would never do such a thing. I believe that Amelia would, if she were backed into a corner. Yet by all reports she has had a very profitable three years."

"Then its Three Moons" Ille sighed. "As I voted. Nikki?"

"Five votes for Shiba, none for anyone else" the mare answered, never having looked at the papers she held. "So great and mighty hare. What are we to do?"

Kjellfrid closed her eyes. "How are you certain?"

"I cheated. I looked into everyone's eyes" Nikki admitted.

"I see." Opening her own eyes again the rabbit took a breath. "The Allthing will not openly assist us, they have never openly assisted us. I believe that they never will. He will not either, as we were already certain. Shiba's one true love in life is her ship. It is well insured as is her cargo. Sinking it will do no good. She and her crew would simply replace it. Nor does this..." She paused, turning to look each woman in the eyes, "Committee have the resources to crush her financially. Though she drinks and gambles she never does both at the same time. On Spontoan she has broken exactly one law. Once she broke a tourist's arm when he tried to pull her against him. She paid that fine. I must now admit that I have no ideas."

Nikki snorted. "We can hold her until Molly gets to her" she suggested.

"Oh great idea oh mighty slave trader" Tasha snapped, missing the hurt look in Nikki's eyes. "Lets see. As I understand it this Molly would simply skin Shiba alive. Then she'd cook her over a slow fire right?"

"More likely stuff her living body with explosives, but your close" Ille admitted.

"So now we have a murderess and we are party to the murder. Meanwhile her crew get away scot free. And tell me oh great tourist hunter, just what lengths will Amelia and her dorm be taking to save the doe? Not to mention what our selfless mouse would try. Its possible we'd lose all Meeting Island in the resulting battles. Maybe even more."

"I'll take that as a no" Nikki sighed. "It was a thought."

"Damn right it's a no" the eagle snapped, her beak making a loud clack in the small area.

"Legally" Kjellfrid reminded them softly. "There is nothing we can do. Nothing."

Nikki glared at the rabbit. Close friends they might be but Nikki's temper was legendary. As was her control of that same temper. "Legally" she repeated in a flat tone.

"Yes" Kjellfrid agreed.

"Kuo Han has a dealer on Casino" she reminded the rabbit.

"Under close watch. Nor does he deal in stock of the age we are talking about. Nor unwilling stock, which is why he still breaths. He only deals in those who come to him of their own free will, for whatever mad reason some do."

"But you'd let it happen?"

"I would not see it" the rabbit admitted.

Elsa stood, the Spitzmäuse head barely reaching Kjellfrid's chest. "I've an idea" she announced.

Everyone looked at the private detective, who's adventures were legendary among a certain tight lipped society. "Been raids on our villages, taking youngsters an property right?"

"That was dealt with most recently" Kjellfrid reminded her friend.

"Ah know, I was involved, sorta. Look. We let slip to this woman that a group of young girls are camping out in a certain area. Ille's good at making up rituals. Make it some kind of coming of age. Let slip they'll probably be three sheets to the wind by midnight. Then involve that Kuo Han agent, coerce him into making a deal with them. They get those girls to his ship outside territorial waters, and he pays them big shells. Something that witch can't ignore is gold."

"Kjellfrid?" Ille asked softly.

"Can you come up with a ritual?" the rabbit asked.

"On the first full moon of each Year, those maidens now of age must spend a single night alone upon the Island of Virgo. Here they spend the last night of their childhood, the first morning of their majorityship in dance, feast and drink. Taking into them also the sacred herbal mixture, one which oftentimes allows them to see their future husband."

"Your sick" Nikki laughed.

"It does need some polishing" the skunk agreed. "There is a small island near the tidal whirlpool, Moto's Revenge I believe it is called now. It should do nicely. Close enough to bring a freighter, yet just rocky enough to require longboats."

"We are gonna need some girls" Nikki reminded the elder woman. "Ahn none of tha villagers are gonna chance their kids on our say-so."

"All you say is true" Kjellfrid agreed. "There are though more than a few young ladies waiting for news of admission to Songmark?"

Even Nikki paled at those words. "Your not gonna get them involved" the mare gasped. "Noh Songmark."

"Remember Nikki, one of their own was injured. They will desire justice. If you will agree, I will speak with them on the morrow. No one knows when Three Moons will again dock at Spontoon. Perhaps tonight, perhaps next month, but eventually."

"Just one question" Ille asked. "How are you going to get this Kuo Han agent to work with us."

"That" the rabbit answered with a smile. "Is simple. Should he assist us and we are successful he will be allowed to leave Spontoon unmolested. If he refuses to aid us, certain families will learn just who he is and where to find him. Even though he had nothing to do with their own children's loss."

"I've got a question" Nikki asked. "What happens to their ship?"

"Impounded of course. Especially if, as I suspect, another prisoner is located aboard. International waters are one thing, national waters another. It will then sold to settle debts. Most likely to one of the local shipping companies. As I recall there is currently only one Spontoon Citizen who might lay claim to such funds. Or the ship."

Tasha gasped. "The doe? What would she do with a freighter?"

"Target practice" Nikki answered. "Lots and lots of target practice."

"And the ferret" Elsa asked.

Kjellfrid remained silent for some time, a silence respected by the four with her. Finally she came to a decision. "This committees actions, as long as they remain within the law are none of his concern. We will hold this woman just long enough for her to tell us where her victims are, then release her to the police. Not you Elsa. No public attention must come to any of us regarding this. Are there any further words?" She looked around, seeing only the determination on four faces. Nodding to Ille the rabbit sat.

"Then we are decided" Ille announced.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

May 6th, 1936

Kjellfrid looked up from her reading as a breath of wind tickled her long whiskers. Standing before her, as though she had been there all morning was a well known bobcat. A bobcat currently being hunted across half of the Abyssal Sea by the Americans, British and Cipangans. "Is he in?" Sandy asked politely.

"He is not on Meeting Island all of today" the rabbit answered, ignoring the fact that Sandy Doecan had entered her office, then reached her desk without alerting the rabbit. Something very, very few managed. "If you would like I can send him a message."

Sandy shook her head no. "Don't let him know you follow him that closely. Not yet." She sat a large travel case on Kjellfrid's desk, dropping a small brass key atop it. "Everything he wanted. I lied to those kids Kjellfrid. I lied to kids I liked and I feel terrible."

Standing the rabbit quietly lifted the case, noting its weight. "I'll leave this in his office for you" she told her visitor as she walked towards a nearby door. When she returned both case and key had remained behind. "You've lied to a lot of people in the last five or six years dear" she reminded her visitor as she sat again. "Why does lying to a pawful of teenage dreamers bother you?"

Placing both paws on the rabbits desk Sandy leaned forward, an act that brought her eyes level with the sitting woman. "Because I caught their dream Kjellfrid. I want to fly into space. I want to visit Selene, to walk along the canals of Mars, to see the swamps of Venus. I've been bitten by their space bug and too late I discover that its an incurable infection."

"I see. Well dear, he should return late tonight. I will leave him a message you want to see him. Is there anything else?"

"One thing" Sandy admitted. "Its time Sandy Doecan died. I'd like it today if it can be managed."

Kjellfrid looked at the bobcat, searching those dark eyes. "I'll see what can be arranged, but this is awfully quick dear. Have you any specific way of dying in mind?"

"Public. Very public. Messy and very, very bloody."

"Very well then I will see what may be arranged. He will be sorry to lose you. Go back to the safehouse. I will send you a message when everything is ready." She watched silently as the woman she'd known for over fifteen years stood straight, saluted sharply, then turned as smartly as any parade soldier and marched out of her office. A few minutes later she stood again and re-entered the office connected to her own. "You heard?" she asked.

Looking up from the opened case Mr. Sapohatan nodded, setting aside a cutaway of a failed rocket nozzle before he spoke. "Call Andrew. Tell him as messy as he can make it. This afternoon. Tell him, not enough left to identify sex, certainly not who. Mincemeat comes to mind."

Kjellfrid walked over to the ferrets desk, picking up the cylindrical shaped lump of aluminum that had once been a machined part. "Too low a melting point" she observed after a moment. Sitting it back down she turned to face her superior. "She's going to run away. I know her too well. She wants to say goodbye and run."

"I know. I won't stop her either."

"You're a damn fool if you don't. A damn fool and maybe I won't work for you anymore. Damn fools are dangerous."

Sapohatan looked up at his secretary. "I keep my nose out of the Committee's business" he reminded her. "You quit, I can't do that anymore."

"Blackmail doesn't become you sir. Or me. Besides. Without the Committee your short something we both understand you need. Perfectly deniable forces to clean up problems you can't touch, but want too. I'm right, we both know that. If you let her get away... Damn it sir she ripped her life apart for you. She loves you so much she went back out knowing her cover was already blown because you asked her too. Not ordered, asked. Knowing if she was caught the best she could hope for was a slow, painful death. If that isn't love what is?"

"Call Andrew, your wasting my time."

A dozen or more emotions crossed the rabbits face before she turned and stomped out, slamming the door behind her so hard its thick inset frosted glass pane cracked. Looking at the door Sapohatan licked his lips. Kjellfrid had never done that before. She just might quit after all, but there were other things to weigh in the balance. Marrying Elizabeth. That act wouldn't just be signing her death sentence, it would be pulling the trigger himself. Didn't they understand that? Didn't they?

Somewhere inside Annette Riverstone watched in silence as a wide white stripe was carefully painted around the Ducks fuselage just behind the cockpit. A quickly but professionally cut out paper template waited on the floor, a large cross that would be painted red as soon as the white paint dried. Externally nothing else was changed, internally the makeshift reserve fuel system had been ripped out and two narrow folding cots had been fitted in its place. She had been amazed at the extra tanks size, having expected a simple oil drum. Sandy it turned out had lied to her as well. It was a great deal more than 780 miles from Hawaii to Spontoon, they had arrived with a sputtering engine at 400 Keys Atoll where the bobcat had refueled their main tanks. After almost flipping the aircraft on landing.

Along with that all the war equipment was gone, even the armor meant to protect the cockpit. It reduced the aircrafts weight, weight meaning speed, distance and air time. Both could one day be important. She had just arrived after several hours talking with the administrator of Meeting Islands main hospital. Pending the arrival of her school records she had been accepted not as a resident, but as a full fledged doctor. She would still be under the watchful eyes of Spontoon's other doctors for a period of time, but that was merely a formality. Sandy it had turned out, knew the right people.

"It is our aircraft and we are demanding that it be return" a harsh American voice yelled from somewhere behind her. Turning around she was amazed to spot a wolf in full tux and tails, a stovepipe hat sitting on his head while he argued with three local officials. Walking forward she stopped just close enough to listen but not be noticed.

"According to treaty any American Military equipment recovered by your people is to be returned to us immediately" the wolf snapped.

Annette noticed a rather rotund gopher who was slowly flipping through a large book, as if hunting something. Finally he stopped. "Section ninety-seven, subsection eighteen, paragraph three and I quote. 'Materials of a military nature recovered by Spontoon authorities stolen by a third party are to be returned to American authorities upon request...'"

"See? I told you so" the wolf interrupted.

“..except in such cases where a crime was committed upon Spontoons soil or SOI involving such materials. At which point the material are to be considered evidence and or contraband and thus disposed of in a matter as such Spontoons authorities deem best once the case is closed.”

“WHAT? What crime was committed?”

“This unlicensed pilot, the one who stole your craft identified herself as a dead Spontoons ships captain. She falsely claimed to be a medical flight and falsely claimed that American Military ‘air pirates’ were chasing her. She also had aboard a Doctor that, as you yourself admit, she kidnaped from Hawaii. Most likely for immoral reasons when one looks at said pilots background. She then illegally landed in Spontoons waters, docked at a restricted Spontoons Militia dock and assaulted several men attempting to capture her. Within the craft was found twenty gallons of highly refined catnip oil.”

Stunned the wolf’s jaw dropped. Had it been long enough his tongue would have hit the rather dirty floor. “Andrew. You are not going to tell me that your keeping a \$69,000 piece of military equipment on such flimsy charges?”

“I could Thomas” the groundhog admitted. “For a year or two as the case drags out. Maybe even five with appeals. Meanwhile it will float inside a locked hanger slowly rotting. But I’ll make a deal with you. I will trade you the bobcat for your plane. Doctor Riverstone has requested to work here. We are dead short of Doctors so we were happy to accept even considering her background. After all, if she does become a problem you are still interested in her. She has this idea of making your aircraft an air ambulance. It’s a good idea and the right people have agreed that we need that, so I’m willing to set aside this woman’s crimes here and give you first crack at her.”

Annette started to step forward only to have strong arms wrap around her waist. A large paw then clamped tightly over her muzzle, keeping her mouth shut before she could scream. Bodily she was dragged back into the darkness of a spare parts room. Blindly she tried to fight, to no avail as another set of paws grabbed her feet, easily lifting her off the floor. Within the space of six breaths a heavy door closed between her and the outside world and darkness enveloping her like a blanket. A third figure shoved home the doors bolt before she was somewhat carelessly placed into a waiting chair, her attackers releasing her as they moved away. Taking several deep breaths she tried to steady her nerve, only to find that she couldn’t stop the thunder of her own heart. “So I die anyway. Just like Sandy will?” she asked her unseen attackers.

“No. Not at all” a pleasant female voice answered. “You were about to blow her one chance at life. Now sit down and listen or you’ll rot in here until tomorrow morning.”

Still unable to see anything she found herself suddenly blinded as a brilliant light came on, one aimed directly into her face. “Stay in the chair or they’ll tie you in it and we’ll leave you here until tomorrow. Now I am going to tell you some things. Some things that if that American friend of yours with the stove pipe hat finds out means the end of your precious pilot. So listen and keep that pretty face shut. Or by the God’s I will sell you to Kuo Han myself. Where you will have a very short and very violent life.”

Annette stayed quiet, listening as a plan was explained to her. Listened and wondered how Sandy intended to get out of it alive. From what she was told one misstep and the bobcat was mincemeat. Either at the American’s paws, or her own.

In a hut on Orpington Island Oharu wrote carefully in her book as Namoeta chanted. She was catching each phrase phonically as best she could at the moment. When there was time later tonight she would have her hostess correct the mistakes she had made. She would also help with clarifying any translation problems. That Namoeta was a member of the Hoele’toemi family had surprised the mouse. That she was Saimmi’s sister had almost stunned her. It had taken some time to gather herself together, much to

Namoeta's obvious amusement. Now the mouse was sitting quietly while the feline sang to those she served. Served being a word used here in more ways than one, considering that the ones the Priestess served used chickens as their hosts.

"I understand that Huakava sent you on this quest" Namoeta said a bit later. They were both carrying fresh water for the chicken's water troughs and to wash off the runs. It was a task made the harder since it was uphill from well to where the stone troughs were.

"Yes" the mouse answered, saying no more. She didn't know her hostess that well yet and the woman, though friendly might not like having a chatterbox about.

"Talkative" the feline laughed. "Tell me. Are you going to be wearing a kimono all the time? It gets rather uncomfortable in certain seasons."

Oharu poured her water into the first trough, almost instantly being surrounded by chickens fighting for a cool refreshing drink or splash. "I am this moment. I learn to wear native though" she answered. "It still is embarrassing. No. One day I set kimono aside. Never to wear again."

Setting down her own now empty buckets Namoeta held out her paw. "Your book please?" She waited until Oharu laid her notebook in her paw. "You look good in a Kimono Oharu." Opening the book she glanced through a few pages and laughed. "I had first feared that anyone would be able to read this, yet you have written it in your native language. It's a surprise, but I do like the pictures."

"They are rough. I will complete them later" the mouse explained as she accepted her book back. "I barely read English. I cannot well write more than dozen, two words without translation book. I am learning Spontoon. It will be published only in Spontoon. Not to hide. To insure fewer errors from translation."

Namoeta looked out at her chickens. "They are not certain of you yet. It will take some time" she warned. "A week most likely. Publishing that in our language will upset the Europeans. They don't like having anything important not written in English or French."

"Their problem." Setting her last bucket down a gleam came to the mouse's eyes. "Must make them certain. Before you speak to me of secret things" Oharu whispered, her rough voice giving those words a melodramatic sound. "Must I bring a maiden for sacrifice? Here I understand they are rare." She looked deep into the cat's eyes, then wiggled her eyebrows up and down in a way she'd seen at a movie, acting as though she were stroking a long mustache.

Namoeta cracked up. "For... for a moment" the feline managed through her laughter. "I thought you were serious."

Standing straight Oharu pulled her dignity about her like a robe, silently watching the Eastern side of Namoeta's compound for several minutes before speaking. "Sister Priestess, I am as serious as the day is long." As she finished talking a storm cloud shadow covered the sun, darkening everything about them.

"Short day. Yes?" Namoeta asked.

This sent both head over heels into laughter. Amused or confused, certain chickens looked in at the pair, then looked up at the coming storm and calmly walked to shelter under Namoeta's hut. This stranger they decided, had a rather interesting sense of humor. Perhaps she would be worth speaking with after all.

"You are feeling some better?" the native skunk asked. She was studying Helen Whitehall who was currently laying on a sofa, her bare feet up and an ice pack on her forehead. They were in S.I.T.H.S. Teachers Lounge with the door closed, still curious students could be heard just outside the door.

"A little" the teacher decided. "I can't believe that I screamed like that. It must have frightened the children most terribly. Right after lunch too. They must have thought I was losing my baby."

"Only those not of the old way were frightened. They are being attended to now. They are being told you experienced a bad head pain. As you did. I am to tell you that you have rest of this day off. Not to come in if you have such a dream as last night again." She was kneeling next to the half-breed canine, her left paw gently lying on the woman's forehead. Helen Whitehall had 'had an episode.' In European society with her history she would have been shipped off to an institute, to remain the rest of her days most likely. Here on Spontoan her problem was obvious. Xiùme was trying to take over the woman who had helped kill her. How Xiùme's spirit had found Helen didn't matter, only the fact that it had was important. Carefully the skunk built a web of deception about the half sleeping woman's mind. It would not last long, but it would last more than long enough for the Priestess she needed to return.

Soon Helen slipped into a light sleep, untroubled by the hungry spirit wandering Spontoan's Islands. A spirit hunting for a body, a specific body to replace the one she had lost in China. This being far from her own base of power it would be easy to banish Xiùme's spirit back to China forever. But Xiùme and Helen were of different paths than the skunk. It would take one like a certain Japanese mouse to do this job.

Sandy Doecan was near dragged out of her holding cell, her clothing in disarray, torn in places. It was late afternoon and her stay at the Police Headquarters had left her for a mess. She spit blood at the American's waiting for her. "I was on neutral ground" she snapped, only to have her arms yanked up from behind causing her to gasp in pain.

"Be polite, or its back tah the black room fer yer kind" a rough male voice growled. Jerking her forward a rough looking mastiff nearly threw her at the waiting American's feet. "Yer prisoner" he growled, leering at the battered bobcat. "Yah want, woldn' min couple more hours wid her."

"That is not necessary" the older American answered. "Red, please take possession of our.. Guest."

"Not quite yet Thomas" the groundhog from earlier corrected. "You are to sign that aircraft over to us first. Remember?"

Not taking his eyes off Sandy the wolf growled. "Andrew... Your trading one of the most wanted, one of the most dangerous female spies since Pfalzgräfin Schwarzkopf for a stupid utility aircraft. You poor islanders, you have no idea what you've have your paws on. Here are the papers, enjoy the craft. I am certain that Miss Doecan, or whatever her real name is will enjoy visiting us. Then the British, and if they leave enough of her the Japanese. Who will leave exactly nothing for the French." He pulled a large envelope from his coat, setting it on a table beside him.

Quickly a clerk took the envelope, offering it to the waiting groundhog. It was a matter of reading the single page enclosed to seal the bobcats fate. Indicating a waiting sheet of paper Andrew Papersmith turned his back to the group and walked out. His clerk gave the transfer papers to the waiting wolf, then he too turned his back and left.

Lifting Sandy by her shoulders the cougar Two Red Stones looked her over. "You have been treated badly" he noted.

"Nah as bad as your gonna treat me" Sandy answered, then coughed.

Her cough caught the ornately dressed wolfs attention. "Escort her to our Embassy Red. I'll see you there this evening. I've other business to attend too." He held up a second envelope. "Extradition papers for that little darkie Riverstone. She'll pay for helping this woman, and the Chip spy as well." Gathering his hat from the table Thomas Brines, Ambassador to Spontoon from the United States erased Sandy from his mind and walked away.

"You able to walk?" Two Red Stones asked. "I will hire a cart if you are in pain."

Sandy leaned against a chair, her paws bound tightly behind her back. "Awful respectful, consideren" she admitted.

"Considering we are both spies, we are both members of a brotherhood with unwritten rules? No. You have been ill treated. I would not allow such treatment to a prisoner. Do you require a doctor when we return to my Embassy?"

Sandy stood, taking a deep breath before she answered. "Couple of cracked ribs, split lip, nothing major. I would like to make certain I'm not going to be a mother though."

Two Red Stones turned toward the door Sandy's guard had vanished through a few moments ago. "Such..." he growled, a truly blood freezing sound coming from such a muscled feline. "A woman. There are rules. We are not in France." He turned towards the front door, waving Sandy to walk in front of him. "There are rules" he repeated in a voice as cold as Hades ice.

Carefully hidden Annette watched from across the road as Sandy, followed closely by the huge America cougar limped from the police building. "How badly is she hurt" she asked.

A shadow moved behind her, the voice that of a man she had not been allowed to see, had been warned that her life was instantly forfeit if she did look. "Sandy is hurt yes, but nothing major. A few weeks, perhaps a month and there will be no mark upon her body."

"Why" the otter asked, her tail whipping about in anger. "She didn't deserve this."

"Her request. So they would not expect her to have much energy left. Now watch. Just a moment now."

A truck turned a corner a bit too fast, that in itself not unusual for Meeting Island. It slid across the crushed coral road throwing bits of blasted stone in a shower towards Sandy. In an act that showed exactly what he was made of the cougar leapt forward, grabbed his smaller bobcat prisoner by her shirt and threw her across the street to safety. He himself bounced off the truck and tumbling to the ground. As he struggled to get to his feet he found himself surrounded by concerned citizens. Each trying in their own way to help him. By the time he broke free Sandy was no where to be found.

"Its only a few seconds head start" Annette observed.

"Correct. Nor can she hope to outrun or evade him."

"Then why?"

Standing the shadowy figure stepped to a door. "Go with Kjellfrid. She will show you our agents one chance. I truly hope that she succeeds. Yet one error and not even you can return what will remain to life. Good day Miss Riverstone. When you see Oharu remember that what she did she did for your good. Not her own. She would have loved you I think, if she hadn't so much already weighing upon her small shoulders."

Annette spun, ignoring her warnings. But all she got was a glimpse of the shadow of a furred tail vanishing through a doorway, then a rather tall female rabbit was blocking her way. "Come with me" she ordered. With no other choice Annette followed the rabbit.

Far West of Main island PEPPERS DELIGHT, a private American registered yacht was sea anchored several miles from Main Island. Currently its well too do (and very spoiled) owner was having an impromptu furry dipping party. An elderly, and rather overweight bear he watched his guests frolic on and just off of his ship. Though if he had been within sight of Spontoon none of the natives would have bothered him, the constant waiting reporters and their cameras would have made ruin of his currently spotless reputation. At the moment though he was in heaven. A beer in one paw, a shapely younger ferret in the other while both were lying in their fur basking in a warm sun. Truly he was in heaven.

It floated well below the surface, absorbing infra-red waves of light for energy as it hunted food. Since arriving in this area it had learned the food it most liked, much to the dismay of the occasional solo fisherman. It had been that kind of prey, floating on a wooden platform that had allowed it to reach this far alive. Washed out to sea during a storm it had been dying. Dying until that food had come its way. At first it hadn't needed much, being small. Why the first three prey it had located had survived quite well, though with a shuddering fear of the ocean that they would never defeat. Lately though it had grown, and having grown needed much more warm iron rich blood for quick energy than before. After that, a long slow feeding several dozen meters below the surface was preferred. Of the last eleven encounters none had survived.

Splashing vibrations of distress called to it. This prey was a little closer to the shores than it liked to roam, but it was hungry and the fast cold-bloods were no where in sight (it had no word for shark as yet.) Releasing tentacles that looked more like those of an octopus than the jelly fish it had been based upon it sensed the currents, then rose slightly to allow itself to be pushed closer to its target. Why waste energy when food wasn't yet certain. Besides, the sun was warm and at this moment it was as transparent as clear jelly.

Robert Hanson had swum as far from the yacht as he felt was safe. It was further than he had been told he could swim of course. But the old man who had brought them out here was too busy with Cathy to care about what his third nephew once removed was doing. He trod water a few minutes, his long dark brown fur drifting lazily around him. A smile came to his lips as he noticed Conchita starting his way. A Mestizo furless she was tiny, well proportioned and as her species was defined, completely devoid of fur even on her head. He waited, drifting. Maybe a little fun after all.

It drifted just under the nearly motionless food, mentally licking non-existent lips. Food like this had never been given to it when it lived in a pen on Cranium Island. Allowing its semi-tentacles to drift upwards it searched for the furless areas. Locating one, it struck with the speed of a snake.

Robert felt a blinding pain in his right armpit. Gasping air to scream in his agony he felt his muscles relax, his scream stillborn as his chest muscles lost all strength. He could barely breath, but that didn't matter either. His last view of the sunlit sky was of Conchita swimming towards him with a smile on her beautiful furless face. A moment later he slid beneath the waves, never to see the sun again.

Conchita arrived at Roberts position confused. Her handsome target of opportunity had been right here, she was certain of it. Yet other than an odd scent hovering just above the waves there was nothing. No sign of the handsome bear she had been chasing for days. Taking a deep breath she dove under the waves. Maybe he was playing. He had to be playing.

Half a minute later her shapely form resurfaced, nearly clearing the water as she grabbed for sky. Crashing back into the waves she started screaming. Screaming and swimming for all she was worth toward the drifting yacht. Following her, attached securely to her right ankle by its own needle-like fangs a

ten foot long tentacle followed, blood escaping from its torn end. Conchita's blood. Or was it Roberts.

Somewhere on Meeting island Annette was leaning against an inside wall beside the strange rabbit, fighting to regain her breath. They had just run half-way across the island and every step had been underground until now they were facing the Northern shore. She could feel an odd, heavy vibration through the pads of her bare feet. "Why are we here" she asked.

"To watch Sandy Doecan's escape" the rabbit answered. Opening a heavy curtain the rabbit pulled Annette close to her. "Sandy will leap over that cliff" she explained, pointing down to a sharp cutoff with a guardrail. "You cannot see them, but there is a waiting fast tug just below that cliff edge. It will be a simple leap. A thirty foot drop to the water, then off to Main Island where she can live to a ripe old age unmolested. Of course proof of her death will be forthcoming within a few months. Some bones, rotted cloth, bloody rags."

"A fast tug" Annette laughed. "I've seen the American embassy boat. It has to be faster than any tug."

Snorting in amusement the rabbit patted Annette's shoulder. "This one has been clocked at nearly twenty knots. It uses two salvaged twin rotary engines with four bladed props each. Nothing will catch it short of a military ship. Or a plane."

Annette relaxed a moment, then stiffened again as a horrible thought came to her. "If she hits those props" she gasped softly.

"She'll never know what killed her" the rabbit admitted. "That can't happen. Sandy's my friend too. I know she's too good for that to happen. Much too good. Now quiet, here she comes."

A shout was Annette's first warning of the chase coming her way. Leaping into view the bobcat, her paws still bound behind her cleared a cart, turned right and vanished between two buildings. Behind her the cougar cleared the same cart, but somehow his left foot just caught a rope loop lifting loose from its cargo. A rope loop Annette was certain wasn't there when Sandy had made the same leap. He tumbled, carrying the cart onto its side, its contents crashing about him. Even before he sat up an old badger had leapt forward, releasing the entangled foot and pointing in the direction Sandy had taken. With a quick call of thanks Two Red Stones resumed the chase. Through her feet Annette felt the vibrations suddenly build as though at some signal.

"One chance" she whispered.

"One chance" the rabbit agreed. "It is all I would be given, though unlike Sandy I would not have a dream of success. It is more than the Europeans would allow."

A few moments later Sandy appeared from their right, having apparently encircled them somehow. She dashed out from an unseen alley then headed directly towards the cliff, leaping headfirst without a single look as the American cougar stumbled after her, his left foot seeming to be giving him trouble. Seconds later the roar of engines Annette had felt more than heard stumbled. There was a horrifying sound followed by screams of horror from below. As she watched a red mist blew up from just beyond where the bobcat had leapt. That vibration she had felt suddenly tapered off, finally vanishing.

"She missed" the rabbit observed, her voice as flat as a beaten sheet of lead. "She missed. I have lost a good friend." Stunned Annette could only watch as the cougar reached the railing looked down, then turned away and retched.

"She was my friend" the otter whimpered as her knees gave out. "She saved my life." Collapsing she started to cry. Annette never noticed the rabbit leave, or seemed to care that she was now alone.

It had rained hard all day on Orpington island, rain in which both women continued their chores. Chickens had to be fed, runs drained, protection checked lest the birds catch cold or worse. There was wood to be brought in as well as all the chores a place such as Namoeta's required. Eventually both sat before a small fire in the late evening, water steaming off their freshly combed fur while they prepared a meal of boiled corn.

"I saw no shrine" Oharu mentioned as she carefully pushed each hard kernel from its cob.

"There is no need for such. Chicken spirits are not so inclined" Namoeta explained. "They wish only to be cared for, to be talked too and on occasion danced too."

"My dancing" the mouse whispered. "Is not yet very good."

Namoeta nodded. "I well remember when I started learning. Then I was a child, still you must know some kind of dance. I don't believe that they are much set in their choices. At least not from what they told me about watching some Euro's on our beach doing something called the Swing last month. I think they just like the entertainment value mostly."

"Then I shall try" Oharu agreed. "Without music of course." Setting her cleaned corn cob down she stood carefully, moving away from the pot of soaking corn into a somewhat larger space. Humming to herself, and completely in her fur (for her Kimono was still dripping wet and she had brought nothing else with her) Oharu slipped into a delicate, complicated dance.

Outside, ignoring the rain (which actually never quite seemed to touch their feathers) a tiny group of chickens standing on an impossibly dry stone watched the mouse dance. Eventually one chicken lifted its wing, closing another's beak. When Oharu had ceased her movements to her hostess's delighted appreciation the group moved away. Among them though they quickly decided that there was a dance they would like to see again. Especially if the dancer was in her fur at the time.

Chicken Spirits it seemed, had a very evolved appreciation for all forms female.

May 6th, 1936

"Your passport Mam" the overheated purser asked. Standing before him wanting to board the U.S.S. Moonsprite was a woman dressed as much as any tourist would expect to be dressed upon leaving Spontoan Island. Over bright dress, sun bleached fur. Even a bandage over a nose that had seen just too much sun. But she hadn't come to Spontoan on his ship, that he was certain. It was normal to pick up extra passengers, usually women, who had missed their original vessels departure for one reason or another. Almost always that reason was a local native. Accepting the passport she offered he opened it, cross-checking the beaming face within its pages to the tired, slightly pain filled one before him. It was well within the normal range of differences he decided. "Welcome aboard Miss Brighton. Returning to Colorado?"

"Ah-yep" the young woman answered, her drawl certainly western United States he noted. "Missed mah bus. Mah brothers gonna be tad upset the extra cost. Bettern stickin around this swamp much longer. Mah ticket" she continued, handing him a company envelope.

Reading the offered ticket the purser noted that everything was in order. She had even paid premium cost for first class. "Twenty-two starboard. That the right side of our ship, as seen when you look forward. I think you'll find the easiest way to remember is it is always the side facing away from where we dock."

“splains portside then. Thanks. Mah luggage, such as ah got noh. Aboard?”

“It should be in your cabin mam.”

“Thanks. Ah’ll make mah way round. Been onna boat or two already.” She smiled at him, touched her chin with one finger then moved past. Her passport would be retained by the purser until they docked at San Fran as was normal.

His next passenger, being a rather overweight and very fussy more than sunburned porcine took the purser’s attention fully. In seconds he had completely forgotten the rather cute bobcat with a bandaged face traveling alone. Of course that was why Elizabeth Kathleen Brighton had made certain to be directly in front of her.

She didn’t want to be remembered.

Two hours later on Moon island a rabbit entered a certain ferrets office. “She’s gone” Kjellfrid announced. “Moonsprite just undocked.”

Her companion looked up from his desk, glaring at his secretary. “And for this you bother me? Have you any idea how much work I have to do today?”

Kjellfrid glanced at the desk, there was no more or less work upon its surface now than any other day in the many years she had worked for him. “No sir, not one thought” she answered. “If you need me, don’t bother. I’ll be at home.” She turned to walk away, stopping at the door with its frosted glass pane still cracked. “With my husband, who loves me.”

The ferret known only as Mr. Sapohatan winced as his door slammed shut again. This time a large section of glass fell out. Falling to shatter on the hardwood floor of his office. He looked up to find his rabbit secretary mildly studying the damage. Gently, as though she had all the time in the world Kjellfrid worked loose one jagged section. “Elizabeth loves you enough to leave you.” She tossed the shard into Sapohatan’s office where it too shattered on the floor, scattering diamonds of sharp crystal across the room. “You ought to have someone fix this. Someone worth bothering about might get hurt.”

Kjellfrid walked away from the shattered window before he could answer, only to return a few seconds later with her purse over her shoulder. “Nikki’s waiting with her plane Louise. They can get you to the ship if you leave anytime before sunrise tomorrow. After that, well Nikki has a charter at noon tomorrow and her partner has a bad cold. I quit.” Turning away Kjellfrid started to leave, her metal lined purse swinging just right to catch the last remaining shard of glass. Like tiny bells it too fell into the ferrets office.

“Oh Gods is she pissed” the ferret whispered.

Annette Riverstone sat on her bed in a safe house on Meeting island an emotional disaster. Before her were the few things Sandy had brought with her from Hawaii. A metal comb with strands of fur still attached. A wallet with over a dozen identity cards. A diary Annette had already read four times. A picture of a very handsome looking male ferret with a heart drawn on its back and of all things a book about a trip to the moon. Silently she touched each item, as if by doing so Sandy would walk out of the bathroom and yell at her for messing with her stuff. She’d known the woman so little, yet had grown so fond of her. It was as though they had been friends for years. Now all that was gone.

“One chance” she whispered. “She’d rather have died than been caught. I know that. But only one chance? It wasn’t fair.” There wouldn’t even be a memorial service as there hadn’t been enough of the woman located to fill a teaspoon. Much less a coffin. Standing the otter made her way to the rooms

single window, a window ironically looking over the same pier where her bobcat friend had ended her days. "Should have been Buddhist Sandy" Annette whispered. "Now your one with everything." Some time later she turned off the light, falling asleep across Sandy's bed while still fully clothed.

Helen Whitehall smiled to herself as the hound Miss Devinski entered the Coconut Grove's dining area. Unexpectedly she was being escorted by the Maitre D' himself. The Songmark owner had turned out to be quite a looker. Or as Ruth had often once said. 'She cleans up very well.' It was obvious that the hound was quite used to such upper class treatment. Helen hadn't been until just a few months ago, when she'd decided that her money was best used rather than hidden away in some bank. She slowly stood in greeting as her guest was brought to the table, one of the out of the way but not quite romantic ones. "I'm glad you came" Helen said in greeting.

"I keep my promises" Miss Devinski replied as she sat. "My apologies for the day delay, there were certain problems at the school." Helen joined her just a moment later, letting the hound know that she, not Helen was the guest here. Putting her elbows on the table the hound laid her chin on her paws and smiled. "So this is dinner. Afterwards you try to seduce me right?"

"Um.. No" Helen stammered, blushing under her thick fur. "Actually, well, I don't know many people. You're the first adult woman I've ever asked out. Since leaving America I mean. And the exact day really wasn't that important. I know things happen."

Miss Devinski's expression changed slightly, making it appear as though she were pouting. "No seduction? But everyone who takes me out to a high class place like this has that in mind. I am, I think I am disappointed with you. I think."

"Don't be" Helen answered, taking a drink of her iced tea to cover her nervousness while a waiter placed a glass of ice water in front of her guest. "Miss... Look, can I at least know your first name?"

"Catherine" the hound supplied.

"Okay, Catherine. You've obviously a lot more experience in these things than I do. Yes, my heart skipped a couple hundred beats when we met. Yes, I like what I know of you and yes your awfully darned attractive. Still there are other things to consider. I've been very well briefed on you, your school and certain supposable secret agreements between the faculty." She shivered slightly at the look Catherine gave her at that admission. "Certain women speak rather loosely under the influence of alcohol and nootropics blue I've been told. Not much, but with the actions of a year or so ago enough that a certain very closed mouthed private eye added two and two, getting three. She was very tight lipped about what she knew, only telling me what would happen if certain events occurred."

"That would be Elsa Hoffman."

"That would be Elsa" Helen agreed. "Catherine. I'm not looking for a one night stand, a weekend fling or a summer romance. I've had those. Their fun yes. Delightful, blissful. But I've a child on the way and he or she needs stability. Honestly so do I. But if you and I were to become a serious item, well it would hurt you and your school. Me? I don't care. I've lived through Hell Catherine. Real Hell. There's nothing anyone can do to me that would come close."

"What about your child?"

Helen grinned, pointing a finger at Catherine. "Be careful what you ask. Illie is my child's Godmother. I've been informed by Elsa that you have contacts who would have informed you about her. She is my child's protector. Harm me, Illie will be upset but she probably won't do anything. Harm my child. Your seriously dead."

Catherine turned her glass of ice water on the table, staring into its depths for a few seconds. "Have you chosen a Godfather yet?" she asked.

"Yes, but I haven't asked him yet."

"You should. Toews has had a hard life. It'd do him good to have something nice happen to him." She picked up her water glass, sipping from it before continuing. "I have my sources as well. They are much better than anything you could buy."

Helen leaned back, studying the delight sitting across from her. "If I wasn't six months pregnant I'd jump you right here" she decided.

"In public?" Catherine asked with a chuckle. "Why. What about me attracts you."

"Your beautiful, that's one" Helen answered, ticking a finger. "Your intelligent. Your unattached. Your self made, curious about the world about you. You really care about the girls you train, I actually like you, you smell delightful..." She stopped touching her fingers. "And something deep inside me keeps screaming 'She's the one, grab her.'"

"Gut instinct can get you into a ton of trouble" Catherine warned.

"It got me Killian. It told me going to China was a mistake. It got dinner with you. The one time I ignored my gut I lost my best friend. I almost died myself. Do you think I'll ever ignore my gut again?"

"No I don't. But what's in it for me. Your asking me to leave Songmark, to leave a life I love. For what? A pampered life as your partner? Helen that's not what I want."

Helen lifted her paw and a waiter arrived in seconds. "I'll have the chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes and white gravy with spinach salad. Oil and vinegar please. Iced tea to drink" she ordered. "My guest will have a T-bone steak, well done. Baked potato with thick cream, cream corn, hot buttermilk biscuits and fresh baked bread with sweet butter. I believe her favorite beverage is Ironwood Beer but I'd rather her have red wine please. Cool, not iced."

"Very well mam, anything else?"

"Yes. There is a reporter from the Daily Elle wandering outside alone in the bitter, bitter cold. Please have something warm delivered to her with my compliments. I believe roast beef on rhy is her favorite, and a very large, somewhat warm chocolate milk."

"Yes mam. Your order will be out shortly." He turned and left, unaware that Helen's eyes watched his tail swing as he moved away.

"Still interested in the boys?" Catherine asked.

"I made an oath to my husband Miss Devinski. I will never touch a man again, or allow myself to be touched by one. Not that way. Still that doesn't mean I can't look."

"Missy bothering you?"

"I find her amusing. Much too energetic for my taste and more than a bit nosey. Still she is a reporter and does her job well."

"The milk?"

"It is a warm night Catherine. By the time we leave it will have hit her. She will either be dragging her tail or passed out. Either way a full stomach slows even the most energetic creature and Missy has a very big weakness for fresh roast beef sandwiches. Still, she will be all over me about you tomorrow night. To be honest I rather like talking to her. She would have made a wonderful little sister."

"You still haven't answered my question."

Helen nodded in agreement, looking into her tea glass. "No I haven't. Catherine. Say we get together. I mean, for the purpose of answering your question. Say we find out were compatible. I mean really after the first months experimenting explosive action mind blowing togetherness we calm down, look at each other and decided that we are really compatible. I wouldn't want your life impacted one bit. I teach at S.I.T.H.S., you teach at Songmark. As teachers we can be together without certain types causing problems. I've done some serious research Catherine. Truth is your not the first woman I've looked at, but you're the first that has woken my heart like Killian did. Short of breaking the law there's nothing that can threaten my job. After all I work for free and supply my own textbooks, subject to review. I'm that rich thanks to what was on Odin's Eye when we got here, and I gave half of that to Illie. She then gave it to her village. I can find time to teach at Songmark as well, say weekends special science classes. Math, geology or say, introductory palenotology."

She drank from her glass, wetting her throat. "Now teaching late, very late it is most likely I would remain overnight in say, guest quarters. Likewise I live on Meeting island. You visit there several times a week I'm told. As my friend, well I have a Murphy bed in my spare bedroom." She looked up into the hounds eyes. "I'm pretty certain I'd rather be your kept woman Catherine rather than you being my kept woman. Available at a moments notice. At least the first few months. But I'm aware of one or two of the rules you live under. Not all of them of course, but at least the important one right now. As long as you are at Songmark I am not going to ever ask you to marry me. I won't rule your life. At least, not like that." She grinned. "There are other things that might make you late for work though. I'm also aware of a certain Catholic flying school, because of the Spanish Civil War, being relocated on Casino Island. If the Allthing agrees, along with some of the problems they plan to create once they are here. Right now I'm asking for a friendship, nothing more. If something evolves, great. If not, I still want to be friends. I do play a mean game of canasta after all."

Their plates arrived and silence reigned supreme until the waiter had left. "Catherine" Helen continued. "If that self important visitor from Rome causes you any trouble, and I mean even a simple stubbed toe you let me know. I'm Christian, but I'm not from that self important faith. I'd just love yanking his chain. Hard."

"So friendship, for now" the yellow furred hound agreed, apparently ignoring the offer. "Maybe, just maybe something more later. Or not."

"Or not" the long furred half afghan agreed. "Shall we eat?"

May 7th, 1936

Naometa woke to find her visitor already up and preparing breakfast. "You did not sleep much" the feline noted.

Oharu stirred the hot mush that last night had been boiled corn. "I slept all needed" she answered "As get older, sleep more. Too much to do for sleep right now." She pointed out towards the busy chickens with her wooden spoon. "Fed and watered. Sometimes priestess need little break. Breakfast is almost ready."

"Corn mush?" Naometa asked. "Well, its better than nothing." She crawled out of her bedding, noting with interest the three chickens sitting, silently watching the mouse as they had done since she had arrived. Oharu had begun calling them the Inspectors.

"Inspectors wanted to watch me ravish you" Oharu explained. "I think that disappointed them I not do that. Now they are unhappy with me."

"They're unhappy with everyone in the mornings" Naometa admitted. Looking out she could see it was going to be another dreary day, another one filled with rain. "I'll lay you odds that on Spontoan it is sunny and warm. At least we can get some training in for you. Dance and chant. If your willing."

Glancing over at the three chickens the mouse smiled. "With roast chicken for supper?" All three birds simply looked at her. There was no possibility of the oriental mouse fooling them. Besides, they'd just move to a younger bird and be back within minutes.

"Not today" her hostess disagreed. "Its really too dreary a day to pluck chickens and without a nice breeze the smell of wet feathers simply remains forever. What are you doing?"

Oharu had taken Naometa's griddle and placed it over the small cooking fire. "Corn cakes" the mouse explained. "Not corn mush." Deftly she poured a large dollop of mix on the greased griddle, a frying sound rising to be followed by a scent even the strange chickens seemed interested in smelling. "I cooked for my father and brother. This is simple. Much better than mush agree?"

"Very much" the cat agreed as a scent of lightly spiced corn meal frying into flat bread enveloped her. "Much better." Walking to the back door she pointed out toward her outdoor room. "Back in a pawfull, save me some please?"

"A crumb or two" Oharu agreed. She felt wonderful for the first time since leaving Hawaii. She was learning, she was helping. She had a path now, one that needed walking. That her foot prints would be the first ones on that path was exciting to her.

Behind her the watching chickens kept their own council.

It was hours past time for Kjellfrid to have arrived to work, yet her desk was still vacant and its surface was slowly piling high with incoming messages and packages, all the things even the smallest intelligence agency gathered each day. Giving up on waiting any longer Albert Sapohatan walked past the two ringtails replacing his door pane, grabbed his hat and headed to where his secretary and her husband lived. It was a short walk on Meeting Island, almost everything was, only a few hundred yards still long enough to clear his head. Yes, he'd ignored the offer to chase down Elizabeth. But he'd had good reason not to go after her. Besides, he still very much loved his departed wife. There was no one who could ever take her place. Why bother to try, and his foster daughter at that? People would talk. Tongues would wag and Elizabeth's reputation would take a nose dive. Since his wifes death Albert himself hadn't given a crowies care about his own reputation. .

Reaching the bungalow he was surprised to find both his secretary and oft-times absent husband both sitting on their front porch in rockers, apparently enjoying the morning sun with their coffee. Or was it coffee he wondered. "Kjellfrid, are you ill" Albert asked as he walked up the path to her porch.

"Go away. I don't work for you anymore" the rabbit answered. "My resignation letter is on my desk. I put it there last night before I left. All legal, I'm officially retired now. No more dark corners for me."

Stunned the ferret stopped, looking over to the woman's husband. "Kjellfrid says she don't work for you" the part time fisherman echoed. "Means she doesn't work for you."

"Sam... Look. I NEED her."

"No you don't. I do" the hound corrected. "You had Elizabeth, you let her get away. Go back to work. Find some little fluff tail to do the work, there's enough still who hold out some hope you'll notice them. Even now. Now I gotta ask yah to leave Albert. This is, well private property and we get to decided who wanders on it. My since wife says your not welcome here anymore, yer not. So shoosh, got away."

"SAM." Sapohatan backed up a step. "I can't marry her. It'd get her killed in a second. Besides she's my foster daughter, and anyway no one can take..."

"You shut your muzzle right now" the rabbit snapped. "Don't you DARE bring my little sister into this." She stood, walking down the steps slightly unsteadily until only a breath of space was between them. A very alcoholic breath the ferret noted. "My sister loved you. She loved Elizabeth. You idiot. She knew Elizabeth was in love with you. Elizabeth told her that herself. Did you even suspect that Elizabeth became your private little run around spy just so she could keep from getting between you two, ruining what she saw was true love? But still somehow be part of your life? And when my sister died... You remember that right? Hospital room, pale thin nearly furless woman covered by hospital blankets? Cancer eatin away at her, Dia-Kura praying over her softly while she spent her last minutes discussing a future she could never see? Yes her. She told you, in front of me and that priestess to find someone. And you agreed. Well Mr. High and Mighty. What have you done since but feel sorry for yourself. My sister loved Elizabeth. She wanted her to be with you because she trusted her to keep you out of trouble. Hell, she GROOMED Elizabeth to take care of you for her. So what did you do? You ran her off. You little runt wimp. Now get off my property before I kick you off." Turning so sharply that she almost stumbled the rabbit marched back up to her rocker, sat down and drank heavily from the dark liquid in her glass.

"I don't believe that you just did that" Sam remarked. He was speaking as though they were alone again.

"Neither do I" his wife agreed. "Pour me another whisky."

"Kjellfrid.. Sam.. I. Well I..."

"You want a drink?" Sam offered.

"I think I could use one, yes."

"Then get up here and pour one. I ain't a-gonna serve you on a nice day like this. You know? We need to seriously talk son."

Peppers Delight, the private yacht came barreling into the Casino island docks so fast it actually ran aground, lifting a third of the ships hull from the water with its fog horn blaring the entire way in. Dozens of officials ran down to the ship where confusion reigned until one of Casino Islands two ambulance's arrived, siren blaring. Anyone close enough to see what was going on really didn't discover much other than a single body was taken off the ship on a stretcher. Yet even so all they could see was some great lump about the feet under a blood soaked sheet, then things settled down as accident investigators started questing the crew. Peppers Delight wasn't going anywhere for a while though. Not with the bowsprit of a local fishing boat shoved through her port side.

Annette Riverstone had been visiting Casino Islands hospital in an effort to push back her grief at Sandy's death. When the patient was brought in she found herself quickly shanghaied as a surgical nurse. Stepping into the surgery she was stunned by what she saw. A great long rope like appendage was laying over an oddly furless hound. From what she could see there was a knot in the rope near the woman's ankle where it seemed attached. Blood was seeping from the woman's ankle, she was unconscious and if

her skin tone was any indication, close to death. Moving quickly she followed the surgical doctors orders as they tried to save a life.

This emergency did make her forget Sandy. For a while.

Far East of Spontoon island U.S.S. Moonsprite found itself in the odd position of stopping in mid-ocean. A Rain Island Syndicate Corvette had radioed that a Spontoon Diplomatic envoy was aboard and was being recalled back home. Now. They would be taking her off and returning her as a favor to Spontoon. Her, the Captain thought. An Envoy? Incognita? On HIS ship? He was absolutely beside himself with glee. Nothing this exciting had happened since Mrs. Elisha Vundebund had fallen off the bow with three million dollars worth of jewels on her, and come up well behind the ship without a stitch of anything on. That had been three years ago, but international politics. Oh how he was going to lord it over his brother about this one.

RISS Skyebright eased slowly towards the waiting ship. Though the warship could easily blow Moonsprite out of the water, Moonsprite's size made it just as dangerous to the Corvette. With a displacement of less than 1300 tons the tiny ship was out classed by the liners 5900 tons so a powered longboat made the journey from tiny warship to massive passenger ship, with the RIS crew piped aboard with full fanfair.

Elizabeth knew something odd was up but honestly didn't think it involved her. After all, she'd used one of her Macao passports. One not known to anyone on Spontoon and she'd made certain not to be remembered. When a heavy knock came to her cabin door she was both upset and somewhat frightened. All that, nearly dying and she still was still captured. There was nothing she could do though. Her pistol was in her bag, there wasn't time to grab it and honestly a pistol against a corvette? *'I'm good'* she admitted to herself. *'I'm no way that good.'* Opening her door she was surprised to have a Rain Island Syndicate officer salute her.

"Mam" the fox said in greeting. "I am afraid that your mission to Mixtexas has been cancelled. You've been recalled immediately by the Spontoon Allthing. If you'd get your things please?"

'What the...' Shrugging in acceptance Elizabeth shoved the few things she'd taken out of her bag back into it, closing it only to have a RIS rating take it from her. Much to the amazement of her fellow passengers (most that had noticed her having dismissed her as a common low life passenger who just happened to have a little money) she was escorted off Moonsprite. After a somewhat bumpy trip she set foot onto a Rain Island warship for the first time in her life.

"This way Mam" the Lieutenant nearly begged. Following him she eventually found herself in the Captains cabin with a grizzled old male that reminded her a lot of a certain Spontoon Captain. In fact so much so she had to ask.

"Heard of him" the Skyebright's Captain admitted. "Seems we favor each other. Now Miss Brighton, would you be so kind as to explain why your so all fired important that your government would ask me to stop an American ship in international waters? Not that I didn't get a kick out of it, and we did need the practice."

"I really don't know" she admitted. "How did you know who I was?"

"All in the orders mam, though why a Government Envoy was traveling under false papers as an American citizen... Hon, I think someone blew your cover. You better lay low for a long time. A real long time."

"So you know" she sighed. "Okay. Who gets first shot at me?"

"No one. You see hon, we have this cute little treaty with your country. Does us a lot of good in the long run. Personally I LIKE being treated like an idiot tourist. Problem is, since I made Captain you folk's treat

me right. I miss those nutty shirts, the idiot sayings, girls hanging off my arms whispering native sayings that sound great but refer to rather embarrassing events. And those photographs I'd find in my gear later. Say listen. I get you home in record time do you think you could put in a bad word for me with the tourist board?"

"I think I could Captain, if I knew your name."

Pulling a calling card from his shirt pocket the captain grinned. "Shouldn't be a problem. I go under this name when I'm trying to have a good time. I'll have food delivered here in a bit. Now I have to go scream at my engineer to get this tub moving."

Left alone Elizabeth read the card, then started laughing.

May 8th, 1936

Nikki looked up with interest as her newest on again, off again customer sat down at her table at the Double Lotus. Presently 'unattached' the mare wondered if this was going to be another short night. It was past midnight and certainly Songmark hadn't started giving First Years overnight passes. "Its been a while" she said to the young Songmark student.

"Hoped wouldn't be again. I need your help" the Russian admitted.

"My help" Nikki asked, laughing as she drank her beer. Setting her bottle down her expression changed, becoming hard. "You don't have a pass do you."

"Nyet" Tatiana admitted. "Not even my dorm know I am out. They still beginners. Right now that is least of my worries."

"Explain your problem my little red pet."

Quickly, but quietly Tatiana explain the situation she was in, finishing with "Both ways I am dead. I like breathing. I have been everywhere. You are last real chance."

Nikki leaned back in her bench, appraising the sable before her. "I could get the money right now" she admitted. "If your willing. We just visit a certain Kou Han agent. Then your off the island by morning. Safe and sound, no one on Spontoon will ever know where you went. I'll even give my word the money will go where you want it to go, no skin off my nose. You probably won't like your new life, but I guarantee it'll be an adventure."

Tatiana had the experience not to react at that offer, other than admitting it was an option. One she'd rather avoid if she could.

"Then that leaves only one source of income" Nikki admitted. "One I can't touch until the banks open. But tell me my little red. What have you got to offer that's worth that kind of money? Seriously, no great flowing political agenda. The hard pravda."

"Myself" Tatiana responded, her voice so soft even Nikki almost missed it. "I want like to stay in Songmark, but.. Me" she continued in a stronger voice.

"I have enough pets to play with, and they pay me for the privilege" the filly reminded her unexpected guest. "Just like you have. Not the other way around. You have to admit that, in truth your not offering anything I don't already have, or have had." Her words invoked memories in the sables mind, most pleasant. Some not.

Tatiana sat working up her courage for her next words. "Nikki. They make you follow rules."

"No rules?" Nikki asked, suddenly interested. Other than a certain Macao citizen not even her lost Louise had offered no rules. "You realize what your saying? I can yank you out of Songmark against your desires. I can sell you to anyone. I could blind you if I wanted too. Cut your limbs off." She leaned forward, her face only inches from the smaller woman. "Dear little red pet, you have no idea as to the darkness my soul is capable of delving into. It is a very good possibility you wouldn't come out of this whole. A very good possibility." She let an evil smile come to her face. "In fact, I guarantee you won't come out of this whole. From the first night I will grantee you do not leave my home unmarked for life. I have a great hate for you reds, and for the best of reasons. You killed the woman I loved. In front of me."

"It is better than death" the sable admitted, though the revelation truly frightened her.

"All right then my little red pet. In the morning I will get a letter written up by a friend, a legal I.O.U. I will get the money to those people, pick up your papers then you meet me here tomorrow night. Same time. If you welsh on this I turn all the information over to your embassy. If you show up late by one minute I turn everything over to your Embassy. If you ever say no to anything I tell you to do I turn everything over to your Embassy. No rules and you pay me back with every spare crowery you have, when you have it. When the debt is paid I release you. Not one second before. Agreed?"

"Agreed... Mistress" Tatiana answered. Her eyes dropping instantly in full submission.

Leaning back Nikki again studied the smaller woman. Through her mind ran all the dark thoughts she'd held back. Oh this one would live. To suffer the rest of her life for Louise's murder at a Red Russian's paws. She would pay dearly for Nikki's loss. "Go back, now. Don't be caught. You'll finish your schooling, you'll be worth more as a graduate.. If you haven't paid me off by the time you graduate, well just remember this. There is a standing Kou Han offer for a graduate Songmark student. No matter her species. I'll get my money." She watched with amusement as the sable, visibly shaken even through her NKVD training stood and left. After the door shut the current waitress came by, looking at her oddly. "Completely legal" Nikki explained returning to her normal, heavily accented speech while answering that unasked question. "An ah mah pay fer this heavily." Picking up her beer she continued drinking. An interesting night after all she decided.

May 11th, 1936

Namoeta approached the silent figure in her home quietly. Carefully she settled down a few feet away from the mouse, preparing herself for a long wait until her visitor Oharu withdrew from her meditation. This was only the second time her visitor had done this, the first had been when she had stumbled over something that required serious contemplation. This time though, the feline priestess knew Oharu's problem had nothing to do with religion. Last night until the mouse had woken and gotten up, had been filled with things the like that surprised the cat. She had never thought that her visitor had such passion, or such hopeless longing within her heart

Over an hour passed before the mouse slowly released a long breath, her eyelids flickering open as she returned from her inner world to the outer world. "I left breakfast for you" she said in greeting.

"I found it. Thank you. And that the chickens had already been tended. You did not sleep well" Namoeeta answered. "Is this Molly you dream of the same doe that visited me in February?"

Oharu rubbed her paws together, taking her time awakening her body. "I do not know. Describe her please."

"It would be simpler to say that she arrived with three others. An English housecat named Amelia, a Italian bovine named Maria and an American tigress by the name of Helen."

Oharu turned her gaze on the chickens, noting, and dismissing the three who continually seemed to be watching her. "Then it is same Molly" she admitted.

Namoeta relaxed a bit, though she noted that Oharu seemed to tense after admitting that. "Does she know how much you desire her?"

Oharu's face broke into a sad looking smile. "Namoeta. I came here to learn about your beliefs. Please. I did not place myself in the position of having to ride through frightening waters in a too small boat to return to Spontoon, or walk so far simply to speak of my own failings. I know them, it is my place to deal with them as long as I am able."

"When you are no longer able? What then?"

"That is obvious. I turn to other priestess's for help. Just as you would." She suddenly laughed. "Do you believe I think myself infallible? Of all of us, I have had such lesson most severely taught to me."

"Your back" Namoeta asked.

"And more my new friend. Much much more than I think that I will ever speak about." Standing, the oriental mouse pulled her kimono about her, hiding from view that fur which those three chickens seemed to prefer to see. "I believe those three are perverted" she mentioned.

Namoeta herself laughed. "You should have seen them following those girls around. I doubt any of them even noticed. One chicken is so much like another and these are new bodies for those spirits. Sometimes I wonder just what they see in the female form. They are spirits after all."

Walking slowly up to three waiting birds Oharu settled down, gently petting the closest one. "Why not ask them" she asked.

"Because it would ruin the mystery. Understand Oharu that my life here is rather... tedious at times. Having a mystery to work with helps keep me from needing my own help. It is rather easy for a Chicken Spirit Priestess to lose herself into the birds. It has never been a pretty sight to behold."

"Madness never is. I helped return lost priest to world when I was Miko. He had become no more than animal himself, barely discernable from animals he served. It was a difficult time. I still remember the feel of dark evils within me as my Priest cleansed his spirit."

Namoeta stood. "It is time for the morning prayers" she reminded her guest, changing the subject. "It is still a wonder to hear what you already know. To realize that you are not just beginning, but have already walked paths I could never see. You are still returning to Main Island today?"

"There is a visiting fishing trawler from the Amerind villages that agreed to return me, if I am at dock by high tide this afternoon."

"Then you best be off, it is a long walk to that dock so you've little time left."

Oharu smiled, stopping her petting of the chicken. "I will join you this last time. For the practice. Then yes. I must be off."

It was late afternoon when Annette Riverstone found herself in a rather large office on Meeting island, one that she had never been in before. At this moment she stood, hat in paw before the old mahogany desk that half filled the room. Behind it sat a male leopard, bifocals sitting precariously on his long nose. "So" he said, sitting a paper down. "You are to be a Doctor. It is my privilege to inform you that your school has, by wire confirmed your scores. Also that they will be sending transcripts by air mail." He watched the otter relax slightly. "It is also my duty to inform you that the American Ambassador has filed extradition papers. He wishes to send you home for trial."

Annette whimpered, actually staggering back a step at those words. "I have broken no law in my country" she managed to answer.

"So. Then you will not mind my interrogation. With a star nosed mole present?"

"I will face even that" Annette agreed. "I have faced worse already at my own peoples paws. My friend died to get me here, another friend I cannot contact because she is off-island. Yet I am certain that she would back me up."

"So and So. You refer to the spy Sandy Doecan. Who's death was rather messy I must admit. And the spy priestess known as Oharu?"

"I do" she admitted.

"So I see. Then sit." Apparently he pressed a buzzer, or sent some kind of signal as the rooms other door opened. An elderly female walked in, a star nosed mole, and sat facing the determined otter. "So. This is Shiva, a stage name I believe. At least she will give no other and I have known her since my childhood. She is a native born of Spontoon. Will you freely submit to questioning in her presence?"

"I will" Annette nervously agreed.

"So. You are aware that any lie spoken by you will be detected by Shiva. That even one lie will result in my releasing you to your Ambassador immediately?"

"I am now" she admitted.

"So. And so. Very well." Picking up a folder the leopard opened it, adjusted his glasses and asked his first question. "So. In reference to events on April 5th, 1936 ..."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

May 13, 1936

Queen of the Isles 3, a Mixtexa flagged vessel of some 15,400 tons slid into Casino Island's port with all the grace of a rust bucket. For this in truth the battered old freighter was, as it hadn't seen a paint brush in at least ten years and the neglect showed. Long ago a pool had been started in various ports as to the date she would finally slip beneath the waves. Pools that had seen employees come and go, yet somehow the late nineteenth century ship still managed to limp from port to port. And at each port Harbor masters sighed in relief as they watched her leave. This afternoon she had arrived at Casino Island, her cargo of ice ready for delivery. Eventually her small pawful of passengers also began to depart while cranes mounted on the ship herself began unloading her precious cargo. Northern ice. Block after block of Alaskan ice for the casinos, upper class hotels, resorts and hospitals. Almost as an after thought a net of luggage was swung across by the smallest crane, to land as gently as anyone could please on the customs dock. Immediately that same crane returned to assisting in unloading even more ice.

Of the five passengers that stepped onto Casino Island only two remained together. A rather tall, fairly well dressed male Roe deer and an impossibly small female mink. Carrying only a walking stick the deer led his companion towards the customs desk, ignoring the fact that she was carrying well over half her own weight in his own private gear. "I am Albert Fennigen Garner, Esquire" he told the waiting agent, a tired and very bored mole. "Of Malovia. This is my assistant. Miss P. Callie Underwood. Of Prussia. We are expecting to meet a Mr. H'shoshon. Would you be so kind as to notify him of my arrival."

"Passport please Mr. Garner" the agent demanded. "Anyone waitin you will be on the other side of that gate." Somehow he was completely unsurprised when it was Miss Underwood who laid two passports before him. Garner, he quickly decided, was a stuck up... Setting his thoughts aside he opened their passports, going through each page carefully. Lately there had been problems with certain European visitors. He was determined there would be no problems because he wasn't paying attention. "From Alaska?"

"Fairbanks" the deer answered. "Delightful place, absolutely delightful. One could only hope for an earthquake to send it, and its crass natives into the sea. Deep into the sea one would hope."

"It was nice" a tiny voice added. "I liked it."

Wincing in apparent pain the deer turned his attention on his companion. "Callie my dear. Do not make me remind you again to keep your muzzle shut unless asked a question directly. Else I shall have to replace you."

"Yes Mr. Garner sir. I'm sorry sir."

This interchange set the gophers' anger on slow broil. To treat an employee like that. In front of him by all means. For a moment he was tempted to deny entrance, but there was nothing wrong with their papers, nothing he could do. Motioning to the woman he lifted her two bags. Each one must have weighed twenty-five pounds and he knew she couldn't be more than eighty herself. Opening them he found nothing more than camera gear, notebooks, paper records and smoking supplies. Those last had to belong to the deer, as there was no scent of tobacco about the mink. "What is this exactly" he asked, holding up a wooden case that, once opened, exposed over twenty large vials of a clear bluish colored liquid.

"My medication" Callie explained after glancing to her employer for permission to speak. "There is a letter from my Doctor. In the lid?"

Locating the letter the mole read. One of those serious programs Spontoon required him to pass was a fair knowledge of medical terms and legal drugs. "You suffer from recurrent nightmares?" he asked, looking back over to the young lady.

"Very bad. From during the revolution. I almost went mad for life" she answered. "I was actually in a madhouse for a few months. Until Doctor Oswald accepted me for clinical trials. He says I was a miracle, he'd never seen anyone respond so well. My medication keeps them away. It is the only thing that does."

Reading the doctors letter the agent nodded. Two drops twice a day of *Scopolamine hydrobromide* in any drink as premixed, not to exceed six drops in twenty four hours. Everything seemed in place, so he returned the letter to its place. After noting its information in an official log book he returned the medicine to where he had found it. At least her employer was taking care of her medical problems he noted, somewhat relieved. Having a potential madwoman loose on Casino Island was bad enough. If she lost her medicine and escaped to Main Island. He shuddered. Especially if she made it to Sacred Lake. He had been told stories of that place by his mum as a pup. Again the mole shuddered.

Closing both cases he returned them, then picked up his pawset. Throwing the switch that connected him to his partner, currently in the back pawing through everyone's luggage he spoke. "Got a Mr. Garner and Miss Underwood here. You checked their luggage yet? Yeah? Anything? Okay, thanks." Picking up a rubber stamp he carefully marked both passports. "Through the left gate, tha one marked welcome" he instructed. As they walked away he watched as Miss Underwood struggled under the weight of her load. Garner he decided, needed a serious wall to wall chat. Unfortunately if he were to even mention the idea on duty he'd be looking for a new job. Off duty though was another matter.

Annette was working in Meeting islands Hospital lab, currently carefully examining the tentacle removed from Conchita De la Cruze. It was an odd thing she realized. At the one end it was much like a lizards tail, having broken away from the main body smoothly. Not tearing away as she would have expected. At its other end was a mouth almost exactly like a lamprey's, though it had a single long hollow spike in its center. That spike seemed to normally be carried retracted but could be thrust forward at least six inches. Thrust with enough force to penetrate a tibia just above the ankle, which was where she had helped Doctor Kiwi recover this one from. Once within its target the spike delivered what appeared to be a combination muscle relaxant and anti-coagulant. Only the fact that Conchita had been struck in the bone, thus delivering its deadly payload to her morrow and not her bloodstream had saved the young womans life. Conchita was going to live, but it would be at least a year before she danced again. From her reaction last night she would never swim in the ocean again. Her wound though. She had seen the likes before, somewhere. As to the where, that eluded her for the moment.

Beneath her microscope the flesh was odd. There were details in each cell the like she had never seen before. Even as she watched her stained cells they appeared to glow from within, as though some sort of phosphorescence was still active. Had she been using polarized light it would have meant crystal diffraction, but this was simple white light. Under the microscopes harsh light any such glow should be invisible. Stepping away from her microscope the otter rubbed her eyes. She was seeing things because this entire 'animal' made no sense. Picking up her notes she went over them step by step. Nearly transparent, muscle structure like a squid or octopus but no suckers. A release point like a lizards tail and a lamprey mouth at the end. What was this thing she wondered. It made no rhyme or reason. It was like someone had placed half a dozen creatures into a bowl and mixed them together. This was completely beyond her medical knowledge.

'What we need' she thought. 'Is a Zoologist.' But there were no Zoologist's on Spontoon Island, she'd already checked. There were on Tilamooka, so this morning she had shipped samples, photographs and carbon copies of her records to be examined by him. If Doctor Flumbulger could determine what she was looking at it would be a great help. Absently looking at the clock Annette realized her shift was only a quarter hour away. Quickly, but with great care she stored the samples. It wouldn't do to lose them now,

there was little chance of obtaining more. At least not until the creature itself was captured.

May 14, 1936

It was mid-afternoon and Oharu had long before finished her daily duties attending certain Main island shrines. Now she had retired to her little bamboo hut, to review her notes from Orpington Island yet again. Two full journals and part of a third had been used on Orpington Island. Filled with her notes, observations and corrections she was carefully collating them into their purist forms. Once done she would transfer them to her largest ledger. This ledger held what would one day she hoped become a great book of rituals. As she worked a sharp sound from outside caught her attention, a sound of hoofs slipping a bit on the damp path that brought occasional visitors to this place. Setting her pen aside she closed her ledger before going out to meet this new visitor.

It turned out to be a male deer. He was grey furred and in his later years. She noted that he walked with a staff to help him get around, especially upon the stones Oharu had yet to attend too. "May I be of assistance?" she asked in native Spontoon.

He looked up, as though seeing her as some unexpected apparition. "Euro's are not allowed here" he answered gently in English, as though instructing a child. "Even though they speak our language."

"I am Oharu Wei" she explained. Still speaking Spontoon. "A priestess in training. I live here only to serve. How may I assist you."

"You've arrived?" His expression became much more friendly and he shifted into Spontoonie himself. "Well, that's a horse of a different color. I came for the water. Once a year I drink at the stream. Have since I was a fawn. Is that still allowed?"

Oharu smiled in return, stepping away to allow the man access further down the path. "I am only a servant of this place" she explained. "I certainly cannot refuse anyone a simple drink of water. Please." She held an open paw towards where the small cascade of water was to be found. "Enjoy."

Elizabeth Kathleen Brighton, once known as the Spontoon Secret Agent Sandy Doecan (say that three times fast her Doctor had once commented) lay on her stomach in her bed on Meeting island. Outside on her door was a placard declaring the room quarantined. In actuality some medical problems were being attended too, the bobcats tail had developed serious problems because she'd forgotten to care for it, and her face was still an angry red along her developing scar. Otherwise she was in excellent health, for a woman who had supposable fallen through the blades of a running aircraft engine. A tap on her door was the only warning before a nurse stepped in. "You've ah visitor dear" the much older nurse announced. "Will-yah be seein tha darlin?" Turning her head to face the door Elizabeth answered yes, starting to roll on her side in preparation for her visitor. "Nah darlin. On yer belly till tha good Doctor says otherwise."

"I should have listened to Annette" Elizabeth admitted in defeat.

"Ah, tha be tha good Doctor Riverstone. Certainly, her advice was good. Yah know she stil greaves yer death?"

Elizabeth's head came up in shock. "No ones told her yet? The idiots."

"She's bein watched by tha Americans dear. Tha grivin has tah look real. Nah you just wait, I'll get your bonnie lad for yah."

Less than a minute later a well known ferret entered, glancing around apparently at random before taking the seat next to Elizabeth's bed. It was a chair that oddly fit him perfectly. "You are well?" he asked softly after the door closed.

"Don't rip Annette's heart out dad" the bobcat answered. "Let her know I'm alive."

"Dad... How interesting. And here I thought you wanted me to marry you. You haven't called me that in what? Five years now. So then your fascination with me is just a father-daughter complex."

Burying her head in her pillow the bobcat groaned. "You can't marry me" she argued through the pillow. "I'm your daughter, not even a member of your religion. It wouldn't be allowed by the Allthing or the Priestess's and we both know that."

"And why not? There's no blood relationship to worry about. Something Kjellfrid rather forcibly reminded me of a few days ago."

Elizabeth turned her head to face her foster father, the one man in all Spontoan who truly knew all the secrets. Secrets even she hadn't figured out. "How is Aunt Killy" she asked.

"Rather unhappy with me. She actually quit. Can you imagine that? She walked out and left me alone. Have you any idea how much of a backlog that caused?"

"I'm not looking for a job" Elizabeth answered. "I won't take Aunt Killie's job even if she died. And thank you for ruining my escape by the way. I was headed home, had a whole new life ahead of me. Owner of half of the Bar Everything Ranch. Now I'm back here. So what's the poop on that anyway? Need to trade me off for a warship or something?"

"We have a warship" Sapohatan answered, noting with secret pleasure her stunned look. "I'm offering you a job yes, but it requires certain sacrifices by you."

Raising her right paw Elizabeth traced the scar on her face slowly. "I think I've sacrificed enough thank you. Annette warned me I'll go to the grave with this. I almost lost my right eye too. Not to forget a shattered heart. Mah tails still healing an though I hide it best I can, my left shoulder is killing me."

"I understand that once you have healed and your fur grown out that your scar will be quite unremarkable" the ferret reminded her. "Your heart, a few staples and some glue will patch that up. Elizabeth. I need someone with brains in Operations. Someone I can trust not only with my life, but with Spontoan's life as well. Someone who has been out there. Knows what's worth following up and what's just smoke in the wind."

"That's Bollin's job. He's darn good at it too. He taught me and I know I didn't learned a twentieth of what he knows."

"Lenny Bollin had a heart attack last week Elizabeth. He's at home learning how to breath again. Retired for life. His wife sent me a message. *'Mess with Benny and I'll kick your tail over your head.'* Reba has a temper, remember? Doctor's say the stress was simply more than a man his age could handle. Even if he is a bull. I need a replacement and your it."

Elizabeth ignored her nurses orders and rolled on one side, the better to study her foster father. "I'm not a native Albert. Now that I'm not a spy anymore, I'm no longer even your foster daughter. I have to leave. It's the law and I've never, ever broken a Spontoan law. On Spontoan I mean. Besides, only a native can be in positions that sensitive. I seriously recall reading the Allthing decision on that five years or so ago while in training."

"You've never called me Albert" Sapohatan said in answer.

"Your no longer my boss, your no longer my foster father. It's dumb to keep calling you dad or by your last name. And why bother to offer me a job I can't have anyway?"

Leaning back in his chair the ferret looked up, talking more to the ceiling than Elizabeth. "She's wrong about the Allthing. In one respect" he told the soft blue painted ceiling. "As a certain rabbit reminded me a foster daughter is not legally a member of ones family, when matters of marriage are involved. Then she takes back her own name and runs away. My favorite relative, even if she is my sister-in-law, walks out on me. Throws me off her front yard even. So I have to beg a warship to get this one back." He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before facing the bobcat again.

"One. Yes. You are no longer my foster daughter. Two. You are no longer useful as a field agent. Three. It has been brought rather forcible to my attention that you love me." He paused. "And that I love you. I'm asking you to marry me Elizabeth. You can take Bollin's job or stay home. It doesn't matter. I've been running away from my feelings for way too long. It's time I faced them. It's time I stopped hiding and admitted I'm just as mortal as anyone else."

"No kneeling on the floor begging?" she asked softly, in shock from his words impact.

"With my knees?"

"There's nothing wrong with your knees Albert." Elizabeth slipped out of her bed, standing before the ferret with nothing on but a thin hospital gown. "Okay" she husked. "I'll marry you."

"No demands?" he asked softly.

"Just two."

Albert Sapohatan raised one eyebrow. "And they are?"

"First. I want kits. Your kits."

"Ah, well. I guess so. I'm sure we can find a few spare seconds now and then. Number two?"

"My application to Songmark?"

"Will be in the right paws before close of business, today" he agreed. "That doesn't guarantee you entry. They are a rather elite group you know. I could call in a favor."

Elizabeth frowned, reaching out to run her fingers along the ferret's jaw. "Application. I want in yes, but if I'm not good enough. No special favors. There's work enough for me, isn't there."

"Yes" he agreed. "And the job offer?"

"I'll think about Bollin's job, no guarantee there. But I'll seriously think about it. If I get into Songmark you'll have to pick someone else though."

"Done. But Bollin's job will always be open for you. I am serious Elizabeth. There isn't anyone as good as you available. I truly need you. I love you."

Elizabeth answered his words by dropping her gown.

Just inside the gates of Songmark School for Girls Tatiana Bryzov bit her tongue as the doe Molly Procyk walked away. She so much wished that she had some comeback for the American gangster, some way of verbally gut punching the upper classwoman. Sure, Molly had been right. With Tatiana's numbers they would have ended up exactly a hundred miles off course. But had she really needed to announce it to everyone within hearing distance? Holding her breath the Russian sable gained some control of her temper. *'One day Procyk'* she thought. *'One day I'm going to wipe that smug look off your capitalist gangster face. One day it will be you humiliated before your friends and the student body.'* Crushing her graded paper in her paws Tatiana turned back to her navigation books. There was time before her upper classmate finished Songmark's three year course. Time to find the perfect bullet for that ones pride. For now though she couldn't let anyone know her current situation. Death was one thing. Bringing shame upon the Glorious Revolution and her personal hero Iosif Starling was another. She winced as a pulled muscle complained. Nikki had proven quite inventive, more so than the sable had believed. There were certain scars now upon her body that she would carry to the grave. Well hidden yes, but still there. As was a certain tattoo now covered with regrowing fur. They, as her pulled muscles, pained her. Nor had that table been in any way comfortable. But she was still alive, that was more important than her own comfort or pride. Yet from the madness she had seen in the mares eyes there was a good chance she would end her life crippled. If so, then so be it.

Oharu sat unmoving as she listened to her visitor. After gaining his drink the buck had stopped to talk. She had been delighted to just sit and listen, as it was already very late so she guaranteed herself more work that evening. Along with a cold meal. Yet his words held clues not only to the islands history but Great Stone Glen as well.

"You say this place cursed" she said to her visitor. "Yet I feel no evil."

Pulling out a pipe, with a look to Oharu for acceptance before he started packing its bowl the elder buck nodded to her. "Curse is this was one of the anchors for that great ritual" he explained. "Is why the waterfall moved. Was a grand temple there, on the cliff you've started the clearing of. All was destroyed when the thing went pear shaped. There were the nine anchors. Not one survived unchanged."

"You speak as one who saw all happen" Oharu noted. She was writing his words as he spoke.

"Nah. Tah long an long ago fer any mortal tah see. Was a sailor when I was young. There's much that yah learn if yah keep your muzzle shut, as you do. People what left these islands, they settled elsewhere. Have their stories. Won't talk tah many. But mah wife, she was one of them. Her family spoke tah me ah lot." He lit his pipe, taking a deep puff of something Oharu was certain had died centuries ago. Nor was it in any way related to the tobacco family. "Sorry bout tha smell. Addictive stuff, but it helps with pain. At my age everything hurts now an then. Tell me. Yah gonna rebuild their temple?"

"I had not thought to do such" she admitted. "There are ruins yes, but I am no builder. Only an artist. I would spend a lifetime with such puzzle."

"Less yah knew what it once looked like. Yeah, I tried once. Spent ah year here after g'silhoon died. Managed tah fix those steps yah use. That's all. Its ah puzzle not meant for our eyes I think. Angles are all odd." He slowly stood. "Same time next year?" he asked.

"You are welcome when you wish to come" the mouse answered. "Be it next year, or tomorrow. This place is open to all."

"Even tha Europeans?"

"With guidance."

He laughed. "Yah. With ah gun at their head ahn ah knife tah their throat so they don' steal, break or defile. Yer ah good woman Oharu Wei. I'm pleased tah meet you. Might tak yah up on that offer. Long time senced any woman spoke tah me nice like." With that he turned and walked away, soon leaving Oharu alone with her notes, her thoughts and much set aside work. She had not liked his opinion of how to deal with Europeans. There was something dark about the buck, some great hidden hurt. A hurt she should be helping him heal. But at that moment Oharu could not determine what it might be.

May 16th, 1936

It was just after sunset and Lady Tsukiyama stood just outside the IJN TONE's bridge, looking South towards her destination. Nothing was visible at the moment other than a faint glow of artificial lights on the horizon and brilliant stars above her. Though it was quite possible for both ships to enter the main harbor at night, Admiral Hiroaki had decided to wait until morning and high tide. They would remain anchored at Spontoon only so long as it took Lady Tsukiyama to complete her mission. What mission that was only she knew. Not even her maid was privy to such things. All anyone aboard knew was that a message in clear had been sent to the local Embassy. That message had demanded, not asked, that one Miko named Urako be waiting at the dockside for Lady Tsukiyama's arrival at a certain time. There would be no shore leave and only minimal resupply.

"They will be waiting" a familiar voice said from behind the mouse.

"That worries me not Admiral" she answered, not bothering to turn to face him. "It is how my message will be accepted that is important to me. Unfortunate we were unable to arrive for today's high tide. Yet nothing could be done about that."

"Yes. These natives will have that much more time to hide their military power. Quite unfortunate."

Lady Tsukiyama did turn to face the Admiral now. "That is not our concern" she said in a suddenly emotionless voice. "Each hour we must delay reduces my ability to complete my mission in America. Spontoon is nothing but a broken stone. Had every citizen a weapon. If every citizen stood against us to the death." She turned to face that glow again. "It would mean nothing. At best they may bloody the army's nose. A nation of this size cannot stand alone."

"There are worries that the American's might come to their assistance" Hiroaki mentioned. "It would give this broken stone much more strength."

Delicate fingers wrapped around cold steel as the brilliantly dressed mouse leaned forward, placing her weight against the ships railing. Made to hold a mans body from being washed overboard in a force five gale the rail never noticed her slight weight. "You search for what I know Admiral Hiroaki. Trust in this. Should my mission fail those same American's will not have the power to spare here. Not for some time. By then the Army would be dug in, your navy, the air forces. It would be near suicide to attack such a fortified series of islands such as these. Not impossible, still greatly wasteful of lives."

Hiroaki stepped beside the woman on her downwind side, his nose catching her delicate scent. He wanted so much to touch even her little finger. Yet his training and his Honor held. He simply stood beside her, paws held behind his back. "You do not think that islands such as these, once fortified could not be held against any force" he observed. His words were not a question.

"As history has proven. Against a determined foe no fixed position may hold without so great a cost as to make any victory pyrrhic. Even the Roman's discovered this when they held against an attack from within and without their great ringed fort. They held, they were nearly destroyed. Should we wake the Americans. Should we heat their blood. This would be a disaster we could never recover from. Submarines would ring this harbor making fleet movements difficult. Battleships and carrier aircraft will

reduce your air forces eventually to nothing. Your ships would be rusting hulks at the harbors bottom, your fighters burning wrecks. Only then would the American's invade. Invade with their own naval guns, their own aircraft. Invade, then move on towards our own homes. There is no glory in war. No true honor. Only pain and death."

Hiroaki blinked. This one had read her history, even closer than his own teachers perhaps. "Perhaps you should have been Emperor" he said, cursing himself even as those words escaped his lips. Her reaction was instant and his head rang from her slap. Blood filled his mouth where a fang had cut flesh. For almost a half second he started to respond, before remembering who she was. Who she represented. What his words had meant to her. His simple statement had been so out of line she could have him killed for it. She could easily order him to take his own life, and he knew that he would. "I apologize" he said softly. He ignored his pain. He ignored the fire in those sweet eyes.

"Never again mention such to me" she warned. "Now I wish to be alone."

Backing Admiral Hiroaki bowed then returned to his bridge. He had been wrong in voicing his words. Yet, deep inside he knew he had been right. Once again the wrong person was in power. Yet at least this time that person had close to him those who should have been there. Who had influence. As much as his warrior heart desired conflict he knew she had spoken the truth. Fight yes. Anyone but the English or Americans. For America may be a weak foe at the moment, her factories and natural resources would overwhelm any enemy given time.

Lady Tsukiyama remained at her place, still watching that soft glow on the horizon. To any watching her she appeared calm. Yet within herself she was raging. How dare he suggest she usurp the throne. How dare he believe her so petty. So dishonorable. How dare her own heart leap at his words. *'I am loyal'* she told herself. *'I will serve, even to my death. I will not desire the throne. I will not. I will not be shattered as my sister.'*

Miss Blande sat the very official Songmark School for Girls application form carefully on the coffee table, sucking in her lower lip as the weight of that paper hit her shoulders. "I never really expected" she admitted to those present. Those four who truly ran Songmark and their nurse.

"Neither did any of us" Mrs Oelabe agreed, the feline taking a sip of her wine. "Certainly not a simple application sheet with only her navigation classes listed."

Miss Devinski sat a shortbread biscuit aside, its edge daintily nibbled. "We all know what that means" she admitted. "I wish to apply as a student. I wish no special consideration. Liz was always downplaying her abilities even when they were keeping her alive."

"Just considering her fur raising flight back form Hawaii in a stolen military plane" Miss Blande admitted. "The one that new Doctor proposes to become something called an air ambulance. Such escapes are what we teach our students to do. Yet there is no mention of any flight hours. Just her navigation credentials. That" she leaned back, looking up at the ceiling, "would have been a terrifying flight by itself. Having the life of someone else in your paws. She must have been near mindless with fear."

Silence filled the room as several women remembered their own first long distance flights. Silence broken only by the sound of breathing, or a goblet striking wood until Miss Blande spoke again. "An Air Ambulance. An interesting idea. I wonder if there is a way we can arrange to slip a student into that program. They won't have much money though so it is doubtful. Returning to our current problem, one scruffy little bobcat. We have until our normal day of decision to make our choices. Perhaps it would be interesting to see what pressure might be placed on us to accept her. I move we privately notify her benefactor that we are unimpressed by her credentials."

Miss Devinski snorted into her paw. "How many water taxis will suddenly be unavailable? How many difficulties will our students run into? Elizabeth was with us during one summer break. We were the ones who taught her navigation and the basics of survival. Was there anything in her demeanor that might make you believe she would accept a position made open by force?"

"Nothing" Miss Oelabe admitted. "That though was almost five years ago. Since then Elizabeth has been playing dancing games with at least four nations, using her own life as the playing piece. That changed her. It would be a good idea to discover how it changed her. Devi, you have an in with the little mouse that knows her. Ask her what she thinks of our bobcat. After all we've all lost our bets to you. Might as well get something out of all those sodas and ice cream. Other than a fat hound."

Miss Nordlingen broke her own silence. "Yes. As you have told us she has offered to 'train you.' I'll lay ten shells that your newest admirer wouldn't like that."

"Oharu was simply being amusing" the hound reminded her friends. "She has no interest in any but one. We know that. Helen is simply probing the waters right now. Nothing more than a friend."

"At the moment" Miss Oelabe admitted. "As was a certain Mr. Voboole 'Nothing more than a friend' when he stole the heart of our Miss Pelton. Are we going to lose you as well my friend?"

Miss Devinski carefully sat her now much smaller cracker aside, settling herself for a possible battle. "I find Helen interesting. I find her attractive. All right, I admit this. Songmark is my life. I will be here until the last student departs. My will, as you all know, stipulates that I am to be buried upon these grounds. Helen has somehow learned that should one of us marry then we must walk away from Songmark. She refuses to allow me to walk away from Songmark. Ladies, Helen Whitehall has already decided she will never ask me to marry her. Thus. Unless as a certain mouse puts it my heart blossoms for another there is no chance of your getting rid of my ugly mug."

"Here here" Miss Nordlingen cheered. "Songmark would be all the less without you. In the least it would become a completely catty organization." Something bounced off her more than ample chest and with amusement she brushed away cracker crumbs from her blouse. "More importantly. We would lose the contact you represent with Spontoon's priestess's. True we have many such contacts, but Huakava is dying. It is possible that Oharu may replace her. If not Oharu then Saimmi is my bet. In that case Oharu would be Saimmi's second most likely. There is also the work she has started doing. One day I feel we will need her insight. More than simply discovering that one of our most difficult students has caught the eye of some local spirit. These were sacred grounds once. Sacred to maidens and unmarried women which is why it chose us."

"One does wonder what a local spirit finds interesting in Liberty" Mrs Oelabe admitted. "She is as bound in her ideals as a cast stone block. She is aggressive, distrustful and haughty. I fully expect to walk into Red Dorm one morning and find all four dead, paws at each others throats. What could she have that we missed?"

"You do the physicals" Miss Devinski reminded the cat softly, a gleam in her eyes. "Is there any personal equipment we should be made aware of that she shouldn't have?"

Laughter broke out, with Mrs Oelabe actually bushing. All were reminded of the French boy who's mother had tried to enroll in the school, and two girls that had turned out to be boys during their admission physicals. "That's not it. But we digress. You realize that though Elizabeth is sorely lacking in a great deal of training. In certain areas she is better trained than even our best third year."

"Oh yes" Miss Nordlingen agreed. "We must use her as our new rabbit. She will drive our third years to distraction. In that ability alone we certainly should use her. As a student or not. I have heard of a few of her escapes. Hiding in a full septic tank for half a night isn't something many of our girls would think of.

Lets say, our favorite dorm offered a three day pass if they could find her, with only a five minute head start?"

Laughter again broke out. "Make it a week pass and ten minutes. Make those four really work for it." someone added.

"With no ferret bothering them. Yes" Miss Devinski agreed through her laughter. "If nothing more than for the amusement of upper classwomen trying to keep her behind the fence she'll be worth it. I'll send a letter to her benefactor. I'll say something like we have looked over her application and find it unremarkable when placed against other applications. Perhaps she has some talent or knowledge to bring her to the surface?"

"Good" Miss Blande agreed. "Though I never could have made that leap, knowing if I erred by so much as half a step it would be me and not a dead pig going through those blades. Elizabeth has the courage we need. We already know she has a driving need to learn. But in truth, so do many of our students. Many who fail anyway. All right, enough of this hen party. Who has the unmarked cards?"

May 17th, 1936

Helen Whitehall looked out from the Meeting island beach in stunned shock for two massive warships were anchored in the harbor that had not been there last night. One near her, between Meeting Island and Moon Island, the other between Casino and Main island. Between the two they commanded the entire area with their guns had they desired such. Yet even she could tell there were still plugs in those great guns, with sailors apparently tending to mundane tasks rather than preparing to shell the islands. What was most disturbing were the national flags. "Japanese" she gasped, unaware she had spoken.

"Aye" a rough voice agreed with her. "Tha old fox set hisself up well."

Not too far away from her Helen discovered one of the water taxis, currently waiting in line for its chance to obtain a customer or six. Astride its one lugger engine sat a rather old meercat, a strange hat sitting cocked over his head. "Old fox?" she asked.

"Tha'd be Ameril Hiroaki 'mself lass. 'Es got his ships coven each other. Looks peaceful nough, but if one ship were attacked." He shrugged. "Ain no way second sip'd miss. Peaceful nough tho. Tha dropped ah coloful mouse off on Assem.. Casino isle. Noh they waitin."

"Thank you" Helen told the old male. With another fearful glance at those hungry looking ships she turned away from the waiting taxis, returning home as quickly as she could. Though she had wanted to talk to Superior Engineering the boat ride would have taken her very close to one of those floating monsters. It was a thought too frightening to contemplate.

On the Captain gig en-route to Main Island Urako sat silent across from the richly dressed mouse. To the Miko's eyes she was beyond beautiful, as was the maid who had prepared Lady Tsukiyama this morning. Since her arrival the mouse had spoken hardly a pawful of words to the young fox. Since those words she had remained silent. Now they approached a waiting pier on Main Island. "This is where" Lady Tsukiyama asked softly in Japanese.

"Sandstone Village" Urako answered. "It is the closest landfall to our destination."

"That being?"

Urako took a breath. "Where she whom you wish to see lives great lady."

"Acceptable." Silence returned to the small boat. Silence broken only by the sound of its engine, and a creaking of wood upon wood as the boat flexed in gentle harbor waves.

They arrived upon the shores of Main Island to find a Constable waiting for them. Lady Tsukiyama automatically motioned Urako to stay back. "We are denied landing rights?" she asked softly in gentle, absolutely fluent English.

"There's ah law mam. Sorry. No visitors without ah native guide."

"Yet I have such a guide" She moved aside, her silks making a soft rustle in the unusual silence. "My native guide."

Urako now appeared to the officers sight, her own rough cotton red on white costume shining in the sunlight almost as brightly as Lady Tsukiyama's silks. "Ah. I was misinformed" the officer admitted. "I do so apologize." He stepped back, preparing to leave. "Trust that I'll speak to the one who reported inaccurate information. If yah need help mam, she'll know how to get it for you."

"My thanks to you officer." Turning to the embarrassed fox Lady Tsukiyama gestured, switching from fluent English to their shared language. "I must not delay Admiral Hiroaki any more than I need. It is a long walk?"

"It is a long walk Lady" Urako agreed.

"Then you shall shorten it for me. Tell me about your people, yourself." She completely ignored the dozens of curious tourists that had gathered around. They, and their constantly flashing cameras.

It was near noon and Oharu had finished her daily duties attending shrines, now she was preparing tea for her noon meal. Still in her grass skirt and thin blouse she felt not at all out of place at the Great Stone Glen anymore. It had come that for her that this style of dress, though at times awkward, was almost natural. Her two good kimono hung in sections from a pole in her small bamboo shack, drying from the morning wash. When those sounds made by creatures walking on two feet came to her she automatically added water to her pot. As to why the visit, it could be simply curiosity or one of the other priestess's. Perhaps someone wishing to view the ancient shrine she was slowly clearing or even Huakava herself. A few moments more and Oharu was certain who it wasn't, but not who was coming. Turning away from her small fireplace she walked towards the path, her grass skirt rustling as it moved against bare legs.

What greeted her was a shock to her. Urako she knew and was delighted to see. But the woman with her had no business in any level of Spontoon social life. Even the quickest glances at those emblems that mouse wore was enough to cause Oharu to step back. "I am no longer Cipangan" she said boldly in their shared language. "I no longer support its Emperor. I am NOT."

"This is known" the woman agreed. "Urako, set tea please. I must speak with this one alone." Turning her eyes on the slightly smaller mouse Lady Tsukiyama managed a smile, fighting back her horror at the visage before her. Gone were the silks. Gone were the badges of office, of clan. Gone was the bright smile she so well remembered. Her teeth... Even with those few words Lady Tsukiyama had seen how badly Oharu had fared. Her own heart burned with tears, tears she could not let anyone see. "You have a place?"

Turning away from her visitor Oharu led them to a wide flat bit of stone near the great stone needle. Brushing the stone with her grass skirt the mouse stepped away, waiting until her visitor had sat before settling herself on a rounded stone. "How may I assist you" she asked. "I may not preform any Shinto ritual for you, nor would the Spontoon ones I know be helpful to you."

"You may help me by keeping two secrets" Lady Tsukiyama answered. "Is this possible?"

"Not if the keeping of such endangers my new homeland. My new people" Oharu admitted. "Otherwise, yes."

"These secrets affect only you."

"Then yes, such secrets are easy to hold."

Lady Tsukiyama visibly relaxed, pulling a scroll from her obi then unrolling it to read. "This was written by the Emperor's paw itself" she explained. "I observed the writing with my own eyes. Your last name is left blank, we were unaware as to what you would be using now."

"I am called Wei" Oharu explained. "It means a fresh breeze I think. Or it could be another local jest. It matters not."

"Wei then." Carefully she wrote the name on that parchment, filling in the only blank place. "Wei Oharu. It is with great sorrow that I admit my failure to a trusted servant. Nothing I may do in mortal life will change this. All I may do is apologize. You are released from all vows, all responsibilities. I wish you sweetness in your new life." Lady Tsukiyama closed the scroll. "It is signed by the Emperor himself."

Tears touched Oharu's eyes, tears she quickly pushed aside. "He was not flowery of speech" she observed.

"He had little time and he wished to be completely understood in this. You understand that it changes nothing? You still may never return home?"

Oharu stood, holding her paws before her. "Once I hoped only for death. Death to regain my honor. Events changed me, I was not strong enough to take my own life. I lost my belief in the Emperor. I am nothing. Yet I have found a way I may be useful to others. You may not ask me to turn away from that."

"Nor will I. Please remove that scrap of cloth, then turn around." Lady Tsukiyama waited until Oharu had done as she was asked. "Your hair?" Carefully Oharu moved her hair, bringing her back into full view. "I was wrong to kill them" the mouse whispered just loudly enough for Oharu to hear. "I should have had them blinded. Their paws and feet removed. What will you tell your children?"

"I may not have children" Oharu explained. "A cargo hook insured that."

"Demons take them. I curse them in my name, with my own blood. Dress, I will tell you my second secret when you have."

Miss Nordlingen ran a paw along the twin engine Ju 86D Songmark had recently purchased, as if by doing so she could insure it was no dream. Such a craft had been a dream to Songmark. That their students would be able to work on, to have flight time in such a craft had also been a dream. Waiting at the pilots hatch two third years stood silently, their two dormmates waiting next to the cargo hatch. They themselves were engrossed in the majestic vehicle before them. Their time at Songmark was almost over as this was their last year. That such a prize had fallen into their paws was almost unbelievable. "Only third years will have access to this plane" Miss Nordlingen announced. "Inform your year. This is too important a craft for simple second years to handle. Certainly not green first years. Now inside, you have exactly one half hour to inspect this craft's condition. Then the other half of your team will have their chance. This inspection you will most certainly will do. Your reports will be graded. Severely."

She watched in silence as the first two girls clambered up into the aircraft. It was a sweltering day, to be certain both would lose several pounds in their inspection. Within the craft it must be close to 120 degrees Fahrenheit, with no hint of a breeze. They would learn how to open the craft for a breeze, or be dragged out unconscious by the next two girls or the next dorm who would arrive in exactly one hour. Then two more would come until every third year had inspected the German designed craft. Only then would their reports be opened.

Turning to lean against the crafts right landing gear she looked across the harbor to IJN TONE. Even at this distance the warship was intimidating. Beautiful yes, yet intimidating as only a true warship could be. Out of her sight IJN CHIKUMA also sat at anchor. "I wouldn't want to cross those ships in anger" she whispered to herself. "At least it is a friendly visit. This time."

"You will select a dentist." They were returning to Casino island and instructions were being carefully given. "You will insure she has the work done" Lady Tsukiyama instructed the Miko Urako. "I will speak with our people. Money will be available. Once each month you will send me a written report on her. I will be at our Washington Embassy for at least four years. Hide nothing."

"I know of an excellent local dentist" Urako answered. "This report you ask for will be done. Yet. How am I to insure that she will do as you have instructed."

"For the same reason she has always done as I have instructed her" Lady Tsukiyama, her face emotionless. "At her mothers firm instruction. She has never disobeyed her older sister."

"You are..."

"She is important to me. You will insure she has what she needs." Lady Tsukiyama touched Urako's lips with the fingers of one paw. "You will never speak of this. It would cause great pain to many who do not deserve such."

"I understand. It will be done."

For the rest of their trip there was nothing but silence and just before sunset both deadly warships slipped out of Spontoon's harbor. Just a pawful of minutes behind a rather decrepit tramp freighter named Three Moons. A ship many eyes had watched, yet had remained only long enough to unload and load cargo. Three Moons also had reason to hurry away from two such dangerous ships. There were rumors that the nation of Cipangu desired to speak with her ship and Captain about a missing nobles daughter. It would be months before that ship returned to these waters but return it would. Hunting was good this far North.

May 18th, 1936

Rain was pouring outside Meeting island Hospital as the four doctors and one member of the government gathered. It brought a welcome coolness to the day, yet all four knew it would also bring more patients as people slipped, misjudged or otherwise decided that their personal experiences were better able to protect them than the careful rules society had created. Yet the morning was still young and other than a burned breakfast nothing important had yet come up. They were here though to discuss the idea of an Air Ambulance.

"Costs too much" Doctor Kiwi stated as he sat down, barely managing not to spill his coffee as he fired his opening salvo. "Fuel alone is more than we can afford.. Then there's upkeep, a pilot, mechanic... All the things that go with such an endeavor. Too expensive."

"We have the plane" Doctor Riverstone reminded her older, and wiser colleague. "That's the biggest cost."

"You have the plane" Kiwi corrected. "Doctor Riverstone please. We all agree it is an excellent idea, an idea that needs to be turned into reality. Our problem is simply funds. We don't have them. Spontoon isn't rich like America."

A rather effeminate looking leopard raised his cup. "Touche my dear Kiwi" the male announced. "Too the point at once. Tell me my good friend, how much is a life worth? A hundred shells? Two hundred? Or simply water taxi fare?"

"Patrick" Kiwi sighed. "Unlike you I do not have a large interest in Kanaka & Muumuu Coconut Wine. I don't have that much in my small budget to spare. But to answer your question I don't put a price on life. This is an excellent idea. I wish we could afford it but we can't."

A noise from the only rabbit in attendance turned everyone's head. "Gentlemen. Excuse me if I do not quite understand" Kjellfrid said. "Am I correct that the general thoughts are that this is a good idea?"

"It is" the leopard answered. "Doctor Passan?"

Opening his eyes a very old and very grey porcupine snorted. "I'm retirein soon, nah that we have tha otter" he answered. "Too old fer this stuff. Yes, best idea I've heard all year." He snorted again, closing his eyes. He'd just finished an all night shift with two Gunboat War victims nightmares. Sleep was something he, like all those present, had learned to grab when he could.

"Passan, you've been retiring for over ten years Kiwi laughed. Yes Miss.."

"Mrs." Kjellfrid corrected instantly.

"Apologies. Yes, it is an excellent idea. But Doctor Guzemon and I went over the medical budget for hours last night. There's just not enough available to support such an endeavor. Unless of course the Allthing would call an emergency session and change our budget?"

"That will not happen" Kjellfrid admitted. She turned her attention to the otter across from her. "Annette. Your friend, Sandy? Yes Sandy. What do the letters SPQR she had painted on the Duck's wings mean."

"Spontoon Pacific Quadrant Rescue" Annette answered.

"Of course, we all know there is no true Pacific Ocean" Kjellfrid admitted. "No matter what a certain Spanish explorer once thought. Still Pacific. It means Peaceful as I remember. There was a rather nasty beaching a few days ago, because the ship in question had a life or death situation. Tell me Doctor Kiwi, how is that patent?"

"I last saw her yesterday" Kiwi answered. "Her bleeding had stopped, her fever is still high but stable. I expect her to make nearly full recovery. That bone and muscle damage will leave her with a limp the rest of her life though."

"She came close to dying?"

"Yes, very close."

Kjellfrid opened a book she had brought with her, removing a single sheet of paper. "An air rescue craft would have given her a much better chance. How many people are lost each year. Through accident, wreck, storm and illness that a rapid response might have saved?"

"We don't keep those numbers" Dr. Passan admitted, though his eyes remained closed.

"Happily our military does" the rabbit continued. "Sixty-three within the limits of our borders of influence. This includes seven ships that for one reason or another floundered. Two pearl divers poisoned at Lufthart Atoll, a breach birth on Lovo Island that took mother and son and an influenza outbreak on Tatoosh Atoll that took four children. Just getting supplies to these problems might have saved lives." She tapped the paper. "Until our next budget is settled the Spontoon Militia has agreed to cover flight costs as well as putting several pilots on rotating alert. There is a small pier and set of buildings the Militia no longer needs that they are willing to transfer to SPQR. These buildings are located here on Meeting Island. It is the old Ironweed ferry company as you may recall. There is a request in the change of words for SPQR though."

Annette remembered to breathe. Her idea, her dream would happen. "What change" she asked softly.

"Spontoon and Rescue are quite acceptable" Kjellfrid answered. "Pacific Quadrant is to be changed to Private Quixotic. Why? This aircraft is privately owned, and honestly if there were not a more Quixotic dream than to save lives with an ex-military craft. One originally intended to kill." She shrugged her shoulders. "I can't think of one."

Annette laughed. "Sandy would have liked that" she admitted. "But I'm giving the Duck to Spontoon. So it can't be private."

"You can not do that" the leopard announced. "First. We can not afford it and second. Truth be told it was transferred to you by the American's. If you don't want it then it goes back to them. I read the paper" he finished with a sheepish smile. "Nosey yes. Still interesting."

"Doctors" Kjellfrid continued. "You have until the next Allthing to finalize your budget. To locate a pilot, a mechanic and determine your total costs for a year. Be aware that some money will be returned to you in fees to non-native emergencies. I will suggest to you that you ask the Allthing to budget compensation for native uses. Consider your worst case, then budget half again more than that. Then be happy if you can get half of what you request. It seems to be the way of governments." She stood, nodded to the four then left.

"My shift is starting" Patrick announced as he too stood. "Doctor Riverstone? I believe we share duties?"

Struggling to her feet Annette reached across the table, noted the snores coming from her porcupine colleague then offered the page to Doctor Kiwi.

"Oh, budgets." Making a face the good doctor stood, absently tipping his now empty cup over as he accepted the page. "I will get you back for this Annette" he warned. "First flight if nothing else."

It was a bedraggled, soaked mouse that finally made her way to the shelter of her bamboo hut in Great Stone Glen. Oharu had finished her duties but was soaked to the skin now. Removing her thin, now transparent cloth blouse and dripping grass skirt the priestess in training sat on her home's steps, too tired to do anything but let her fur drip. Unaware of the waterproofing Spontoon natives took for granted, and unable to have used it fully even if she had (for she had no one to do her back) she had managed a raincoat out of an older grass skirt. That skirt though had failed two hours ago, becoming fragments in her paws. Once the rain stopped she would gather the materials to make a Cipangan straw rain dress. At the moment though simply sitting was the best she could do.

A pattern had developed in this storm, soft gentle mist followed by a roaring crash of water that could drown, slowly fading to gentle mist again. As she sat her numbed mind drifted back to the day she'd given Miss Devinski that German weapon. Half asleep she re-ran the meeting through her mind, remembering

each and every word as though it was just being spoken. It had been in the main office, one shared by all Faculty members that they had spoken while Mrs. McGee waited outside.

Miss Devinski had looked with interest at the black case Butterfly had placed on her desk. Having done so the bovine had made excuses, vanishing towards the restroom area. This had left Oharu alone with the yellow furred hound. "Is this is what I think it is?" Miss Devinski asked.

"I do not know" the mouse admitted. "I can not read minds."

"So you claim" Miss Devinski laughed. She opened the case, whistling in appreciation at what she found inside. "She's going to love this. But I thought you weren't going to let her know how you felt."

"Sensei?" Oharu asked, somewhat confused.

"Molly, your little doe" the hound explained. "I didn't know you were aware she has a love of weapons." Pausing a moment Miss Devinski started ticking items off on one paw's fingers. "Fire, explosive, big guns, fast airplanes, I'd hazard a guess fast boats too. I thought you'd have her up on a pedestal so high she'd need an oxygen tank just to breathe. So is this gift your attempt to edge into her heart? I warn you Oharu, she hasn't changed her feelings about such things."

"I..." Oharu's tail wound about her right leg in fear, her mind raced. Trying to fit words together that wouldn't make her or her hostess look like a fool. "She does not need to know who sent it?"

Miss Devinski lifted the spotting scope, peering through it towards the school's front gate. "Best optics I've seen out of Germany, and they made fabulous optics. Hon, she has to know why it was sent, but not who. How about I tell her a new suitor has surfaced, someone who sent her this as a gift in hopes she might find them of interest." She lowered the scope. "Two woman team, now who.. Helen, yes I think Helen would make a good spotter for our sniping doe."

Breathing a sigh of relief Oharu had nodded her head in agreement before remembering Miss Devinski's back was to her. "That is acceptable" she agreed. It had been her intention simply to give the weapon to Songmark, that it might be seen as a direct gift to one of the students hadn't crossed her mind.

Turning back to the case Miss Devinski returned the scope to its place, removing the Mauser instead. "It's been lightened. I wonder how" she commented as she assembled its two parts into a single weapon, knowing Oharu could never tell her. "One bullet is missing?"

"It was fired at Annette and I" Oharu explained. "It missed."

"Bad aim?"

"No Sensei. A good Englishman intervened."

Smiling at some personal joke the hound turned again to peer out the window at Songmark's gate. "It's always nice to have a good Englishman about" she agreed. "They are a bit rare sometimes. Very nice balance, better with the scope. We may have to remove some of the stock. It's a bit off for Molly's reach. That shouldn't be a problem since I know of a good gunsmith." Setting the Mauser's butt on the floor she stared out the window. "Oharu" she whispered softly. "You realize this makes you a player in Molly's life, it puts you in harm's way. Lars isn't one to let anything be taken away from him. He can be quite... difficult."

Oharu walked to the hound's side, moving close but not quite touching as she too stared out at nothing. "I must never part Molly's life" she warned the hound. "I wish to, but cannot be. She never allows such. Lars has no worry my taking from him freely given him. Molly's heart. They live happily together."

Miss Devinski's paw on her shoulder startled the mouse. "Hon. You don't know everything you should. Don't make vows you can't keep, and never assume someone isn't worth killing just because someone you love loves him." She turned back to the case. "I'll see that this is given to her when she comes back. It will have to stay in the school armory of course, but it will make her happier. And what of you?"

Still with her back to the hound Oharu fought to hold back tears. "I face next trial very soon" she admitted. "Still have three trial to face. Now I must go. I have things must be done, and soon." She hurried towards the door, to be stopped next to it by the hounds next words.

"Your going to make a wonderful Priestess, and a better companion. For someone."

Opening the door Oharu started through, to pause only long enough to answer. "Only if survive."

They were on a water taxi returning to Casino Island when Butterfly had spoken. "Yer very quiet again" the bovine had observed from her position across from Oharu.

Looking up the mouse gave her a soft smile, her tail in her paws as was her habit when troubled. "Miss Devinski right" she admitted. "I hold Molly high, so high. Never think she may be other than self believe."

Butterfly returned the smile. "I held Taza high too, when we first fell in love. When he couldn't make me Queen of all Spontoon, well I sorta lost some of that. So nah what? You gonna dump your doe?"

Shaking her head the mouse had looked out of the taxi's stern, her gaze locked towards where the Songmark compound must be. "Mean only I know she be in danger always" she answered. "And I not able help often. Fact's not change heart. Heart never ruled by facts. So tomorrow I find Huakava. Day after I go Meeting Island. Plead case. Hope for best."

"I thought you said you'd wait nine days" the bovine reminded her companion.

Oharu nodded in agreement. "Nine days. Longer I wait, harder is to do this. By now Sandy's lover make his escape. More days mean nothing. Tomorrow I see if any value to Huakava. Think yes, am. Believe yes am. Up to other to decide." She had dropped her tail, curling it around her right leg as was her habit, then turned to face the tiny ships stern again. It was her signal to Butterfly that she wished to be alone in her thoughts, at least for a while. It was the day before Molly nearly died of Marsh Typhus. She never did get to talk with Huakava before her trial.

That had been some time ago. Since then had been Molly's illness, Oharu's own coming to terms with her inner demons, even meeting the Natives of No Island. "Have I so changed" Oharu asked the rain. "I still dream of her. I still smell her. I still taste her. Am I mad, or simply a fool?"

A sound caught her attention. Too tired to care that she sat outside in nothing but her damp fur and a soaked through loin cloth that hid nothing Oharu turned to that sound. Before her stood the same wild priest she'd met before. "How may I serve you" she asked quietly, moving just enough to cover herself slightly from his view.

"You fool" he answered, leaning on his staff. "Huakava chose her last daughter wisely. Yet even the greatest priestess must have something in their heart but pain. Else she is useless to all."

"I tell her I love her, she will hate me" Oharu answered.

He laughed, turning in a circle about his walking stick. "Angry yes" he agreed. "Hate? No. That one can not truly hate the one who saved her life twice."

Picking up her curry comb Oharu began easing the snarls from her fur, at the same time removing excess water. "She not know" the mouse admitted.

"Secrets. Children" He leaned forward. "In your mind you have so reduced yourself? You are no animal. Wear your beautiful Kimono for her child. It would be the worse that she never knows. More so if you allow this pain to burn your heart to ash."

Too tired to argue Oharu stood, turned her back on the man and staggered into her home. She was exhausted and this was a battle she could not afford to win or lose. Behind her the rain continued. If the priest remained she cared not. All she wished was an ending to her pain, if only for a day. Not only her heart, but her back, her paws, her mouth. All the places she had been tortured. Weather such as this brought the aches she wished would pass. Troubled she fell asleep on her own mat floor.

May 19th, 1936

"Tell me Mr. Ruman. If the space between atoms is greater than the solid matter itself. Just why is it that you do not fall though that desk?" Helen Whitehall listened as the boy in question gave his accounts of the facts. He was impressive for all his sports ability, in that his mind was just as evolved as his body. When he had finished she nodded in acceptance, turning back to the blackboard. "An excellent dissertation. One might almost believe that you actually read the book." She wrote a girls name on the board. "However we all know who has been coaching you. Lolo, as of today you are my assistant in this class. Your efforts with our once stumbling young man have born excellent fruit. There are others who need as much help. Do you concur?"

"Me?" a tiny female gerbil squeaked. "Teach? "

"If not you then who?" Helen asked. "You see, in no more than a few weeks I will be having my child. Though I will only be gone a week or two, I would like my substitute to know what is going on and to have help stopping the spit-wad battles. Correct Mr. Brighton?"

A young coyote quickly lowered the double barreled sawed off waxed straw that he had been about to use, blushing under his fur. "Yessmam."

"Where does the thing go?" Standing the boy walked up to Helen's desk, dropping his straw into her trashcan. "Very good, four pages on why lead poisoning contributed to the Roman Empire's collapse. Tomorrow if you please."

"But Mrs. Whitehall. This is physics, not history."

"I am aware of that Mr. Brighton. However as it is your history book you have open on your desk and not your physics manual, then perhaps I should discover why that subject interests you so much. Be seated. Lolo?"

"May I ask mother and father first?"

"I would prefer that." She turned to the full class, noting the time as she did so. "Three minutes until end of school. I suggest that you spend it... unwisely." With a smile to her students she sat in her chair, relaxing her swollen ankles. It had been a long day and she felt unwell. Was there something wrong she worried. She remembered her mothers pregnancies. There should be still two months before her child was due. There were differences between species, but at least a month remained. Didn't it? But her dreams, the stress. Was she about to miscarry? Around her students were busy spending their time 'unwisely.' Mainly by chatting with each other. Whitehall's class was known for having a few minutes of social time, if everything had been covered. It was a popular class, though students like the coyote boy

Brighton swore oaths that she had three sets of eyes hidden under her long hair.

Not too much later she found herself again at a semi-hidden door. Police officers had offered to help her, on Spontoon at least a pregnant woman was considered very attractive even if her face had not been granted great beauty. She had smiled, told them where she was going and accepted the fact that one officer remained following her. To insure she didn't get lost of course. Reaching out she rapped sharply on the old wooden door. It was a matter of seconds before it opened and she found herself facing the now rather friendly female face of Officer Katrina O'Tool. "Is he in?" she asked softly.

"Von Toews? Sure, he's in. Lemme fix things up fer ya." Katrina politely held the door to the office she shared with Detective von Toews, and then hurriedly cleared a chair of the papers temporarily "filed" there, depositing them on a nearby patch of open floor space. Helen was under no illusion that they would remain there once she had departed. She waved for von Toews to remain seated as she settled herself onto the bench.

"We meet again Mrs. Whitehall" the Schnauzer said in greeting. "Though I hope there have been no other difficulties."

Helen smiled, holding one paw up to delay further questions. For just a few moments she inhaled the room. Typically male even with O'Tool's constant presence. Dark woods countered by stark white plaster, books everywhere yet both desks obviously well used, clean of all things but what was important now. She noted in amusement as von Toews quietly slid a sheet of paper over whatever was in front of him. She loved this room, even though this was only her second visit. It was so like her grandfathers study that another smile came to her as she recalled her grandmothers's voice demanding that 'this rats nest be cleaned up.' Even the scent was much the same. A male scent, strong yet not overpowering.

"Mrs. Whitehall?" Antonius asked again.

"I'd love to just move in here and live" she answered, then laughed at the stunned look on boths faces. "Its just like my grandfathers study. A bit smaller but my desk was over there" she pointed to the rooms one window. "And his where the good Katrina's is. He taught me so much about science that I breezed through college. At least in the Science subjects. Sir, I have a proposition for you."

"A proposition?" the schnauzer asked.

"Yes. I am about to have my baby and I need a Godfather. Are you up to the position?"

Antonius Von Toews look was exactly like the current slang term 'Deer in Headlights.' "Godfather?" he asked. "Of Killian's child?"

"It would be rather helpful sir" Helen said gravely. "If you would admit that I have some relationship to this child as well as my departed husband." Her voice lightened. "Yes, Killian's child. Illie has accepted to be Godmother, though having a child running around speaking nothing but Cantonese will have me translating for his, or her teachers. Killian thought the world of you sir. I can think of no one else on these islands I would trust my child to than you and Illie."

Antonius managed his own smile of amusement. "Miss Devinski?"

"Is still only a friend I regret" Helen admitted. "I truly fear that I am not attractive enough for her, though I do try. Will you think on this?"

Antonius nodded in agreement. "Certainly, ma'am, I will do so."

"Thank you. Now please remain seated while I leave. It is uncivilized for a woman to expect a man of your age to stand and sit like a yo-yo. Katrina?"

Officer O'Tool noiselessly padded over, gently assisting Helen to stand. "Thank you Katrina. Your wife is a very lucky woman. Now gentlemen? I've papers to grade and a test to create. One learns as a teacher that the mimeograph waits for no woman." Making her way out she paused at the door a moment. "Your missing the traditional fishing photo" she noted. "I believe there is one in Killian's effects. Some arrived last week. I shall have it brought over." She opened the door, turning again to face Antonius. "It shows him laughing while holding up a rather large and very ugly fish. He is standing next to a very handsome Prussian."

Closing the door Helen managed three steps when it happened. Her cry of dismay was enough to bring both Katrina and Antonius at a run, along with the police officer who had followed her. Leaning against a wall she looked first at Antonius, then at the puddle at her feet. "Someone please get the janitor, and Mr. Von Toews? I'm afraid I'll need your answer sooner than later."

Chapter Thirty

May 21st, 1936

A watery late afternoon sun shown through Helen Whitehall's hospital window as she woke. It had been a harrowing, frightening two days for the woman. Her labor had been long, and very hard. Killian's son, even though almost three months premature to her experience had been large. Leg splitting tail cracking large. Now she lay in bed recovering while her son was tended by others, held for now in the hospitals single premature room. Her son. Killian's son. Antonius James Whitehall, the name she had chosen yesterday for him. How Inspector von Toews would take that news she wasn't certain. Though he had been with her as she entered the delivery room, Helen had lost all interest in anything but delivering her son within minutes of arriving. God himself could have been in the room and she would have cursed no less. Child bearing Helen had discovered, was a real pain in the tail.

A little while later, while still in her thoughts her door opened. One of the many nurses coming in with her evening meal. "Cardboard and glue again?" Helen asked weakly.

"It isn't quite that bad" the nurse laughed. "I looked in on your son, he is doing better than we expected. For a supposed premie he's almost full sized. Are you certain your husband wasn't a bull?" She started opening containers, letting the almost scent of almost food tickle Helen's nose.

"English Bulldog" Helen admitted. "I guess I should have expected he'd have large children. Have I any visitors?"

"Dear, you know its past visiting time. Now eat. Doctor Kiwi says you can see your son in the morning. Maybe a week, two at the most and you should be able to take him home. Baring complications. It's quite amazing how strong he is though it isn't that early for a Bulldog young lady."

Helen ate, but for the life of her she could never have sworn as to what she ate. When the nurse left the priestess that had taken Helen under her wing stepped in, allowing the door to shut behind her. "I thought visiting hours were over Dia" Helen remarked. Privately she was happy to see the calico furred woman however.

"For we there are no hours. We come. We go. As we are needed. Your dreams have settled?"

"First night I didn't feel like something was trying to shove me through the floor" Helen admitted. "What did you do?"

"I asked assistance of one not born of these islands, yet who is now one of us. She had the knowledge needed to chase away the spirit that vexed you so."

Helen pushed herself up into a sitting position, for the first time noting twin wet spots on her gown. "Antonius better be a hungry little boy" she remarked, settling herself comfortable. Or as comfortably as her bone sore tail would allow. "What kind of spirit."

Settling herself on the floor Helen's visitor looked up, apparently preferring this position to using a chair. '*She's never sat in a chair around me*' the American suddenly realized.

"Your husband sent an evil creature to its own doom. It desired revenge. It wanted the body of his wife as its own. How it tracked you here we can not know. Oharu sent it back. Forever locking it within the borders of its birth nation. I do not presume to understand how she did this. Only that upon seeing you

her face was that of a warrior preparing to deal with a much lessor opponent. Almost I felt sorry for it.”

“That would have been Madam Xiùme” Helen explained. “A more evil woman I’ve never met.”

“Nor will you again meet her. In this or any other life. Oharu in this area at least, it appears she is a very powerful Priestess. I was honored to study her as she worked. She has promised to teach me anything I wish to know.” Stroking her grass skirt the priestess looked down from Helen’s dark green eyes, as always apparently unaffected by their depths as others were. “We have lost so much. To have one come willing to teach anyone all she knows. It is a ray of hope that our ways will not be burned to ashes as so many others have been.”

“My son?” Helen asked, moving to avoid what she had discovered some time ago was a raw wound in this woman’s soul.

“Your son is in excellent health. He will grow strong, tall. I fear for our daughters for I have seen that he will grow to be a very attractive man.” She smiled. “Many fathers will laugh as their daughters tails snap sideways at his approach.” Both women laughed, then for several hours they chatted. Speaking of everything, of nothing. It was the healing Helen needed. It would eventually become a life long friendship.

May 29th, 1936

Oharu Wei walked into the Double Lotus at a time that was early for her, Spontoon’s harsh sun having given the mouse a slight headache today. Or had it been Saimmi’s detailed grilling of the differences between a Miko’s training and a Spontoon priestess. Unsure which, what the mouse wanted right at this moment was a cold Nootnops Red. It was much too early for alcohol and her current dress made her self confident about appearing in the heavily trafficked tourist areas. It was only the second time she had worn this Kimono, a gift from someone who had not stayed around to meet her. She had discovered that not only was it the work of someone who though was a seamstress, had never made such clothing before as it was a bit too small in certain places and was tight even after her own alterations. There simply hadn’t been enough material to loosen some places. Still it had been a gift, one she was not going to insult the giver by not wearing. In truth her clothing choices were limited, the three kimono’s she had made already showing their wear.

Setting carefully at the bar, something she almost never did unless she was hot and tired Oharu ordered her drink. Carefully she sat a shining quarter shell on the counter as the bottle and glass arrived. Like most of those who visited the Lotus she paid native prices, not the inflated Tourist ones. Yet unlike tourists and most natives, drinking directly from a bottle was something Oharu never did. It brought up raw memories she had only recently dealt with. Even straws it seemed were sometimes difficult.

“Warm today” Becky said in greeting as the coin vanished. “Learning more about us today?”

Quietly Oharu picked up the bottle, tipping her glass slightly so the cool carbonated drink would not fizz too much as she poured it. Nootnops Red poured as a rich red liquid, its sweet scent promising quick energy along with a delicate aftertaste Oharu had learned to truly enjoy. Nootnops Blue was of course a pale, light blue liquid. Just as fizzy as its red brother, not as sweet however it had been aimed towards the more mature consumer. Along with the special extract it held, one Saimmi had promised her that she would find much use for in the future. Another difference was that to date, no one had discovered a way to remove the stain that the red version left behind. Once stained ones clothing was ruined, ones fur would have to be cut, to grow out. Still it was a very popular drink.

“We discussed further differences. Local, Shinto” Oharu explained. “Not much difference mainly. Miko trained almost Nisou... Priestess level already. There differences I must learn, must accept or find ways work with what know already. Not easy step to make. Many small things I must learn first.” She sipped her drink, letting the red’s thick soft coolness sooth her throat. There was singing in almost all of the local

rituals, singing that was not optional. Though her damaged throat had healed as best it ever would, leaving her no difficulty managing the chants. Long use did leave the mouse's throat sore. "I never will be great priestess" she admitted to the lynx. "Maybe close to Saimmi, never her equal." She sat her glass down. "Had been born here things much different. Point I will never be what I could have been." She turned her glass steadily, studying the red liquid held within, absorbing its pattern of tiny bubbles as though they held the secret of eternal life. Or a good hot bread recipe. "But I be more than I could have ever in Cipangu."

"You like to help people" Becky observed. "I've noticed that. You gain pleasure from doing so, as a woodcarver gains pleasure from a well completed piece. So please do not become angry but I have a favor to ask of you."

"We have tried that recently" Oharu reminded her lynx bartender softly. "We are not compatible. You are too forceful."

Becky laughed. "No, not that though it sorrows me to know we cannot find a joining place. This is important to me, to my family and to other people as well. You do remember when Butterfly dragged you in here. When you first came here that you were hurt, vulnerable?"

Oharu nodded yes, carefully lifting her glass to her lips. She had seen the results of spilled Red before. Considering how many ways she had damaged her clothing already, doing so with such a foolish action would be unthinkable. She swallowed, setting her glass down before answering. "Had not been for certain people I would be easy prey" she admitted. "I would be someone's willing slave today, or dead. Is this something about?"

"It's about Nikki and her newest. Well, her newest acquisition. There are problems with that pairing. Problems that could cost Lotus our license to operate. We might even end up in jail. Nikki might even end up dead, her acquisition lost for all time."

That statement caught the mouse's attention. Of all places she knew of where the law held strong Spontoan Island was the fairest, though on Casino Island much occurred that could not elsewhere. As long as the tourist's or movie people were unaffected then the local law held a laid back view of things that occurred between consenting adults. But there was a limit. Not that crime was rampant, there would always be crime to balance peace. Only that certain things could occur without much more than a paw slap on Casino, where it would be major difficulties say on Main Island. She remembered a case in point where two of the bars patrons had decided to air their differences in public with one ending up in the hospital. Anywhere else and the bar would be closed for the night, perhaps a week or more. But the Double Lotus, like its smaller opposite the Yellow Lance were too badly needed by Spontoan's tourist trade. A fine had been levied, one all the regular patrons had ponyed up for, then things had returned much to normal. She herself had dropped three shells into the fine hat that night though it had left her with barely water taxi fees to Main Island. "What could be so bad" she asked, carefully pushing her now empty glass aside.

Becky warmed up to her subject. She was much the talker once you got her started Oharu had learned. "A month ago this young Songmark Russian girl came in. She'd been in before some time before that. We all thought it was funny then. She'd sat alone, ignored but afraid to move once she discovered what this place is. Anyway she came back a little less than two months ago and Nikki made friends with her. At first. Now the problem is this. Like I said, the girl is a Songmark student and apparently important to her government as well. Nikki's a second year.."

"Nikki is part owner of Kart-Tooms Charter Service."

"How did you know?"

"I met Katherine" Oharu explained. "My pilot on last leg return from Hawaii. She too is second year graduate. Katherine is nice native dalmatian woman. Now makes sense. Please continue."

"All right. Nikki sometimes likes her girls difficult to train. This one has to have been her hardest subject and I think she's been much more than a bit rough. Well she's always rough, but this time its like its personal, but that's not the real problem. You see this girl. Her name is umm... Tatiana, can't remember her last name. Anyway, somehow she got hooked into a crooked deal. Ended up owing certain parties six hundred and doesn't have it. So she turned to Nikki. Nikki ponyed up the money but under strict guidelines." Becky took a drink of water, having dried her own throat. "What I mean is that Songmark girl has no future. Not unless she can come up with that six hundred. Nikki owns her debt which means she owns her. All very legal. Consenting adults you understand."

"This girl is an adult?" Oharu asked. She was feeling her stomach begin to knot.

"Under Spontoon law yes, and all the papers are above board legal. Seems she doesn't have any family either. At least she's never mentioned that any anyone here has heard. That makes her perfect prey for certain types."

Relaxing Oharu stretched a bit. "She make her own bed, she sleep in it. So unless she ask me for help what has this with me to do" she asked, reaching for her second soft drink that had appeared as if by magic, dropping another coin to pay for it.

"Songmark can get us shut down Oharu. I mean seriously shut us down. We'd end up on the beaches fishing for a living with pawlines if we are lucky. I'd bet you could shut us down too, just not as fast. Oharu, this girl is a student. She's spending every minute free from the school as Nikki's pet. And I do mean pet. We've talked it over, the girls and I. We want you to buy her off Nikki. Right now is the best time. Nikki needs the money. Very badly."

Withdrawing her paw from her glass again Oharu looked directly into the lynx's eyes, holding her with her gaze. "I do not desire to deal in slaves. Even if I did, I do not currently have one hundred shells. I certainly don't have six hundred."

"It was pounds Oharu. That'd be about three thousand shells. We know that. We're offering to back you."

"Then I would be in debt to you for such? It would take a full tourist season to earn enough to pay you, beyond that I need to live a year on my own. I think you should find another."

Leaning against the bar across from her customer Becky's voice became desperate. "There isn't anyone Oharu. Most of our people are scared of Nikki, or enamored by her. Nikki knows that the few who could come up with this much money wouldn't deal with her. There's a bit of hate as well, at least two I know of who would gladly burn that much money in front of her face just to see her company fall. But she's desperate dear. Superior Engineering has been working on that Romano R-5 they salvaged from the inner harbor. If Kart-Tooms doesn't pay by the end of this month they lose the plane. Its going to be worth ten, twenty times that much when its finished. Its one of a half a paw ever built. Thing never even reached production stage. They've bet everything on this, then Nikki sank her companies entire ready cash into basically a fools play trying to help an idiot. If they lose this they will fold."

"Why not you offer then."

"Because. Well for all the friendliness you see here between Nikki and I. Oharu. She was my student. She went too far with me one night. Ignored or more than likely missed a safe word. We don't talk outside business anymore. She'd as soon die of starvation at my doorstep than accept a moldy slice of bread from me. That goes with the other girls too. Don't ask about Songmark. They don't get involved unless their girl is in trouble she hasn't a chance to get out of, and right now Tatiana isn't in that kind of

real trouble. This is what they train them to deal with, how they train them. Their best students sometimes end up in deep trouble, dragging themselves out by their own claws. I know one English house cat for instance who's done the near impossible already. By the time anyone knows that she is in serious trouble Nikki will have sold that I.O.U. of Tatiana's to someplace like Krupmark, or worse. Kuo Han."

Becky paused to catch her breath before continuing.

"Oharu... Kart-Tooms is Nikki's life, one woman is nothing. Ten women are nothing weighed against that. It's the only thing of her great love Louise that she still has. Nikki doesn't like slavery any more than you or I. Oh we can accept it when it is needed, but we don't like it do we? But if her company goes down she loses everything. That means going home, where she'll be married to some fat cat in hours. Married in order to cure her of her illness of course. Our illness. This Russian doesn't mean that much to her right now. She's probably had her long enough for the newness to wear off. Nikki goes through a dozen or so every tourist season, even some of the local girls can't seem to refuse her. She does that somehow. Sure, Songmark will probably get Tatiana back. Then probably fail her in some subject and make her earn more points to catch up but they'll probably cut our throats for doing nothing about it. In the least one of your bosses's is going to make our lives hell, while the other may just make the rest of our nights rather interesting."

Closing her eyes for a moment Oharu worked her way silently through what she'd just been told. Finally opening her eyes again she faced Becky as one who understood more than the other could believe. "Becky. In this I to act your agent. You wish me procure this contract, then turn over to you. Daughter, that changes nothing this Tatiana."

Becky stumbled a moment at the word Daughter. It meant Oharu was speaking as a Priestess, not a friend. That she was taking this in the most serious manner that she could. "Honored Mother" she managed, feeling her short tail slowly lift from between her legs. "It changes everything, because you keep Tatiana. As she repays you. You repay us if you want to or not. Call it our contribution to your studies. We don't care. This is just too important to us to care about shells. Honored Mother. She came here hurt and vulnerable just like you did. You had help, she didn't. It was like a bleeding chicken in a sea of sharks. You were busy, off to Orpington Island studying the Chicken Spirit cult. Huakava had no interest in her so she didn't show up either. This is the first chance we've had where you're here and Nikki will be too. Please, as a favor. Money isn't everything. Hades knows I could close the doors right now and walk away. We're pretty good tourist guides still. We don't need the money, just each other. But this girl needs help and I know enough about you that I know you're the right choice to help her."

"Daughter. I am ex-Cipangu spy. I may do again for our nation. I am artist and priestess. What of that makes you think I the right choice help this girl. I could be worse her ways Nikki could never be. For I hunger too."

"Really? Then why are you still avoiding the Procyk girl. We all, except you know that Lars is wrong for her. That he will use her, then discard her when she's no longer useful to him. Probably sell her to some slaver like we think he's done others. If you are even half the priestess Saimmi is you could turn that does heart to you in a matter of hours or less and she'd never suspect it wasn't her own choice. So Oharu Wei, and I do like your new last name better than the old one. Would a Priestess lead a woman around like a pet dog?"

"No. She would not. Unless woman needed such. Then never in public." Oharu picked up her new drink, looking through its red surface at the older lynx across from her. "I am to buy girl then what Daughter. Set free? Nikki would understand. She and I talk often. Yet if what say is true this woman not understand. Might even be harmful for her. So what I do with her Daughter. I not need servant, even part time one. I not yet ready take real apprentice. I happy in my hut alone. My studies, my art. They take most my time. My garden rest. Tell me Daughter. What I do with her then?"

"Retrain her?" the lynx asked with a grin. "Whatever Nikki has done, undo it. By then she will understand if you burn that contract and release her. I understand that she is a promising student after all, and if she goes home. Well losif Starling doesn't much like failures. She would at best, be mining salt by nightfall. More than likely, considering what news comes out of there some woman Starling fancies at the moment will be wearing a new fur coat by the end of the month. At least you won't have to worry about falling in love with her Priestess. Not with Procyk in your soul."

"I will do this then" Oharu agreed. "Under one condition Daughter."

"That is?"

"No one within these walls ever mention Molly or her name within my hearing again. It is more than painful."

"Agreed." Reaching under her bar Becky brought out a stack of one hundred shell notes. "Thirty. It reduces our savings to a few hundred shells but the tourist season is still strong."

Carefully Oharu picked up the notes. "I am holding your lives in paws child" she said softly. Lifting the stack of hundred shell notes she stared at them. "This your lives. How much Nikki truly need?"

"Two thousand five hundred. Why?"

"That all I shall pay for used pet." Slowly counting off five bills she laid them on the counter. She then opened her new, tiny blue shell purse to pack in the rest. "Nikki will know where money came from. By using me you allow yourself help her. She allows you do so. You would both make very good politicians I believe. Place those away. Then tell your wife, the door guard that you are open again. If you do not mind I will settle tonight's bill on next visit. I not like to show my paw spilling hundred shell notes on floor."

"Thank you. And tonight is on the house Honored Mother."

"Daughter" Oharu warned. "Do not thank hired butcher until last head has been piled in your courtyard. Then is certain that neither you or loved ones among them. I do not like this. Yet you are correct. I cannot refuse. You need my help. This Titania needs my help. Songmark needs my help. Nikki needs my help. How could I refuse any, even though of four only you, your family follow the path I now represent."

"If she knew" Becky whispered. "If she knew everything you have done. For her, for others, what you have put yourself through to do these things. I know in my heart that she would be in your arms as fast as she could manage it."

"You are wrong. I have seen her heart in fires. There is no place for me. In any case she never will know. Now I take my bottle, my glass retire to table as always do. This night though Daughter you have made debt. One I think you will not like the paying when bill given you." She stood, bowed ever so little to the older woman then turned to head for her favorite table.

Oharu sat silently for hours after that, as she was known to do. It was nothing unusual, those regulars who now knew her understood that she wished to be alone. That most likely she needed to work through her mental notes those things that had been taught to her that day, or the last few days. Oharu was a regular yes, but only if by such you meant once a week. Though she often sat in this corner, if another was already there the mouse would simply select another place. Eventually she dozed. It had been an exceptionally hard and hot day after all and the Lotus had ceiling fans that sent cool breezes among the tables. Some group of tourists had defiled a shrine, even to the point of dragging a heavy stone Tiki several dozen yards into the jungle. Saimmi had been saddened, Oharu had been enraged. To damage, to destroy that which was not your own simply because you could. Because it was not what you believed. Such was unacceptable behavior by any civilized being. Only a base animal acted such. They had spent

hours between them first locating, then dragging the two hundred plus pound weight of stone Tiki uphill back to its shrine. After their hard work the site was again holy, however Oharu planned to spend tomorrow evening in the area waiting. Vandals often returned, to again destroy what they could not own. That was one of the differences between Saimmi and Oharu. One of the main reasons the mouse knew that she would never be greater than her teacher. For Oharu believed in retribution. In full.

A clatter of a wooden plate hitting the table before her woke her. Nani was tonight's waitress, being one of Becky's co-wives and she had sat a plate of freshly cut pineapple slices in front of Oharu. A moment later another bottle of Nootnops Red joined it. Looking up in surprise Oharu was about to ask a question when Nani moved aside, her movement unblocking Oharu's view of Nikki's normal table. The leather clad mare was just settling down, a bottle of locally brewed beer in one paw. Taking up her plate and new bottle Oharu stood, walking over to the solitary mare. Sitting uninvited across from Nikki Oharu sat her plate between them, her opened bottle she sat to her right. "Pineapple cleans the breath" she offered in greeting.

"Thanks" Nikki answered, selecting the top slice. "Haven't seen yah in a while Priestess. Busy chasing ghosts around the island?" She didn't even look up as Nani sat a clean glass next to Oharu for her own drink, then vanished as quickly.

"Ghosts exist within our souls Nikki, not in places. They ride with us, forever bringing painful memories. Europeans are wrong, time heals no wounds. Time cannot heal. It allows pain to return. Worse each time. Unless unreleased it destroys all."

Nikki nibbled at her slice of fruit, examining the much smaller mouse across from her. "So they told you" she snapped.

"Yes. I am aware that you are in trouble. Is it a boy?"

Nikki laughed. Her sudden laughter was true, not forced. "Only if I go home. No, money. Like always it seems. I spent tha' cash reserves and now Liz says we need tha' money."

"I have almost three hundred to spare" Oharu offered. "If your need is that great."

"Greater than that Kahuna Wei" Nikki admitted. "About eight times greater than that."

"Perhaps the bank may help? I will go with you, if it would be helpful."

"Tapped" Nikki admitted. "Nah more credit till Superior releases tha' plane. All I got now is this" she pulled out a paper from her worn leather blouse. "I.O.U. Songmark girl, no one wants tah mess with a Songmark girl. And ah bunch of cheap stock certificates."

"I see. I have heard rumors that you might have pet for sale. She your pet then?"

"Hard tah train, but I've managed tah at least house break her." Nikki's laugh was forced this time. "Nice kid, tried to do her ah favor. It cam' back tah haunt me." She sighed as if in regret. "Nah good deed ever goes unpunished."

"No. Every good deed returns to burn within your heart. You cannot sell her. It will cause too much pain for too many people Nikki.

"And your going to do what? Fight me for the Russian? I warn you Chip. I won't back down this time. There's more to this than just wantin a kiss."

"Have I ever called you Beak" Oharu asked softly. "Do you in any way suspect that I ever will?"

Nikki's nose flared at the insults sound, then just as quickly she calmed. "I apologize. We have our differences but you have proven a friend. Its just the stress. Stress, lik when I jumped 'er bout her so called government. Nothin but theives ahn murders them."

Oharu selected a slice of pineapple, nibbling herself its tart flesh. "Perhaps" she said after finishing half the fruit. "We should take the air. I would like to know the history of this problem."

"Why, your suddenly rich?" Nikki started to laugh, then noticed the serious look in Oharu's dark eyes. "You are, aren't you. All right then. Out back. There's a nice stone bench and we've an hour at least." Standing Nikki finished her beer then walked towards a half-hidden door in the back of the Double Lotus. Oharu gathered up her plate and followed, leaving her untouched bottle and glass behind. They would by unwritten compact hold this table for them.

Once outside in what was loosely called 'the yard' Oharu joined Nikki on a wooden bench. It was a small place, no more than thirty feet square, however it was hidden from the outside world by the windowless buildings that surrounded it. Some odd compact had insured that no building, not even the Lotus herself held an opening that looked out over this space. There was a hidden way out but Oharu knew only that such existed, not where it was. Holding out her plate she sat silently until Nikki, after taking another piece of fruit broke the silence.

"It started out as revenge" Nikki explained, her voice low. "She is Russian, Red Russian. It was ah Red Russian that murdered my Louise. I found out that much. That crash, it hadn't been an accident. When she came to me I think she was only interested because of what I am. Tatiana is strong in spirit and body, but she was raised to have someone stronger in control of her. I think that was what she was lookin for when she first came to me tha' night. Someone to control her so she could relax. Tah heal."

"You saw only revenge" Oharu whispered, understanding. "A chance to return that pain that your soul holds. I wonder, is that why you sold the Macao Persian two years ago. To pay the bills you could not afford to pay?"

"Malou?" Nikki asked with a laugh. "You mean people bought that story? They really believe tha' I sold Malou to Kuo Hon? What a riot. As if I could hurt her." She ate her fruit in one gulp, taking a deep breath. "Malou is really from Dalian, she was only born in Macao. She started getting intah my heart. She was... is in love with me. Like you and your doe, my Louise is my only love. I kept warning her, I even threatened to sell her if she didn't go home. I guess I was a bit vocal that night. Ah know ah was drunk. Finally I ordered her to go home. She refused. So I tied her up, carried her to the Louise and dumped her in tha cargo compartment. Told her that her next stop was a cheap Kuo Hon hotel, tha cheapest I could sell her too. You know what she said? 'If selling me brings you joy, I will never be unhappy.'" Standing abruptly the mare looked up into a darkening sky. "How can anyone hurt someone who loves them that much? So I flew low, chased down ah tourist boat that was en route tah Macao and dumped her on it. Left nough money so's she could get back tah Dalian. She really thought I was selling her to some slaver an all she asked of me was one last kiss. I still get a letter from her every week."

"What has she to say?"

Nikki snorted, looking down to the seated mouse. "I've never opened one. They are all stuffed in a box under my bed."

Oharu leaned back, setting the plate with one last slice of fruit on the benches arm. Stretching she yawned, the act allowing anyone who was looking to discovered that nearly half her own teeth were missing. At the same time her too tight kimono moved, allowing certain patches of fur to suddenly become visible even as curves rarely seen became all to evident. There was a use for a too small kimono after all Oharu realized. "Perhaps you should Nikki. If for nothing else, amusement."

"Your trying to trap me Priestess. Those letters are nothing but hooks, hooks to pull Louise out of my heart and let Malou in. I'll never read them."

"Then burn them Nikki. That is your only other choice. If you don't, one lonely night you will open one. If another slipped into your heart what could Louise ever think of you?"

Nikki just stared at Oharu for long moments. "They teach Miko's a lot don't they" she finally asked.

Oharu looked up, fully aware of how inviting she appeared to the mare. "Teach yes. Almost two thirds my life I help others. I learn even more. Now I feel what others feel. Only fool not able to understand. You are in love with Malou. You are in love with Louise. Make room for Malou. Share Louise with her, her with Louise."

"Sit up mouse before I try something that will get me another bloody nose" Nikki snapped as she again sat beside the mouse. "Is it really that easy?"

Oharu sat up, not bothering to straighten her kimono. "No. Is not. Yet can be done. I will do so, one day. When doe is long gone. When heart so lonely I must. What of this Tatiana. Will you truly sell her? I know this is possible for you. You are strong enough to live with such choice."

Nikki sighed, wringing her paws. "Already talked with Krupmark's man here. He offered two thousand for her. Won't go higher, not trained well enough he says. Kuo Han says three, and ten more for your doe but..." She shivered at some thought. "At least Krupmark is civilized about these things and she knows him already. Be easier to trick her onto tha boat. Kuo Han would destroy her, but I need tha money. Sellin yer Doe..." Nikki shivered in real fear. "Havin yah angry with me isn' something I ever want tah have happen."

"Nor would you survive my madness" Oharu admitted. "So you will sell her to Kuo Han."

Nikki lowered her head, speaking so softly Oharu barely heard the answer. "Yeah. Probably in ah few hours."

"How did you two get into such difficulty."

Nikki raised her head, looking at the wall opposite as though it held every answer she could ever need. "Revenge. Its why I took her as a customer" she admitted. "Harder on her than anyone. She thrived on it. Then some upper classman offered her stock in some American company. Only six hundred fifty, but they had to have the money in a week. Dumb girl thought it was shells. Signed, took that stock, came back ah week later with six hundred an fifty shells. They laughed at her. POUNDS they told her, over three thousand shells. Took her money, gave her till noon to find the rest or she'd sleep with the fishes. She eventually came tah me. Much as I hated her, what her bein Red Russian she's too pretty, to strong hearted, to intelligent tah see floatin in tha bay. So I bought tha stock from her. She signed an IOU, paid off tha' bad guys. Mouse, she's too good to let this happen to her. Even if she is Red Russian."

"Stock is fake?"

Nikki shook her head no. "I checked tha next day. Its real enough. Some tourist lost it in a poker game. Some company called Balkness Fiskey. Make little cartoons for theaters. Fifty-two percent o' tha company. Still nearly useless, probably go bankrupt in ah few years. But now I find mahself tha owner of ah Red Russian Sable an tha proud owner of over half of ah useless cartoon company."

"And suddenly need that three thousand." Oharu stood, her kimono slowly falling back into place about her body as she took a few steps. "Louise be proud your actions. I buy her from you. I not have three thousand, but enough perhaps save your company. She repay what she owes you. I burn her IOU. You give her useless stock back her when done."

"You'd throw away money on bad paper? Just to help me out of ah jam" Nikki asked.

"No Nikki. You are friend, of sorts. I do to save another friend's dream. Katherine. You will owe me nothing."

"Kath? No, your not.. Kath? You do like to joust at windmills Priestess. Kath'd act just like.. If you asked her... Oh I want to see that."

"Katherine was pilot that flew me to Spontoon. We became friends only Nikki. Her dream though. Yes, her dream much like my own. I will help to save that dream. For her, for Louise."

"Not for me huh" the mare asked.

"No Nikki. You are grown woman. You did this yourself, just as Russian, Red or White did herself. You will learn from this. I not know if she will."

Nikki laughed. "Oh my dear helpless Priestess" she giggled. "Don Quixote has little on you. Your blinded by your own romantic heart. I tried tah run Tatiana off mahself at first. When I realized tah I was startin to really hurt her bad. Was really scar'n her. She said no. She made the debt, she would pay it. Even if it meant her freedom. She's not gonna let you off any morn' she let me off. Strong girl, body an mind. Its her soul I worry bout. Maybe bein a powerful Priestess pet will help her there."

Oharu too looked up into the now dark sky, a half moon showing through the islands bright lights. "I not powerful Nikki, I simply serve. At one time... At one time Nikki I thought own life ended. That I had no future. Since that time has been shown me that my path to help others. I never be great. None will tremble sound of name. No great armies heed orders. Nor I great Prestress Nikki. I never be. That Saimmi's destiny I think, though she be first deny such. I not keep pets, I not much like slavery though has place. We do this thing such way as greatly embarrass her. Such way that she run when given choice." Looking down again, turning her gaze to Nikki Oharu smiled. "Perhaps after coming storm she sell these worthless sheets paper tourists. As oddities."

"Really think there will be war huh? Yeah, so do I. Okay mouse, but if your country invades my country. I warn yah I'm gonna be wearing ah mouse fur flying jacket."

Leaning forwards Oharu brought her face close to Nikki's. Their lips almost touching. "You really think Casino Island stand against invasion Main Island?"

Taking the opportunity Nikki did what she'd wanted to do for months. Pushing her lips against the mouse she stole a kiss, catching Oharu by surprise. As the mouse stepped back shocked Nikki simply smiled. "I'll take Casino and ten shells" she whispered. "Now lets go play the hard slave traders. Make this little Russian think she's losing everything. Oharu, scare her yes. Don't hurt her. I've done that enough already. Her body will scar. Is scarred. Ah did bad things tah her. Very bad things."

"Have you gained revenge then?"

Nikki shook her head no. "Dreams. Louise isn't happy what I've done, what I'm doin. No mouse. Revenge isn't what I thought it would be. There is no good taste in my mouth from this."

"Then we end this. Come. Let us haggle over animal as were animal. That woman will fear. Hope run away. I not keep her Nikki. I give you word."

Nikki smiled as she moved to open the door for Oharu. "No, you won't keep her" she whispered to her companion. "She will keep you, just like she kept me. Mark my words little mouse."

Oharu shrugged. "Destiny what we make it" she admitted. "Nikki. You think I fight fair again..." Her paws came up and for a moment the mare could swear the mouse held something within them. Something that faded in and out of sight. Something she felt deep in her gut that she had no desire to experience. "You wrong."

It was almost a quarter hour later when the unsuspecting young sable finally arrived at the Lotus. She paused just inside the door while waiting for her eyes to adjust. It was what she was wearing that caught Oharu's attention. Upon entering the young girl had quickly removed her Songmark jacket, leaving her in a too tight too thin blouse that had to have come from the cheapest tourist stall on Casino island. Its colors were actually painful to behold. Though such clothing was common among tourists, it was not common in the Lotus. Added to that fact was that this girl seemed so very nervous. She scanned the room, finally spotting Nikki who was sitting with Oharu. Quickly she came over, dropping to her knees beside the waiting mare and lowering her head in submission while ignoring the, to her unknown mouse-fem. At this range Oharu couldn't miss the thick leather collar Tatiana wore. From the way her fur matted under it the mouse could tell that she didn't wear it full time. Gently Nikki clipped a thin brass chain to the collar. Immediately the eye burning blouse was removed, leaving the sable naked from the waste up.

"Her coat beautiful" Oharu commented in admiration. "Even for this time year, though she not most beautiful woman I have seen. That is ugly blouse."

Tatiana started to glance at Oharu, but a hiss of displeasure from Nikki brought her eyes back to the mare's hooves. "There are more beautiful, we both know that Oharu. Tha blouse is tah remind her who holds her soul. She 'ates it, is why ah chose it.." At Oharu's name the sable inhaled sharply. Nikki had once told her horror stories about the Priestess mouse. How Oharu had beaten her in a friendly match simply by being ready to die to win. That story though had been more to frighten her for fun than warn her away. She'd asked Brigit Mulvaney and the stories her classmate had told her about Miko's froze even her Russian blood. "But ah have tah sell her. Its Kuo Han in tha mornin. I'll turn her over tah tha buyer just before four, righ after ah brand 'er one las time. By sunrise she'll be nothin but a memory. Be dead in ah year iffing she's lucky."

Tatiana swallowed. Not in fear, for her training by Iosif Starling's instructors had been the best possible. She knew Nikki was desperate for cash, had been with her when the mare had gone so far as to beg for help only to be turned down. Had she remained at Songmark she would be safe, but it would be tomorrow's sunset when her pass expired and only when she failed to return would anyone suspect that she was missing. It would take a day to be certain that she wasn't on Spontoan. By then... Gritting her teeth Tatiana reminded herself that she had walked into this with open eyes. Even now she could run, be away before either woman could catch her. *'I made this debt'* she told herself. *'I will pay it. In my blood if I have too. I will never beg.'* So involved she was in her thoughts she'd missed some of the conversation.

"..kill you Nikki" Oharu was saying. "Songmark is power beyond what people believe. Even own students not suspect."

"Some do. Tha' English House cat knows."

"Sell her then. I understand her country turned back on her. None come looking for common house cat who turned against own country. This one, someone from Russia come looking for her."

Nikki sighed. "Oharu. I wouldn't sell my pet iffing I wasn't desperate. I like her. She's tough tah train yes. Strong willed, hard headed but she listens. Has ah high pain threas'old. Not like those mushroom skinned tourists yah have tah repeat commands to. She's pretty, she's talented, intelligent ahn... She's comfortable. She maks me happy. Maybe... maybe iffing ahm lucky ah can buy 'er back afore Songmark finds out tha whole sordid story. Its noh like one of their girls wasn't inna Krupmark hotel before. Or sold, tha doe, she was sold."

"Kuo Han different Nikki" Oharu reminded the mare. "They never resale. May I?" she asked, holding out her paw. Shocked by the act Tatiana was looking into Oharu's eyes, thus she missed the grin as Nikki settled into the play they had decided upon. With a nod Nikki laid the leash into Oharu's open palm, granting her full control and use of her pet by the doing so. Pulling gently Oharu stood to lead the Russian girl into the open, indicating with a motion of her paw that she should stand as well. "Good lines" she admitted as she walked around the now standing sable, noting the hard muscle and glossy fur. "She wears too much my taste though, that be rectified. I could use pet. Maybe. To play with, to keep old memories away. Warmth at night. Especially cold nights. I have pains" she admitted.

"Didn't think you were tha kind" Nikki admitted, catching the wink Oharu gave her from behind Tatiana.

"A priestess may have all life she want Nikki, long she is true to path. Does not defile trust given her. A pet be nice. You have spaded her?"

"No" Nikki's face turned slightly grey for an instant at that thought. "That might nah be ah good idea, Sables don't breed often. Their still rare outside Russia at tha moment."

"A pity. I will have lock her up when in season. I would not want have pups until I ready. Of course local boys - girls could always do pups their own. Does she eat lot?"

"Stomach like a whirlpool. Eats almost as much as ah do" the mare admitted.

"You have not declawed her I hope."

"No." Nikki's voice was getting softer as she fell into character. "Nah yet buh was plannin tah next weekend. Is expensive. You want tah buy her?"

"You do have papers. A purebred is course more value than mongrel." Oharu ignored Tatiana's low grow of displeasure at the insinuation she might not be purebred. Nikki opened her leather blouse, setting two passports and a single sheet of paper in front of Oharu. Ignoring the passports Oharu picked up the paper, studying it. "How much she repaid" she asked seriously.

"Two hundred, some coin. Won't go to her friends, won't ask for help. Too damn proud."

Setting the paper aside, for it was as legal as any Spontoan service of debt could be, Oharu picked up the passports. Two hundred shells. Where could a Songmark student get two hundred shells. Not to forget the six hundred and fifty she'd had earlier. Two passports. Why she wondered. And knew when she opened them. Knew and knew where the money had come from, what it had been meant for. "Tatiana Bryzov, Ludmila Tsenko" she whispered. Looking up into Nikki's tired eyes she held up the passports, a questioning look on her face.

"Told her she wanted my help I get her identification papers. All of 'em" the equine admitted. "Bettern than bein deported for bad debts I guess. Or floating face down in tha bay, gutted alive more'n likely."

Nodding in understanding Oharu leaned over, placing her lips very close to Tatiana's right ear. "We drown spies here" she whispered softly. "It very slow death. You fight hold last breath, your eyes searching for way out, for help. Help never come. Your lungs burn for air. You reach for surface, only half-meter above nose. Your paws break surface, try claw air down to mouth but no avail, no air comes. Then body revolts, throwing out old air, trying bring in new. Only brings in acid hot salt water. It slow, painful death. I almost found out myself." Leaning back she watched for a reaction and was pleased by what she saw.

Tatiana did not whimper or cower in fear. Instead she stood upright, her eyes hard as she stared at Oharu. Her eyes daring the mouse to announce what she knew.

"I will give you fifteen hundred for her."

"Three thousand three hundred" Nikki countered.

"For three thousand three hundred she should be fully trained. Look at her. Defiance. It take months break her that. Eighteen hundred."

Nikki got into the spirit of bargaining then, her fake accent vanishing as she started bargaining. "Look at her pelt mouse. When her winter coat comes in she will be breathtaking. Why in Vostokiye alone they would give you three thousand just for the pelt. You will have her company for months yet. Thirty one hundred."

"This is not Vostokiye. I do not know how to skin sable much less tan hide. I would ruin it. Two thousand."

"Bah, for two thousand I could sell her to Krupmark. Kuo Han offered three thousand."

"Krupmark deals in used goods. False coin. Sell her Kuo Han for three thousand. This winter when coat comes THEY skin her. She is not worth it. Look how wilful she is. Why she refuses lower eyes. As though had right look at me. Twenty-two hundred."

At Oharu's complaint Nikki growled a sharp command. Instantly Tatiana's eyes dropped to Oharu's unshod feet. "See, she obeys without complaint. For this alone she is worth more than a paltry twenty-two hundred. Look at that figure, she is a pleasure simply to view. Why I cut my own throat selling her so low. Twenty-eight hundred."

"For such small breasts? I do better Macao for third." Leaning over Oharu lifted the sables head by putting a paw under her chin. "I grant you eyes bright clear." Pressure from two fingers caused Tatiana to open her mouth in surprise. That painful hold hadn't been taught to her yet. "Good teeth, some repairs. Her tongue uncoated." Releasing Tatiana's jaw Oharu returned her attention to Nikki. "I grant you offering quality goods, but I must remember she Songmark. Songmark great trouble. I must also deal with Huakava's displeasure. Twenty-three hundred."

Sensing Oharu was reaching the limit of her offer Nikki bit her lower lip. Twenty-three hundred was almost enough, but Superior didn't float notes. It was time to accept she just might get barely enough. Nikki was unworried about Tatiana's possible fate. Oharu's love for the doe Molly was common knowledge at the Double Lotus, a result of a nurse with too much to drink and too loose lips. She would do nothing to anger the doe, even though she believed that her chances of capturing that heart were less than Nikki's chances of willingly returning home. "I will deal with Songmark" she offered softly. "You will deal with Huakava. Twenty-five hundred."

"Twenty-five then. It is deal. You will sign her papers over?"

Nikki smiled. "Cash first" she countered.

Opening her tightly packed purse Oharu withdrew the money Becky had given her earlier, carefully counting that she had not missed a bill before setting it gently on the table in front of the equine. "Twenty-five hundred shells. I take collar, you keep leash. You hold stock until need. It be ruined at my hut."

"Agreed." Pulling a pen from her pouch Nikki called for witness's. Almost instantly at least ten woman appeared, each eager to witness the dark I.O.U.'s transfer of ownership. When they were done Nikki leaned back, all stress in her face now gone. "I know where the money came from" she said in a voice only the three could hear.

"They are still your friends Nikki. You have old anger, let fade like accent. Open your heart. You need them, they need you. Malou needs you. You need her. Try, please?"

Nikki coughed, a heavy sound in her chest. "When its serious I drop the accent Priestess. All right, for one letter only. Oharu I really would have been forced to sell her. There is a Kuo Han agent on Casino Island right now. He sent me a message. Thirty five hundred, her I.O.U. in full. No questions asked and I keep the worthless stock. Krupmark offered two thousand. Krupmark would have been better for her but it just was not enough. Her friends rescued one woman from there already, another would be child's play for them. But I prefer this better. You will treat her well, much better than I did. And you will find, as I did that she is a fiercely proud woman. She will obey you until she has repaid you. Then I think she will kill you as she would have tried to kill me."

"If it her destiny to take my life then take it she will. Still I think I not need her to repay her debt." Taking the paper and passports she turned to Tatiana, noting with interest that the leash was already gone but not the collar. Holding out the papers she offered them to the young woman. "I do not like deal in slaves. I try keep no one against their will. Though it is true my life lonely, my heart is filled by another. There is no place in heart for you or anyone else. Take these. Go home. Finish school, make your people, your friends proud of you. Use this as learning experience. Always remember little one. Could have gone much different way tonight."

Taking the offered papers in her paws Tatiana studied them, insuring they were truly real. Then just as silently she laid them back on the table. "I have a debt. I will pay it. But I think I shall not be angry about the payment anymore. Nikki. Thank you." It was the first words she had spoken. Her voice Oharu found was quite pleasing. Standing she slipped into the seat beside Oharu. "Nikki taught me a lot, but tonight has taught me more. I will learn from you, and I will be with you when I can. It is hard, I have discovered, being alone."

"Then we must leave now for is very late and I am very tired. Will you please put jacket back on? At least until we at my home? Then please, tomorrow we find you something better to wear. Leave ugly blouse for Nikki to remember you. I do not like what you wear."

"Ahn tha waiting agents?" Nikki asked, slipping back into her false accent.

"I have dealt with German assassination squad. Nikki, you spared with me. Do honestly believe anyone will harm woman while she in my care, unless they kill me first?"

"No, Ah don. An Oharu? Thanks for tha bargaining. Ah missed it."

Tatiana had stood again, was waiting silently with her eyes downcast, her Songmark jacket now again covering her nakedness. Oharu stood as well. "What you had to sell" she answered. "Had I money she well worth thirty-five hundred. Perhaps, if she not so wilful she be worth twice that. Now get cash to partner before spend on fast women cheap booze. " She looked around, noting two familiar bovines watching with interest. "Daughters Agatha, Imagine. Please escort slave trader to her place of business. She has partner to placate."

Laughing the two woman stood, one bowing to Nikki as though to royalty. "My Lady Slaver" she intoned. It was a title only those who were in the Lotus that night would ever freely use with Nikki. It would eventually cause many stories, especially among certain tourists. It was a title that would only be used by those who had been present.

Some two hours later Oharu and Tatiana arrived at the tiny hut the mouse called home. "This is the old falls" Tatiana noted. A muted but still deep rumble from the new falls filled the tiny glade. A soft mist filling the bamboo thicket between them and where tourists roamed so freely made a soft white curtain, one that moved gently as air pressure changed behind it. It also muted any harsh tourist voices to a dull mummer though at this time of night such were very rare.

"Few minutes walk through that" Oharu admitted, pointing towards the dense thicket. "I found comfort here. Huakava allowed me build my home here and shrine."

"It is sah small though" the sable observed, studying the tiny raised building.

Oharu laughed. "I have only been here little time. The Hoele'toemi family built for me. I finish roof next day. They promise return after tourists have left. Make larger. I trade my work their fields for year to building real long house. Not that it be large. I need little, there only myself. Will possibly always be only myself. Cannot have children, though want. Tomorrow I travel with you Songmark. We explain all Miss Devinski. Then you free do as you please."

Reaching up to touch her collar Tatiana gave the mouse a questioning look. "But I am your pet. Your property."

"My guest young Russian Spy. Get rid of collar now. Then take passports back tomorrow. You will need them. I will burn this paper in moment."

Tatiana laughed in response. "I already have another passport. But yes, I will return them. Thank you. It is different to be trusted and I will repay you. But don't burn that paper please. I will want it when its debt is cancelled. As a warning for the next time I feel a deal is too good to be true. But tell me, how did you know that I am a spy?"

"Repay Beth and her wives, it their money that saved you from darkness. Remember that. You have friends when you think you have nothing. I will always be here should you desire talk. As for other. Young lady I too was spy. For Cipangu. I am now Spontoon citizen. Spy against Spontoon and I deal you a spanking you will not forget in this life. Perhaps not in next either."

"May I ask one last question then?"

"It is?"

Tatiana paused. It was as if her voice wanted to speak, but she as unsure. Finally she managed. "Scuttlebutt around the Lotus is your hopelessly in love with Molly Procyk. Is that true?"

Oharu laughed. "It is true I am love with someone" she admitted. "But Procyk? Know her. Met once. Only once at Songmark gates. What ever future would any woman have loving someone who see's lifestyle filthy. Think about it little one. I am woman of peace, she is woman of war. I desire woman in my life, she man. I understand has rather energetic young man named Lars in heart." Shaking her head no she entered her hut, hunting a match to light her single kerosene lantern. "Procyk" she laughed. "As though she were only woman I know these islands. You will sleep in bed, I will take the cushions. If you need to speak nature tonight simply step over me. I will not mind." She pointed into the darkness. "It is that way, past the garden."

Following Oharu into the small building Tatiana had decided one thing for certain. Her new owner was a very bad liar. Molly though. That information would prove useful. It also filled several gaps in the puzzle of her information. Just when the sable would use it she was unsure, but she never ignored useful information. She and the upper classwoman Molly had had words before, with Tatiana getting the worst of it most times. One day soon Molly would say the wrong thing. Then she would hear the whole story. That would shut her up finally. And she kept her collar on.

May 30th, 1936

Tatiana currently stood at attention outside Songmark school's office building. That was such a normal enough punishment for minor infractions that none of her fellow students gave her a second glance. Had they, they would have noted the collar worn by their fellow student and the loose dark blue silk blouse she wore under her Songmark jacket. It was a gift from her new owner Oharu, a gift that had cost he budding

priestess most of her spare funds. In honesty though, personal fashion statements were fairly common when students were 'on pass' so they would most likely have ignored it. Tatiana however was more than aware of the black leather weight around her neck. Since she had refused to accept her freedom her new owner had decided to rub her nose in it. One would wonder though what the mouse would have thought about the tiny little smile on Tatiana's face as she felt that weight that almost all would have despaired at.

"Why" a certain yellow furred Labrador asked from behind her desk inside the building, "Are you constantly ending up in this office?"

Across from her, standing in a way Miss Devinski knew from personal experience that the mouse could hold for hours without discomfort Oharu Wei mulled over an answer. "You smell nice?" the mouse finally offered. She easily dodged a small book thrown at her. "Missed" she commented softly.

"You know we were aware of Tatiana's problem. Its not like you had to get involved with another Songmark student." Sitting hard the hound yelped in pain, lifting just enough to remove her tail from under her before settling down again. Angry at her own mistake she looked to her visitor. There wasn't even a hint of a smile on the mouse's face. A fact which, for some odd reason made her even madder. "Swell. So you now legally own one of our students. Oharu, it was already planned out. Several third years were eagerly waiting their chance to prove that they are as good as Amelia's group. So what do you do? You BUY her."

"I cannot defeat Nikki in any fair physical battle" Oharu admitted. "I will not use other means unless have no choice. Money was made available. I bought product."

"Yes. The Lotus. I ought to blackball that place.."

"You will not."

Stopped in mid-thought the hound looked up. "Why not?"

"You like sleep."

"You wouldn't."

Oharu gave a non-committal move of one paw. "No. I not do to favorite pet. Many Priestess attend Lotus. Most not same Lotus mindset but like peace. Not happy angry hound ruin peace."

"A warning then. Thanks, and thanks for telling me you wouldn't threaten me. So my dear friend. What do we do now?"

"You take student back. I not like slavery. I try free. She refuse. Say she make debt, she pay debt. No matter what cost her."

Miss Devinski rubbed her eyes. "Have a seat Oharu, please. Let me think okay?" She closed her eyes, going over her options. An entire dorm had been waiting outside the Lotus when Oharu and Tatiana had exited. Four of their best girls and not one had dared make a move against the older priestess. Songmark was after all still a non-native business. Supported fully by Spontoon's religious community, accepted by most of the Allthing and needed by a certain ferret as well as those the average tourist laughed at. Still they could easily overstep their welcome. She'd given extra points for intelligence to all four girls for avoiding a potential disaster.

"Keep her" she suddenly decided. "She's yours. I'll have her papers ready for the others to sign in an hour. She is expelled as of now."

Oharu's answer was soft, yet somehow the stronger for it as her raspy voice accented her one word answer. "No."

"And why not" the hound asked, looking up to face her visitor. What she saw made her mouth dry, whomever had made that kimono Devinski thought, knew exactly how to accent the mouse's body when she sat.

Oharu was now well aware of the affect her new kimono gave and more than willing to use it, now that she realized it. "You teach how to survive. To use whatever at paw in order to remain breathing. Tatiana use me. If not, you really think four girls beat Nikki and waiting bully-boys? Maybe. Maybe have four gutted bodies float in harbor come sunrise. Nikki desperate. This dream she try to save. This dream woman she love like I love..." Her right paw flickered. "They have to kill her. Think Nikki easy kill? We find way out. Truth I not know about plan. I accept request from family I serve. In doing so maybe keep several hearts beating few more days. Not right to throw out Tatiana for mistake. For being used by fellow student."

"Beryl."

"Same."

Miss Devinski leaned back in her chair, studying the problem. Everyone knew what Tatiana really was, as they had known about Oharu. Only Sappy had slipped through their screens undetected. So far, in truth she had reacted without thinking. A knee jerk reaction, a chance to get rid of a potential problem. "I can't just take her back" she admitted. "There has to be some sort of deal between us. At least you and I. One Tatiana will believe is all that keeps her from spending the rest of her life as, well whatever you'd have to use her for. She has to learn a lesson, and to know we will go out on a limb for our students."

"Would have learned that last night" the mouse asked.

"Yes. So what's your first offer?"

"I offer trade one young, intelligent Russian sable to Songmark. Want in trade one old, worn out yellow hound. I know of new American mother with bottomless green eyes need full time babysitter. After careful training."

Outside Tatiana wondered at the sudden barking laughter.

Sometime later Oharu sat alone at Song Soda's. She was enjoying a bowl of Strawberry ice cream, part of the agreed upon price for one young Russian sable student. There was another part to that agreement, several in fact. One being that Oharu would be available should Songmark have need of her. That agreement had only been a formalization of what had already begin to occur though, not anything new. Tatiana however had no idea of this. Only that she was to spend any Sunday that she was not involved in school work (such as training classes in the middle of the boonies) with Oharu at her home. Even if her dorm was restricted. That, though an apparent punishment for the sable was an agreed upon addition to the Russian's schooling. It would allow her time in a safe, quiet place where she could 'contemplate her navel' as the hound had put it.

A scent of skunk warned the mouse of her unexpected visitor's approach. Without asking a woman in Songmark uniform, three notes carefully sewn upon it pulled back a chair, spun it around and settled down. "I was one of the four waitin" a voice that could only have come from the heavens announced in greeting. "We thought it best not to interfere."

Oharu looked up from her bowl of pink ice cream, intending to study the Mephitidae only to find herself being studied in turn. "You would have agreed, had I asked" her visitor explained, leaning forward on her

elbows. "Tell me Priestess. Who would have won had we attacked you?"

"Short term, you. Easily" Oharu admitted. "Long term. No one. We would all lose." She stared at the woman before her, wondering why the traditional stripes seemed broken. "Dye?" she asked, indicating the strange fur pattern with her spoon.

"Natural hon. I'm a spotted skunk from the East Coast. We would all lose?"

Oharu sat back, setting her spoon into the ice cream bowl. "Is difficult to explain. This way all learn. All grow. Other way, not good things happen. It better this way."

Nodding in agreement the skunk, who hadn't bothered to give her name sat up, taking her elbows off the table. "I have dreams. Now and then. I have had dreams of Tatiana and I as partners. Partners in adventure. Not like... well. Friends. Last night I had another dream. Songmark in flames. Many of the girls I know fighting something dark. Something evil. Some were on the ground, hurt or dead I don't know. You were there, you and others like you. But it wasn't just Songmark, it was everywhere. There wasn't any safe place anywhere I looked. I don't understand."

"If you wish a reading of dream. You must go to another. I do not like to do so" Oharu answered.

Shaking her head no the third year laid both paws, pads down on the table top. "Priestess. I'll pay any price for the truth. Even greater than the price Tatiana has paid. I know it means war. But when? I was no older, none of us were older. So when? Today, tomorrow? When. And with what."

"That is still reading" Oharu warned.

"Just an idea. A warning? Priestesses. I mean this. I will pay anything you ask."

A movement of the skunk's body informed the mouse that her interest in the skunk had been noticed, and accepted. She decided to tell the woman what she needed to know, nothing more. "Age means nothing important in dreams. There will be war yes. Any fool can see such" the mouse answered. "I think though, this war will be planet wide. More than technology. Things best never awakened. I know no more."

"Our instructors have began warning us away from China. Japan is attacking there yes. But I get the feeling they mean more than that. Could this darkness be there?"

"Darkness is everywhere. We carry inside" Oharu explained, for this was no longer a dream question. "It is the wakening of darkness that we fear. Yet all are as dark or as light as any other. There are places not meant for you to go. Inside self, actions, such. What they warn I do not know. I think though someone has told them of danger. One they prefer you not face."

"But you don't know what it is?"

"No" Oharu admitted. "I simply serve. I do not know all. None may know all."

Closing her eyes the skunk seemed to be talking to herself, then her eyes still closed she slowly spoke again. "My older sister Apple vanished in China. She was a missionary. I intend to find her. It is why I fought so hard to get into Songmark. So that I would be prepared. But my dreams tell me I will fail without the Russian. I want to take Tatiana. Will you allow this?"

"That is Tatiana's decision. Not mine."

Soft laughter answered the mouse's statement. "I know a slave collar when I see one. Will you allow this."

Oharu stood, looking down at the seated women who's eyes remained closed. "That Tatiana's decision. When she no longer wears collar. Until then. No."

"Then I will wait. A day, a year. My dreams tell me that time means nothing to my sister now. That means she's dead. But I have to know how."

"Revenge is bitter taste in ones mouth. Ask Nikki" Oharu warned.

"Never revenge Priestess. Justice. Nothing more. Never any more. Thank you for your time." Opening her eyes again the skunk too stood. "I have class in half an hour. If you ever need me, ask for Ash. It's the name I go by now. Until I find my sister."

"It is harsh name to carry" Oharu observed.

"Actually... My real name is Cherry. But if you tell anyone I will seriously pummel you with hundreds of marshmallows. That is a promise. My parents have the oddest sense of humor. And I will pay for this information Priestess. I swear this. I never ignore my debts. Any price you demand, except my life. At least until I find my sister. Then any price."

Oharu reached out, taking the skunks paws in her own. "I wish you well Ash. Until I may call you that other name. Be well. Now I must go." Releasing the woman's oddly warmer paws Oharu stood, stepped past the other and headed for the water taxi dock. It was a long trip against the current to Meeting Island this time of day, and with her luck she'd catch the opposite tide when she went back to Main Island.

Helen Whitehall greeted her unexpected visitor warmly. She was still in hospital and would be for at least another day Doctor Kiwi had warned her. Visitors were a welcome break in her daily routine of laying on her back studying the ceilings light blue texture. There were exactly 3,171 dimples in the ceiling. She was certain. She'd gotten the same number three times now. "You are?" she asked.

"Oharu" her visitor answered.

"You're the one who sent Xiùme away" Helen gasped as the name triggered her memory. "How can I ever repay you?"

"Debt is not yours. Is Dia-Kura's debt. I come with message. May I give?"

"Not mine... A message? From whom?"

Oharu raised an eyebrow. "Message answers all."

Helen sighed. "Priestess's. I'll never understand you. Okay, what's your message?"

"Next time we have supper it my treat."

A smile blossomed on the hound's face. "Catherine said that? Wonderful. So when is she going to visit me?"

"Catherine?" Oharu asked. In the time she'd know the hound, Miss Devinski had never mentioned her first name. Noting Helen's amused expression Oharu accepted what was. "Tomorrow. She hopes be here before noon. Though she cannot stay long."

"You've been chasing her too?" Helen asked.

"Not serious" the mouse admitted. "Amusement. We both understand. Fun thing. Brings light in dark times. She is yours?"

Helen gently shook her head no. "I wish, maybe. I don't know. Not really. I know I need someone. Killian told me to find someone but I'll not have another man in my life. Not that way I mean. Nothing wrong with looking though. We're friends. Testing the waters I think. We may only ever be friends. No matter how it goes, even if we become one I ask you to keep chasing her. I truly think that she enjoys it. And even as just a friend she is a great joy in my life."

"Your son is very healthy" Oharu continued, gently changing the subject. "He looks nothing like too early."

"I know. I saw him this afternoon for the first time and hungry? I'm glad the boy doesn't have teeth. He's a lot like his father in some of his interests."

Both women laughed softly, so as not to bother other patients.

Chapter Thirty-One

June 2nd, 1936

On Casino Island it was a dance class a certain mouse was attending. "Move your right foot a little further back" Mrs. Ratahabe, Oharu's Hula dance teacher ordered. At the moment she was speaking in her own honey soft accented version of the Spontoon language, exactly as her student had requested. Doing as she was told the mouse moved her right foot then held her position as her teacher walked around her slowly. "Now, again. From top." Moving back to her starting point, a kneeling position with both paws pads down in her lap Oharu moved without music through the dance sequence she was learning. This time she moved her right foot further back as she reached the point where her original mistake had been. With no comment from her teacher the mouse continued her sequence until she reached its end, again on her knees. Though this time she was posed with her upper torso curved backwards, her open paws above and behind her head as if holding a bowl in offering. "Good. You pay attention. Now hold position for..."

A twitter of laughter from several younger students caused the female lizard to spin on a dime, giving nine and a half cowries change. "You think this is easy?" she asked the three S.I.T.H.S. girls. "You have trained since childhood" she continued as she moved towards the now silent students. "She is learning from only weeks ago. Must be ready for after tourists leave for great party."

"Sorry teacher" the older girl apologized. "It was. The way she turns her wrist, her open palm inwards to outwards. What it means. Its funny."

"Oharu. Please to show girls where said move comes from."

Breaking from her pose the mouse stretched a moment, then slipped easily into a dance from her birthland. As she danced to the music in her head the three watched critically, with mental notes being made as they observed new moves. There would be another competition against the Songmark girls this year and any new move... "I see" the older student suddenly exclaimed. "She is holding a leaf, or something in her paw. As she turns it a different view is seen. It doesn't mean what we thought. I means to see something from both sides."

Nodding in agreement the lizard turned to face Oharu. "I have music and fans in back room. Will you show them full dance?"

Ceasing her movements Oharu turned to bow to her teacher. "One time yes instructress" she agreed. "My time..."

"Very limited Honored Mother. You rest. I will get things." At the words Honored Mother all three girls cringed with embarrassment.

As the dance instructor left to find what she needed the three students walked over to Oharu. "We apologize Honored Mother. We thought you must be some tourist with too much money. The light was against us, we didn't see your marking. We didn't realize that you are a Priestess."

"In training" Oharu corrected. "Under Huakava. I much much yet to learn."

"So you're the one everyone talks about" a tiny doormouse squeaked. "The one who drifted ashore nearly dead. It must have been terrible."

"Better than death" Oharu admitted. "Not much. Maybe quarter cowrie difference."

"Was that a joke?" the oldest girl asked. "It sounded like one."

Oharu smiled, not showing her teeth as she did so. Not because such would be seen as aggressive, not in this place but because she was conscious of her missing teeth. Even if the dentist she was seeing had begun to make some noticeable progress. "I try" she admitted. "I am not very good comedian."

"It's a natural talent" the doormouse admitted. "Mrs. Ratahabe says I'm the cats meow when it comes to humor."

"Cats..." Oharu paused, thinking over the words. "That is joke too?"

"Not really" the reptilian teacher explained as she returned, carrying an record and two Cipangu made paw fans. "Leela once made a bad joke against Songmark student. She nearly ended up as said students lunch."

"Supper" Leela corrected lightly, a hint of red blush touching the tips of her ears. Looking back to Oharu she grinned, just a touch of ivory showing. "It was a real learning experience. Who knew a tigers mouth could open that wide? If she'd really bit hard enough there would have been three of me. Torso, legs and what was in her tummie."

"Mrs. Ratahabe told her if she ate Leela she'd have to join the S.I.T.H.'s team against Songmark" the trio's third member, a mongoose, laughed. "And clean up the mess. I am Vidhyalakshmi. I am fourth generation Spontoon. We came from Kasgami. That's the United Provinces in India. These two are native all the way back to... Leela?"

"Third generation only" the doormouse admitted, sticking out her tongue. "Sveden. I think dad said his grandfather was from Limkoping or something oddly strange like that."

"Arrival" their larger hound companion preened, pulling on imaginary coat labels. "My name is Ulani. We've been here forever."

"And a day" Leela added with a soft laugh. "When they said light the fires your ancestor was still yelling at her husband to quit fishing and find some dry wood." That brought laughter from all three.

"I was born on Honshu, in Cipangu. A lifetime ago" Oharu admitted softly. "It is something I wish to forget."

"Enough of this" Mrs. Ratahabe announced as she detected the pain in Oharu's voice. Her command easily broke the mood that was in danger of turning dark. "Music is ready now. You will dance?"

Picking up the two fans Oharu nodded to the teacher, slipping into her dances starting pose as the three girls backed away. A moment later her music started and Oharu quickly fell into the spirit of a, to her well known dance while the three watched, still making mental notes.

Songmark would find themselves facing an entirely new dance this year. One that would be practiced in secret. One that just might be something that they couldn't top.

June 3rd 1936

It was very late even for a Songmark instructor to be awake. Miss Devinski though had problems on her mind. Carefully she sat her cup of hot tea to one side, leaning back in her chair to stretch cramped muscles. Her luxurious tail elongated as it too sought relief. Seven years the hound thought, looking out one of the office windows into the darkness of oh-dark-thirty. Songmark had been founded, though not

fully open a full seven years ago. Yet at one time it had seemed like an impossibility. When Irving ran off with their money, hauling his cute little Siamese secretary by her very willing tail everything had looked like an impossibility. She well remembered that meeting when the four of them, Pelton, Nordlingen, Windlesham and herself had sat around that table in the Double Lotus. Everything was gone. All the saved money from years of fur shedding work, scrimping and saving, their just rebuilt aircraft and all their records. All after living off the cheapest food that they could manage, going without new clothes and making their own repairs to the battered old aircraft with rebuilt or scrounged parts. All gone in a moment along with the companies only still flying aircraft. Off to someplace they would probably never know. Or, even if they did discover would have no desire to visit. Her mind opened to those memories, returning again to yesteryear. A time when everything had seemed so simple.

At first they had all cried in their beer, until Pelton had come up with a possibility. Certainly the land they had their eyes on was now out of reach, that great open plot right next to the land based airport. But there was another possibility. A bit of land, not quite as large as they dreamed, not quite where they wanted but available. They had all heard that the land was haunted, that no business built there had ever prospered. That even the European Trade Mission originally based there had left. It was available, but at a cost. Such a cost. Though the company funds were gone they did have their own meager savings.

That had been the true beginning of Songmark. They all knew the site, having studied and rejected it before. Pulling in belts until their spines cut flesh the four had pooled every crowery they had. It was enough, barely, and they would have to rebuild the existing structures themselves. But the site was already fenced, if badly overgrown. Finishing the last alcoholic drink they would taste in more than two long years the four stood, grasped paws and swore to make Songmark live.

Buying the land had turned out to be easy. Still owned by the Imperial Pineapple Import/Export Company the deed had almost been shoved into their paws. It had been a money drain for much too long and the managers were glad to see the last of it. At a price of course. IPIEC never really gave anything away. Not even their garbage.

And garbage it was. Almost a full year followed where they had alternately worked as pilots or mechanics for hire, the rest of their time spent clearing the site as best they could. First repairing the fence, then slowly each surviving building. Mainly they had used the wreckage of unrecoverable buildings, as new materials were simply unaffordable in most cases. Especially lumber that had to be shipped in from other countries. Lumber was a scarce commodity in the small nation of Spontoan. It would be too easy to strip the islands of trees thus only the most meager of logging was permitted. As first one then another building 'came on the line' their spirits improved. Until that first night when the dreams had come. Strange dreams, haunting dreams. It had been Devinski herself, the only hound among a pride of felines that had stumbled upon the truth.

She had been clearing a mound of rubble when the first carved stone turned up. Stepping back the hound had wondered about what she had uncovered. But it was marked a garbage tip on their supplied deed map, not a ruin. In truth all she had found until now were wrecked chairs, moldy books, broken bits and pieces of scrap of which some were saleable, but most shipped to the garbage dump. But a carved stone? "I need to find one of the local priestess" she remembered saying.

"Why?" an unexpected voice had answered. It had been an old voice even then. Yet one that retained the soft sounds of youth, though now filled with power. Spinning around Miss Devinski had found herself facing the then High Priestess Selvana.

"Because this is not a mound of garbage like the map says" the hound had managed. 'How' she wondered, *'Did she slip up on me like that.'* She knew of the of Spontoan's High Priestess only because the woman had been a passenger on several strange trips. Trips who's reasons had never truly made sense even to her. At the time Devinski hadn't really believed in magic, or that the Priestess's were anything more than religious... Fruitcakes she had finally admitted to herself. Just like most of the European Priests on Casino Island. Just like her own beliefs.

"You are correct. This is not a garbage mound. Though those without souls have made it seem so. Shall we speak?"

Nodding in agreement Miss Devinski waited until her older visitor had settled herself before sitting down herself. "Europeans came, taking all that they wanted" the feline started. "As they always do. As the four of you have, to a point. We have been watching you. Your choice to continue after he whom you trusted vanished was admirable. Your interest in our ways, how you have been respectful to all things even though you did not understand them completely. In some cases did not agree with them." She laid an aged paw on a tumbled stone. "Yes, we have been watching. Do you know what this was. Originally?"

"No" the hound had answered truthfully. "I am no archeologist. A building yes but it is alone. There are no other mounds about. Nothing in the records indicate any were removed. Perhaps someone's home, or a small temple." Movement caught her eye. Miss Windlesham was returning from carrying away the last barrow of trash out the gate to a pile that was picked up every other day. Under a fairly expensive contract that was.

An odd smile came to the felines face. "This was an overgrown mound when we arrived. Long before these islands were again habitable. It is one of the nine anchors, though of that I will not speak further today. Look about you. Follow that fence line with your eye. What does it tell you."

While she had studied the fence line Miss Windlesham arrived. Setting her barrow down she too sat to rest, only after bowing ever so slightly to Selvana. "A chat? How wonderful. I'm exhausted" the cat/skunk had admitted. "May I get you water" she asked Selvana pleasantly.

"No thank you child. Tell me, what do you see here."

"A garbage dump" Windlesham answered. "Though these rocks under this trash are worked I don't remember anything said about a stone building mentioned in the deed. It looks burnt though, as though a fire ate at it a long time ago. This is an important ruin?"

"It is from before, as I was telling your sister" Selvana admitted. "Tell me. This school you intend to create. What dreams have you for it."

Taking turns Devinski and Windlesham spoke of their dream. Of a school for young women to prepare them in a way no school had in recorded memory. At least not since the Amazon's had vanished. They spoke of their course plans, their selection criteria until eventually both women ran down, their voices finally silent. In that silence they looked at each other. Why had they spoken so freely they both wondered. Selvana still sat before them, obviously working their words over in her mind. Finally she blinked, frowned a bit then rubbed one knee.

"Legends say that this land was once sacred to women only. There is supposed to be an equal on Moon Island for men, though no hint of ruins have yet been found. Legends say any male who remains upon these lands after sunset will have darkest of dreams. This I believe is why all who came before you have failed. Tell me, you will be building everything yourself?"

"There is an awful lot we can do" Miss Windlesham agreed. "And much that we cannot. There are only the four of us and even then we spend a lot of time making the shells we must have at various hire jobs. Another year, maybe two and we can start advertising for students."

Selvana stood as smoothly as a trained dancer, brushing the dust and debris off her worn sari as she did so. "I would speak with all four of you tonight. Here. It may be possible to waken your dream the earlier."

"For a price" the hound finished.

Selvana laughed. "My dear sweet sister. There is always a price. Yet those I will bring before you. They I believe will ask such a price that you may accept. Now I must go, for I have many people to speak with. In peace my daughters." She had then simply walked away, right through what both knew was a solid wire fence without any trouble at all.

Miss Devinski well remembered that night spent at the mound chatting. They had met Kjellfrid, personal assistant to one Mr. Sapohatan. Elsie Hoffman, the tiny private-eye. A bundle of highly controlled energy that seemed ready to explode with enough force to remove Spontoon from any map. Huakava, Selvana's not too much younger assistant. Butterfly McGee, who seemed simple of mind, yet who's questions were as sharp as freshly broken glass and Becky Viper, who's 'family' owned the Double Lotus bar. Along with them were five other women. None who ever gave names, though over the years they had become well known to the faculty of Songmark. It had started as a friendly meeting, swiftly evolving into a serious business meeting. When all had left but Selvana and her panther assistant, then things had gotten down right strange. It had been what had finally woken the hounds heart to a new journey.

No one ever openly talked about what happened that night. Only that a pact was made with that which truly owned the land Songmark would grow upon. A pact that was in the fours advantage, to a point. For that which slept under the ruins was lonely and it had been delighted that women would again live and study on its sacred land. Even more so that men would be a rare visitor, for it much distrusted men. Not disliked, only distrusted. As apparently its opposite somewhere on Moon Island much distrusted women.

Turning away from the dark window Miss Devinski rubbed her paws along her long legs. Their dream had become a reality, at a cost as all had suspected. Yet, not so high a cost as they had feared. Looking back at that bargain she could fault nothing. Songmark was a success. More-so, Songmark was a name among the Independencies. Those who finished their three year studies successfully always found success for themselves, though that first class. What had gotten into those girls Devinski asked herself not for the first time, nor for the last. Why had they gone pirate. It made no sense to her. Every possible moral example had been shown them. Every possible path had been opened to them. Yet.. She couldn't quite hide the smile on her lips. They were admittedly the most successful air pirates in this Hemisphere. Obviously Songmark had done something right after all.

Now she sat again in her chair, reaching for her tea. Those had been long hard years and though two other schools had quickly opened following their example, still Songmark was considered by the right people to be the best. Sipping her drink she opened the drawer that held her private mail. Gently she lifted a lavender scented envelope that had come in yesterdays afternoon mail. Though it had no return address the paw was well known to her. Her niece had written again. Her niece...

The infamous female Air Pirates personal navigator.

June 4th, 1936

In Dalian the feline Malou locked the front door of her uncles shop behind the latest Cipangu officers back. He and his squad had made a complete search of the building, for once not tearing everything up as so many had before. Nor she noted, were any more 'trinkets' missing. Not that many remained in the show cases. Six careful searches had insured that anything of any value had vanished already, including most if not all of Malou's supposed innocence. She was grateful for her time with the mare Nikki, for her experience and training by the mare in certain areas had insured that at least she hadn't been ruined.

Turning away from the door the young siamese started shutting down the oil lamps that washed her shop with golden light. Electricity had been cut several days ago, it would not return until 'The young man and his ancient treasure' had surrendered. She sighed in relief. Electricity her people could live without. It was not that long ago that this section of the city had been electrified. That she was safe from discovery, for even this kind officer had forced her to prove that she was no young boy in disguise, meant that time was still with her.

She walked past the bookshelf holding her uncles reference tomes, almost ignoring a slight rattle as one book seemed to move as she passed. Glanced at, determined that none of the books held weapons or gems they had been ignored otherwise. Had thought that any of the Cipangans been able to read Mandarin. If so all would have been lost. How long she wondered would it take for her letter to reach Elizabeth. How long before she told Nikki. Would Nikki come, or would the mare leave her to die with her people. As much as Malou believed that the Fillypino mare loved her, she was still unsure of that truth.

With a heavy heart, no supper and a still aching arm where one soldier had roughly grabbed her the day before to drag her back to her pallet she went to her bed. Her uncle would never return, his body having been dumped in an unmarked grave when no one came forward for him. As she lay down on her pallet the siamese looked East, towards where the dawn would come. Looked East and prayed that a certain black furred wild mare would arrive to take her away from this. Take her to safety, and the warm embrace of loving arms.

June 5th, 1936

It was late in the afternoon on Casino island when a white tailed deer looked up from the papers under his paws. He had been ordered to Spontoon Island to deal with two targets. This was something that had never happened before. It was something he had no taste for either, for one target was a shattered man, the other an innocent woman. A woman not even a citizen of the nation who had hired him. A woman who's only crime was to have fallen in love with, then married a man Prussia's current rulers hated. Now that he had finished his studies he had come to a decision. It was time to retire. Retire, and vanish.

"Miss Underwood" he called, carefully stacking his papers while he waited. It would be a short wait, P. Callie Underwood had been conditioned for years to respond quickly to his call. To drop anything non-dangerous immediately. True to form the small skunk arrived wrapped in a towel. He noted that she had apparently been taking a bath, as water streamed on the floor around her.

"Yes sir" she answered, waiting for instructions.

"First. Return to the bath and dry yourself. Second, clean up this mess you've made. Third, I have duty for you. In that order."

"Yes sir" the skunk answered, turning immediately to follow his orders.

Albert Garner shook his head. As much as he might wish it, even his best efforts had granted his assistant only limited self awareness. Of course he could take her off the drug, release her fully from his hypnotic commands. That would bring her back into true consciousness. It would also insure his death within seconds. He was fully aware of his assistants training, both before and after her capture by Prussia's goon squads. Even at his best he would barely be a match for her and his best had been years ago. Standing Albert walked to a cabinet, reminded that it was almost time for her second dose of the day. He also poured himself a glass of Malt Whiskey before returning to his desk.

Little more than an hour later a demurely dressed mid-twenties something skunk walked up the Songmarks main gate. There she found herself face to face with an female anteater. Carmen looked over the older skunk, easily noting her somewhat simple way and the way she deferred to everyone as she approached. Ideas started going through the Mixtexa girls mind. Ideas that were sidetracked when the skunk stopped in front of her. "Yes" she asked.

"I have a message for Miss Morgenstern" Callie announced. Not answered Carmen noticed, announced. As if... Something was odd about this one, but a message was a message.

"Give it here, Belle will take it too her."

"I must wait for a response" the skunk advised, still in that odd, nearly normal but slightly flat voice.

Carmen shrugged. If the skunk was going to wait, it'd just give her time to get acquainted. "Belle" she called, her summons causing her dormmate to trot up from where she had been cooling off in the shade. "Letter for Miss Priss" she announced.

"Liberty?" Belle looked at the skunk, sizing her up. "Hon she isn't like us." she warned the waiting skunk.

"I am to wait for a response" Callie repeated.

Belle looked to Carmen, shrugged as she accepted the odd envelope then trotted off to find Liberty. Carmen started to make small talk, or tried too only to discover that Callie seemed to be in another world. No matter what Carmen said the skunk simply ignored her. It was infuriating.

Liberty looked up from scrubbing pots when Belle called her name. Setting the huge thing she was working on aside she wiped her paws dry as Belle approached. "What do you want" she asked, her tone a normal one of a superior forced to speak to an inferior.

"Not you for certain" Belle admitted. "Letter for you. Messenger says she expects a reply. She's waiting at the main gate."

"Fine fine. What now." Opening the letter Liberty was surprised to find that it contained only a single page. Reading it her eyes widened and the flesh under her fur paled until it seemed bloodless. Finally she managed to gather herself together. "Tell her yes" she husked. "Just yes." Turning her back on the amused bearer of bad tidings Liberty nearly staggered back to her work.

Now very interested, for nothing had shaken the coyote girl before, Belle returned to Songmarks front gate. There she found the skunk still waiting, and an exasperated Carmen studiously ignoring her. Belle quickly passed the message across word perfectly.

"Thank you" was all the skunk said before she turned and walked away.

"Odd woman" Belle commented.

"Notice how she walks?" Carmen asked.

Belle studied the departing form. "She walks like.. Well.. She walks like someone afraid of losing their balance. Sort of."

"Or someone not quite in control of herself" the anteater added. "I did everything including insulting her great grandmothers choice in bedmates. Guess what I got out of her."

"A slap in the face?"

Carmen's tongue wicked out, catching a small beetle crawling across the fence. "Nothing" Carmen admitted. "I might as well have been talking to a stone. Or a puppet. There's no more emotion in that one than in that bench over there."

June 6th, 1936

Near New Guinea gunfire stitched a Fokker F.VII/3m's starboard wing, the event shocking both pilots into wakefulness in an instant. Unfazed by such minor damage the huge tri-motor cruised on, still locked on its destination of a private runway somewhere near Madang. Looking out their starboard window the

young co-pilot was horrified to see a blood red aircraft pacing his own. He didn't need to see the symbol boldly painted on its side to know who had just shot at them. "Down down" he yelled, sticking his arm out his window into the slipstream to indicate their compliance.

"Down where" the pilot asked, looking out the main windows at nothing but air, clouds and ocean. "We don't got no floats you idjit."

A crackling on their radio indicated that the air pirates had finally found the correct frequency. "...two miles North of your present position" a pleasant sounding woman's voice announced.

Grabbing his mike the pilot, an ancient brown bear first spit into a bucket next to him then pressed his key to talk. "This is Australian Commercial flight Oscar Nine Nine out of New Ireland. We ain't got nothing yah want."

"Oscar Nine Nine this is BLOOD RAVEN. Tell you what honey. You just land where we say and we won't put anymore ugly holes in that pretty little plane of yours. That do for you?"

Surrendering to his situation, as the nearest military aircraft had to be more than two hundred miles away the pilot shrugged. "Directions mam, we only got two miles North."

"That's all right honey, we know your asleep most of the time. Turn to magnetic bearing 293. You'll see a nice flat island two miles North of your position. Land there, or the water. Its really your choice you know."

"Magnetic 293, two miles. Understood." He looked to his co-pilot, the ringtail as excitable as ever. "Guess we do what tha girls want or we swim. Buckle in, any land round here's gonna be tiny." Changing his course he followed instructions.

Tiny turned out to be the years biggest understatement. Someone had managed to clear maybe a thousand feet of relatively flat runway out of an island maybe ten feet longer than that, and only twenty or so yards wide. Some kind of net was hanging across the cleared area about three quarters of the way down. A single red windsock told him his landing was going to be tough. "Ain't long nuff" the pilot growled as he lined up.

He was right. Still moving at nearly forty miles per hour even with blown tires the Fokker slammed into a heavy fishing net, turned and fell onto its portside wingtip. Above them the red floatplane came in for a landing on a nearly flat ocean. Before either pilot could unbuckle there was a sound of shots. Looking out his window again the ringtail squeaked then almost fainted. Three women were standing just under the Fokkers damaged wing, all three holding very dangerous looking automatic weapons.

It would be late that evening by the time help arrived. Help in the form of a small gunship carrying new tires, gasoline and a groundcrew. Several Australian military aircraft either buzzed overhead or now floated in the ocean. Other than a burning net (which the Fokker's crew had been forced to pile up themselves and set alight with their own fuel) there was nothing else on the island. Of the aircrafts cargo, only three small boxes were missing. Boxes containing freshly minted pound notes meant for the government of Timor. How those infamous air pirates had known about that cargo was a mystery, certainly neither pilot had any idea what they carried. Nor had anyone else, since the boxes had left Hawaii three days before on their secret, roundabout course. One million brand spanking new pounds sterling gone. Five million American dollars. Gone where and for what use no one knew. Getting the heavy Fokker off that small runway was going to prove a challenge though. One the young ringtail (who strangely had lipstick on his facial fur) decided he'd rather forgo.

Later that evening in Brisingaland a tired and disgruntled bulldog known as 'The Commander' threw his battered hat onto the cheap rooms bed, then sat heavily in his only chair. His mission had been a nightmare so far, always a day, a few hours behind his quarry. Now though he held in his paws a photograph taken of his mystery aircraft. No Duck, it was the Ducks father though. A Loening Air Yacht

built in the 1920's. It had been repainted and refitted with small guns, a military insignia painted boldly on its wings. Though he could easily understand the mistake by an untrained observer it irritated him that he had spent so much time hunting in the wrong reserve.

Well it couldn't be helped he decided. He'd brought this on himself trying to protect those who had turned against him. For now he was just relaxing, preparing to work on his report when a knock came to his door. Standing quickly, his .45 automatic in one paw the bulldog moved to the wall next to his door. "Yes?" he called.

"Message for you Mr. Hobsin" came the bellhops voice.

"Slip it under the door, I'm not dressed."

"Yessir."

He watched as a large flat envelope was shoved under his door, then waited a full minute before reaching out with one foot to drag it towards him. The expected bums rush through his door never happened. Uncocking his weapon he shrugged. Sometimes people really were who they said they were. Kneeling down he gently picked up the envelope. Hobsin was his name at this hotel, only the Embassy knew that he was here. Putting his weapon away he tore open the envelope.

"She's WHAT" he cursed a few minutes later. "Dead. Dead and... Well at least Two Stones saw it. He's about as reliable as anyone I could hope for this part of the world, redfur or not. Hah, jumped over a wall right into a high speed propeller. Not even enough to bury. Well she deserved that. Wish I could-a fed her in myself, feet first an real slow." He sat on his bed, reading the rest of Two Red Stones report. By the next afternoon he would be on his way to Spontoon. By passenger boat or plane, whatever he could arrange. Three of his assigned targets were still there and by God he was going to deal with them.

He knew that it was the only way he'd get his good name back.

June 7th, 1936

On Meeting Island the bobcat once known as Sandy Doecan, now known as Elizabeth Kathleen Brighton was laying on a chase lounge reading when her husband to be entered the room. "Welcome to the land of those who never sleep" she said in greeting, laying her book aside as she watched the ferret sit heavily into his favorite overstuffed chair.

"Reading?" he asked, exhaustion heavy in his voice.

"The life history of Pfalzgräfin Schwarzkopf, at least what this author was able to dig up."

"Went bad that" the ferret announced. "Damn French. If she'd been male they would have let it slide, let a female outshine them and they go for blood. Mounted her head on the wall they did. Vicious barbarian brutes the French Government."

Elizabeth stood, walking across the room to stand over her husband-to-be. "Schwarzkopf was a lot better than most and she was of noble blood. Makes a difference Albert. I think you know how close I came to being a stuffed head on a wall myself. Its only because of the training you and Songmark gave me that I survived. Survived and got home with my fur still on."

"Speaking of Songmark, they declined your application." He dug in his briefcase, removing an opened envelope. "Unless your willing to give them more information. Or I could apply pressure."

Shaking in reaction Elizabeth opened the letter, a rattle of paper filling the room as she read. "...unremarkable. Should you still be interested please forward..." A moment later she sat back down. This time on the floor at the ferrets feet. "That job offer still open" she asked softly.

"Honey. This is a test. Just forward them a brief outline of what you've been doing." Albert Sapohatan leaned forward, deftly removing the sheet of stationary from the bobcats numb paws. "You're a shoo in. No prospective student has your qualifications and you know it."

Elizabeth shook her head no. "I can't Albert. Sandy is dead. Spontoon and Songmark both have a really good security system, but if even a hint that Sandy Doecan might have lived gets out. I can't do that."

"Your certain?"

"Oh yes dear sweet love of my life I am most certain. I know what they want. They want me to give them a reason to put me ahead of anyone else in line, any reason. And I'll be honest. I'd love tah'. But... Albert, I want kits. I want a long life. Songmark was always my dream, every since they opened. That summer studying navigation and survival showed me just how good an education they can offer. But I have to weigh the dangers against any positive effects."

"I could pull in a favor you know" Albert admitted. "They owe Spontoon enough as it is."

"So could I. I know where the air pirates base is. But I won't do that."

Albert Sapohatan sat back in shock. "You know where their base is? You haven't told me?"

"I've needed them" Elizabeth admitted. "I might need them again. They owe me. To be honest I thought about joining them once."

"Why didn't you?"

"Their navigator runs rings around me. I'm useless to them otherwise" Elizabeth admitted. "And I would have had to give you up. That really wasn't an acceptable trade."

Relaxing again Spontoon's Chief of Intelligence carefully laid the rejection letter aside. "So your really interested in Bollin's job?"

Elizabeth smiled. "I'd rather Songmark in all honesty. But If you really think I can handle it. There is a really huge difference between running around a circle touching base with agents, another keeping tabs on them from an office."

"Be at my office at nine in the morning then. I'll have warned them. They are good people Elizabeth. I think your doing the right thing. And if Songmark changes their minds, well I can certainly arrange a three year leave of absence. If you'll work in the breaks."

"I hope so. Say, you know what we need to do tonight?"

Albert raised an eyebrow. "Dinner and sleep sound pretty good."

Elizabeth laughed. "We can do that anytime. I want to practice for the honeymoon."

"Again?"

June 8th, 1936

Songmarks Miss Wildford was the one to read Elizabeth's letter. Amused she took it to her comrades, reading it aloud to each one. *"I appreciate your interest in further details of my life. Unfortunately I have lived a rather closeted life, thus have nothing further to add. Thank you for the kindness of your letter. I have however, at your rejection, accepted employment elsewhere."* Soon returning to her own little office she sat down, ignoring the rest of her mail as she went over those words in her mind. No threats, no pressure, nothing. Elizabeth had in effect withdrawn her application. Yet Songmark had not refused her, nor did her letter specifically state she had withdrawn her interest. Interesting she decided. This error would prove useful on a later date. Turning to the file cabinets behind her she withdrew the folder labeled simply *Brighton E.* And slipped the letter into it. Closing the drawer she returned to her portion of the mornings mail. Elizabeth's letter had answered their question fully. No favors, no threats. Well then, not this year but next the young bobcat was in for a serious surprise.

On Meeting Island the next morning a female rabbit called Kjellfrid hardly glanced up from her translation work when Elizabeth entered. "Go right in" she told the young bobcat. "He's expecting you."

"Thank you" Elizabeth responded, turning to walk to Albert Sapohatan's office door. "New glass?" she asked innocently.

"Maid had an accident with a mop" the rabbit supplied. "Things like that happen. Now go in, its almost nine."

Following her instructions Elizabeth opened the door, walking in unannounced (though she knew that Kjellfrid had already pushed one of her many buttons) into the inner sanctum of He Who Shall Not Be Named. At least not to most non-Spontoons who asked. There were three other furs with the ferret, two foxes and a hound. All three were male and though she knew two of them, the hound was new to her. "Nine in the morning as instructed" she announced after she'd shut the door.

"Two minutes till" Albert Sapohatan corrected. "You know Phil Rousseau and Jaco Wallsome. This young twerp" he indicated the hound, "is Avonaco Dal. He's your communications officer. Took the position three years ago. Now if we could only teach him how to use morse code." Albert shook his head in apparent dismay, though the smile on his face denied that. "Gentlemen, I present you with your new Imperious Leader. Elizabeth Brighton."

"Soon to be Sapohatan we understand" Jaco Wallsome corrected as he held out his paw to Elizabeth. "We've followed your career of course Mam. Amazing work, simply amazing. Now your stepping in for Lenny, that's great. Yo were his first choice." He grinned suddenly. "Not that I wasn't hoping for the job but well, I've no field experience. Lenny always complained that no one ever let him get field experience, that anyone in the upper levels ought to have some. It'll be a true pleasure working for you." He stepped aside, letting his partner come forward.

"I've all the agents records on your desk Mam. Currently under guard. I imagine that it will take a bit of time for you to come up to speed, that's to be expected. If you've any questions that's what I'm hiding under my desk to avoid."

"Phil" Elizabeth countered. "Jaco. We've known each other half my life, what's with this sudden Mam?"

"Your our boss now" Phil answered. "If you want, outside the office I'll be happy to call you Mrs. Sapohatan or Elizabeth. But inside these walls, well its not a good idea to be too openly friendly. It hurts the chain of command."

"It really does" Jaco agreed. "In fact unless you order me too, I'm afraid that Mam is all your getting out of me from now on. Even off duty."

"And you?" Elizabeth asked, turning to the waiting hound.

Avonaco Dal caught her completely by surprise. Dropping to his knees, his paws held over his heart his eyes went puppy wide. "Oh great and mighty Imperious leader. We are not worthy to breath in your shadow. Have pity on us. I'm only one simple man..."

"Who reads morse code at nearly seventy words a minute without having to write it down" Jaco added, ruining the hounds act.

"Well La-te-dah..." Standing Avonaco bowed to Elizabeth. "Mam. As long as you want me I am head of communications for this entire group. Anything you want sent my people send, where and how you want it sent. If that's a secret message to some agent in Washington DC, or a request for a ham on rye, everything goes through us. Its Phil's law and as he's in charge of internal security. I tend to follow his rules cause it keeps me breathing and I kind-a really like breathing."

Elizabeth held her words for almost a minute, allowing silence to enter the room. Eventually Avonaco raised one eyebrow as if to ask a question. "You know Mr. Dal" she suddenly decided. "I wonder how you'd look shaved and in a rubber suit."

For only an instant silence continued until the hound burst out laughing. "I like her Albert" he managed through his laughter. "Oh I do like her."

"Then you four better get to work" the ferret decided. "Lenny's absence has left a gap in our defenses. He never was happy about two Songmark girls making his best security look like Swiss Cheese, nor a certain mouse picking out every agent he assigned to her. Elizabeth, that's your priority. Find out how to insure those things don't happen again. Or I'll have your pelt on my floor."

"Again?" the bobcat asked.

Laughter filled the room again for a few long seconds before the meeting broke up. Then there was work to do, work that was always time critical.

A little while later on Moon Island, at Spontoon's Technical High School a half-breed afghan was looking at her class from behind her desk. "Miss Conroy, would you please explain to the class your answer for question sixteen?" Helen watched as the young otter, one of the schools newest 'upper society Euro' girls stood. "Without the chewing gum this time, if you please."

"Um... Sixteen" Teresa Conroy started, trying desperately to remember if she'd even gotten to number sixteen.

"The exact square root of Pi" Helen reminded her.

"Isn't one" Teresa announced. That was one of the few questions she did know. "Cause Pi never repeats."

"Very good Miss Conroy. Now if you would so kindly apply yourself to your schoolwork half as energetically as you do your mating frenzy, I think you just might pass this class after all."

"That's not fair" the otter snapped back. "I won't need this in real life so why bother learning it."

Helen Whitehall stood slowly, she was still feeling the effects of her earlier than expected delivery of her son, the pseudo-whale as she remembered the event. Her son had caught a cold, no one knew exactly how and he would be remaining in hospital until it cleared so she was in no mood this week for a spoiled brats opinion. "Miss Conroy. Perhaps in your country students are allowed to speak that way to a

teacher. In Spontoon you are not. You will now apologize, then we will march down to the principles office where we will discuss wither or not you should remain as a student in this establishment. Do you understand?"

"Won't do it" the spoiled girl announced. "You can't make me." She expected a certain amount of support from her classmates. Though she had only been attending classes in Spontoon for a few weeks since her family had arrived for duty at the American Consulate she felt that she was in the right. After all this was school, ragging a teacher was just a normal teenage hobby. Surprisingly only silence greeted her words. Looking around she discovered that almost every student was looking somewhere else, anywhere else but at her. "Well?" she asked, staring at the pawful who she thought were friends. Pointedly every one of them turned their gaze elsewhere.

"Lolo, the class is yours. Please try to keep them from destroying anything expensive until I return. Miss Conroy. Gather up your things and follow me." Her voice told the otter that any complaint by her would be ignored. Grabbing her purse while leaving her books behind she flounced out of the class behind her teacher, unworried about what would happen. After all her father was a member of the American Diplomatic staff. She had diplomatic immunity. Why, she could beat this woman senseless and only be forced to return home. To return to her friends and the school she really liked. That Lolo, a tiny gerbille she'd quickly discarded as having less than any social worth, had taken over the class hadn't surprised the snotty otter one bit. Backwater little nations she knew were worthless, along with their pretense of having a worthwhile education system. Why any New England school could leave these people in the dust.

Mr. Martin was quick to see them, the crow offering Mrs. Whitehall the rooms only other chair. An act which forced Teresa to stand. Odd the American student thought, in a room this large there should be at least four other chairs. No matter. She stood silently, still chewing her gum as Mrs. Whitehall expressed her concerns and her opinion.

"I leave it up to you sir" Helen finished. "Perhaps I am simply not that good of a teacher. Perhaps she would do better in another teachers class."

"Her father specifically requested your curriculum" the crow reminded his teacher, noting that Teresa beamed with pride at that. "Are you certain that she's that difficult of a student?"

"She wouldn't last ten minutes at Songmark" the half-afghan admitted. "I've given her two weeks. She's not unteachable sir, she simply doesn't want to learn."

"Hrumph." Turning his attention to the slouching otter Mr. Martin grimaced. He'd seen this like before, even with some native students. Nor was this otter unknown to his office. "Miss Conroy. A messenger will be sent to your parents. As of this moment you are suspended as a student at S.I.T.H.S. I'm certain that your father will be able to obtain a tutor for you, at a price he might be able to afford. We do not accept your attitude here. Certainly not from backwards barbaric Europeans. You may wait outside." He waited until the smug otter had left before turning to his newest teacher.

"Mrs. Whitehall. To be blunt you are not a bad teacher. Your not the best either, but your learning quickly. Students like this are part and parcel in our lives. Were she a Spontoon native I would have dealt with her different. As it is she is nothing more than a distraction our students do not need. Let her return home. I am certain that she will be much happier there."

"Thank you sir. I... I just..." Helen's paws shifted in her lap. "I don't want to lose students sir."

A short bark of laughter came from the crows beak. "Oh I doubt you'll lose students, not from what I've heard. Just who is watching your class right now?"

"Lolo.. I mean Hinatea Himee."

"She is a student correct?"

"Yes sir. She's intelligent, shows a talent for teaching and likes to help the other students."

"I see." Mr. Martin said. "Is there any reason you chose a girl? Why not a boy, and why a native, not one of the visiting students."

"She's the best student I have in that class sir" Helen admitted. "In other classes I have male and female students whom I would trust equally for the same situation. Believe me sir, I did not select Lolo because she is female. I admit I think the best teachers are women but that's only because right now most of the teachers in our world are women. At least, outside of college or university levels, places where there are almost no women. Our pays too low to interest most men. It isn't until the college and university levels that pay is high enough to interest men."

"That, and the girls are old enough to be interesting" the crow laughed. "Understood. I remember you suggested Lolo for a teaching assistants position. You understand that increases her work load and that it is an unpaid position."

"I'd like it if she at least had the chance to refuse."

"Very well Mrs. Whitehall. I will see what can be done. Now I need a letter from you explaining to our Euro students parents why their loving daughter is being suspended. Three days out of class ought to get her parents upset enough to do something. If not, twenty whacks will wake her up."

Helen paled. She well remembered being bent over a teachers desk, accepting punishment for something she'd done, sometimes hadn't done. "Not in front of class" she gasped.

"No Mrs. Whitehall. Punishment is punishment. For a child it should be a private thing. I do not subscribe to humiliation here. Not even for a Euro. At least not unless it is required as a last resort." He said Euro in such a way as to leave no misunderstanding about his feelings.

Helen stood, paws held in front of her. "I am a Euro sir" she reminded the crow.

"Mrs. Whitehall. You are a European who cares. You are not a Euro who comes to take, with no consideration of those who own. Yes, you are euro yes. You are not Euro."

Simply in the way he stressed each word let Helen know that, though the crow had a less that polite feeling for those not of Spontoon birth he was obviously flexible about those feelings. "Very well sir. I will return to my class now. That letter will be on your desk in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you. But please take your time. Insure your words are neutral. It will take at least that long to find someone willing to go to Casino Island. Even longer for them to get there and the family to return."

"Yes sir. I assure you I will stick only to the facts. All the facts."

Laughing again the crow waved Helen out. Sticking only to the facts would make Miss Conroy's situation even worse. Pressing a button on his intercom he asked one of the student aids to come in.

June 9th, 1936

Oharu sat quietly on a large stone on Main Islands tall mountain, watching in delight as various aircraft made there ways below her. Huakava had suggested that she spend some time at the top of Mount Kiribatori. She had not however mentioned how to reach its summit, or what the mouse should do once she arrived. Finding a way up had turned out to be easy, one of those ever present Guides happily offered

to show her the easiest way up. What hadn't been easy was the actual climb. For all things a Kimono was not designed for scrambling among stones. Especially if those stones were many times the size of she who wore said Kimono. Nor was she nearly in physical condition to make such a climb. Yet with determination and more than a little help from her guide she had reached the summit.

"Will you be able to find your way back down?" the young wolverine asked.

Oharu, still trying to gather her breath extended her right arm, pointing towards the supposable unclimbable cliff several yards behind her. "Run, jump, bend knees when land. Yes?" she answered.

Indecision crossed the young mans face until he realized that Oharu was joking. "Well, yes" he admitted. "I guess that would work. But only once."

This elicited a touch of laughter from the mouse. "Yes, remember way down. Thank you." A few minutes later she found herself alone. Even a simple search showed her that others had spent time up here, most likely lovers she decided after noticing a few bits of clothing that had been left behind. As there was no water or food here she was limited to what she had carried, and the canteen her guide had thoughtfully left behind. There was nothing left to do now but... watch.

An ancient Sopwith Tri-plane spun lazily in the sunlight to her North, its Clerget 9B rotary engine occasionally laboring in a climb. "Needs plugs" she told herself. Still the pilot was excellent, sending his over half ton mass of struts, fabric and metal into gyrations that sometimes left the mouse's heart in her throat. Finally after over an hour of delightful maneuvers she watched with a touch of sadness as the aircraft turned towards Eastern Island and the runway there. She spent the rest of her day simply watching as aircraft maneuvered. Taking off, landing, cruising across the water. As day turned to night a chill filled the air. Once a problem, her Kimono now helped keep her warm. Laying on her back Oharu spent the next several hours simply watching the night sky. It wasn't until she was almost asleep that she realized why she was here. It was pleasant, it was quiet, and for the first time since arriving on Spontoan she truly felt at ease.

June 12th, 1936

At S.I.T.H.S. Helen Whitehall watched as her class gathered their things, preparing to leave for whatever studies they had next. Lolo had turned out to be rather good as a teacher. Why only two desks had been upside down when Helen had returned from the principles office on Monday. That was a record, then Lolo was somewhat respected by the other students and these were the most promising students. At least that was what their transcripts would lead one to believe.

Teresa Conroy though wasn't moving quite as fast. Twenty rather hard strikes delivered by the school nurse with a wooden paddle, in front of her mother and teacher had left the otter incapable of quick movements. "Teresa" Helen called as the girl reached the end of her desk line.

"Yes Mrs. Whitehall?"

"Wait a moment. I want to speak with you. Lolo, go on and shut the door behind you."

"Yes Mrs Whitehall" Lolo answered, hurriedly gathering her books as she headed for the door. As soon as it closed Helen stepped from behind her desk.

"Teresa I want you to know something. It won't make any difference to you, but you need to know it. I believe that striking a student is wrong. I fought Mr. Martin about that, but I'm only a first year teacher. I 'don't understand what students need' is how he put it."

"You held my tail" Teresa reminded the green eyed hound.

"Yes I did, and if I hadn't it would be broken right now. Teresa you have an attitude. I know this isn't an American school but I am an American teacher. If you won't show the other teachers respect your not showing me respect and I will write a letter to that effect to every university in America when you leave."

"You wouldn't do that" the otter gasped.

"Yes I will. You do realize that Mr. Martin intends to blister that rather pretty bottom of yours in front of the class next time. Cartoon panties or not. I don't want to see that. In fact I will leave the room. Humiliation isn't something I will accept used against my students."

"But you'd ruin my life with those letters. You don't even know how life treats kids today."

Helen leaned back against her desk, crossing her arms under her now amply milk filled breasts. "I'm a mother" she reminded the girl. "Who's son is still in hospital. You don't know how life treats mothers today. Teresa, violence is the last resort of the intelligent, the first of barbarians. You just experienced a barbaric attack on your body. I'd like to try a civilized approach. What about this school bothers you."

"Nothing" the otter admitted, looking out the window a moment. "I miss my friends. I miss my home. Why did father have to drag us all the way over here for four years? Why did he have to ruin our lives."

"I don't think he did Teresa. He brought you here because he couldn't stand not having you around for four years. It would have been harder on him. Not seeing you grow up, not meeting whatever boy you found charming. Teresa, life is full of choices. Sometimes we make the wrong ones, sometimes the right ones. No one is perfect and sometimes we make mistakes. But parents do what they think is best for their children. For their families. My father is a rancher. He dragged my sister and I out in blizzards at night to find missing cattle. He thought it was the best way to help us understand about life."

Teresa smiled softly. "That must have been awfully cold."

"Young lady. Pray to God you never find out how cold."

"Mrs. Whitehall... Why are you teaching here. Why not America? Your very good, honest. I bet any school would want you."

"Sometimes we make the wrong choices Teresa, then we have to accept what life gives us."

"You did something criminal?"

Helen laughed, reaching beside her for a notepad and pencil. "No. I went someplace I shouldn't. Never wake up ancient things Teresa, you never know what they will want. Or who serves them. Now here is a note for your next teacher to explain why your late. I'll see you again Monday. I'll expect the homework I assigned to be ready, or you'll find yourself at the blackboard with Lolo tutoring you while I teach class."

"That's humiliation" the otter reminded her teacher.

"Not really, I've done it before myself as a student, even in University. It's embarrassing but Lolo needs the teaching experience. Its actually more for her benefit than yours. It's certainly nothing that would hurt you socially. No student or teacher is an expert in every field after all. Especially not the jocks. But having every young male in your class know exactly how long your pretty legs really are, exactly the color of your tailroot. That would humiliate you. I wouldn't want that done to me. I certainly don't want it to happen to my of my girls. And think, the boys will be watching your tail while you work. Just like they do me." She grinned. "Its why we were given tails right? To confuse the boys to helplessness?"

"I see. Thank you Mrs. Whitehall. I'll think about this over the weekend."

Helen waved towards the door. "No promises right? But you'll think about it."

"Yes Mam."

At a certain house on Meeting Island it was very late when Albert Sapohatan, briefcase in paw finally returned home. Entering his abode (which was secretly well guarded now a-days) he noticed Elizabeth sitting at the dining table, her own papers carefully stacked beside her as she went through non-critical reports. "When do you want to get married" he asked the bobcat in greeting.

Without answering Elizabeth stood, walked into the kitchen and returned with a hot cup of coffee. Setting his coffee next to him Elizabeth found her own seat before speaking. "There are rumors from Kuo Han that another black raider has been sent out."

"Don't change the subject" Albert laughed. "When."

"Is the twentieth too soon?"

Albert Sapohatan sipped at his coffee, running his mental calendar forward. "That's a Saturday. No, its not too soon. Have you any idea who to invite?"

"Kjellfrid and her husband obviously. Annette and Oharu of course. Maybe Phil and Jaco. And you?"

"Basically the same, though I'd like to have the McGee's as well. Maybe a Songmark teacher or two. But we need to keep the list small. Unfortunately even with your dyed fur now bleached and your real pattern dyed back in there's too many who would put two and two together. It's still too soon since Sandy died so tragically. By next year we can have a real bang up wedding."

Elizabeth sipped her own drink before deciding. "If it needs to be small, Huakava and Sammi. Maybe Oharu. No one else then."

"Three Priestess's? None of your friends, why?"

"Like you said Albert. Keep it low key. Besides, I think I'd call Oharu a friend wouldn't you? She darn near became a lover and truth comes to truth, may still do so. She's absolutely unforgettable. Why not bring your Songmark girl. Amelia isn't it? Quietly of course, without her dormmates. I certainly don't trust that doe Molly even if Oharu is head over tail in love with her. There's something about her that just isn't right and her commitment to Lars is dangerous. Maybe we ought to think about removing her, or send her back to America. I'd love to remove Lars but we really do need him. For now."

Albert tapped his leg, his tail absently swinging slowly from side to side as he thought. "Its Schneider Trophy time. Too many unknown eyes wandering around. We can't use a church. Everything should be as far from prying eyes as possible. Okay, I'll ask around. We might be able to use a certain place for a few hours. I'll even arrange for a European priest who can keep his mouth shut. That would let us have everyone we originally wanted as well. All right my sweet, the twentieth. That girl Molly can wait for now. So far she's toeing the line, if barely. Besides I like my sleep and we both know what a certain Priestess could do about that if she wanted too. Now about that rumor."

June 13th, 1936

in Honolulu, Hawaii two men were finishing preparations for a long distance business trip. "Well Albert are you about ready to go?"

Albert Flintstine tapped his ever present pipe, nodding slightly in the affirmative. "Bringing your secretary is one thing Bartholomew, but that other Kathleen as well? My my. We are getting adventurous."

Laughing at the comment the older rabbit lifted his briefcase. "Kathleen was involved with that Oharu woman. She might be advantageous to have with us. More importantly I have discovered that she speaks Polynesian fairly well. She's coming as our official interpreter Albert, thus she will be used solely as such. Susy, well everyone has to have someone to take notes right? Just because she's cute, and very very willing is simply a plus."

Shaking his head in amused disbelief the only slightly younger fox shoved his unlit pipe into a pocket of his jacket. "When your wife discovers this change of attitude..."

"She will divorce me" the rabbit laughed. "And take half of everything I own that she can get her paws on. Albert, you know what's funny? She already has half of everything I own. At least that she can touch. Other than a small pittance I send her, which she does not need by the way as she inherited three quarters on a million two years ago, all my money is in local native owned and run banks, completely untouchable by any lawyer that harpy can buy. Let her have the house, furniture and my winter clothing. And the savings account. There may be five thousand in it, but she will blow through that in half a year. Even if Pan Am were to fire me right now I'd rather spend the rest of my life as a beach bum than leave here."

"My my. A few weeks of the finer life has certainly changed you my friend. Not that I blame you. All right then. We have a company aircraft waiting for us. With stops our voyage will take around two days, depending of course upon the weather. How long do you suspect that our negotiations will require?"

Bartholomew picked up a notepad. "I asked Kathleen the same thing since I'd forgotten that those Schneider Trophy races are being run right now. Her best estimate is three weeks, taking into consideration that most government officials will be out of office most of the time watching the heats. Perhaps we should think about a reschedule."

Tapping his cane's brass tip on the floor Albert let his mind run free, taking in every possibility. "We have one month to, as I was so graciously reminded, sink or swim. A week's delay would leave us with no buffer should things become difficult. Then there is the fact that we will see for ourselves just what quality of support Spontoon can give our aircraft. If truly they are able to support the Schneider Racers even marginally, then certainly they have the best aircraft support in well over a thousand miles. I have researched this severely my friend. Those islands may be a nation to themselves but they are certainly not a backward nation. I believe that it would best behoove us to maintain our current schedule. In any case notifications of our intent will be arriving at their government offices within the hour."

"Then we best be off. Your bags?"

"Already aboard the aircraft this morning. And yours?"

"Susy has ours. It has been easier since she moved in with me for her to handle such things. Shall we?"

South of Hawaii the bulldog known only as the Commander sat staring out at the clouds as a morning sun lit their tops. Transportation had proven to be difficult. Unlike just a month before he could no longer snap his claws and have anything he wanted arranged. Now he sat along with everyone else, crammed into a seat next to a noisy, and very nosey old hippo. That wouldn't have been so bad, but she must have poured a gallon of the cheapest perfume she could find over herself. Even so, this close he could scent that she hadn't bathed in weeks.

It was hell. Still he'd earned it. Too sure of himself, his position. If only he'd made certain that raccoon had lived. That, he discovered had been the real reason for his downfall. Those who could control their own scent, even change it when they needed were terribly rare. Rarer than he'd thought. Currently there

was only one other known in the United States equal to the woman who's death he had arranged, and that ferret had a great hate for the government (along, it appeared, with a completely untrustworthy below average IQ of ninety-two.) He had wasted so much time in the South, now he was on a long trip North to be briefed by Two Red Stones. After that remove a pawful of targets, then he could return to Washington. Grovel at certain furs hooves, perhaps a little boot licking. There was still time to pull this rabbit out of his hat. At least when he arrived at Oahu he could pick up a passenger ship headed North. A little sea breeze would do him good, even if he was spending his own money. He'd arrive as a tourist, leave on a diplomatic flight and there was nothing anyone on Spontoon could do to him. As long as he stayed out of the ocean for the rest of his life that was.

June 14th, 1936

At the Great Stone Glen on Main Island the mouse Oharu eased up onto a ledge, carefully clearing yet another vine from her path. Below and behind her the sable Tatiana Bryzov held her position, ready in an instant to come to the mouse's assistance should she slip. It was Sunday, thus having no special school requirements Tatiana was spending the day under Oharu's guidance. Though Tatiana was uncertain what Oharu was up to, the mouse herself was. By reaching this high ledge she could cut away those vines that hung down the slope. This would perform two functions. It would give her material to use as a rough rope in her projects, and it would clear the slope so that she could see what was under it.

What was there she already knew. A forgotten temple that predated the current Spontoon inhabitants' arrival. Perhaps older even than her own race's oldest temple. Her soul told her it was not an evil site, but even her fire-dreams gave insufficient information as to exactly what was here. For all she knew she had chosen to live in, worship and maintain a fertility site. That of course would prove to be embarrassing. Taking her utility blade she sliced through another arm thick rope of twisted vegetation, her blade's razor sharp edge making easy work of the tough material. As it slid away refuse followed. Old leaves, built up soil, roots and such. A small landslide tumbled down into the Glen thirty feet below her. Blinking her eyes as the dust settled Oharu was surprised to find herself looking into the carved face of a bird. Its mouth was open and seemed to be hollow. "A drain" she called to her leather collar wearing assistant. "This was roof, this is drain to carry rainwater away." Delighted in her discovery Oharu started cutting away even more growth, forgetting her precarious position.

When her feet suddenly fell from under her the mouse barely had time to drop her blade before Tatiana's paws were around her. Pulled tightly against the sable Oharu had time to watch as a rotted log she had been standing on fell, to shatter into dust when it struck the stones waiting below. "Molly would skin me alive if I let you die" Tatiana said in explanation.

"Only because she will want to do so herself. When discover truth. Thank you Tatiana. I must be more careful." Only after she had spoken did the mouse realize that she had let slip her secret. Turning her head she locked gazes with the younger woman.

"Already knew. I'm no idiot. You're a terrible liar."

"Perhaps then I marry you. Make you wife, unable cause me harm" Oharu retorted.

Tatiana laughed, carefully setting Oharu back on solid ground. "Dream. Slaves cannot marry ahn I don't like girls that much. Now what have you discovered. Pravda. Already know that this is ruin. What kind."

"Temple" the mouse explained while looking for her blade. "Old. Very old. From before. Ah..." Holding onto a vine she reached across a small depression to relieve her blade. "Only can say if here was once important. Can order you marry me yes?"

Still holding onto Oharu's work shirt, yet another gift left by some visitor, Tatiana studied the exposed bird carving. "Yes. You can. I would, but I would not like it much. The being ordered, unless always wear this

collar. Then not mind at all. Have not seen this bird before” she admitted, absently tugging Oharu back to vertical as the mouse slipped again. “Was this good place or bad place.”

“Good. Had it been bad I would not be attracted to live here. Think maybe I will rebuild this place.”

“Is that wise?”

Tatiana’s question caught the mouse off guard. She hadn’t expected such a question from the Red Russian. “Leave in ruins, rebuild. Tatiana. Make no difference to what is here. Still as strong, or weak. Nation without ruins has no history. I think maybe it time many these places be brought to sunlight. They much like sun.”

Tatiana shifted her position, watching as Oharu, unaccustomed to such heavy work, panted as she rested. “Sacred Island?”

“Not time yet” Oharu admitted, not trying to dodge the question.

That, Tatiana realized, was why she liked the little Priestess. Oharu answered truthfully, clearly and hid only that which had to be hidden. “Will you take me there?”

“Day you ready to die” Oharu agreed. “Even I not yet able to go alone. Not just because afraid of ocean. I am not trained enough. Even most peaceful place is dangerous those not know rules. I not know all rules yet. When do. Yes, I take you there if still want.”

Tatiana tugged against Oharu’s shirt again, the action causing the mouse to turn around. “You are exhausted. We climb down now, have lunch. Then maybe I cut some away while you wash.”

“Hentai” Oharu responded, sticking out her tongue. “You only want to watch me wash from above.”

Shaking her head no Tatiana pointed towards the tiny waterfall. All that remained of a mighty torrent that had once carved out the bowl now known as Great Stone Glen. “Cannot see you from here. Besides, I am not really that kind. Now loan camera, I will make much money with tourist trade.”

“And get self arrested maybe. Many things I not know about you Tatiana Bryzov. Stupid I know you are not.” Sheathing her blade Oharu moved closer to the sable, waving towards the way down with her free paw. “As say, I am tired. Food does sound good.”

“Not Poi I hope” the sable remarked as she lead the way down. “I do not like Poi.”

“Chicken, rice” Oharu answered. “Was left this morning. Smells delicious.”

Tatiana stopped at a particularly dangerous place, waiting on her current ‘Tutor’ (whom, the Sable was beginning to realize was more like a friend. Or more than that but not a lover by any means, for she much preferred men in her bed.) “Maybe I ought to become a Priestess. Free clothing, free food. People defer to you. Nice job.”

Oharu smiled at those words. “If want to learn, I teach.”

Some time later when they were again on the safer ground of Great Stone Glen Tatiana asked the question that had been bothering her for some time. “Oharu. About what Nikki said. About Communism. Is she right?”

“I am not trained in the matters of government” the mouse admitted as she too sat, her grass skirt flaring about the stone she most often choose. “Yet as I understand what you have told me, idea is that everything goes into one large pot then shared equally among everyone.”

"That is what its supposed to be yes."

"Is that what happens?"

Tatiana bit her lower lip. "There are special needs, the State. Our Glorious military, diplomatic..."

"Tatiana" Oharu asked softly. "In heart of hearts. Taking all into concern. Is that what happens?"

Silence filled the glen for some time. Long enough that the small fire Oharu kept to began to die down. "No" the Russian finally admitted. "Its not."

"Then was she right?"

"It is my country!" Tatiana answered with heavy emotion.

"Do thieves rule your country my daughter?"

Tears fell from the Russian girls face, falling to leave dark spots on her Songmark jacket. "I won't deny my country" she blurted, barely keeping from sobbing.

"Nor would I, until I came to truth worse than your own. One I could not justify. You are welcome here daughter, but your politics no longer. Perhaps you should return Songmark now."

Tatiana looked up, her eyes water filled. "Are you throwing me out too?" she asked.

"No child. I am throwing out politics. If Tatiana wishes to stay she always most welcome. Iosif Starling never welcome here. I never ask anyone deny their country. As one who has had do so, I well know how soul shattering that is."

"I wish to stay" the sable admitted.

"Then let us eat."

"I wish more" the sable suddenly realized.

"Eat first" the mouse answered.

Chapter Thirty-Two

June 16th, 1936

It was a warm Tuesday morning on Eastern Island when a PanAm amphibian slid into Spontoon's waters. Idling up to a waiting ramp its crew lowered their landing gear, revving their engines in order to roll up over a poured concrete ramp and onto dry land. Parking at the Eastern Island terminal they finally shut their engines down. It had been a long and very uneventful flight, as long as one ignored the antics that had occurred in their passenger compartment. They had arrived on a soft day, in how the Irish considered their weather. A gentle mist with warm temperatures and almost no wind. Even the harbor surface showed only slow gentle swells today. Almost immediately after the engines shut down two water taxis cruised up to the pier near where the aircraft had stopped. One brightly painted boat was meant for passengers, the other larger, less ornate one for cargo. Neither were going to be disappointed today. When the hatch opened a rather rotund, yet somehow fit older male rabbit stood in the entrance breathing deeply the fresh air. "I don't care what you say Albert, there's nothing like fresh air" he said as he backed away to let his otter Air Hostess lower the built in steps.

Both native boatmen looked in appreciation at the female otter in her tight fitting PanAm flight uniform. Kathleen was well rested, having slept from Midway island to Spontoon. Her fur glistened with health and her body was one that promised a great deal. Her smile was genuine as she greeted the men, calling out in American accented Hawaiian a greeting meant to be used between friends. It was obvious to both that this Euro had at least spent some time learning about those about her. Dr. Annette Riverstone though would have been stunned by the revelation that her friend knew more than a pawful of words in the native dialect.

Tying up to the pier the first boat took aboard four passengers, two men and two women. It might be thought that their long lives as water taxi pilots gave them the ability to determine who they were picking up. Or it could be said that the briefing they had both received less than two hours before had given them their information. Either way, those who stepped upon the passenger taxi found themselves settled into the best seats by rank, not as both women had hoped, beauty. "Casino Island please" Bartholomew Matthews ordered the boats pilot before settling down to relax. His closest friend and company lawyer Albert Flintstine sat across from him, with Kathleen next to him. Bartholomew though carefully insured that his young secretary Susy White sat next to him. Very close in fact. Susy, a Scottish bat glanced towards him and even now, hours after being introduced in several ways to the Mile High Club still managed to blush at his open interest. Behind them they left both pilot and co-pilot to sort things out.

In the American Consulate on Casino Island, somewhat over three hours after the PanAm flight had landed a coded message was handed to the American agent known as Two Red Stones. It was a short message, *Grapefruit for breakfast*, yet it told him everything he needed to know. The Commander would arrive tomorrow morning. Carefully burning his message (which had been typed on flash paper to insure such destruction was total) the Cougar leaned back in his chair. This was going to prove interesting. He knew that the bulldog would be double checking his report. He also knew the man had other targets and who they were. One target though the cougar had come to respect. After all, it wasn't often that anyone dragged themselves from the pits of oblivion to become an important person. Somehow he was going to have to warn that mouse, without publically tipping his paw. That he was suspected, perhaps even known as an agent he was already well aware of. Therefore he made a point to keep his nose out of anything that might get himself invited to a late night swimming party. In the rare cases that he had to investigate something that he suspected was real, he had always made certain to complain vocally to himself about it while on a water taxi the night before. Thus strangely, when finally he arrived at his destination the next afternoon there was never anything to be found. Odd that he thought, his supervisors always picking

empty fields or abandoned buildings for him to search and photograph.

Of course he knew what was going on. He knew they knew but it was professional curtsy. A game actually, one he had no desire to win on this island nation. He'd made a point of attending Sandy Doecan's wake even though he hadn't been invited. It hadn't been a surprise to him when space was quietly made available. I was as though he had been expected. It hurt him though that she had died that way, but even he had to admit that a quick death was better than what had been waiting for her. Later, after a long night of thinking (and a bottle of Nootnops Blue with rum) while going over everything that had happened he had penned a letter that somehow would find its way to a certain non-existent office. One expressing his feelings, and hoping that Sandy's 'next life' would be a long and peaceful one. That of course told the reader two things. Two Red Stones hoped that the rather public and messy death had been rigged, and that if it had been that he had no interest in proving that she was in any way still alive. After all he knew the difference in scent between hours long butchered pork and fresh death. At least he hoped his nose was right that day, as he hadn't thought about it until too late to be certain. Sandy could as easily be dead, and dead he would have lost one of the few people he that respected in his line of work.

Certainly no one worth knowing respected The Commander.

Calling in his assistant he started making preparations for The Commanders visit, and dearly hoped that it would be a very short visit. Later tonight he would shake off his Embassy tail yet again (the boy really was hopeless) long enough to post a warning note to the same address he'd sent the last letter. An address he wasn't supposed to know, an address he should have reported long ago. What would happen he didn't know but Two Red Stones was a warrior, a husband and a father. He was not a murderer of women. Already knowing the bulldogs history and those events in Hawaii he silently hoped that this would be a terminal visit for the bulldog, and no one else.

At the Meeting Island Hospital sunlight cascaded across a stainless steel worktable, highlighting a woman and several dozen thick medical folders. Dr. Annette Riverstone lifted herself into a straighter position as she pushed away the reports before her. Patients with no chance of further healing. Patients limited in their hope to simply a day without great pain. Quietly she buried her face in her paws. Gunboat War. Two simple words. Two words that had left such horrors. Doctor Kiwi had introduced her to their special patients the day before, then she'd spent an entire night on her own studying every medical record on them. There was just so little that could be done. Basically it was care for them, ease their pain with narcotics when needed, or however it could be eased. Wait and watch them age and die. All that damage had been done by a pawful of ships and both Oharu and Sandy had told her there would be more war. A greater war.

Sandy was dead, Oharu... People looked at her oddly when she mentioned the woman. 'Have not seen' they would say, or 'Do not know.' She knew that she was being locked out for some reason. It'd happened enough before in her short life that the otter was certain what was being done. Had Oharu fallen? Had she been wrong? Were her bones now rotting slowly on the ocean floor along with what was left of Sandy? Was a vibrant intelligent woman now nothing more than free food for scavengers? Remembering her ex-husband a wave of depression rolled over the young otter. "Why does everyone I care about turn out to be bad or die" she cried, her tears falling on thick manila folders.

Far North on a feared land known as Cranium Island, deep within the ancient ruins Saimmi and her crew had visited not long ago a tall, thin form walked. Male, his species indeterminate within the long white lab coat he wore the figure stopped at a heavy bronze door. It had been there when he had arrived with his family and a paw selected group of assistants. Though it had been cleaned, there was no reason to strengthen it. Two feet of solid bronze was more than enough of a barrier for anything he planned to create. Currently the door stood open, a young, well armed meerkat standing guard. Nodding to the boy he walked in, turned right and continued down a hallway lined with ancient statues. Statues of creatures

from some fantasy dream he'd long ago decided. Reptiles simply never gained intelligence. Certainly not enough intelligence to wage mechanical wars with each other. Finally he stopped, now standing beside a much shorter but well shaped female form who was also wearing a lab coat, though her's was dyed a dark red. Better to hide the bloodstains he knew.

"What options have you decided upon" he asked, setting his clipboard down on an open space near her.

"That native guide knew better than to bring them up here" the woman answered, her voice a soft contralto with a touch of barely restrained madness added for spice. "He's already feeding your newest plants. They needed the taste anyway. You want that girl?"

"Yes Sarah. You are already aware that I've always a use for a female subject. What are your plans for the male."

"Biff?" Sarah reached to her far right, selecting a folder that she then gave to her companion. "Thought I'd test the new ocean hunters mind controlling abilities. Maybe they will do better than the man of war base I tried before. These have linked together into a single social organism."

Opening the folder he read her report, smiling to himself as he returned it. "For being my sole surviving child you certainly are blood thirsty. I still believe that I will win the contest before you are ready. All right, when will you be ready to test?"

"And you're a perverted old man for a father. Which is why my rooms have an iron bolt on every door. Why not right now." She reached in front of her, pressing a button as she leaned forward gracefully to speak into a goose-necked microphone. "Mr. Armstrong. Will you please come out?" Her voice was soft, inviting and filled with promise.

Only a few moments passed before a very well built and very handsome Doberman walked into view. His jungle adventurers outfit was artistically torn in places, mainly in the chest area. All by his own paw the female knew. "So" he announced as he came into the light. His voice was deep, rumbling, highly attractive even to Sarah. Unfortunately for him his brain didn't come near to matching her requirements for a mate. Or fortunately. "Someone will finally talk with me, and such a sweet inviting voice you have young woman."

"Mr. Armstrong" Sarah continued, secretly delighted at the interest her voice aroused in the Doberman. "Since we have no further use for you, you may now leave. If you will go to the blue door to your right you will find a long tunnel with stairs going downwards. At its end is another door. It is unlocked. Beyond is a path to the beach where your boat is waiting."

Biff Armstrong looked towards the indicated door, then up at the loudspeaker. "How do I know this isn't a trap my sweet lady" he demanded.

"Mr. Armstrong. Please. We have been holding you and Miss Huntley for over three weeks now. Have I at any time lied to you?"

"Not that I know of" Biff admitted. "And what about Louise? Your letting her go too. Right?"

Sarah laughed, her sweet laugh holding more hints of her madness though Biff seemed to miss the warning. Looking to her father she released the key a moment. "If he was a real adventurer he'd have tried to break out the day he woke up, like that girl did. All bluff, no brains. If he'd had brains father you would soon be a grandfather for he is almost everything any woman could desire. Just no intelligence I am afraid. Like a professional sports player, sadly lacking in the one thing that would make him impossible to refuse." Turning back to her microphone she managed another sweet laugh before speaking. "No Mr. Armstrong. They need only one experimental animal. Miss Huntley is much easier to control than you would be. Much less dangerous to them. Or are you offering yourself in her place? That

is an acceptable exchange. If you also agree to remained chained while in my presence.”

Below her the male figure shivered, actually moving back a step before answering. “I warned Louise she could get killed out here. She’s all yours.” Actually running he made his way to the blue door, opened it and vanished inside.

“Thus exits the great whitefur hero. Huntley is yours dad, what do you plan this time?”

Picking up his own clipboard the taller man glanced at it. “I’m finished with my breeding experiments for now, so I think I’ll turn her over to the flytraps.”

“Feeding? If you just wanted food I’d have given you Biff. Father, she’s much too intelligent to waste that way.”

“Your certain?”

“Next to those Songmark girls we had, I haven’t had as much trouble keeping a prisoner in her cell in years. She’s been most inventive, and she hasn’t even tried the vamp option yet. Had Armstrong had her intelligence, or she his body.” Sarah actually shivered in pleasure at the thought. “Oh one day he has to arrive father. He just has too.”

“Vamp.. Now there is an idea” her father agreed, forcing himself to ignore his daughters biological needs. Contrary to everyone’s beliefs he had no interest in his daughters body, he had more than willing slaves for that release and in truth the idea of touching his daughters body that way horrified him. “I’ve those Mixtexa Vampire bat samples. That is an interesting idea. Is it really possible to create a vampire that isn’t already dead.”

Sarah giggled. “She’s a fox father. Not even a tree squirrel. Even if your successful, could she really learn how to fly?” Reaching over to her control board she threw another switch, then slowly turned a large black rheostat. An image crackled across one of the treated circular mica screens before her and though small, only six inches wide, eventually cleared to show a battered cabin cruiser tied up to a broken stone dock. Even though the image was only in greys its detail was excellent. As they watched Biff Armstrong ran into view. He stumbled over stones that even the most average adventurer would have had no trouble with as he made his way to the boat.

“He certainly is incompetent” her father agreed.

“For simple plant food father, he is more than adequate. As a test subject, laughable. As a father. That idea is simply too horrible to imagine.” Selecting a lever she moved it slowly forward. At her movement the scene changed, zooming in on the cruiser. Biff was having trouble untying the simple half hitches that their guide had used. Finally he gave up, vanishing into the boats interior. A few laughable minutes later he returned with a hatchet in one paw. It only took three strikes for him to cut the wet one inch hemp rope with that razor sharp blade. Only then did he decide to start the crafts engines.

“Incompetent is a metaphor with his face upon it” Sarah’s father laughed. “And to think it was he that I was most worried about when they arrived. How far will he get?”

“I do not know father. I had expected him to escape, then return to where he had come from. Not have to release him. At this rate he will sink that ship before he even gets the engines started.” Moving to one side she threw another switch, waiting calmly while several huge vacuum tubes behind her warmed.

“He just ran aground on the sand spit. This is almost as much fun as watching that cow from Songmark try to refuse the Korgon. No woman has ever refused him once his scent reached her. None.”

Sarah sighed. "I'll have to sacrifice one of my creatures or he will never find Spontoon. A small price. I simply cannot believe that fox placed her life in the hands of such a clown. What was she thinking anyway?" Turning another rheostat she began talking in Latin. Slowly to be certain, words were often muddled when transmitted underwater. An odd booming voice soon answered her, also in Latin though much slower. By the time her conversation had ended her father was following the cruisers escape. "They will attack him as soon as possible. Mad, his body will die eventually. They really are not ready for this, still they have agreed to see to it that the boat arrives at Spontoon if possible. Biff too. Alive if possible. Dead if not. His guide will try to drop off in those waters to explore for the others later arrival. They are linked mentally somehow you understand"

She joined her father, watching as the little ship slowly eased out of a tiny harbor. "Idiot" she whispered as the craft turned parallel with the incoming waves. A large wave crashed over the ship, soaking the Doberman. For a moment it looked like the small ship was going to capsize. Then it suddenly righted, turned into the waves and steadied down. Though not visible on her tiny screen Sarah knew what had to have happened. Biff Armstrong had been taken over by one of her creatures. They were small but incredibly fast in the water. Should this branch survive she might just win the contest on who could destroy the world first. Not only win, but survive long enough to hold the prize. Shutting down her terminal the young woman sighed in relief. "Your going to give her wings too?"

"Oh no" her father answered. "Wings would be too much to hope for. I've barely gotten the Mark Seven Orscalator aligned correctly for one change. If I tried anything that extensive we'd just end up with glowing protoplasm again and have to dump it in one of the craters. I'm just going to try for one part of the biology, later perhaps the hunger. It would be nice to have more subjects though. I will settle for the biology of course. I'm not quite ready to attempt using Doctor Johansson's latest mind exchanger yet."

"Don't look at me dad, not if you ever want grandchildren" she warned. "So your making a vampire" Sarah decided. "An undead. Father what is it with this obsession with vampires? Their all myths."

"Not undead Sarah. That is still beyond even the newest Orscalator's abilities. I've had promising results, but they still rot away normally." He glanced out at the atrium beyond his daughters windows, an atrium neither was foolish enough to enter at night. "You really believe Vampires don't exist? Come dear. I have some interesting things to show you. Things one of my colleagues dug up in Southern Piccupac when I was still in school."

Aboard the tiny cabin cruiser now headed directly for Spontoon a well built and very handsome Doberman stood solidly at the helm. His hat was now set perfectly to keep the suns glare from his eyes. Had anyone watched the boat pass they would have been impressed by his uncanny ability to keep his balance even in the roughest chop. But Biff no longer controlled his body. No, under that hat a pinkish gelatine mass was slowly working its way through his ear channels, slowly becoming part of his brain. Biff Armstrong was no longer his own man and he knew it. Every second of it. Biff Armstrong was already quite mad. Mad, and the creature had hardly started feeding on his brain to make room for itself.

On Main Island that evening while families sat around fires, while friends spoke, Oharu had worked her way up to Sacred Lake. It was not a place she liked to be, not with what lurked beneath its surface waiting for the right mind to stumble by. As she expected none of the three children whom she had been told about were at their self appointed posts. Of course not, after all tourists only invaded in the daytime correct? Settling herself down to rest she stared into the now black waters, her inner eyes easily seeing that mass of dark energy waiting so deep below. Whomever had placed it there had made one error. One simple error of only a meter or so placement. For to reach it would kill any priestess that tried. So deep was the stone now that there was only one way to reach it. A priestess, holding a net and large stone would have to drop into depths so great that her rib cage would collapse before she finished her decent. With luck she would get her net about the stone for others to raise, but she herself would continue falling. Falling ever deeper down the ancient, slumbering volcanoes throat. Had the stone been placed less than a meter to the North then it would have been within the ability of a well trained Priestess. One who knew well

how to dive to reach it and return alive.

Three little horizontal feet was all that made the difference between life and another sacrifice.

Looking up into the skies Oharu wondered who would eventually make that selfless dive. Could she? That answer was of course yes, as this was fresh water. Not the horrid salt water where her hunter lived. It would have to be a young woman though. Young to bear such pain and still have the strength to finish her task. It was, as she had pieced together, how the twins who placed it originally had died. Down there below even Oharu's mage sight lay a third of the bodies of those who had saved Spontoon. She knew that on Cranium Island the lava had tasted at least as many lives and under Krupmark Island even more lay under collapsed stone, to never see the sun again. European religions treated their women as trash, yet it was upon their souls that civilizations foundations were built. Evil by its own creation could never be defeated by a male. No, that was why women gave life. It was their task, for Spontoon to truly be free at least one more life would be needed here. If it were to be her's she would accept the task, though not with any anticipation.

A soft sound of bare feet on grass warned her that the three had finally arrived. Still she made no move. Made no attempt to defend herself as the brash young male started his chant. As his young female assistants joined in Oharu stood slowly, turned and made one movement with her right paw. All three stuttered, tried to restart their chants then looked to each other.

"I can't feel it anymore" one of the girls admitted.

"Nor I, or I" the other two agreed. Taking off their masks the teenagers stared at the mouse who stood before them, herself not that much taller than their young selves. Stepping forward the young male's face showed anger. "What did you do to us" he demanded.

"To you? Nothing" Oharu answered. "All I did was tell the spirits that you call upon that you are not yet worthy of their attention. They decided wither I was right, or wrong."

"You can't do that" he screamed. "They are our spirits. They come to us."

"Then call them. I will wait."

Donning their masks again the three tried. Tried again and again to call upon those they so depended upon. Called... with no answer. Finally admitting defeat they removed their masks. "So now what" the boy asked bitterly, his years not yet up to the task to answer his own question. "We become fishermen, gardeners? Who guards this lake until another is born?"

Walking forward Oharu gently took each mask away from its owner, leaning them against a nearby fallen tree. Turning to her captive audience she studied them before turning to the girls. "Undo the curse you placed on that tourist" she demanded. Happy her anger wasn't aimed at him the boy watched and waited.

"But, it just bothers her dreams until she becomes nicer to everyone" the older girl explained. "Anyway, we don't know how. Honest."

Oharu sighed, waving the three towards her. "I will explain the law we serve under to you, once. You want be guardians. That is good" she told them. "But you won't wait to learn how. In your rush you have harmed one woman simply because you were angered. That violates one of our greatest laws. To do no harm. To force no change upon another for only our own desires. You harm her now, eventually you would destroy what she is. Is that what you want?"

"No Mam" both girls said in unison.

"And you" Oharu continued, turning her attention to the boy. "You are wild priest of this group. To you is the responsibility for their actions. Aware or not, you led them to violate a basic law. Are you ready accept punishment for that?"

Shivering the boy still held his ground. "We didn't know" he said in excuse. "No one would teach us. Huakava refused."

"Knowing is your responsibility young one. Harming another for your own gain, in this case protecting lake well capable of protecting itself has no excuse. For Huakava I am last student. Not even full student as she has too little time left. As to why she chose me, I am already trained in another path that much matches Spontoon's. I am capable of teaching myself, given nudge in the right direction. Huakava will die before Winter solstice. She could never teach any enough be worth while."

"But everyone else said no too" the youngest cub complained.

"Because everyone already has student, or is student" the mouse explained. "There not enough priestess's to go around. It is one reason I sent here to help. As I have no full time assistant I will teach you. If you wish. Yet I have my own path to follow. It is a path that will, when I reach its end make the training of such as you much easier. Should I survive. So. If you will accept my rule over you. Then I will teach you."

She held her left paw out, a single round river stone in it that she had carried for over an hour. "Your path will be hard. You will do drudge work meant to teach you the patience you need. You will memorize songs, dances, stories. Until you can recite them in your sleep. Often even as I learn them from others or we learn them together. You will learn how a shrine is cared for, how to aid one in need. And then, only then. When I feel you are no longer formless stones will I teach you how call upon those who guard. For only then will you know when need their help, and when simple words will suffice." She leaned forward, her voice becoming much kinder. "And I have in my time discovered that it great deal fun to mess with tourists minds. Especially those wish learn our religious way for 'scientific study.'"

"How long will it take, to learn all this" the boy asked.

"All your lives" Oharu answered. "Upon your last breath you still be learning. Just as I will. Just as all priests and priestess's are. We serve, we do not rule. WE MAY NOT RULE." Her harsh voice rose, causing all three to shiver in their tracks. "No one may stand between people and the Gods. We keep up temples, we keep up shrines. We remember rites and rituals. We serve at pleasure of the Gods. At the pleasure of people. We are nothing more than poor orphan who makes crumb of bread sweeping path for others. That is true secret of what we do. We are and always will be less than those we serve."

"I still want to learn" the boy decided. His two female companions talked among themselves a few minutes before asking a question. "Where are you from" the older girl asked.

"I was born in Cipangu, some call Japan. At age of nine I decided to become Miko. That is a Shrine Maiden. My work was to keep sacred flame, to sweep the floors, steps and such. To remember rituals, to aid in banishment of evil spirits, to bless each years seeds and many more things. I came to Spontoon because your Gods asked my Gods for one like me."

"Could you be a Miko again" the younger girl asked.

"I am no longer a maiden young one. Only maiden may be a Miko. I may be priestess, I may train maidens but I may never be what I once was. Time passes, we change. As we change we become more than we once were, or less. As we decide."

"I want to learn" both girls decided, almost at the same moment.

"Do you know where I live?"

"No" all three admitted.

"Do you know where the old waterfall was, before the Great Fall?"

"Yes" the boy answered. "My older sister took me there once. To show me how misuse of power changes things. I. I didn't believe her."

"Then tell your parents that you will be living there, until I feel you are trained enough to let visit home again. Do not worry about your lake, it is more than safe. I will heal tourist, at cost to you all." She sat the stone in the boys hand. "Your first lesson. This stone is strong is it not?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Break it. Without hitting it, break it."

"That can't be done" he admitted. "You have to hit it against something hard or you can't break it."

"You are so certain? Wait." Closing her eyes Oharu began to chant. It was an ancient chant even in her birth nation. For over nine thousand years Shinto had evolved from its roots. For over nine thousand years paths had been explored. For over nine thousand years knowledge had been gained. For Shinto is in truth one of the oldest religion's on this planet. What Oharu called to had been discovered over eight thousand years ago, quite by accident. In eight thousand years it had never found a use beyond what she called it for.

For several minutes nothing happened, then with the sound of a small bell the stone, still in the boys paw cleaved exactly in half. Opening her eyes the mouse smiled as her new students gasped in awe at what had been done. It was in truth a simple thing, though it took much out of her as it had the one who had taught her. There were easier, less energy wasting ways to break a stone. But none that would so excite young children. "Be at my home in thirty days. Bring everything you need. Come alone for I will have much drudge work for you there. Sweeping of paths, cleaning of garden, clearing weeds and such. I will also begin teaching you." Reaching out she retrieved the stone, held it up for all three to see, then carefully pressed the halves together again. Pressed them together just a touch out of position. When she returned the stone it was whole again, yet where the break had been was now a ridge. Razor sharp, its face reflected even the smallest light. As to why it came back together, well of course someone like Oharu could never understand what a mono-molecular surface was.

She stood, feeling exhaustion roll over her. It was a draining chant to use and in fact this cleaving of a stone was the only use for it anyone had ever found, but it did have its use. '*Huakava*' she said in her mind. '*I'm going to kick that grey tail of yours over you head.*' Leaving the children she started back to her home. She would have students now. Since her own apprentice she had taught no one. It was a good feeling to teach again. Removing the young ones curse would not be easy, still she would remove it. For Spontoon lived by its reputation, and such a reputation as this was not good for business.

Somewhere on the Main Island a vixen named Mary glanced behind her fearfully as she ran through the dense jungle. Behind her followed several armed male natives, all intent upon capturing the young whitefur girl who had so violated their sacred altar. Even if it had been a terrible accident they simply wouldn't accept her apologies so she was to be given to the Sun God for her folly. Desperately she pushed through a stand of wild bamboo, only to find herself emerging at the edge of a several hundred foot drop. Her mind rushed. Should she chance climbing down or face the wrath of those spear welding savages behind her. Did they simply want to scare her, or was blood really on their minds? Either way the vixen couldn't chance it. She had a social party to attend tonight after all so she simply had to escape. When she heard a rough voice call close behind her it made up her mind. Ripping off her expensive skirt

the virtuous vixen Mary Wrightwood grasped a nearby vine and began making her way down that forbidding cliff.

Minutes later four heavily painted wolves stopped at the same cliffs edge, one kneeled down to gather up the discarded skirt while the others leaned over the drop at various places, easily spotting the shapely vixen's decent. Her bright white underclothing was now stained by dirt and green plantlife. "She die down there" the leader announced. "Taboo valley. No one who go there survive." Noticing the stretched vine that still held Mary's weight he pulled out a wicked looking bush knife. With an effortless twist of his wrist he brought the blades keen edge against living vine. Parting like rotted twine the vine slipped over the cliffs edge. From somewhere far below came Mary's scream of fear as she fell. Satisfied, with one now carrying Mary's discarded skirt as proof that they had punished the outlander offender, the four returned the way they had come. No one had ever returned from the Valley of Ancients. No one.

Setting aside his pen Harcourt Fenton Swordfire (the middle aged male rabbits pen name) leaned back in his chair. As it was now late in the evening he had forgone his typewriter in deference to anyone who he might disturb on such a romantic night. It was a grand first effort he thought, but something was missing. Having arrived on Spontoan not quite a week ago he had been intent upon not writing. Intent upon spending his visit simply relaxing. But the rabbits Muse had woken him last night and now over a hundred completed pages lay on his rented rooms desk, most typed, the last twenty paw written. Mary Wrightwood, adventuress and long term girlfriend of the he-fur bulldog Donald Jacob Darkmare III had again disturbed that which should never have been disturbed. Of course in the end everything would come out right. Mary had been in two dozen adventures already. Each one a bit more furraising, each one closer to claiming forever the young women's precious virtue, or life before Donald could save her. But his readers kept demanding more. Privately Harcourt knew that they wanted Donald to fail at least once, for Mary to assume full womanhood or his villains for once to win the day. Those ideas dwelt in the back of his mind as well, but Mary's character was aimed at young boys and girls. To raise her to the level he knew his readers desired would be to forever lose the character. Of course such a story existed, Mary happily walking to the altar of her own free will but not with Donald. It was hidden away in his bank safety deposit box where it would never see the light of day for as long as he was alive.

Still leaning back in his chair he looked up at the ceiling. It was a soft golden paneled wooden ceiling. Its calm colors were nothing like the cheap white painted ceiling of his tiny apartment back home. Mary Wrightwood kept food on his table, his job managing his fathers hardware store kept the rent paid. This trip to Spontoan had taken every last penny he could scrape up over six years. It would be nice he thought if some movie mogul would pick up his stories, that would bring in enough to maybe afford a used car. Then he could take drives in the country, maybe even finally find a girlfriend. But that wasn't likely. If no one had noticed his work after this long, other than a very loyal group of readers who snapped up just enough books to keep him published then no one was going too. "What I need" he told the empty resort room. "Is a new character. A new plotline. But what?" Harcourt slowly fell asleep in his chair, unaware of what plots the future was going to bring him.

June 17th, 1936

Even in Great Stone Glen's retaliative sanctuary high on Main Island the powerful throb of competition engines caught Oharu's ear. Looking up from the stone she was cleaning the mouse tried to determine from which direction that sound came. Her home though worked against her, each throbbing wave of sound bounced from one hard or soft surface to another, leaving her unable to determine anything more than it wasn't to the South of her, for in that direction was the heavy growth of bamboo. All sound was absorbed by that growth, even harsh crackling seasonal tourist mating calls.

Although it was near noon the young priestess decided that she would wait until tomorrow to investigate. It had taken her nearly a day to clear these tumbled stones and their carvings kept calling to her, it was she thought, as though they had something important to say. Besides Huakava was to be here sometime today. There was a task she needed Oharu to perform, so wandering off simply wasn't possible. But

tomorrow... Returning to her task Oharu smiled to herself. Tomorrow she would see that aircraft. With luck touch it. Nikki had promised to start teaching her how to work on an aircraft in the evenings when she was at Casino Island, late after sunset song and when her business was closed for the night. That memory also reminded her of her other duties. With a gentle sigh of regret she continued removing ancient plant growth from carved volcanic stone. In truth her life was not her own, though she had scads more free time now than as a Miko. And she loved every minute of it.

On Cranium Island a young mink walked into her fathers laboratory, noting his current work was at a place that she could bother him. "Father."

Looking up from his papers the thin lab coat dressed male smiled at his only surviving child. "Yes Sarah" the young woman's father answered.

Sitting beside her father, something no sane woman would do had they known the man as well as she did, Sarah laid a gold coin on the desk. "Last night you mentioned wanting more subjects. I know that we have been buying Kuo Han girls for you but they are starting to get expensive."

"True" Sarah's father admitted. "Quality has also suffered since Japan invaded China, as has variety. You have a suggestion?"

"Yes. I remembered how those Spontoon women had come for that old chunk of stone. How delighted you were to finally have a bovine test subject."

"There was also that movie star. I recall she much enjoyed her experience with the Korgon, though her daughter was about as feminine as a pile of dead seaweed. Even the Korgon had no interest in her."

"True. Well now that stone is gone, not that it was worth anything anymore. Not since Horace drained its last power into his multi-stage accumulators. But we do have that mass of treasure Bill found just before its guardian ate him."

"Your older brother. Yes, a bit too greedy. I miss him, he was an excellent chess player. Still we have a deal with that Guardian now. All the treasure we want for nothing more than a small power feed from our electrical generators. Hardly enough to keep a light on all night."

"Yes" Sarah laughed. "I do smile when Titto brings it a charged battery for desert. How it leaps upon the cart, screaming in that tiny voice 'Bah-riesssss.'" I think Titto is fond of the creature. Perhaps that is why she spends so much time down there."

"Nevertheless. You said you have an idea?"

"Oh yes. Father, adventurers are always looking for treasure, correct? What if we leaked to certain persons what treasures are available, buried just within one of the carters though not exactly which one. Say a pirates treasure, so many pirates have suddenly vanished around here lately after all. Mainly by trying to attack us."

"Sarah, that treasure vault is not inexhaustible."

"Of course not, of course not. Do not forget, not many who come will escape. Some must escape though to tell others of the treasure that they could not carry away. A few thousand coins, those rotted bags of carved jewels, plates and such. That useless pile of scrolls. Nothing we would use anyway. Just think father. Your creatures would be able to pick and choose which subjects you want. Which ones they want."

"There would be a rather wide variety as well" her father admitted. "I am so tired of those water blooded Chinese. They seem to die if you look at them sideways. Very well then. Arrange your deception. But I must ask which lands will you leave your crumbs to.'

"Germany, France, England, Uavapacal, Australia Japan and the United States. I think seven or so coins as well as a dozen or so of the lesser carved jewels will be enough. If placed in the right paws. After all, Museums are so greedy. Titto can make maps from the old blank scraps of scrolls we have. She is an excellent artist you remember."

"Then get on it. Why, I can already see the fools landing on forgotten shores. Hoping to slip in unseen. Of all my children I am so happy you're the one still alive." He watched happily as his daughter walked away, noting the unconscious sway in her hips. Yes he thought, I will certainly leave her out of my experiments. I do so want grandchildren.

Unknown to the madman his daughter Sarah was just as mad, having watched her own mother slowly eaten alive by one of her fathers plants when he was away. What he didn't know was that she harbored a secret. Deep in the ruins, in a small section of rooms unknown to him Sarah had locked away her oldest sister. At first to protect her from their mad father, then later after she too went mad simply because it amused her.

Late that afternoon Titto, Sarah's only trusted servant made her way down to the village. Though no one would touch her. Not even her own mother, none dared to refuse to serve her needs. Therefore the next morning eight carefully designed packages left Cranium Island by air post. Each headed for a different museum or adventurers club. Titto herself returned to the laboratory late that night, her glowing golden eyes both lighting her way and warning even the near mindless death plants that this one was more than death to assault.

Oharu stepped off her water taxi onto Moon Island already looking around for someone who could help her. It was well after noon and she only had until just after sunset song before she had to be where Huakava wanted her. Still there was just enough time and an island guide quickly stepped up, taking in her dress, a simple cheap tourist dress from Hawaii that made her appear Euro. But the fur combing, her flower and the necklace she now wore told him exactly what the mouse was. One may cloth in outland clothing, but what was clothed could never be hidden. He bowed ever so slightly, automatically speaking in Spontoon. "Honored mother. Your needs?"

"My name is Oharu" she responded gently, mindful of the respect she was being given by the older male. "Please, unless it is needed in ritual to use that name."

"As you wish... Oharu." He looked uncomfortable, but she had asked most politely and it was such a little thing. "You are looking for?"

"Yesterday a race plane flew over my small hut. Is it allowed to visit these aircraft?"

"Yes Oharu. If you would allow I will guide you there."

Oharu smiled, touching the hounds arm with her fingers. "Simply tell me way. I not take coin from your paw, food from your kits mouth."

Shaking his head no the hound indicated Oharu was to follow him. "Consider then this my gift to you this season" he responded.

Accepting the inevitability of her situation she quietly followed her guide. It was a short, less than ten minute walk to where a sleek aircraft floated low in the water. A few dozen yards away were four more aircraft, though Oharu did not know the language being spoken and the Songmark uniforms warned her of

who were there. Nor did she recognize any of them as their sleeves all bore three notes. Silently she swore to remain unnoticed, though her freshly cleaned, worn soft blue cotton dress (one Annette had given her as a joke) stood out among the euro costumes in the bright sunlight.

Her guide went forward to speak to a large bulldog who seemed to be in charge. For several minutes the two spoke in English while Oharu stood as still as a statue. Eventually both men came to her, her guide introducing her while the bulldog simply smiled.

"Not often we get the local religion interested in us" he admitted. From his accent she placed him somewhere near Sandy's home.

"You are American?" she asked in her own accented English.

"Texan. Part of America yes Mam, but we were a nation of our own not long ago." He glanced around in a comedy movie style before leaning forward slightly. "Might be again" he stage whispered. "If they don stop stealin our oil."

"I see" the mouse answered seriously. "Being occupied by invading nation is never pleasant." She completely misunderstood the Texan's reaction to her words. "It is not as Priestess that I come to you today, but as one interested in aircraft and their workings."

"You wanna be a pilot?" the bulldog asked somewhat in surprise.

"No honored one. Simply a mechanic."

"A mechanic? Well gal why didn't you say so. Come along then. Me and my boys will show you anything you wanna see. Just watch out for them engine parts, that grease will ruin your pretty dress."

In answer Oharu stepped forward, purposely placing her right paw flat on the still warm engine. "I do not mind honest grime" she answered the mans stunned face. "It is dishonest filth I stand against." Taking an offered rag she wiped her paw, then just as purposely ran her paw down her skirt, leaving a thin sheen of oil behind. "This clothing is meant for work, not dancing" she explained. "Now please. Show me everything I may see."

As she listened and looked Oharu missed the four Songmark girls walk by on their way home. They though did not miss her. There was only one oriental mouse priestess on Spontoon, and the fact she was so interested in a planes workings (in fact rather dirty herself by now) amused them to no end. After all, her love for the second year Molly was an open secret to all but the doe. Incorrectly they assumed that Oharu was interested in aircraft only to find a way to get closer to her doe. It never dawned upon them that she just might be truly in love with aircraft herself. As a mechanic though, never as a pilot.

On Meeting Island that night Albert Sapohatan sipped his coffee, waiting until Elizabeth had finished rubbing her feet before speaking. It had been a long day for both of them, with Elizabeth spending almost her entire workday on her feet. "You said the twentieth my love. Are you still on for a June wedding?"

"I have a very nice leather covered lead shot bludgeon somewhere in my things" the bobcat responded. "If you tell me your thinking of backing out now, I shall simply have to demonstrate to you how effective it is."

"Not likely" her husband to be laughed. "I had it pounded into me how lucky I am to have you. I'm certainly not going to change my mind now. Of course there is one weakness I will have to live with" he abruptly admitted.

"And that is?"

"I always loved a bushy tail, and you haven't one." Even expecting it he was amazed at how fast, and how hard the chair cushion struck him.

Elsewhere on the island a little later a native woman entered San Fernando's doorway. She looked like any other native, unless one were close enough to read her fur. Then one would wonder why was an island Priestess entering a bastion of Euro religion. It was enough to make one wonder. Yet oddly no one was close enough to gather that intelligence, though normally at this time of night the area was well traveled. As she walked up an isle towards the altar an elderly owl turned to greet her.

"Ah my child. How may... I see." He looked over the young woman who stopped not more than three paces from him, then stood as equal to equal. "I had thought the local religion disliked our path" he commented softly, though with no anger.

"All do" Oharu acknowledged. "I not here to speak of such. I here to speak of marriage."

"A marriage. Ah. I understand now. She has sent you here to work out the details between us. Is it your sacred place that this wedding will be held?"

"Great Stone Glen. Yes." Indicating the front pew Oharu waited until the priest took her hint and sat. Following his lead she settled on the floor. "This is union of love, not need. One your path, one ours. Huakava thinks it best we meet, that we find understanding. For this will be their time, not ours."

"I see. And you will be assisting in the ceremony?" the owl asked politely.

"I am still Shinto" the mouse admitted. "I am not yet fully trained in all local rituals. Marriage is one I am not yet qualified to perform. That be your task. Mine to have Glen ready. To insure no darkness clouds this union."

Understanding the true meaning behind her words the priest smiled. "I believe that Huakava has chosen wisely. Yes, let us discuss Saturday evening. Saturday and what important event will occur then."

It was very late when the rabbit known to his readers as Harcourt Fenton Swordfire, and everyone else as Boguslaw Rictor or Bog for short entered the late night Casino Island bar, as had become his habit since arriving on his first vacation. A habit to come here, have a relaxing bourbon then stroll along the public beaches before returning to his bungalow at the McGee Resort. This night as he settled into a stool at the bar a rather impressively large cougar wearing an eyepatch and long, neatly trimmed beard moved over to join him.

"My pardon" he said in accented English. "Are you not the one who writes those Mary Wrightwood novels?"

"Um.. Yes I am" Bog admitted. "How did you guess?"

"Why my dear sir, your very picture was posted on the literary pages several months ago. I may only have my one good eye sir, yet it is a very good eye." He tasted his drink before continuing. "Actually" he admitted in a softer voice. "Having but one eye means one see's everything as flat. It is somewhat of an advantage, as a photograph looks much the same as a real person. Please to meet you Mr. Swordfire. My name is Carter. Carter Hawkins. I work for the local English emplacement."

"Pleased to meet you sir" Bog responded. "But please, call me Bog. Just everyone does."

"An odd name Bog. Live in the moors then do you."

"Ah no" Bog sighed, accepting his own drink. "Its short for Boguslaw, easier to remember. Do you really read my books?"

Carter smiled. "Sir. In my profession there are many, many days when one has nothing to read but dry reports. A clerk's job. Even that of a senior clerks job is never an exciting one. My sister sends me your books once she has done with them. I must admit it took some effort to enjoy them. You seem to have aimed for the juvenile market."

"I did" Bog admitted. "Took a shot at the older market at first, but my editor said they were too racy or not racy enough. He suggested I tone things down to a teenage level." Taking another drink from his glass Bog looked around. There were dozens of customers, all already heavily involved in their own conversations. Mentally he photographed different scenes to use in his notes, then perhaps later books. "I would very much like to write something worth reading, but the Wrightwood stories do have a steady buyership."

"And money is what keeps us going" the cougar admitted. "Another? I'll buy."

Bog looked down at his glass, surprised to find it empty. It was one of his few pleasures and he'd not even enjoyed it this night. "Well, if your buying certainly." A moment later a fresh glass replaced his empty one. It was more than he normally drank but it was also rare that he met one of his readers. "So, which story did you like the most" he asked, careful to only sip his drink this time.

Carter signaled for another drink himself before answering. "Lost Cabin was fun. I particularly enjoyed the way Harkness ended up in that icy stream. It brought a laugh to me. To be brutally honest, out here so far from Chesterfield there are so very few things to laugh about. However let us not forget A Forgotten Peak. Dear sweet Mary almost vanished in that one, what with Harkness becoming drunk and cutting the wrong rope. Yet to be honest, to date I must admit that I most enjoyed The Black Pyramid. You seemed to catch a balance between childhood and true adventure most elegantly there. Though I must admit there is one glaring error."

"That being?"

"Harkness was not to be found. He is such a wonderful villain. One can, after time understand that though he places Mary in deathly peril each time they meet that he has grown fond of her. One almost comes to believe that he is truly in love with her, while your hero Donald is a touch fey. He only saves her because it is the manly thing to do. In the doing of such he turns attention away from his odd relationship with his constant companion George."

Bog smiled at those words, taking a few moments to enjoy his own drink before answering. "You have it correctly" he admitted. "Samuel Harkness is a true villain. He would no more be able to cease his lifestyle than you could become a hound. Donald is fey and George is his partner. Yet to bring this up would destroy the series. Of course should you be in truth a reporter you must understand that I will express stunned shock and disbelief should this come to print. Though in truth, I believe that it would grant me a larger readership."

"Reporter? Not I" Carter gasped, feigning shock as he placed one paw over his heart while the other tightly gripped his drink. "But, what of dear sweet Mary?"

"Mary is a girl raised to be well, a young lady who wanders the upper halls of society with ease. Her Aunt and Uncle constantly try to guide her into 'the right marriage' while she just as carefully finds ways to avoid such a thing. I think she would like an honest Harkness as a husband, for she is an adventurers at heart. Though a clumsy one."

"That would be Major Steinhauer wouldn't it. I am aware that he only shows up in her adventures set in Europe. That would be three so far, yet he is that."

"That" Bog countered, "Would be a social disaster. Though I admit that he is her best choice. Remember Steinhaur is retaining his military position in a country that is currently becoming quite unpopular. I would be a fool to allow her such an interest at this date. In truth, any interest at all." Bog took another drink, only to discover that again his glass was dry. Where was all the bourbon going anyway? He noted with amusement that his host quickly signaled for another drink, one which he just as quickly cancelled. Two bourbons in one day was his limit. "Are you trying to get me drunk" he asked softly. "Nootops red please. Now if say Steinhaur turned against his current political masters. To join perhaps a resistance. That would quite change things. Still it is only a what if situation."

"No, certainly not. It would make a ruin of my idea. One which has just come to me."

"An idea? I assure you sir, I have no interest..."

"Neither have I" the cougar countered, having the decency to blush slightly. "You wish an adventure to write about. One with much truth in it. I may have just the item you need."

Accepting his chilled Red Bog waited silently, wondering where this stranger was going. It was obvious that he had read many of his books, but accepting a plot from someone was always a disaster.

"You are aware of the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies that is on Eastern Island."

"Yes, I became aware of it on my third day. I asked a guide about those rather athletic looking attractive young women in those odd uniforms. She was quite willing to explain all about it. I believe that had I not signaled her to stop she would have talked all day. They are really attractive, especially a certain English housecat I stumbled across. Amelia I believe her name is."

"Yes, well some of these guides are rather interested in that school for reasons I often do not understand. A bit of quick history. Songmark is an active five years old, each class year is fourteen girls broken into dorm sizes from three to four each. Songmarks first graduating class involved a dorm that turned Air Pirate. In truth, they are the best air pirates in this area. Perhaps within three or four thousand miles. Some have placed bets that they are the best in their craft to be found anywhere. What one does not hear about are the girls who fail. Usually these are first years, each being quickly replaced by one waiting for such a chance. There is one young lady who's rather short career I followed quite carefully. I am afraid that she was a failed first year and that she has passed away most recently."

Bog frowned a bit. "And you wish me to write her story?"

"I do think that you should sir. Sandy Doecan was the Cook Sea equal to Pfalzgräfin Schwarzkopf. That famous Great War spy for Prussia who's head now hangs on the walls of the French National Assembly building. Unfortunately like all women who become either spies or powerful figures she died most violently. On Meeting island actually while trying to escape the American Authorities. Most recently."

"This Sandy. She was a spy like Schwarzkopf? Why."

"That is somewhat a murky area of her life I must admit. She was not a Spontoon native, not from these main islands at least. I believe, as do most, that she was from Hawaii as she spoke that language fluently. She also spoke other languages well. Yet she had close friends in Hawaii. Friends who did not know what she did. No where else is this true. Thus Hawaii must have been her birthplace. Besides she was half English or American and half Cipangan or Chinese. No one is really certain."

Now interested Bog pulled out his writing pad, beginning to make notes. "So whom did she spy upon, the English or the French?" he asked.

"And the Cipangans, Chinese and at least the Americans. Perhaps more."

"A busy little woman. Tell me my new friend. How did she manage this for even a year?"

"Over four years. As to how." Carter waved his free hand in dismissal. "She was a beautiful woman. Yet more to her credit she was an intelligent beautiful woman. I met her once, quite by accident I assure you. An Embassy event. There was more about her than simple beauty or intelligence. Something that made one want to believe her even if she said it was raining while the sun shown brightly. I became entranced by her. Of course as the Senior Clerk all dispatches cross my desk. I read everything about her, even things that contradicted her. Now she is dead, my world is the darker for it. Please Mr. Swordfire, would you take up her cause? Would you write her story, as Schwarzkopf's has been written? If not you she may vanish into history forgotten."

"You wouldn't like that, would you" ask Bog, already knowing the answer.

Finishing his drink Carter pushed his glass away. "No. No I guess that I would not. So. Do you think that you would like to take this challenge?"

"It is an interesting concept. I've already read Schwarzkopf's biography of course. It seems to me that people always like a true story involving spies, even if they are the ones being spied upon. Especially if you toss in a bit of immorality. Yet what spy could be truly moral and remain effective. You have here, you say, a pretty woman. She's dead, so no longer any threat to anyone. Nor would a book in any way harm her. She was apparently very successful at her chosen profession. Of course there would have to be some literary licence. A love left behind is always a good bet. I'll tell you what. I'll make some inquiries tomorrow, to see what information is available. I may even contact this Songmark School. All I can promise you is that I will ask around. To see if I can find out enough to base a book upon. I've three weeks left before I return home after all and this will be a completely new path for my writing to take."

"You will not have to do that much ground work sir. Though you may should you wish. I will be happy to supply you with enough material. Official reports, photographs, rumors and such. From that I believe you will be able to follow her adventures. Discover from others close enough to know, far enough away to be safe. Where are you staying?"

"McGee Resort, Bungalow four. I'm normally asleep most of the day though."

Standing Carter threw some coins on the bar. "Day after tomorrow. I assure you that you will be most satisfied by what you are given. Remember, you never met me. I don't exist. Clerks, even senior clerks who speak too freely. Well, we have accidents. I truly desire to read what you create and to know if your Mary ever ceases being the perennial maiden." He put his odd bolar hat on, tapped it into place and walked out leaving Bog alone.

"What an odd man" he thought, staring at the closed door. Turning to the bartender he indicated the empty glasses before him. "My bill?"

"Paid for by your friend" the much older otter answered. "With ah fin tip at that. You'll be here again tomorrow?"

"Certainly." Finishing his Nootnops red Bog picked up his own hat. Mary's next adventure just might be placed on the back burner soon, but until it was he had a great deal more to write.

Two Red Stones, his false eyepatch, beard, wig and detested hat now removed watched from dark shadows as the rabbit returned home. Yes, this man would make a perfect vehicle to create Sandy Doecan's biography. Even if some of it was going to be fiction. There were the Indian knew, simply too many gaps in that woman's life for anyone but her to fill and she was dead. Hawaii was just as possible a birthplace for her as Tilamooka, but personally he felt she had to have come from the Filiyppines. There was just that about her, and her odd friendship with the Filiypino Nikki Benevedo that sent his mind in that direction. Bog he knew would probably give the spy, his secret hero, a male lover. Two Red Stones

though was certain that he knew who she had left behind, and that one was now a Priestess on these islands. One simply did not do such things. Not unless one was truly in love. Now all he had to do was to gather his secondary copies of official mimeographs and carbon copies. Copies of those records he and others had made over the years, and of course copies of the photographs in his possession. No one would suspect a hack writer of secondary juvenile titter adventures to write a serious biography of a spy. It would catch everyone by surprise. He thought of a certain stovepipe wearing wolf who had just today ordered all records destroyed, especially those involving his actions in the matter. Yes, absolutely everyone.

June 20th, 1936

"Your certain you saw her death" the Commander demanded of the local agent Two Red Stones. Currently he was sitting in the mans office, his disappointment at not being the one to rip Sandy Doecan's heart out with his own paws very evident.

"Not only I, but the British Consulate was walking with his latest companion and saw it as well. There was no mistake in this case sir. Bloody chunks of scalp, her hair still attached washed up on the shore. I have samples in the cold room in case you want physical proof. Sir, there simply wasn't time enough from when she jumped to when I arrived for anything but her death to occur. Her body parts were still floating on the ocean, her blood still a cloud in the air. Sandy Doecan, or whatever name she was born with is no longer among the living."

"Damn. I so wanted. All right Mister. Have you any good news for me?"

"I thought that Doecan's death was good news."

"It is, but not as good as doing her myself. I mean about my other targets."

Opening a drawer in his desk Two Red Stones withdrew an official Secrets envelope, tossing it into the Commanders paws. "Your in very good luck Commander. Every one of them is currently on Spontoon right now. Annette is working as a Doctor. She makes frequent trips alone to each of the islands. Oharu lives in a very remote section of Main Island, Kathleen is visiting with her employer attempting to gain landing rights for Pan American Airways and Molly is still a student at Songmark. Pick your time, your place and every one will fall."

Opening the envelope the bulldog studied what it held. A photo of each targets home or hotel room, those of Molly's dorm having been taken with a telescopic lens he noted and a two page report on each targets habits. "I'll need a sniper rifle for Procyk an the Chip. I want to catch her when she feels completely safe. With her friends maybe, where she is certain that she is safe. Sunday for the mouse. So Osui calls herself Wei now. As if changing her last name could hide her. Riverstone will be easiest, she's a pacifist. I'll do her last, when I can take my time and really enjoy watching the light fade in those eyes. Kathleen though... She won't be here long. I'll take her and Procyk tonight. No one expects to be terminated on a Saturday night and I want to be out of here on the Monday morning courier flight."

"All right" Two Red Stones agreed. "If you'll come with me I'll get you the rifle you want. I'm too well known here so its best we not be seen together outside these walls."

"Good idea. All I'll need for this first one is a good throwing knife. You have a selection I assume?"

"Quite a few. None American made" the Cougar answered.

Less than a half hour later Two Red Stones sat in his office pondering what to do. The Commander had left with a wicked knife and one of their best German breakdown sniper rifles. This Kathleen was none of his business, as other than an arranged 'chance encounter' he knew nothing of her. Molly too was nothing

more than an amusing side diversion. He'd miss her and the continual messages from America demanding that he somehow arrange her return home 'by any means he desired.' Annette Riverstone though, she was a Doctor. Not only that even his best efforts had found no evidence of truth to the accusations leveled on her. Then there was the Priestess Oharu whom he truly believed was Sandy Doecan's true love. A Doctor and a Priestess. He dismissed the other two as unimportant side issues. But a warning for the other two had to be gotten out. It was already late, but he had to do this tonight. Not a moment later. Picking up his favorite hat, a battered stevedore he headed out. With luck the ferret he needed to speak with would be at his home. If not he'd just have to wait for him.

Many figures were watching a rare event in Great Stone Glen. One that had not happened in living memory. They remained silent as the Euro Priest spoke his last words. "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Elizabeth looked to her husband, still unbelieving that this was real. That she was now his wife. It had been a dream of her's since after Yoana had died. Her eyes misted as she allowed Albert to draw her into his arms, while time seemed to slow. "Kiss her you fool, before someone else does" came Kjellfrid's voice from behind them. "Like a certain mouse." Then she was kissing her husband. Her husband...

Sometime later while Oharu was cleaning up the flowers that had been used as decoration she heard a step behind her. A well remembered step. "It is very late Doctor" she said, kneeling to catch a gathering of flowers from their place. "You should already be home, asleep."

"Party started late" the otter responded. Her voice was tight with restrained emotion and at the moment her paws were held in fists at her side. Right now she didn't know if she wanted to kill this mouse, or drag her behind the bushes and ravish her for months. "Why."

Oharu stood, her arms filled with flowers as she turned to face her visitor. "It was decided by others that this wedding must take place with no alien eyes observing. Late night is best. I had no voice in these decisions" she explained, avoiding the real question.

"Not that" Annette snapped. She was near the edge of her control and knew it. Fighting her own urge to lash out she took several deep breaths, counting to nearly eighty before she felt that she could speak again. "Why haven't you spoken with me. Why have you ignored me."

Walking past Annette Oharu sat her burden on a flat table of stone before answering. "We are not meant to be Annette. I explained that. Molly is my soul. I have nothing to offer you."

"Really? Turn and look at me. Please." Annette stepped forward, placing a paw on the mouse's shoulder. "I love you. Isn't it up to me to decide if I want something back from you?"

"I will not hurt you Annette. There is nothing I can give you that would make your sacrifice worth the making."

"And Molly gives you more than you can give me? Than I can give you?"

Oharu turned to look at Annette, taking the otters paw in her own. "You are chilled" she observed. "It is a cool night. I will walk you to the water taxi."

Great Stone Glen echoed with the sound of Annette's paw striking Oharu's cheek. Stepping back from the fallen mouse Annette tried to feel anger. Tried to feel rage, only she couldn't. Finally kneeling she took Oharu in her arms. "You didn't deserve that. You didn't. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She buried her face in the mouse's blue and silver kimono, her long held tears finally given release. Annette hardly noticed when Oharu put her own arms about her, pulling her closer. Holding her as a mother would a frightened child. Letting the otters tears soak into her kimono as another's had. Helping Annette otter release her pain.

Above them the stars turned slowly upon their axis.

June 21st, 1936

Albert Sapohatan was in heaven even as the water taxi carried him and his wife home to Meeting Island just after midnight. Everything had gone as had been planned, not even a hiccup to mar the marriage. Everything was... He broke his thoughts at the music that came to him. "Elizabeth" he ordered. "Remain in this boat when we reach the docks. Something is seriously wrong and it involves my office."

Not quite understanding, for she had been busy dreaming up what she was going to do that night the bobcat opened her eyes. "Maybe I can help" she offered.

"Not with this signal" her ferret husband warned. "It's a new one, someone who shouldn't know Sandy Doecan might not have died is involved. Wait until I get out of sight, then head for home. Can do?"

"Can do. I will be waiting dearest."

He smiled, leaning down to kiss his love. "Why do women get involved in dangerous things" he asked softly.

Elizabeth returned his smile with one of her own. "That's simple my love. Good girls never make history. Now run off, I'll be waiting when you get home. Even if its tomorrow night."

"Heck of a honeymoon." As the boat docked Albert Sapohatan, in a move that belied his day to day activities leapt from the boat with a skill no one would suspect. No one that is but his wife Elizabeth. Walking quickly he found the young girl waiting for him. Silently she lifted her players needle from her record, removed said record and smashed it. All without a word to the ferret.

"I hate jazz songs" she finally commented. "Cougar. Sitting on your doorstep. Has been for four hours. Rather agitated. He's packin but I don't think that's why he's there."

"Let my wife know when she comes off the boat. Tell her to wait at Kjellfrid's house" he ordered, turning towards his home.

"You made an honest woman out of her?" the girl gasped. "Damn, I just lost thirty shells. Tikki Nine is waiting as backup. Just don't be too messy." So saying she closed up her portable phonograph and headed down the pier.

Tikki Nine Albert Sapohatan thought with humor as he hurried towards his home. Six rather robust and well trained men of various ages and skills, one such skill being able to load and fire the carefully designed silenced handguns with deadly accuracy. In pitch black darkness. Arriving at his home he discovered Two Red Stones sitting quietly on his porch. Settling down beside the larger man Albert sighed. "You realize that you have just completely blown your cover" he announced in the same tone as he would use discussing the weather.

"You already knew. It was of little importance. My news is worth perhaps a running head start?"

"There are conventions" Albert agreed. "If it comes to that, a running head start. What news?"

"The Commander has arrived. Tonight he has gone hunting."

"Well, that is news. The last solid information I had places him in Vanirge. What is he hunting?"

"Women. Four. Two of no account to my people, two of powerful account to my people. By now those of no account are with their ancestors. I came as quickly as I could. To be honest you are the only one I am certain I could give this information too. I had hoped to save the doe at least."

"Explain" the ferret ordered, but his voice held no anger, only a hopelessness. His knowledge of the American popularly known as The Commander was of a vicious brute who cared not for anyone but himself and his country. Not always in that order. In the intelligence community he was known as The Mad Curl.

"You may not know this but he was disowned. Your late spy Sandy Doecan ruined him. She killed his entire team and left him holding a smoking gun. In truth he was holding the smoking gun that killed them both. We know about Doctor Riverstone and the Priestess Oharu. They are his targets now. You must protect them. By any means."

"You will help us?"

"I will help you."

"You know what that means, if your found out."

Two Red Stones laughed. "I have no love for the white furred ones who stole my peoples lands. I will return to the reservation if I must and let my people judge me. As is required by treaty."

"A Doctor and a Priestess. Yes, your people. Not the people you work for. So, what bodies will my people find tonight. So that we can start writing cover stories."

"A Pan America Airlines woman named Kathleen Hightower. An otter. Only because she was Miss Riverstones best friend. As a warning to others I think."

"The other" Albert prodded.

"A Doe, Songmark student. Molly Procyk. Simply a loose end I have declined to bother picking up."

"Gods... If he harms Molly... Where, how?"

Standing the cougar looked towards Eastern Island. "Hightower with a knife. I have read his reports and know the blade he took. He will strike her from a distance in the back. Procyk by rifle. Wherever the doe is he will find her, then kill again from a distance. It is his way. He has never fought paw to paw. I don't think he knows how."

Albert whistled a signal and a moment later Tikki Nine was standing before him. "You heard?"

"Sir" a battered looking fox answered, snapping sharply to attention. "Your orders?"

"Find him. Remove him. Before sunrise."

"And this Euro?"

Albert looked to the cougar, who was waiting as calmly as though someone had asked if he wanted lemon in his tea. "From this day forward this man is a friend. Should the day ever come that we must disagree, he will be afforded a long running head start. Just as he afforded our agent. I trust his honor."

"Yes sir" the fox agreed. "Move" he ordered. He and his group then vanished as quickly as they had arrived.

"You train very good men" the cougar admitted.

"From birth."

"There will be no second Gunboat War" Two Red Stones observed.

"No my friend. There will be no second Gunboat war. You should return to your home, we will do what needs be done. I think though that you will need an alibi this time. Stop at Katys. Tell her a fat ferret offered you cantaloupe and you'd like a red to wash it down. Katy will arrange a very convincing alibi for you."

Standing the cougar looked around, sniffing the air. "I so wish Sandy had survived" he whispered. "In truth, she was my hero. Goodnight old man. You should marry your new woman though. She is good for you."

On Casino Island in the popular Luakinikia Park Kathleen Hightower groaned as she woke. Her chest was on fire and breathing was almost impossible. Each breath brought a soft bubbling sound and the smell of blood was heavy. What had happened she wondered. *'All I did'* she thought, *'Was step off the path to smell a flower.'* Moving carefully she edged her right paw around to her back, feeling rotted leaves fall away as she moved. Her fingers encountered something hard protruding from her lower back. Hard, unyielding and thin. *'Knife'* she thought, working in her mind how to survive this. She was badly injured and she knew it. Her last memory was of something punching her in the back, then nothing. It had to have been a knife. Since she hadn't heard anything or scented anything it had to have been a throwing knife. That could be good or bad. Bringing her arm back around the otter forced herself into a sitting position, fainting for an instant from the pain. Then waking again as her body slid back into its original position. Gritting her teeth the PanAm Air Hostess forced herself to move slower this time.

Her blouse refused to move though, meaning it was glued to her fur with her own blood. Enough vegetation cascaded off her to tell her why she was still alive, she had fallen into a pile of old leaves. Her attacker had probably waited a time to be certain that she was dead, assuming so when she didn't emerge. So there was a murderer of young women wandering Casino Island. Who would have thought. Carefully pulling her skirt up well above socially acceptable levels, through her pain Kathleen removed one of her two hideaway blades. With that the otter began cutting up her own clothing single pawed. If she wanted to live she had to move, and moving would start the bleeding again. There was only one answer to that. Remove the blade and bind herself tightly. Very tightly. Grimly she started to work.

Growling to himself at the difficulty of finding an adequate firing position the American Bulldog known as 'The Commander' was slowly circling Songmark's parameter. Whomever had designed the place had taken care that there was simply no way to see directly into any of the quarters windows. Oh there were angles, and he'd spotted a really attractive Mongoose he knew he'd have to try. At worse, if she fought him her ears would make an excellent addition to his collection. But that would be later. Much later. Easing around a large boulder he continued his search.

As Tikki Nine fanned out on Meeting Island so did their orders. When one Guide met another, there were now two. Within half an hour Meeting Island was being swarmed. Elizabeth abruptly found herself under house arrest with her husband. It should have been romantic but...

Elsewhere other searchers were fanning out. Two on Casino Island stumbled across the American otter Kathleen Hightower, her chest wrapped in her own clothing so tightly she could barely breath. Misunderstanding her situation the otter surrendered as soon as she was discovered. Besides, by now she had lost so much blood she could hardly remain awake. Meanwhile Main Island was being swarmed as well and the word had gotten to Eastern Island. But the phone line to Songmark, unknown to anyone, had been professionally shorted. It seemed that it was ringing only it wasn't. Well outside the compound

a stolen phone tried to ring, but someone had snapped off its clapper. Slowly the search concentrated on Eastern Island. But would it be soon enough?

On Main Island a mouse looked down into a friend's eyes. "You now feel better?" Oharu asked softly, unaware of the guides who were even now quickly ringing the Glen at a distance.

"No, but I feel like I can manage" Annette admitted. Slowly she stood, looking around her. "You said you were an artist and a maid" she remarked.

"I am. I care for the McGee's resort three times a week. I draw. Would you like to see?"

"Come up and see my etchings?" the otter asked with a laugh.

"I have no etchings" the mouse admitted. "I do though, have drawings."

"All right. I love your art. But you're a priestess now too?"

Oharu stood, brushing her kimono of the leaves that had stuck, ignoring the massive tear stained salty wet spot on her breast. "I am in training. One day perhaps I will be accepted. It is my chance. My one chance." She noted with interest the shiver that ran down her companion's frame. "Something?" she asked softly.

"Someone I liked a lot had one last chance a few weeks ago. It wasn't until tonight that I learned she hadn't really died."

Looking to the piled flowers Oharu selected one, a pure yellow swirl of petals. Turning to Annette she carefully snapped off the long stem, then slipped her flower into the otter's hair. "When I die you will know it is real. Not false" she promised. "Some hot tea while we look at my art?"

"Delighted" Annette agreed, though tea was not the hot item she most desired. Nor, in the end, was it the only hot item she enjoyed before sunrise. One last time.

On Eastern Island The Commander kicked himself mentally for not having climbed on that bolder an hour ago. From here he had a perfect view of two dorms bathrooms. Setting his weapon in place he began watching. As he waited several young women used the rooms, though none the doe he was after. Well if not tonight then tomorrow. So intent was he on his prey he never heard the two native felines slip up behind him. His position was above them and well out of normal reach so one knelt silently while his companion carefully climbed onto his back. The Commander's first indication anything was wrong was when a pair of impossibly strong arms wrapped around his neck. Caught by complete surprise his last conscious thoughts were of how odd a broken neck felt.

Only minutes later the doe Molly Procyk entered one of the bathrooms. Stripping out of her underclothing she laid her towel on a bench, then turned on a shower. Unknown to her a certain wolf water taxi driver watched through the dead bulldogs' dismounted rifle-scope, quietly licking his lips. "So you see this in her" he said to no one. "If her heart were the same as her body my Priestess, she would be yours. It is not, so she may never will be. That is sadness, but I will pray for you both." Sliding down the bolder he nodded to the waiting two felines. Sometime after lunch a passing crewman from some tramp steamer stumbled over the body. One that had obviously fallen down a rocky cliff. '*Poor man*' he thought, '*at least it was quick.*'

It was late morning at the Casino Island hospital when Annette stood studying the chart in her paws carefully. Doctor Kiwi had done a fantastic job repairing the punctured lung, then sewing up his patients

flesh so that it could heal. Kathleen Hightower though was sound asleep and would remain that way at least another three hours. She would scar though for life, she would certainly lose a great deal of strength on that side for muscle had been cut deeply. The blade had been an evil design, and Kathleen had ripped it out causing more damage. Gently the otter lifted her friend's bandage, carefully examining the wound. Leaning closer she sniffed. Then sniffed again. "Get Doctor Kiwi" she yelled to a nurse. "We've an infection."

It would be another hour on the operating table, Annette's fingers this time doing the exploring as Doctor Kiwi was much too tired, they hadn't had time for another Doctor to arrive. A ragged six inch incision was now closer to ten. That scar was going to be worse than expected. If the otter lived. Carefully the older doctor talked his young student through each procedure until finally Annette held up a tiny fragment of leaf. "Very well done. Now wash it out and re-stitch. Watch the nerves, damage one and she'll never recover any function of her arm."

Forcing herself to work slowly while ignoring the blood a nurse gently sponged up Annette worked. It wasn't that Kathleen was her friend that caused her so much worry. It was the fact she had never been fully responsible before. Even Sandy... No, keep your mind on what you're doing the otter reminded herself. Finally it was done, a new sterile bandage placed on the wound and an unconscious Kathleen wheeled back to recovery. She would not wake for many hours now.

"Very well done. Very well done" Kiwi announced as they scrubbed. "I might make a doctor of you yet. But you are never going to be one until you lose your first patient."

"Why, because I have to know what it feels like to fail" she asked.

"Partly. Mostly to understand that we are mere mortals. There are things that we cannot stop and death is one of them. Given a few months your friend will make an almost a full recovery, though why anyone would attack her is beyond me. She will never be without discomfort from that wound and will always have a weakness in that arm. It was an evil wound."

"Why anyone would attack anyone is beyond you" Annette agreed. "Lunch?"

"Only if you are buying. My funds this week seem to have gone for something called a magneto."

"I'll buy" she agreed. "Though most of mine went for aircraft gasoline. We need that plane but it's so expensive."

"I know. Yet if it saves one life as long as I live I will consider the money well spent. Now let's eat, I'm hungry."

On Casino Island a still very tired rabbit answered the persistent knock on his bungalow door. When he opened it the rather large Mrs. McGee held a package out to him. "Special Delivery. Apologies for waking you."

"Oh no Mrs. McGee" he answered, accepting the offered package. "I was up late writing. I'm almost done though so maybe I'll get back on a better schedule."

"Better" the bovine warned. "Or you'll miss all the fun. Plane races and stuff."

"Mrs. McGee. In total honesty aircraft hold no interest to me. Why, I wouldn't fly if my life depended upon it. But to see you dance again. Ah for that I would remain awake all night. Your husband is a very lucky man."

"Then maybe tonight, or tomorrow we have another small luau. Now I have today's lunch to clean up. Goodbye for now."

Shutting his door Bog turned to the room's desk, opening his package as he walked. That day he took his meals in his room. A slightly larger expense but he had reading to do. Amazingly addictive reading. Only the promise of another dance by Mrs. McGee would drag him from his room for the next two days.

Butterfly though had other plans. On Spontoon there were always too many young ladies looking for husbands and not enough men available. Especially of the rabbit variety. Her guest had proven to be a complete gentleman, something that was an oddity with Euros. She had quickly noted his longing looks at pretty girls, and his lack of a wedding ring. It had taken her little effort to examine his room while he was away, after all she and her children cleaned them daily. Discovering what he was, a writer, was a pleasant surprise. What he wrote though had left her laughing. Why, one week of Songmark would break that little Mary of her foolishness. A year and she'd be... well it was writing. It was also very obvious that he had no lady friend back home. A few messages later and half a dozen eligible young Kaikamahine of the right style had answered her call. It was a thin chance of course, this Mr. Swordfire would only be on Spontoon a few more weeks. Yet men's hearts had been captured in much less time and after reading what he had written Butterfly thought she knew exactly what he needed. Besides, a thin chance for a husband, even if it took her away from her homeland was a better chance than remaining home and sharing a husband with a sister, or worse doing without.

Chapter Thirty-Three

June 22nd, 1936

Helen Whitehall looked down with delight at her son as he fed, cradled now in her arms and finally at home on Meeting Island. It had been almost a month since his too-early birth and for some time she had worried that he would never come home. Now here she was a proud mother and with her son home everything was right in her world. Everything except the loss of her husband and Ruth. Yet even that was bearable now. Antonius James Whitehall was home right where he belonged. In the next room his nanny, if one could call a native mother of six, grandmother of twice that number a nanny, prepared his room. Antonius's caretaker Rewa had been suggested by Dia-Kura, Helen's native Priestess friend. That was all the American had needed to know. With her teaching duties in paw, staying home until Antonius went to school himself wasn't possible. Not that Helen didn't want to be home all the time, but it was better for him and her that they be apart some of each day.

Sometime later Rewa returned, having gone to Helen's small kitchen first. "Breakfast" announced the woman, sitting a bowl of fruit beside Helen. "School may start soonest think I."

"Half an hour before I must be on a water taxi" Helen agreed. "I just got him yesterday, I don't want to leave him so soon. But I must, my students deserve the best I can give them." She picked up a slice of mango, sucking its sweet juice before taking a bite.

"Be here when come home. Promise I" Rewa prodded. "Now sleep he must." Gently she took the now sleeping infant from his mothers arms, cradling him closely to her own chest to keep him warm. "Proud father, have son such. Make all girl hearts open." She waited until Helen had buttoned her own blouse before leaning forward, letting mother kiss her son goodnight then carefully carried Antonius to his own waiting bed.

Meanwhile an empty feeling had come over Helen, to fill it she took a pile of papers from her side table and started going through them, all the while snacking on her fruit. When Rewa returned from the nursery she thanked her, then with a moan of regret began packing to leave. Her students had been without her long enough. Rewa was here to insure that they didn't have to be without her any longer. With no further excuses to keep her home Helen left for the short walk to a water taxi and the normally fifteen minute trip to Moon Island.

In Great Stone Glen Oharu's work blade made a satisfying thump as it cleaved a four inch thick bamboo shaft in one stroke. Stepping aside the mouse walked quickly, yet carefully as she followed the slowly falling length of monster grass. At a specific point her blade sang again as she cleaved through the bamboo, cutting it into a slightly longer than ten foot section. Satisfied she walked to the shafts centerpoint, all the while making certain that her feet did not come down upon a previously sheared stump. Doing such would be a critical mistake, most likely the resulting wound would leave her crippled for life as such had others to her knowledge. Lifting the light weight with one paw Oharu carried it to a waiting stack of like poles, trimming any remaining shoots from its length before setting it carefully into place among a stack of its fellows.

"Bravo" a certain Bobcat's voice called.

Looking towards the sound Oharu was pleased to see Elizabeth, formally known to her as Sandy entering the Glen. Sliding her blade into its locally made sheath the mouse made her way to greet the woman. "How married life" she asked in greeting, taking a small towel from its place as she passed her own hut.

"Everything I always dreamed, more and less" Elizabeth admitted. "Clearing a new vegetable patch?"

Wiping her fur to remove some of the stench of heavy work Oharu managed a tired smile. "Students to come Sunday" she explained. "They must build own home. I supply only place, materials."

Elizabeth made her way to the pile of cut bamboo, also watching those deadly dangerous stumps as she walked. Unlike Oharu she had first paw experience with what such things could do and because of that would limp slightly the rest of her life. Stopping at the pile she quickly ran a rough tally of its numbers in her head. "About a hundred poles?"

"One hundred. Yes. Will be a small place, until have time to build more."

"But one is a boy..."

Oharu did laugh at that. "Boy. Boys sister. Boys girlfriend I think. They work, live together many years already. If not settle that problem yet never will. How may I serve you."

For a moment a scene near a well known waterfall early in the morning flashed across the bobcats mind, a scene she pushed away. Though not quite completely. "Would you believe me if I told you I only came to visit an old friend" she asked.

"Is that truth?"

"It is" Elizabeth answered. "Mainly. I... I want to talk about Spontoon as well. Her future."

Oharu waved towards what had become a seating area, a collection of large stones, logs and one moss covered ancient carved stone bench. "I am pleased to have friend visit. Spontoon is always interesting to speak of. Rest, I will get water."

"Thank you."

For some time the two simply sat and talked. Nothing in their conversation was earth shaking, but it did tell the mouse something important. Elizabeth was troubled, but specifically about what the bobcat simply would not mention. Still there were hints, clues, subjects danced around instead of faced while unimportant things were gone into with great detail. Carefully the mouse memorized those areas her visitor most danced around, ignoring those things she seemed so involved with. Finally after a time Elizabeth stood. "I have a meeting soon. I apologize but I must go now."

"Return any time" Oharu replied. "It was true pleasure speaking with you again." She watched as the bobcat left, and though nothing specific had been spoken of something about the woman's gate told Oharu that a part of her weight had been lifted. When she could see her visitor no more the mouse stood, returned her towel to its place and drew her blade. There were still nine shafts to cut, then lunch, then...

At Kart-Tombs Charter Flights on Casino Island the mare Nikki downed another beer, her sixth before she accepted the letter from her partner. "Kathy. You know how I feel about her. So why?"

"Did she write not you, but I?" Her partner asked. "Simple dear partner of mine. Of her letters, how many have you read."

"One" the mare admitted. "Two days ago."

"That many then. Certainly she would write you. At this rate, she would of ancient age be gone before you opened it. Now sit that fat rump down and read."

Grumbling her complaint the mare grabbed another beer, popped its cap with her thumbnail and began drinking while she read the single page of delicate writing in her paw. It was a good ten minutes before she turned the page over, saw what was drawn on the second sheet and dropped her half-full bottle of still cool beer.

Meanwhile at Songmark School for Girls the hound Miss Devinski held an envelope gently in her paws. Its cancellation mark stated Tin Can Island though she clearly remembered the islands real name was Niuafu'ou. Before opening the letter she knew from the script who it was from. Knowing that, along with the geology of Niuafu'ou (though in truth she had been forced to double-check her suspicions on a chart) her blood suddenly went cold. Tin Can Island was an eight kilometer wide shield volcano North of New Zealand. It also sported a huge freshwater lake that was exceptionally difficult to get too, from the sea. No European country had ever bothered with that island, or the group it was part of. Obviously then it made the perfect base for air pirates. There was no safe way to get there except by air, or a most disagreeable landing from the sea in a small boat. Especially as the native population had degenerated mostly to drunkards and lazy good for nothings. This last thanks completely to what little European influence there was of course. Yet there was no official European presence, so they couldn't be arrested even if European's found them. It was the last real Polynesian monarchy and as such she recalled, very loyal to those who served it. Especially those who filled its coffers with non-traceable funds. Such as a million English pounds in fresh minted cash.

So now she was certain that she knew where the air pirates true base was. With a call, a note, a single whispered word to the right ear and Songmark's most infamous students would find themselves in jail. Or dead. Knowing the French they would be dead. Her paw now trembling laid the letter on her desk. "Why did you make such a mistake" she asked the letter. "Or was it truly a mistake. Is this a trick, to turn eyes away from the truth?"

Yet her niece was not an idiot. She was not a fool. She knew that all mail to Songmark, specifically that to herself was suspect. Their mail was probably routinely scanned by Customs for hints of where the Air Pirates might be. It was a message of course, but what kind of message? Shivering in reaction the hound knew that there was only one way to find out. She would have to read the letter. Taking another drink of her coffee she again picked up the innocent looking envelope. On close examination it was evident that it had been opened, then expertly re-sealed. It had been opened from the right side, and from the marks whomever had opened it was right pawed, which meant that she could remove perhaps twelve percent of Spontoon's population from suspicion. In this one case. Admitting to herself that she really couldn't expect to have privacy concerning this particular class Miss Devinski reached for her own letter opener.

Upon opening the envelope she was certainly surprised when a photograph fell out. It was her niece, looking like a normal tourist and... studying the swimsuit, very healthy. Really healthy. She was standing on a sandy beach with a temple of some kind behind her. Certainly not Niuafu'ou, more like... "It's a hotel. She's in Singapore" the hound laughed as she read the lab name stamped on the prints back. "She was in Singapore. How butch of her." Still laughing she settled down to read what turned out to be a very enlightening missive. Though her niece was still very much unmarried she had written to tell Catherine Devinski that she was going to become a Grand-Aunt.

June 23rd, 1936

Oharu woke, her heart beating fast and her body boiling. Gasping for breath she pushed away the immoral images that her dreams had brought. Pushed them away, to feel hot tears matting her facial fur. Forcing herself to her feet she made her stumbling way to the waterfall below her home, pushing her face into the icy water, letting its cold fingers under her thin shift, across her flesh, washing her sweat soaked fur. Still under the stream she stripped, pushing her body against the cold moss covered stone. Still she could not force that last image out of her mind. It was a dream more nightmare than possibility, for it was a

dream that could never become true. No matter how much she desired it.

She had been on Sacred Island and she had just married the doe Molly Procyk. They had been kissing, Molly had been the superior that night. In all ways.

After some unknown time the mouse slowly pushed away from the icy stream, her body now chilled to the bone. Stepping away from the rushing water she ran her paws through her soaked hair, pushing water out of her fur and away from her flesh. Still the dream would not go away. There were of course two options. She could try to ignore the image, or she could meditate, carefully locking such thoughts away in her mind forever. Bending down she retrieved the soaked mass of fabric that was her sleeping shift, then she turned, to find Huakava standing in her way. Watching.

"It will never go away" the ancient panther warned her student. "It cannot leave you, ever."

"Great one" Oharu responded, bowing so deeply her wet hair brushed the stone at her feet. "Somehow it must."

Huakava simply frowned. "I no longer have time to spare dueling with you my daughter. Your dream woke me, reminding me of my own destiny. I have come to tell you all I know, that you may write it down for others to learn in generations yet to come. Accept that your heart, your soul currently belongs to that doe wither she accepts them or not. You cannot change that any more than I may stop the sun from rising. Accept it. Accept those dreams for what they are, your hearts love. What they mean, your souls desires, then continue. Further fighting will simply destroy you. That I cannot afford to happen. Should you be so foolish as to lock away your feelings." Huakava looking into the darkness, directly at where that great stone splinter waited. "We would have no further use for you. None. Now come. You will need your books."

Suitably chastised Oharu followed her superior back to the small hut she now called home. Silently, respectfully she waited as Huakava found her favorite place to sit. "Dry yourself" the High Priestess ordered. "Then bring water for us. You will be writing a very long time."

As she had warned it was long after noon before Huakava ceased talking, nodding to her student. "I will return tonight. We will continue." Then she stood, brushing her clothing of a few bits of clutter. "You will prepare yourself. There is a party at the American Consulate Friday night. I am now too old, to weak to leave Main Island. Thus you will represent me. I would prefer Saimmi only as she is more aware of my ways. Saimmi though is unavailable. In any case unlike Saimmi I understand that you own suitable Euro clothing." With that she turned away from her student and left. Oharu, exhausted to the bone barely managed to put away her books. It was only a small time before her own students would arrive as well. Stumbling to her bed, her left paw numb from writing and still in nothing but her fur she fell forward, asleep even as her face struck the tiny bundle of grass filled cloth she called a pillow.

It was late in the afternoon at Song Sodas and Tatiana Bryzov was thirsty. Her dorm had done particular well today with their latest tests, so as a surprise they had been given an afternoon pass. Due to the time available their passes were limited to Eastern Island only, but there was much to see on Eastern island. If one only opened their eyes. Since spending her Sunday's with the island priestess Oharu Tatiana had found her eyes opened just a bit more. No matter though, all her dorm really craved at the moment was a soda, some ice cream and perhaps a little relaxation. Though what each of the four considered relaxation varied wildly. Tatiana herself simply wanted to let her brain wind down from overdrive for a few hours. It would also be nice to escape from her dormmates for even the pawful of hours allowed her.

Lifting her Nootnops Red to her lips the sable stared across the harbor towards Casino Island. There she knew the Russian Consulate waited. Waited for her next report. Waited to discover if she had advanced in her mission to infiltrate Spontoon's society. It had surprised her when they showed delight at her being assigned to the Priestess Oharu.

"Pozdravlyayu! Very good work Comrade Bryzov" her potato brained controller had exclaimed. "Priestess run island dah. You do good work. Make her your friend. Make her trust you. Ply her with anything. Money, jewels, clothing, self. Whatever she want. With Priestess on our paw we have better opening into Government. Continue good work Comrade Bryzov. I am certain losif Starling will be delighted in this turn of events."

She had been given more money. Much more. '*Whatever it takes to gain her trust*' her contact had said. Sipping her drink she wondered at what he would think if he knew how she felt now. Where much of the money had really gone, buying down her debt to certain parties and just what it would take to 'gain Oharu's undying gratitude.' Finding a way to convince a certain doe that a certain mouse was her destiny was a project Tatiana hoped would never be dropped into her paws. Certainly it could be done, had been done before she knew. But just as certainly any gratitude would never begin to pay back the effort required to succeeded.

"Zdraustvuyte. May I sit" a cultured English voice asked.

Looking up Tatiana was surprised to find a distinguished English bulldog standing at her table, a bowl of vanilla ice cream in one paw, a cup of steaming tea in the other. '*Tea*' she thought. '*With ice cream. How... English.*' Intrigued she pushed the chair opposite her away from the table with one foot. After all, no matter who he was he was darn handsome, which was a major change from her last so called boyfriend that her 'comrades' had selected for her.

"Thank you." Settling down the bulldog first sipped his tea, apparently relishing it. "I am very happy to finally meet you Miss Bryzov. Or should I say Comrade Nyha?"

"Either" Tatiana answered calmly, though within her breast her heart froze. Nyha was the name she had given in Vostok. When she thought she was being debriefed by her own people. If that got to Isoph... She swallowed a large gulp of her soda. "You are?"

"Major Thomas William Hawkins, retired" the hound supplied. "To answer your second question. I sincerely desire to hire your services. Comrade."

"Else certain people will discover who Comrade Nyha really is?" she asked. Her voice was calm but her heart was racing.

Hawkins enjoyed his ice cream a bit before answering. "Miss Bryzov. Please believe me. What I wish to hire your services for has nothing to do with Russia. Either Russia. It has to do with a country-woman of mine and certain persons of interest that you happen to have access to."

"Or you will let slip such an important bit of information?"

Looking up from his ice cream Thomas Hawkins stared at the much younger woman. "Were this 1917 again, were you her. No Miss Bryzov. We may be agents of different countries. We are not, at this time enemies. Nor do I make war against women. I have never made war against women. Especially not her. I have no desire to destroy you either."

Leaning forward Tatiana looked over her guest. Well dressed yet restrained. Good health, intelligent obviously, and with a dark secret behind him. "How did you discover Comrade Nyha" she asked softly.

Abruptly signaling a waitress Major Hawkins indicated he would like to rent one of the small meeting rooms. "Please deliver several bottles of chilled red, with a pot of hot tea" he ordered. Standing he held his paw to the sable. "Come with me, I will explain all." Amused Tatiana placed her paw into his, rising to follow him while ignoring a tittering laugh from behind her.

"Sommon's got a Beau" a well known voice yelled from behind her. She ignored it. This was serious. The few days of jokes and ribbing that she would have to endure were more than worth this. If it was what she thought it was. Still she remained silent until they were alone, watching silently as Hawkins poured himself another cup of tea.

"You found me how" Tatiana finally asked.

"To be honest it was not an easy task" Hawkins admitted. "I most strongly doubt that your... friends, are aware of the truth. For your sake and those few people whom you count as true friends let us pray they never do. I will be truthful with you Miss Bryzov. It was a guess. Not a foolish guess as you answered all the descriptions I have. But nothing said you were a Songmark girl. In fact according to what information I have, Comrade Nyha is supposed to be a member of the Russian Court. Possibly even one of the Ladies in Waiting. Some suggest that she is a Princess. A certain missing Princess that is."

Laughing Tatiana removed the cap off one of her waiting bottles of red with the school issued pocket knife. "I have once been remarked as looking much like a sister to Anastasia" she admitted. "Many years ago, when I was much younger. So I am now a Princess. How delightful. za vashe zdorov'ye!" She drank deeply, her head thrown back, her throat exposed. When she lowered her bottle it was to find a very sharp edge of steel pressing gently against the hollow of her throat. A moment of silence passed before that blade vanished back into the walking cane it had come from.

"A warning only young lady. Never do that again. I am not trustworthy. Though I most strongly dislike ending a woman's life, that does not mean that I will not leave you laying here, your hearts blood pumping onto this floor if I feel that you are a danger to me. To England. Especially if I should ever believe you were truly Anastasia. I knew her family. I met her twice. She deserved much better than this. Much better than a lost grave. Are we at an understanding?"

"Completely" the sable admitted, denying her companion the pleasure of seeing her rub her throat. She knew better, should have remembered. But it had been a long time since cold mother Russia and Oharu had shown her a gentler path. Perhaps she had weakened. But he was a very handsome bulldog and she could scent her own interest. Tatiana drank again, though keeping her eyes on her companion.

"Nor is it Ladylike to drink from a bottle. A glass was presented you. Use it."

"Why" Tatiana asked.

"Because as much as it bothers me to admit this, you just might have to become a Princess one day. To live as one the rest of your life. Even as a ruling Queen. It has happened in our line of work before in history. Try to began to act as a Lady, not a dock workers daughter."

"Mine worker" she corrected. "Very well." Reaching out she took the waiting glass, filled it with the last of her red and sipped. "Better?"

"It is a start. Who was the real spy. Oharu or Annette?"

"Why should I tell you?"

Hawkins smiled. "I already know that money means nothing to you. Still I offer money for information. I am also able to offer you say, a translators position at the English Consulate. Only during your school break of course. Perhaps even an English passport, should you one day find yourself needing such."

"Titania Bryzov, inside the English Consulate?"

"Inside my Russian friend, legally. Now with that offer, and if you give me what I need I will not withdraw it as some would. What can you tell me?"

"You interest me" the sable admitted. "As does your offer. What you ask is nothing. Oharu was spy. For Japan. She turned self in. Now is Spontoon Priestess. Annette, Doctor who visited Oharu?"

"Otter, blackfur. A Doctor yes."

"Only met for few minutes. I know little of her."

"All right then. For now we'll hold that for later. Helen Ducros."

"Second year. She is nice. Tough but nice. Not a spy. I am certain."

"Interesting. Amelia Bourne-Phipps?"

"Interesting woman. Does many strange things. Her mail is sometimes interesting. On occasion she makes many odd trips. Spends time with Molly Procyk's male friend. Perhaps a threesome? She behaves unlike what I was trained to expect. Maybe so. If so she is untrained."

"Nikki Ibarra Lily Benevedo."

"Her." Titana looked away for a moment. "You know about my problem?"

"Certainly. I'm also certain your people are very aware as well. About Nikki?"

"She is slave trader. Very good pilot. She sold me to Oharu. Very decadent woman. I would not wish to be among her paws again. She is no spy also I am certain."

Hawkins pulled out a notebook, writing short notes on different pages. "All right. As long as it does not involve your country secrets what I want from you is every thing you can find out about Oharu, Annette and Amelia. Specifically Amelia, though I am personally very interested in Annette."

"You wish her for yourself" Tatiana asked with a smile.

"Let us simply say that she interests me, in a personal way."

"I think perhaps you may be disappointed. She showed much interest in Oharu. Perhaps I could take her place?"

Hawkins nodded in agreement. "Perhaps. I remember them in Hawaii. Still Oharu is in love with the American gangster Molly Procyk. This much is an open secret on these islands. Even now the betting is high upon when the American will discover what everyone else knows. Even more on her reaction. Currently odds are six to one that the doe will kill the mouse instantly. You though I have no interest in other than as a source of information. Acting as a lover is one thing. I do not feel that we would be compatible in the long term though. For this work you will be paid, oh twenty shells a week? Into your bank account."

"Fifty."

"I honestly cannot afford fifty. Twenty. I already know how badly you need these funds young lady, or do you prefer to remain that mouses playtoy. Twenty only. Along with a guarantee of employment in the English Consulate during your school break. You will not be all that trusted though I am afraid."

"Twenty then. Agreed. If this otter is a spy, then what?"

"Well I am afraid she would have to vanish. Of course I have a wonderful little cottage just outside Poole. One where she will be kept in careful protective custody. For the rest of her very long life."

Taking another drink Tatiana crossed her ankles, stretching for a moment. "Why are you so interested in this Amelia?"

Hawkins shook his head no. "Only this my young Lady. She is a countrywoman."

Finishing her drink Tatiana carefully used the bottle opener left them, tipping her glass as she filled it in order to keep the bubbles down. "Oharu is my teacher. She has shown me nothing but kindness and truth. She does not use my body as you so obviously believe. I would not enjoy such, still I not refuse if she touch. She has offered to adopt me. I will not turn traitor to her. I will not harm her. All the others, very well. Should you find a way to embarrass this Molly, that I would take as a true favor."

Hawkins raised his eyebrows a moment. "You two have had words?"

"Many. She is better with them than I. I do not wish her harmed, for harming her would bring the wrath of Oharu upon me. Only a fool would stir that sea. I so do love to sleep. Embarrass only. "

"Very well" Hawkins agreed. "Find me the truth on Amelia. Tomorrow I assure you that a certain young doe will pop up on certain lists as a 'figure of interest.' For Amelia, is she a spy or is she being used."

A light blossomed in Tatiana's mind. "You will owe a favor" she stated flatly.

"A very, very large favor. I believe that, when this is over you will owe a rather large favor as well. Perhaps not to me, but to someone."

"And us my one great love?" she asked softly.

Smiling Hawkins lifted his tea. "We must then play the game you seem to desire. Why my dear, how else could I explain spending time with you. Though you do not interest me as much, still you are an attractive woman. Only a fool would claim otherwise. It is obvious to me why Oharu bought you, next to Molly she could have done no better. Then there is this. I must explain my actions in such a way as to be acceptable to those above me. Old men tend to believe that only rarely do beautiful women have any intelligence. That is their mistake. It would after all, be expected that to keep you close I would find you a position in our Consulate. Certainly were you, as that girl called my Beau?"

Giggling Tatiana sipped her drink. "Many stories will come from this" she warned. "What of your family?"

"My family fully understands me. It is a long distance from home and the nights do get lonely. My first wife died many years ago, the influenza I am sorry to say. In truth I miss her dearly. My second wife is of poor health and has begged me to find another. I have very good luck finding women who love me. Very bad luck in that they die before me."

"I will try not speak of either then. So to us my newest love, and to our undying love. May I never threaten that place your wives hold in your heart."

Tapping his tea cup against the sables glass Hawkins grinned. "At least until one of us smothers the other in their sleep. To business, and a peaceful future."

"Zivili" the young girl responded softly.

Much later, when the two parted in front of Song Sodas it was quite evident to certain students that Tatiana now had a boyfriend. At least they had never seen her wrap herself around anyone like that before. Not unless she was trying to kill them.

In Dalian the siamese woman Malou eased herself back into bed. It had again been a strenuous day. Another Japanese patrol had decided that the young man they were hunting simply had to be hiding in the block her uncles shop was in. She had again been beaten, abused, spat upon. Yet though the soldiers had done so much, strangely they had left the few displays that remained untouched. Carefully she held her stomach with one paw, hoping that the pain was only a deep bruise from the sergeants boot, not something more. A claw of her other paw slipped between two pieces of her headboard, snagged and withdrew a worn black and white photo. One Nikki had never known she had. Staring at the grim face Malou felt tears falling from her eyes. Another few encounters like this and there would be nothing for Nikki to come save.

Perhaps...

Perhaps it would be better that way the siamese thought as sleep slowly took her.

Again a light burned late through the night in Boguslaw Rictor's rented room in the McGee Resort. He had already begun his outline of Sandy Doecan's biography. From what he could determine she was apparently a Hawaiian native and had led a very exciting life. As he turned a page he knew that, should he live to be a hundred he could never have dreamed up a story that came close to this truth. Scribbling down yet another note he completely failed to notice two dark brown eyes watching from the window behind him.

Sometime later Butterfly McGee served her young feline guest a cup of thick coffee. "He is very handsome" the housecat admitted.

"You have always loved writing" the bovine noted.

"Yes. I have read many of his works now. He is talented, it shows in his stories. But the subject matter..." She shook her head no. "Such a waste of talent."

Butterfly sipped her own alcohol laced drink, well aware of what her guest was speaking of. She had forced herself to read one of the books. It had been an effort, as the plot though good had obviously been gutted by some brain dead editor. What was left was barely readable by anyone with any real intelligence. "Of those whom I invited, you alone retain a serious interest. Tell me Blossom. Is he worth leaving Spontoon for?"

"I have little possibility of a husband" the housecat admitted. "My family is poor. There are many more daughters than sons in our village and I much dislike hounds. It is their scent, nothing else. I would miss Spontoon. I know I would not be well accepted by the Americans, no matter their pride in diversity. I understand that our children would be looked down upon, at least the boys. Diversity it seems such only applies to pretty young girls. Yes Butterfly, I think he is worth the effort."

"Yet you will still speak with a priestess before making up your mind" the bovine laughed. "As I did, yet for other reasons. He will want you to convert."

Blossom laughed at those last words. "I would not be the first to give worthless lip service to a God I do not serve" she admitted. "Nor will I be the last. Should I capture his heart, which looking upon him we both know will be easy. Then he must accept that I will not change my beliefs, though in public I will play act. For his sake."

Butterfly sipped her coffee. Spontoon's greatest public curse was that nearly a quarter of its female population had no chance of a husband. Thus the revival of ancient practices. Why she was aware of at least a dozen marriages that had three wives to one husband. Yet it took strong women to live in such a joining, and strong was something Blossom wasn't. Not that way. During every tourist season at least eight girls left, having in one way or another trapped a Euro mans heart. Occasionally an Euro womans

heart, but that was rarer. She was beginning to worry about those who had moved to the new Germany. What she was hearing wasn't good. Perhaps it might be time to invite them home. For ceremonial or family reasons perhaps. Yet it would, as always be their choice.

"Spontoon will always hold her arms out for you child" she reminded the girl. "Have you decided the trap you will lay?"

Blossom finished her own alcohol laced coffee. "Should Honored Mother Ester agree to this, I believe the budding writer asking help then being assaulted later would be best as you suggested. After all I do have several short stories finished."

Butterfly finished her own drink. "Then perhaps you should return home. Tomorrow you will have much to do as his time here is short. Perhaps. Just perhaps he might want to visit certain people on Main Island?"

"The priestess Oharu?" Shivering the housecat sat her cup back into its saucer, the two bits of fine porcelain rattling together just a bit. "She frightens me. What she is. What she knows, has done. How far, how fast she has pushed herself. Butterfly. She is no priestess. She is a Goddess."

This caused the bovine to laugh. "Oharu? A Goddess? I think that she would be most shocked to hear anyone believed such of her. Blossom trust me in this. That mouse is nothing more than a woman. Just like you and I. Strong willed yes. Trained yes. Intelligent certainly. But she is no more a Goddess than you are."

Standing Blossom looked towards her targets room, then back to her hostess. "So you say. There are many of us who know the truth. She lives happily where no one has ever spent a single night without fearsome dreams. She took away the powers of three strong young ones without a word. She speaks with the ancient ones, rebuilds their temple. She battled death twice, winning each battle. She gathers all the knowledge, builds upon it. Improves every ritual without thought, without effort. She accepts everyone as better than herself. She is peace in any storm. She even stopped Mad Karl and Crazy Gustav from knife fighting over Regina when they were drunk, by nothing more than asking a few questions. Why, she has accepted those three young ones apprentices. Not one, three. And they those whom she had taken their powers. No priestess in memory has ever accepted three self taught apprentices. Ever. And where her love for that Songmark girl would tear any mortals soul apart she endures. Butterfly McGee, understand that we know what she is, no matter how hard she tries to hide it. Only a Goddess could do such things. Now I must go. I will return when I am certain as to my path." Blossom walked around the table, dropping to one knee to kiss the bovines palm. "You have granted me the chance for children. This I will never forget."

Butterfly watched her young visitor leave, too stunned to speak before Blossom was out of earshot. Oharu? There were those who believed Oharu a Goddess? This must be stopped, now. Standing she suddenly grabbed the table as her head spun from several very well laced coffee's, forcing her to sit again. Well, tomorrow then. It could wait until tomorrow.

Elsewhere on Casino Island, at the Coconut Grove it was approaching midnight and the two males drinking were worried. Having arrived several days ago they had lost the interrupter they had brought to a base attempt of murder. Now it seemed the Spontoon authorities were giving them the run-around. All in all it was not turning out as well as they had hoped and Spontoon was like no other government they had either dealt with before.

Setting his drink on their table the rabbit Bartholomew Matthews looked into his paws as though they held some answer to this latest dilemma. "Another two weeks before Kathleen will be able to leave the hospital, if then. Are you certain that our new interpreter isn't giving us the runaround?"

Taking a slow puff from his cigarette Albert Flintstine considered the question. "Honestly Barty my boy,

no. But nothing that has occurred thus far leads me to suspect his trustworthiness. Main Island is simply closed to Euro interest. Any Euro interest. I've asked around. Its Casino island or nothing, and to be truthful there are very few places on this island that either of us feel would be useful to Pan American. South Island is pretty attractive, but I understand that they are kicking the Euro-church off there as well."

"All right. So then we accept that Casino Island is our only choice. Doing so, are there any possibilities you've found? I ask my friend, because I haven't found but one, and it is already taken."

"Kart-Tombs? My thought as well" the fox admitted. "Perhaps they will sell."

"That is a thought. I certainly do not want to inform our employer that there simply isn't any way. You know how he hates competition."

"I know" the fox admitted. "Buy them out, any way he has too at any price he has too. But Kart-Tombs is barely a viable company, though I do like that new aircraft of theirs. And the mare? Oh she is interesting. Very interesting."

Bartholomew laughed at those words. "Save your coin there my lawyer friend. She's not going to be interested. Not in you."

"Your certain?"

Nodding yes the rabbit again picked up his drink. "She approached Susy this morning. Wanted to know if she would like a drink." He laughed. "Poor Susy, one look from that mare scared her right back to our rooms and into my bed."

"Pity" the fox admitted. "She is a rather fine image of a woman. Very well I shall mark her from my date book. Unfortunate that I still find myself rather attracted to her. Still there are quite a few available women on these islands, and not all of them young and inexperienced."

"Shall we visit this company then? To see if they are interested in joining Pan Am in a business venture?"

Albert nodded in agreement. "I will spend tonight looking through the options available to us. I should be able to locate two or three other options that might interest a borderline company. Even if it is nothing more than leasing that unused dump next to their company to us."

"Then until morning." Grunting the rabbit stood, looking around for a waiter. "Susy is waiting and I hate to waste so much potential energy. Besides, I have arranged a rather pretty native dalmatian to join us. Susy could use the experience. She needs to lose that fear I think. And I can use the rest."

June 24th, 1936

"This is impossible" a grey furred groundhog yelled as he entered the doctors lounge at Casino Islands hospital. "You realize all this. It is impossible. It goes completely against all laws of nature."

Dr. Annette Riverstone looked up wearily from her coffee and cruller. "Professor Flumbulger, what is impossible" she asked. Exhaustion was heavy in her voice and she already knew that she would be spending her 'night' at the hospital guest quarters, not the small apartment that had been assigned to her on Meeting island. Right now all she wanted to do was feel her head against a pillow. Any pillow.

"This thing you give me to see. All rules of nature are ignored. No such thing can exist."

"Please Professor. I'm a Doctor of medicine, not a biologist."

"Zoologist" the groundhog corrected automatically. "There at least are seven different animals in that one tentacle... thing. As we understand science not possible for this to occur."

"But it has" the otter reminded her visitor calmly.

"Yes, yes. It HAS! It is possibly viable, this is predator. Thank the five furred ones that it is not yet mature. Still we may be able to locate it. To kill it before it self-spawns."

"It's a hemorphrodite?"

"It is a true, possible fertile hemorphrodite" Flumbulger agreed.

Annette sighed, sipping her now lukewarm coffee. "That can't be good" she admitted.

Flumbulger sat across from her, staring at the rather attractive though obviously exhausted young doctor. "Miss Riverstone. It is very bad thing" he agreed. "This thing, it multiplies. Then no sea life safe in the world. Anywhere. Perhaps not even fresh water, if adapt it can."

Closing her eyes as if to make those words go away Annette took a short breath, holding it until her head spun. When again she could speak it was in defeat. "Are we are looking at the end of our world as we know it?" she asked softly.

"If this thing is capable of establishing self. Should we not hunt down and destroy it now. Yes. I think yes."

Standing Annette picked up the ruins of her short supper. "Then you better speak with Doctor Kiwi. He's on Meeting Island right now. He can get you in contact with the right people if they will believe you."

"And you don't" her visitor asked.

Annette smiled to herself, thinking of a certain mouse, a river of lava and what she herself had seen in that river. "Sir. I have come to find that much of what I held as truth is a lie. If you say this is so I believe you. But it is completely out of my field so I have to walk away. I wish you luck in your hunt. But you have to excuse me. I'm dead on my feet. Goodnight." With that she stood and made her way out.

It would not be an uneventful sleep for the otter.

June 25th, 1936

Oharu returned from her duties of cleaning and re-laying various shrines to find Butterfly McGee waiting for her in the Great Stone Glen. She approached the woman with a smile, bowing to her before the older bovine could complain. Butterfly could see though that the mouse had missed quite a bit of sleep lately, quite a bit considering the way her eyes were so dark. "Wish yah would stop tha" Butterfly begged in English. "Makes people think ahm betten you."

"Yet. I serve you, as I do all Spontoon" Oharu countered in her accented Spontoonie. "Automatically this makes you the greater."

"Ever consider ah thik its tha orther way? Nah, yah wouldn. Please, don do tha anymore. It bothers me."

"Very well. Yet how may I serve you? I am due to your business on the morning, to clean. Do you need me now?"

Butterfly laughed. For the little work that Oharu did, though of highest quality it was often never noticed by her customers. Which of course meant that it was of the highest quality. "Nah tah-day please. Brogh ah book some American left. Though yah migh wanna read it." She offered over the tome, its thin dust cover long gone.

"I... I cannot read English well" the mouse admitted. "A pawful of words yes, but" she touched the book. "Not this."

Butterfly looked at the book, swallowed, then shrugged. "Ah'll sen Reiko then tah read for yah. Yah do like Buck Rogers?"

Oharu indicated the seating area she had built, waiting until Butterfly had settled down before following suit. "Much" she admitted. "That is such?"

"Kinda. Is called When Worlds Collide. Reiko says is ah great story. Donno, ah don much like this kinda fiction." She held out the book, waiting until Oharu had accepted it. "Place looks good. Suits yah."

Oharu simply smiled, then looked at the tome in her paws. Studying the book she carefully opened it to a random page and tried to work out the words. "Perhaps Tatiana will read for me as well" she decided eventually, carefully closing her new book. "She is very good with English."

"Is she? Well, yah seem tah be gettin aalong with her. Maybe she's yer one?"

"Tatiana?" Oharu giggled. "Tatiana's eyes are drawn to men, not to me. I have no interest in her anyway though she is a good student. I have though thought. Perhaps a daughter. Or sister, should she choose."

Butterfly easily accepted Oharu's statement. After all the mouse was so bad at lying that even the simplest lies were difficult for her. Yet there was something about those words, and from the well trained mother of six it came to Butterfly quickly. "Yer thinking of trainin her. Tah be ah priestess."

Butterfly was surprised by the smile of Oharu's face, though she hid her own surprise well. "She is excellent student. Perfect choice. Such a life will suit her well."

"Ahn if she say no?"

"I think she will" the mouse admitted. "I think she will run, first time I offer. Second also. Not third. Still I see in fires maybe her return. Her understanding, though in truth not soon. Many years. Maybe never. Is not certain of course."

"What is it with yah an all those Songmark girls? Yah tryin tah start ah harem? Ah know fer ah fact yah never touch them. Molly's illness aside."

Setting her new book aside Oharu stood, walked over to the much larger woman and leaned so her face was close to Butterfly's. "There is ancient temple on Songmark" she said softly, her voice so low Butterfly had to strain to hear. "It is linked this temple, as is one on Moon Island, as is..." She paused. "All ancient temples. One who lives in Songmark temple begs I intercede. That until I find temple priestess for her that I act as such. She see's two now as what she wants. Tatiana is one. Other, I have spoken with her. She would not be good choice though is very good in heart. Have been others, will be others. Tatiana maybe not one to train for that, is one to train some. I would be fool not to try."

She paused, moving her face even closer to that of Butterfly's. Already the bovine could smell the mouse's scent. Earthy, clean, a touch of sweat and something sharp, like black pepper. Even though she herself had no interest in women the scent was enticing and she found herself moving forward, to meet those lips now so close to her own. Then Oharu moved back away from her. "You wrong, Tatiana is

very... pleasing. You right, time with Molly never count though will be all I ever have. Is more than ever could hope. I remember her always."

Walking away from her flushed guest the mouse passed her stone seat, retrieving her book as she did so. "As for girls. I am temporary priestess of that temple same as always this temple. When they need I must be available." Turning to again face her guest Oharu's face was completely emotionless. "No Butterfly. I want no mass of women gathered about me. Only one, one I never will have. Will you join me for Poi?"

"Can do better tha that darlin" the bovine announced as she stood, her breath still coming a bit faster than she would want. "Ah brough bread, fresh baked by Reiko. Corn, beans ahn roasted fish. All still warm. Fer desert ah brough apple pie."

"What is apple pie" the mouse asked.

"Something mah sister taught me, somethin she learned in America while ah cookin school. Ah bet you'll like it."

"Then let us eat."

Butterfly laughed. "Yah do get tah tha heart of tha matter don't yah." Somehow she had forgotten Blossom's statement, forgotten the real reason for her visit.

It was just a little after lunch and the mare Nikki was pacing Kart-Tombs the office, not really seeing what was around her as she talked to her partner. "We need the money. I know. I've seen those symbols before" she said, turning to head for the other wall as she mixed subjects. "Its important, but so's this offer."

"You would sell our company?" Katherine McMaster asked. "Nikki, we just got the new aircrafts air worthiness certificate. We have contracts and I don't want to sell my company."

"Then don't. I'm sure not" the mare snapped. "I have to go to Dalian. This weekend. Tell those men to go fly a kite or something. Maybe we could lease them the junkyard. What has Malou gotten into. Dammit Katty, how am I going to get her through that Chip garrison. Yeah, lease them the junkyard."

"Sit... DOWN" Katherine ordered sharply. Her command broke through Nikki's running thoughts.

"No one orders me" she snapped, spinning to stare at her partner, and closest friend.

"And no one but Louise calls me Katty."

"I called you Katty?"

"Yes Nikki. You called me Katty. Now sit down. I can't keep up with your twisted thoughts. Try one subject at a time, please?"

Sitting hard Nikki yelped, coming completely off the upholstered chair. "My tail" she gasped, reaching behind her with both paws.

"I hope you broke it" Katherine snapped back. "Now settle down and lets go over this. You've been nuts since I showed you that letter so now its time that you explained yourself."

"I'm sorry fluffy tail" Nikki whispered, stroking her tail with one paw. Her words raised more than an eyebrow on her partners face, yet when she did 'settle down' Katherine was apparently normal again. "When I was coming to Songmark from... my parents home. Our aircraft developed engine trouble so we

settled down for repairs” the mare explained. “Luck was that the water depth was only maybe twenty feet, a reef I thought. But the reef was broken up into a lot of little square reefs. All only the size of a small house, maybe a little larger, and flat. So while the crew worked I decided to swim instead of sit in the cabin with the rest of our passengers.”

“And dive?”

“Yes, dive. I found stones, carved stones. When I used my knife to clear the vegetation there were symbols.” She pulled out Malo’s letter. “Exactly like these symbols Katherine.”

Accepting the letter the Dalmatian studied what was drawn on that second page. ‘*No, it’s a rubbing*’ she realized. “So, how old was that site Niks.”

Nikki shrugged. “I’m not an archeologist. My geology was barely adequate to pass remember? Louise spent weeks up at night drilling me and I still barely passed.”

“You two kept me up so many night I quite bothering to wonder why” Katherine admitted. “Do you remember where this site is?”

“Could I forget? Between Guam and Wake, and yes I know the exact location because I asked the navigator. He was sweet on me so he took a sighting. Why?”

“I donno” her companion admitted. “I just, well. This is a book she says. If it’s a book its older than any book I’ve ever heard of and when did the ice age melt and raise sea level anyway.”

Nikki laughed. “Your asking me?”

Katherine shook her head no, laying both sheets of paper on her desk. “About eleven thousand years ago Nikki, and even China’s civilization is only four or five thousand years old. They might know, maybe in some old temple record. I might be able to find an archeologist. If we could swing it, if this book is really.... I want to know” she admitted.

Nikki looked out the window, seeing again the beautiful aircraft that they had salvaged, that she had almost lost them in a spit of revenge. Revenge that had become so cold that her own blood had frozen. “I thought only cats were curious” she admitted.

“Wrong, just more... inquisitive. Your really going after Malou?”

“Yes. After I show that page to Huakava. Maybe she knows something. Anyway I need to find a co-pilot, and someone who can get me into and out of Dalian alive. With Malou.”

“And the book?”

“And the book” Nikki admitted.

Picking up another paper Katherine made a sharp needle nosed craft out of it, tossing it at her friend. “They offer ten thousand for our property.”

Snatching the paper plane as it passed her Nikki opened it, studying what was written on it yet again. “Chicken feed and this isn’t Orphenton Island. Why? Why do they want our site, and for what.”

“Its Pan Am dear.”

Nikki’s head snapped up so fast her main flowed for a moment. “Your sure?”

"My little sister has a hunting license and that rabbit is very talkative. Especially with two girls in his bed."

"Pan American. They crush little guys like us."

"Nikki. They crush little guys like us who have routes that they want. We don't have routes, we're contract remember? No threat to them."

Nikki stood again, her hooves making a sharp clack on the wooden floor. "Pan American. They don't have women pilots do they Katty."

"Flight attendants only dear, your too big and I'm not interested in playing nanny at ten angels. So why us?"

"Because everyone else is big enough to say no and we are just small enough, hungry enough to maybe say yes? I don't know. Maybe there aren't enough good sites left on Casino island. Your family sold you this land. On the provision that if it was ever sold again it had to be back to family. Besides. Non-natives can't own land, as I found out last summer remember when I tried to buy my home." She walked to a window, pushing aside a tired grey curtain. "An acre and a half of old boat parts with fair access to the water. Improvable access if you have the money. That would leave us with enough, as long as we didn't expand over six aircraft. Maybe."

"You called me Katty again" the dalmatian warned.

"Sorry" the mare apologized. "Wasn't thinking. We could lease them the junkyard. It would save us having to clear up that mess your uncles and his brothers left and you could use the money."

"We could use the money."

Nikki snorted. "I'm going to Dalian. What are my odds of entering a war zone then getting out, with a sexy looking Chink and a book the Chips want. Then returning home, alive that is. Alive and well enough to ever fly again."

"You've never failed before" Katherine reminded her friend. "Who do you know who speaks fluent Japanese, can pass as a native and might have the fur to do what you need? You'll be wanting to take Louise dear. That R-5 isn't ready for such prolonged flight. Not yet."

"Well..." Nikki rubbed her long nose. "Franzella speaks fluent Japanese but she's blacker than I am. There's Botan but her Jap's rusty. She hasn't been to the home islands in eleven years. Mina could do it, but she's six months along with twins. I'll have to look."

Katherine hid a smile. She already knew who Nikki's only choice could be. "Ask Huakava when you see her. She might know someone. So we lease the junkyard. How much?"

Nikki's smile was a predatory as a pirana's. "How much do those two have?"

Much later, at Great Stone Glen Oharu had just wished the last family good night, she had been happy that they had come. Since she had begun her work here more and more natives had arrived. Most simply to meet this latest addition to the islands religious servants. Some, like this family to see what she had uncovered and to discuss with her what her view of religion was. Almost always such questions were to compare her ideas with their own. In most cases, like this family her answers pleased them. In a few cases her answers displeased those who questioned. Yet she was here to serve, never to convert. She'd always known that simply because those who served as she did had accepted her that it would never be enough. She must also be accepted by those she would serve for the rest of her life.

It was expected.

It was as it always should be.

A sound caught her attention just before she turned away from the entrance. Or was it a scent. In either case she bowed deeply. "As always. I am honored to serve you" she told the growing darkness. A darkness that suddenly spouted a pair of glowing eyes. Eyes quickly surrounded by a grey-black furred face belonging to Huakava. Huakava, who was High Priestess of all Spontoon.

"You are much more sensitive than one would expect" the ancient woman laughed, entering the pool of light left by a falling sun. "For your age."

"Perhaps you should say that to your companion. Nikki, it is a delight to have you here."

"It's ah delight tah have you anytime" the mare shot back, electing a laugh from both Priestess's.

"She will never change" Huakava admitted. "Yet we are here on a serious errand."

"Please" the mouse offered, stepping back from the Glen's understated entrance. She allowed the two larger women to walk past her, following them down to where both had already settled into comfortable positions. Without a word Oharu retrieved her water bottle, pouring out its contents as she walked down to her water source.

"Odd thing tah do" Nikki noted.

"Not quite my equine friend" Huakava explained. "Her water, as with all priestess's was gathered this morning. Soon after morning greeting song. It would be warm now, its taste flat. What she does honors us both in its small way. She will bring fresh, cool water from her source."

Nikki snorted, tossing her head so her hair flew. "She's strange in her own way" the mare admitted.

Both watched as Oharu rinsed out the deep brass bowl that served her as a water container, then filled it with fresh water until it over flowed. Having done that the mouse started to return, stopping only long enough to pour a bit out at the base of that great splinter of stone from which the Glen took its name.

Suddenly Oharu stopped, turning to face that same stone. Both women could hear her say something, then abruptly she sat the bowl down, walking up to place both paws on the stone. "What now" Nikki asked.

"I do not know" the panther admitted with real worry in her voice. "There is a problem. Remain here." She stood, starting to join Oharu only to stop when she could clearly hear what was being said.

"...are welcome here" the mouse was saying. "Accept all or none."

Oharu, the elder woman knew was having an argument with the Glen's ruling spirit. Or Kami as the mouse call it. It was Huakava knew, never a smart thing to argue with a spirit. Especially on its own ground. Certainly not when one lived within those grounds. Yet there stood her apprentice, both paws placed against the spirits home, arguing as though she were speaking to an equal.

"I do not care if her spirit bothers you. I serve all. It is my place to help all who ask. Never to pick, to choose."

Huakava could guess what the argument was about. Nikki. From Oharu's side of the conversation she could also guess what the spirit wanted. She herself remembered such arguments, but only once with a spirit. This would prove to be very interesting. Quietly she settled herself down to rest, and

eavesdropped.

"I do not threaten to leave this place" the mouse continued after a space of time. "I serve you as long as you wish me too. I not ignore someone because their spirit is chaotic. Nikki is hurt. Have you never been hurt?"

There was another pause, then Oharu's eyes widened. "She would not do such. Any more than I would. Tatiana was mistake, not what she is. Tatiana lives, is not food on someone's table."

Huakava found this one sided conversation difficult and she was somewhat unhappy that she had to guess the spirits words. Certainly by shifting her perception the entire conversation would be open to her. But in doing so she would violate her apprentices trust. That she would not do.

"Decide then" the mouse snapped, her anger evident even through her own self control. "You desire a servant who cares for all, without question, regret or reward. Or you want selfish servant who obeys only you. Who takes what want's because can."

That silence that existed between Oharu's words was exceptionally long this time, but as it lengthened a smile came to the mouses eyes. "No more than I force Molly" she answered some unheard question. Her voice was light though and there was true humor at its edges. "Then is decided" she seemed to agree to some statement. "I serve all. Without regard creed, color, species, nation or thought. I serve you same. All remain same."

Stepping back suddenly she bowed to the stone. "Make hard bargain though" Huakava heard her tell the stone. "I get worse of, again." Then she walked over to the bowl, kneeled, poured out its contents to again return to the waterfall. As Huakava watched she repeated her actions, came up the path, again splashing a little water on the tall stone needle. "Hope you wrinkle so wet" she shot as she walked past.

Huakava released a breath she hadn't known she was holding. As she stood Oharu stopped in front of her. "Selfish Kami" she informed her superior in a voice that easily carried to the stone. "Hentai Kami not want me to help non-native. Not want non-native in Glen. I fix."

"And how daughter did you do that" Huakava asked.

"Threaten to put curtain up when bath" the mouse answered, indicating that she wished to move up the path.

"You are joking" Huakava asked.

"No" Oharu admitted with more than a touch of humor in her voice. "Like chicken spirits, this one like see." She looked back at the stone, then in a move that nearly stopped the older woman's heart Oharu stuck her tongue out at it.

"Respect child" the ancient pantheress demanded.

"Of a child? Never" Oharu answered. "Of you, always. Beside" she continued in a much lower voice. "He like this attitude. Sick and tired of respect-respect-respect. Want touch of fun now and then. When Nikki need to leave."

"It told you."

"Everything Nikki tell you in front your shrine. They talk each other, remember?"

"Truth daughter. It sometimes slips my mind. Saturday morning. And your answer?"

"Can go. Can do what Nikki need. Dangerous. Very dangerous. Both of us. Nikki discovered she shot. Malou discovered worse. I discovered" Oharu shivered. "I rather Malou's fate than that. Prefer Nikki's fate. But Nikki need. I serve. I not turn away from her need, even though he" she glanced back towards the silent stone. "Does not like Euro's. I Euro he forget."

They had arrived at the seating place. "Not anymore. Certainly not after that" Huakava decided.

Setting her bowl down Oharu bowed to both of her guests. "I will get cups. Then we speak further."

Several hours later Nikki was walking towards the closest Water Taxi with Huakava. "She already knew everything. How. Is she a mind reader?"

"No child. My daughter is not a mind reader for there can be no such thing. When you explained your needs to me it was at the shrine I live at. That shrine's spirit talked to the spirit of Great Stone Glen. It told her during their argument."

Nikki grimaced. "I've been around these islands tah long tah call you a liar. But what argument?"

"Oharu was told to eject you. From all the islands. She refused. She made it stick."

Nikki stopped walking, looking down to the slightly shorter woman's face. "Oharu argued with a spirit, an ancient spirit I'd lay odds and won? How."

"She allowed it a choice" Huakava admitted. "Accept you, or she would bath with a curtain between them from now on."

Nikki's wild laughter reached as far as a group of tourists being shown a group of night flowering plants. Always ready for an opening their guide immediately began explaining that the sound was that of a mad daughter who roamed the night trails searching for her lost brother. It had an immediate effect of causing the tourists to press together closer.

"Two thousand dollars a month" Bartholomew Matthews sighed, swirling his malt liqueur as he watched a very pretty line of girls dancing in the Coconut Grove. "A twenty year lease. Not a sale, a simple lease. Two thousand dollars. And we agreed. Home office is going to kill us Albert."

His partner in crime tipped his Havana hat back, barely able to turn his attention away from a certain dancer whom had caught his attention days ago. "Two thirds of what we were authorized to spend Bartholomew" he reminded his 'boss.' "Unfortunately, as we have discovered non-natives are very rarely allowed to own land. Even then only to live on and make a living and such can not be inherited by a non-citizen. Obviously this nation was burned badly by their English masters. Just as obviously they are doing everything within their powers to insure that it never happens again. Isn't that mongoose absolutely delicious?"

"Humm?" Looking to the lines right end the rabbit spotted Albert Flintstine's current interest. "Twenty three, four maybe" he noted. "A real looker yes, but I have Susy after all. Were any of the other companies you met with interested?"

"Not one. In any case Barty, Kart-Tombs has the best access to water of all our choices and is almost directly across from the airport on Eastern Island. Tomorrow morning I will meet with the dalmatian and her mare partner. When they sign our contract the deal will be done. Of course this nations local government must accept any deal we make, that will still be a slippery slope that we simply must be careful with."

Sipping his drink the Bartholomew studied the fox friend, and employee. "I've come to the conclusion lying to them would be a big mistake" he warned the lawyer.

"Trust me Barty. I have absolutely zero desire to lie to these people. Not after what I've heard. If we lie and they say no then the deal is off. No second chance, no try again later. At least they are completely unbribable. So until the morning, which I am certain that you will sleep through again let us enjoy ourselves."

He leaned back to enjoy the dance. He'd already met the dancer in question. Had discovered from other long time patrons that she had been dancing here for years, was still unattached and not at all like that delicious mare Nikki Benevedo. She was a very local girl he'd discovered, and much closer to thirty than twenty. She was also intelligent and available. She was exactly his type.

Very late that night in Casino Island's hospital voices woke Annette Riverstone. Voices from the tiny rooms connecting office. Rubbing her eyes the otter reached out, turning a small electric clock in order to read the dial. Four hours she thought. I've gotten four hours sleep. It would have to be enough, at least she was rested enough to walk. Sitting up she yawned, stretched, then twisted her back. Bones popped back into place all the way to her tail. Well she could at least stay awake long enough to walk to her own sleeping quarters. Besides she seriously needed a scented brushing. It was then that she really understood what was being said on the other side of that thin door separating her from a not too often used office.

"..have to die. Nothing else for it" a woman's muted voice said.

"Not in my hospital" came the well known voice of Doctor Kiwi. "We don't murder people here."

Silence answered that statement. Silence that seemed to drag. Then, "Doctor. You have no idea how dangerous this otter is. She's killed before, she'll do so again. Why she even put her best friend, your newest Doctor into mortal harms way simply because it saved her own neck. I know her, I've followed her for over a year. She either dies here, in this hospital or she dies with an anchor around her pretty neck."

"This is a hospital..."

"You've never had a patient have a turn for the worse" that woman's voice asked. "Here where you can let her slip away in peace. If I have to do it. Doctor Kiwi, have you ever seen the face of a drowned person? One who fought for their life? I have. It isn't pretty."

"Mrs. Sapohatan. Please. What your asking is against everything I stand for."

Annette couldn't wait any longer. Standing, forgetting she was in her underclothing she opened the door and stepped out. A bobcat she well knew sat to her right, her back against the wall while Dr. Kiwi stood with his back to the rooms other door. Both were stunned to have her walk in. "Nobody kills anyone in a hospital while I'm a doctor" she snapped. "Especially not you Sandy."

"That woman is dead" the bobcat replied, quickly recovering from her shock. "And that is a name seriously not to be spoken around me."

"Bull" Annette snapped. "I saved your tail, probably your life when I cleaned out that infection. At least your looks. Who do you think your going to kill anyway?"

"She wants to put Kathleen Hightower down" Doctor Kiwi admitted. "She is an American spy. Mrs. Sapohatan here believes that she came to spy on Spontoon."

"Really?" Turning to face the older bobcat Annette leaned over the desk partially separating them, her

paws planted firmly on its dusty surface, uncaring of the delightful view from behind she was giving her supervisor next to her. "My best friend" she told the Bobcat. "Who was the first white-fur to accept me for what I am and not what my fur color tells her. Who trained me on her own time how to overcome Pan Am's specist attitude. Who I spent over two hours with my fingers in her body looking for a source of infection. You just want to kill her."

"Correct" Elizabeth admitted. "Your very good on the uptake. Unfortunately young Doctor your friend bamboozled you. She is an American spy. She used you to get photographs she couldn't, she is here to spy upon us. Our penalty is singular. Spies die. Period."

"Like Oharu Wei" the otter asked softly.

"Oharu is a special case..."

"EVERYONE is a special case" Annette snapped. "Liz came here as an interpreter. Nothing else." She paused, reflecting. "Well, I know she's been sleeping with... That doesn't matter. I know she wasn't spying on Spontoan and I can prove it."

"Really? Well Doctor Riverstone. Considering your certain knowledge are you willing to back it up?"

"Back it up? How."

Smiling the bobcat leaned back. "You're a pretty woman. Educated. But your about as dumb as they come where it matters right now. Your right, she lives. Your wrong, she dies by your paw."

"And myself?"

Standing slowly Elizabeth pushed the chair away. "Maybe you die. Maybe you spend the rest of your life on Main island where your pet mouse can keep an eye on you. Maybe we deport you back to America."

"Oharu doesn't want me" Annette admitted.

Reaching over Elizabeth tugged lightly on Annette's slip, reminding the otter of her state of undress. "You better hope she will. As pretty as you are I don't want you. I'm not into women. Its up to you. Can you find the truth, today? Because today is all I'm giving you."

Annette's mind raced as she crunched everything she knew about her friend. "Okay. But I'll need ice. A lot of ice. For a special enema. And a very tough nurse who can keep her mouth shut."

"Both I will supply" Doctor Kiwi offered. "Fransetta is rather, shall we say, Butch?"

"She's still a nurse?" Elizabeth asked in obvious surprise.

"And a good one" Kiwi shot back. "I will assure that she is available when next Doctor Riverstone examines you for your annual physical. As per Allthing rules."

Elizabeth pursed her lips, looking first to Kiwi, then Riverstone. "Your taking this personal isn't helping" she shot.

"Oh believe me Mrs. Sapohatan" Annette replied. "Personal is just the beginning of it. Get what I need, I'll get ready. And Elizabeth if you ever threaten a friend of mine again."

"You'll what Doctor? Bleed all over my blade?"

"Something like that" Annette admitted. "Something like that. Or maybe I will ask a certain mouse for help."

"Since we are all aware as to the connotations" Kiwi announced. "I suggest that we make this legal? There is a priestess on call to the hospital. I will have her here in ten minutes or less. Dr. Riverstone, I suggest you dress. Unless your taking up Spontoon dress styles. In which case your much too overdressed."

Elizabeth nodded in agreement. "Go call for her. We'll wait here Doctor until she arrives. Meanwhile Annette. I've some serious talking to do to you. So sit."

Chapter Thirty-Four

June 26th, 1936

"And how was our lunch" Doctor Annette Riverstone asked, pausing to pick up Kathleen Hightower's chart while waiting for an answer.

Kathleen noted that her old friend Annette seemed friendly enough, yet there was something in her voice that put the secret agent on edge even through the drugs they had given her to relax her muscles. There was something in that tone she'd never heard, not from Annette. "OUR lunch" the otter who was laying on her stomach remarked, making herself sound as bored as she had felt before Annette's entrance. "Was about as tasteless as always. What do they do to hospital food to kill any taste anyway."

"Didn't I tell you? All hospital food comes from France."

"Oh, that explains everything. So am I going to live?"

Annette frowned as she read something on her chart, declining to answer that question. "You had a visitor after hours. Would you like to explain him?"

"English bulldog. Wanted to know things about you. Things a man should not ask a girls best friend." Kathleen was lying of course, but there was no way she was going to give her friend information she thought the other otter shouldn't know. At least not until someone else did. So she believed. "So what about me?"

"Your wound is healing well. No more sign of infection. Our local Police wanted to ask you questions, I delayed them. Kat, what's goin on? This isn't the first time someone's tried to kill one or both of us. First Germans, now our own people."

"Can you keep a secret" Kathleen asked softly.

"Between us? Yes. So what's the dope."

"I don't know" Kathleen lied.

Annette slapped her friend on her sheet covered buttocks very sharply, the chart board making a powerful snapping sound that caused the other woman to yelp and jerk even through the fog of her medication. "Don't play games with me Kathleen Tiddles Hightower." Annette's voice had hardened, like daggers of Arctic ice. They were nothing like the warm friendly sounds Kathleen was used too. "Not when its our lives that are on the board. I've met this bulldog. His name is Major Thomas William Hawkins. He claims to be a retired British Officer but he is really a British Intelligence agent. He's nice, but I got the feeling he would snap my neck without regret if it had to come to that. He thought I was a spy and he know's you're my friend. Dammit Kat, I'm sick of being jerked around by a short leash. No one tried to kill you because you stepped off the path. They thought you were me, or they knew who you really are. So you give me the straight and furry or I have you given an enema. An ICE enema."

Kathleen carefully turned her head so that she could see her long time friend, hiding the soul freezing fear that statement sent through her. Anything but ice. She could stand anything but that. "You know too much already Annie. Too much for your own safety." She decided to bluff. "I'll take the enema."

"Then you'll get it. I do hope that you'll enjoy it." Setting down Kathleen's chart Dr. Riverstone left the room without another word.

A few minutes later a rather large wolverine nurse pushing a larger cart entered. She looked at Kathleen, at the now closed door then at what was on her cart. Ice drifted in a very large container of water. Several gallons of fresh water, for salt water could be below freezing and remain a liquid. Instant death waiting to be issued. Silently she placed one paw on the bed, then none too gently lifted the sheet and tossed it on one of the rooms two chairs. As drugged as Kathleen was she could afford only minor resistance as leather cuffs closed on her ankles, then her wrists. Eventually Kathleen felt the nozzle enter her body, listened in silence as its balloon was pumped up then tried not to scream as hell entered her bowls. Ice, her private hell.

"Damn you Annie" she cursed into her pillow as her stomach was swelled by a liter of the icy liquid. "You could make a martyr talk." Her only saving grace was that the nurse left before she broke down, for had the woman remained only a minute longer Kathleen would have spilled every secret she had just to get that ice water out of her. It didn't matter though, for Annette returned within minutes. Locking the door behind her and shoving a chair up under the handle she turned to the trapped woman.

"Hypothermia sets in very quickly" Annette remarked softly as she sat in the rooms remaining chair. "After a while your body stops shaking, then your heart slows. It's a rather gentle death all told. I couldn't think of an easier death for you Kat. They informed me that you don't deserve a running head start you know."

"You're a doctor" Kathleen gasped, fighting the freezing cold. Fighting age old nightmares. Trees.. She was lost and surrounded by giant green fur trees. "How could you kill?"

"And I'm your best friend. But you know something, I can kill my dearest best friend whom I care for more than anyone else in the world. Just to save her from what's waiting outside these doors. I'm not Oharu Kat. I can't stand by and watch you reduced to a blubbering mass of bloody fur and flesh, only to be dumped in shallow water with an anchor around your neck. And because like you said I know too much already. I know something because I was awakened while in a place no one knew I was in. Kat, your life, my life, a girl named Molly's life and a local priestess named Oharu. I think your aware that certain people talk in their sleep, while under pain drugs."

"I talked" the otter gasped in horror.

"I was the only one to hear you, then only because I leaned very close for a long time. I was going to keep silent until I overheard that conversation. Even though you've been playing me as a foil, but you really consider me a friend don't you. At least your seemed to say so in your drug dreams. So do you tell me, or do I leave you like this. You'll be dead before they can break that door down even if they started right now.

"Annie, they'll kill you" the secret agent warned.

"They, whomever THEY are, already want me dead. THEY want Oharu dead and I'm betting good money THEY want you dead too. Spontoon doesn't. At least not Oharu or I. But your another kettle of raw fish girl. Look at you, meekly letting death take you in his paws. I thought you would fight it. I'm sorry I was wrong. Your shivering is starting to slow girl. Your strong Kat. I'll give you maybe five or six minutes before your nothing but cold meat. Meat that gets dumped in the ocean for fish food. That's what you want? To be fish food? But if its too slow say the word. That's over a liter and a quarter of ice water in your guts girl and I can force another half liter in by turning on the pump. More would split your bowels. That kind of pain I refuse to subject you to."

"Why?"

"Why? Why do this? I love Oharu. Oharu loves Molly. That's three reasons why Kat. But you're my sister. Oh we weren't born sisters, but you're my sister as close as anyone could be. She wants your guts

laid out on a table, with your cold dead heart in her paws. She HATES your kind Kat. There's only one way I can keep you alive. That's to prove you aren't here spying here and your not like that man who almost killed you and Molly. So talk. Please."

Long rough green branches reached for her. Her fingers were turning black, her paws were swelling. So were her toes and feet. Where was mother, father. Why was she so alone? It was so cold. "Warm me up" the otter finally agreed. "Whatever you want to know." She shivered, inhaling sharply. "I'd rather be flayed alive than freeze."

In answer Annette stood, reached behind Kathleen to lift her tail then did something. Instantly the pressure in the otters belly dropped, taking the death ice with it as water splashed into a waiting bucket though that balloon remained in her. A warning the otter knew. "You must be a lousy spy Kat. She's known about you for over a year. She wants you dead but I talked her into letting me try. I promised her that I could make you talk. If you didn't, well then your blood would be on my paws. She has enough on her own. She's my friend too Kat, almost as good a friend as you are. She would have killed you, she may still. She may kill me too, I don't know. But she's afraid of Oharu so that's to your and my good. And she already owed me one life, so I bought it. Your it."

"Who is she" the otter asked as her body started shivering again.

"I can't tell you. We'd both be dead."

"Doecan?"

Annette leaned over the bound woman, pressing her body hard against the others. Against Kathleen's own feelings she craved the soft touch, Annette's body was like a blowtorch to her glacier. "Doecan's dead Kathleen. I watched her die. Two Red Stones had a better view. This is a different She Kat. She taught Doecan. She's better than her. Better than you I think. Are you willing to bet your life your better? My life?"

"No. Mine yes. Not yours Annie. Never yours. Where do I start?"

"When we met. I'll won't be making notes, the rooms been wired. She is listening."

Kathleen Hightower collapsed, her universe now centered on that warm embrace that pushed away the ice within her. "You've killed me Annie" she cried softly. "No matter what happens I'm dead now. Your people, my people."

Annette brought her lips close to Kathleen's right ear, whispering in a voice so low only the other woman could hear. "If you think I shoved my fingers into your bloody back to save your life so that I'd let anyone kill you you're an idiot. I have guarantees Kat. Hard ones. Ones spoken in front of a Priestess Kat. She won't break those. Not at the price she'd have to pay. I'll be paying your price myself though. They know everything about you. Everything since you hired on to Pan Am. Her word is better than anyone else but maybe yours and Oharu. So talk. Because if you don't those guarantees go out the window. I'm not Oharu Kat. I can't save you any other way. I bought your life Kat with my own. You die, I die. Its as simple as that so please Kat, please?"

"Okay... from the beginning" Kathleen agreed in the same soft voice. "Just no more ice."

"No more ice. I promise."

"Annie... How did you know to use cold" the broken agent asked slowly.

"Your from Maine. You've made a point of moving to the tropics. You don't even use ice in your drinks when its available. I am a Doctor Kat. I do notice things like that. What happened?"

With her shivering passing as Annette's body warmed her own Kathleen shoved her face into her pillow for a while. Finally lifting her face free she turned her head away from Annette. "I was five" she explained in a near normal voice. I wandered off into the woods. Mom and dad couldn't find me but my older brother did. I was frozen. As frozen as a little five year old could be and still live. I've had nightmares ever since, my fingers sometimes go numb for no reason. My toes hardly have any feeling, but cold hits me like a knife. I can't stand it. I have nightmares all the time if I'm too cold."

"And you took the ice enema, knowing what it would do to you. You're a stronger woman than I am Kat. I hope we can stay friends but that's up to you. Talk when your ready. I'll keep you warm until its over. No matter which way the balance falls"

Right then though Dr. Annette Riverstone wished she could cut her own throat. Fate had been with her. No one had known that she was sleeping in that room so when they talked she had heard everything. Hearing it, and knowing Kathleen was going to have a 'tragic turn for the worst' Annette had done the only thing she could.

She'd just put her own life in the same basket as the one holding Kathleen Hightower. She had done it because outside her own family and maybe that mouse Oharu, Kat was all she had now.

Elsewhere on Casino Island a paw set a fork down on a cleaned plate. "That was a wonderful lunch Callie" the buck known as Albert Garner admitted. "Just the right touch of vinegar in the salad. Wonderful."

"Thank you sir" the skunk answered as she cleared the table. "Will you want anything else?"

"Let me think. You've had your medication. Our patsy Liberty Morgenstern will be here Sunday morning. Though I much dislike using a woman, a girl at that to kill she is unlike you. Liberty is after all nothing but Revolutionist garbage after all. Its sad that I can't help our target escape this time, but she won't leave Spontoon at all. No choice in that matter. Tomorrow we will pack. I've a report to get out tonight but no other pressing items. Yes P. Callie Underwood. I believe that I would like desert."

A few minutes later the skunk returned carrying a silk pillow. Turning her back to her master she waited as he reached over to his servant and started untying bows. "I have noticed that you are getting fat Callie. Increase your exercise program by fifteen minutes each day."

"Yes sir."

Watching the skunks thin dress fall away Albert Garner licked his lips. "Ah, desert is finally served. Perfect, as always."

"Thank you sir" the skunk whispered, pure joy in her voice at his praise.

It was very late in the evening when Oharu arrived again upon Casino Island. Stepping carefully from the water taxi, for she was wearing one of the European style dresses she'd been given by Pan American Airways the mouse stopped, taking her time to look around her. It was her desire to walk to the English Embassy, or whatever they called themselves. Unfortunately she was representing her teacher, the High Priestess Huakava. Thus by social compact walking in this situation was not permitted. Moving to a waiting Rickshaw she carefully stepped in, insuring that her precious skirt was not caught by any rough object. It would be impossible for her to ever afford a replacement. "English Embassy" she ordered calmly. In a moment she was moving in a slightly uncomfortable way towards her destination.

As they moved through the streets many eyes turned towards her, for one of the Hoele'toemi daughters had spent a full two hours on her fur, her makeup, even selecting which dress to wear. No one, not even

her friends recognized Oharu for whom she was though the soft patterns in her fur would have informed them, had they been visible in the darkness at range. Even the mouse's natural scent was hidden by something the Hoele'toemi woman had brought with her. What bothered the mouse was that she wasn't wearing a Kimono. Huakava had demanded she wear European dress, but why? When she arrived at the main entrance Oharu understood the why. In her normal dress she would have looked a beggar in this crowd. Unless she wore her greatest kimono, and that she would not do for such a mundane task.

A rather tall male fox in a military uniform asked for her invitation. Turning over the card Huakava had given her Oharu waited silently as he read what was written on it. "I am so sorry Priestess" the man said as he returned the card. "This is for the High Priestess Huakava only." He had, she noted with delight, recognized the patterns in her fur.

"I am here her place, at her request" the mouse explained in English. "Huakava no longer well enough leave Main Island."

"I'm truly sorry to hear that Mam" the man replied. "We were all so looking forward to meeting her again. Still the rules are strict. It's completely out of my paws. I will check however, in case a message has been left. Please. If you will wait just a moment."

Amused, and secretly hoping she would be turned away Oharu stood quietly out of the way as others arrived. From the looks she was given she felt like a common bug on glass as many of these Euro's appeared not to care for those not of their race, and not care that they showed such dislike. If Huakava had sent her here to learn humility in the eyes of Euro's it was a lesson she was certainly learning the mouse decided. These people were nothing like the Spontoon natives who had freely opened their arms in greeting at her arrival.

"Honored Priestess?"

Oharu looked toward the voice, it was a wolf in uniform this time. This one wearing even more bright bits than the fox. "Yes" she answered softly. If he would only say go home she begged within her thoughts. This place was uncomfortable and without a companion she felt like bait for a hungry shark. Certainly she was well out of her own element.

"I wish to apologize. For although we were made aware of your coming, that information simple never made it to the list. Please, if you would walk with me." He gave a glance to the younger fox that told Oharu nothing. Military men, their ways were so strange to her.

Meanwhile over at the McGee Resort the writer Boguslaw Rictor could barely see through his fatigue filled eyes, so hard had he been working. He had shipped his latest adventure novel off to his editor the morning before, now all his attention was aimed at this secret agent Sandy Doecan. "If only a tenth of what I've read is true" he told the Tiki mask hanging from his wall, "She's as good as any European spy. Maybe better. I wonder if I can get her lover though the censors, or will I have to turn the mouse into a male." He yawned, needing sleep. It had been interesting to pick up that little detail, it had been mentioned only in passing yet had stood out to his writers eyes like a searchlight.

But right now he needed a walk, fresh air and some food. Once again he'd worked through lunch and dinner. By now no one was up at the McGee resort so finding food for his grumbling tummy would turn out to be an adventure. Some vacation this had become he thought. Picking up his hat he slipped his reading glasses in a vest pocket. Who knew, he just might meet up with some young lady. Everyone at home knew that young ladies simply did not like anyone wearing glasses. Not unless they were rich or famous, of which he was neither. Stepping out of his rented cottage he looked around. It was a well lighted courtyard someone had given a touch of an oriental edge too. He rather liked it, spending some time simply standing looking at what he could see.

"He is leaving" a child whispered into a certain feline's ear in soft Spontoonie.

Blinking awake a young woman known as Blossom sat up, letting her thin blanket fall away. "Any idea where too?" she asked just as softly.

"His stomach rumbles. He is hungry. Mama Madrid's is closest."

"Barf" the feline responded as she grabbed her clothing. "Italian. Cooked by a Spontoon woman who's only knowledge of Italian is what she reads in a book. He'll have a heart attack from the fats before I get my chance." She was standing, dressing quickly. "My satchel, with my best stories?"

"Where you left it. On the counter."

Looking out the McGee family home's shuttered window Blossom watched as the rabbit she had finally decided to marry walked towards the resort's main entry. "Back way. Hurry" a young McGee girl giggled.

Grabbing her satchel Blossom left by the back way. She would have to run as it was a turning road that went almost two blocks before a path would allow her to return. "Oh Goddess Oharu please let him turn right" she prayed as she ran. If he turned left, all hope was lost.

Boguslaw did turn left, but only for a few steps. That way was towards the more energetic part of Casino Island and what he truly wanted was something to eat, then a quiet walk on the beach. His brain was filled with facts and figures, making any real creative thought difficult and real sleep impossible. Turning smartly in his heel he headed the other way.

Blossom turned the last corner at a dead run, her blouse now artfully torn, her skirt hanging by a strategically placed length of twine. Behind her was Taza McGee, wearing a rough dark blanket last used by a wolverine as a cape in a play and growling for all he was worth. It was a set up of course, still what male could refuse to save a young lady being chased by a madman? Well, Blossom decided. If the rabbit didn't she would keep on running and hope for another writer this season. After all a lady had to have some values. Panting she spotted Boguslaw, took a deep breath and headed straight for him.

At first the rabbit writer was frightened by Taza's growling. Though he had met the wolf several times he had never heard him sound thus, so there was no way he could place that sound with the gentle wolf he'd met. Without his glasses anything more than a few dozen yards away was a soft blur. As was anything closer than three feet. Blossom though he could easily recognize as a shapely young lady in distress. But what should he do? He wasn't an aggressive male, not by a very long shot. He was just about to turn tail himself and run for his cottage when Blossom, now within his natural range of vision ran under a street lamp. He knew that face. She was one of the dancers, she had chatted with him about writing even though he was wearing glasses. Secretly he'd had dreams of her, but there was no real time for introspection. Blossom was nearly on him and turning the corner behind her was a black shape from some nightmare, still howling as it followed the feline's scent.

"Help, please" Blossom cried as she spun on a dime, hiding behind the older rabbit. "He wants me."

"What...what is it" Boguslaw stammered, but there was no time for further conversation. That shapeless mass was nearly upon them. A scent of wolverine came on the opposing wind, turning his complexion pale. Hurriedly thrusting his key into the girl's paw he pushed her towards the McGee resort. "McGee. Number four" he called, turning foolishly to face what seemed to be madness. Something within him changed. A pretty young girl was depending upon him. A young girl he'd already found attractive. Added to that were all the pages he'd read about Sandy Doecan. If a bobcat could stand against nations he could stand against this. Couldn't he? Taking a deep breath he readied himself as best he could, then ran towards the creature, a howl of challenge coming from his own throat.

What occurred next he would be wondering about long after Blossom presented him with his first child. Whomever the creature before him was it stopped in its tracks, spun and ran back the way it had come. His throat raw from his unaccustomed challenge Boguslaw stood in absolute surprise. He'd run the wolverine away. He, old Bog's had run a mad drunk wolverine away all by himself. He'd saved the girl, without a weapon. Just like in a movie. Another growl came then, waking the rabbit from his musing. He may have frightened off the creature once, but it sounded like it was regaining its nerve. Best to retreat now. Hurrying back to the McGee resort he found his cottage door wide open. *'Foolish girl'* he thought. *'If he had ignored me.'* Entering his cottage he recovered his key from the lock, carefully shutting and bolting his door. Satisfied he slipped the key into his pocket. Only to turn and find Blossom huddled in a corner, obviously deathly frightened. Beside her was a thick leather case that had pages of paper spilled from it. Going to the girl he kneeled beside her, feeling her shivering with fear. "Its all right. Its gone. What was it?"

"Wolverine" Blossom answered, barely remembering to keep her body shivering. "Sailor. Very drunk. He thought I was available. I had to run."

"Well in the morning I intend to inform the authorities. Something like that simply shouldn't be allowed to happen to polite young girls. Your frightened to death. Here, sit over at the table. When its morning I'll go get Mr. McGee. He will know what to do."

Blossom stood, quickly pressing her warm soft fur against the older rabbit. "How can I ever repay you" she asked.

At that moment her strategically placed piece of twine tactically snapped.

At the English Consulate Oharu was now certain that she was well out of her depth. Though she understood English barely well enough, every conversation appeared to have keywords or phrases she simply had no understanding of. That didn't even count the names that were dropped. Names she vaguely had knowledge of, but nothing more. She was still trying to appear interested as a Frenchwoman rattled on about some Emperor called Nippodium when a throat cleared beside her. Turning her attention to this newcomer she recognized the sparkly covered military man. "Yes?" she asked.

"If you would please Honored Priestess. Our Consoler would like to have a bit of your time. "

"Of course." She looked to the Frenchwoman, who was now staring at the man who had so rudely interrupted her. "Je suis désolé. Doit parler avec l'Anglais. Mes excuses" she told her companion, stunning the woman who had earlier been assured that this backwater oriental mouse could know nothing of French. Bowing to the woman, who's jaw now gapped fully open Oharu turned to follow her guide.

"Did you just speak French" he asked as they turned to enter a rather ornate hall.

"I much hope so" Oharu answered. Though she tried to act nonchalant, around her the paintings of ancient ones were impressive. Especially the thin man with a long head of hair.

"That is Charles II" her guide explained, having easily noted her interest.

"He looks very wise" the mouse noted, forcing herself to tear her eyes away from that haunting portrait.

"I believe that he was" the wolf agreed. "Tell me Honored Priestess. How many languages do you speak?"

"Enough" Oharu answered with a smile in her eyes. "Cause you maybe little problem."

"And read?"

"Three. Cipangan, Spontoon mostly, French some."

"English?"

"Very little" the mouse priestess admitted. "Was not important at that time. I not have time now to learn. Must learn Spontoon fully."

Opening a rather large door the wolf stood aside, waiting for Oharu to enter. She stopped, looking at her guide. "You first" she whispered.

"Of course Honored Mother, if you wish. But why?"

"English girl once tell me why Knights always let women go first."

"I see. However Mister Ransmore is waiting in the next room." He paused after entering, waiting for Oharu to pass before closing the door. "And why is that?"

"To see if dragon still hungry."

While Oharu was meeting the English, at Kart-Tombs Air Charter the mare Nikki was talking to one of her most trusted male friends. "Yer sure yah wanna do this" Nikki asked the tall willowy fox who stood across from her, his eyes locked on the charts. "Ah can still get Hazel."

"Please Nikki" Mark Brown laughed. "I haven't been to China. I understand it will be dangerous but so is being your friend. Now, who is our third member. The one who will get us in and out alive."

"Ah priestess" Nikki answered. "Names Oharu Wei. Her stuff's already packed ahn aboard."

"Ah yes. I have heard of her. So. I will be outnumbered on this trip and very lonely. For what I have heard she is much in love already."

"Yep" Nikki agreed. "Mahbe yah can pick up a vixen in China. More important, yah checked the numbers. Ah miss anything?"

"I do wish you would get some sleep Nikki, you become less and less understandable the more exhausted you become. No, I cannot see anything amiss. You are an excellent navigator and I'm certain, from the corrections, that Kathleen checked your figures. Is Oharu a pilot?"

"Yes, and no. Kat checked my plans, Oharu canna fly. When do we leave?"

Taking the charts in his paws Mark started rolling them up. "I would like to leave right now. Unfortunately, as you have informed me our third crew member is at a party representing our country. If we sleep now, sunrise would be best. It will place Old Man Sol behind us. Weapons?"

"Standard stuff. Oharu said tah plan like were flying fer an important Lady. Donno what's she's up tah, but she's had tha Miko friend of her's working on papers since lunch yestrda."

"I see. Then until Honored Mother Oharu Wei arrives I suggest that we recheck our loadout, then get some rest. As she cannot break us I am afraid it will be long hours in the seat for both of us."

Nodding in agreement Nikki grabbed her flying cap and headed out the door.

It would be many hours later, Saturday morning in fact when the LOUISE finally lifted off from Spontoon harbor. Aboard were enough supplies to last three furs until they reached China. Papers created on very

official materials by a very talented Miko that, should she be discovered would cost her a great deal more than simply her life and one very ill mouse. Having finally reached cruising altitude Nikki turned her craft over to her co-pilot, unstrapped and moved to the passenger area. There she found Oharu laying flat on her back.

"Someone could step on you" Nikki remarked, carefully sitting in a chair next to her passenger.

"Go ahead" Oharu moaned. "I die now."

Leaning over Nikki sniffed the mouse's breath. "Not drink. Is it your moon? Should I get a clean rag from your things?"

"Is food I ate. Not used too. Nikki, I am Ashihase. We do not have moons as you think of them." She managed to open her eyes. "Remind me, never eat jalapeno again." Struggling up she managed a sickly smile. "Toilet?"

"Come on little girl" Nikki laughed, gathering the smaller mouse into her arms like a child. "Yah can worship tha porcelain God at six angels. Though mine's only solid copper."

Sometime later and with her stomach now empty Oharu sat facing her friend. "Like spices" she admitted. "Did not know."

Nikki laughed. "Now you do. So tell me little priestess. What happened last night?"

Oharu shrugged. "English want more landing rights for military ships. Thought to press priestess. Want much, I offer nothing. I not.." She struggled for a word she did not well known.

"Authorized?" the mare asked.

"Yes, is word. I not authorized. I say take to Huakava when return. She say no, that I know. Still take words to her."

"So what's an Ashihase anyway."

"Coffee?"

Nikki threw her paws up in exasperation. "Coffee." Reaching out effortlessly a distance that would have had the mouse straining to match and failing badly Nikki snagged a hamper with one paw. Dragging it over she dug for a few seconds before removing a thermos. Soon Oharu was sipping the steaming brew that Katherine McMaster had supplied for their trip. "Now, Ashihase. And how do you plan to get us into and out of China. Alive I mean."

"Ashihase is older people who lived in Hokkaido before Cipangu one nation" the mouse answered before sipping her brew again. "Anu come from Siberia, before Cipanguin come from Korea. Ashihase from Northern China. This was all long time ago, before such things matter."

Nikki worked those words in her mind. All this was new to her. She had always thought the nation of Japan, or Cipangu as Oharu referred to it was a single people. She should have known better though as her own birth nation was a mix of races, the original natives of Negrito's were still tribal. "So you don't have moons, you don't bleed?"

Oharu looked over her steaming cup at Nikki. "Still cramp sometimes" she admitted. "We reabsorb. Have seasons. Spring, Fall. Those times my desires are difficult control."

"And we're in Spring."

"We are in Spring" the mouse agreed.

"Hoy, if yah and Molly got drunk... Never mind, your dreams must be bad enough. Okay, biology one oh one over. How do we get intah and outah China."

Lifting her right paw from her mug Oharu presented a ring. Its dark gold surface was inscribed with symbols Nikki couldn't hope to read, but the symbol carved on its emerald surface was unmistakable. "Chrysanthemum. Yah get caught wearing that..."

"Means wearier eyes, ears, voice of Emperor" Oharu explained. "Papers Urako make support same. If work we will not have trouble."

"If it doesn't? I mean, seriously, absolute worst case."

"You and Malu beaten, raped to death. Mark beaten, stabbed to death. Myself?" She drank deeply of the slowly cooling coffee. "I think many years from now what left of me much envy you three. Not happen. Cipangu soldier creature of habit, of history. They see only symbol. If asked, read paper. At worst maybe spend two, three day longer than want. After all, they will want to show Emperors eyes strength their control."

Nikki thought over those words, looked back to her cockpit then back to Oharu. "How much ah my hide yah want in payment" she asked seriously. "I'm noh stupid enough tah ask where yah got that ring. Maybe in mah old age ya'll tell me."

Oharu laughed, holding her mug out to her companion. "I am priestess. You have need. Your love has need. Nikki. I will never have love my soul burns for, my heart aches for. I will not allow my friend to live as I must. You owe me.... nothing."

Taking the cup Nikki washed it with a few drops of water, wiped it out with a clean rag then returned it to its place before speaking. "Like ah'm every gonna believe that." Standing she returned to the cockpit, leaving Oharu to rest.

Sunday, June 28th, 1936

Of course everyone knew that Liberty Morgenstern should have been at her countries tiny Consulate on Casino Island at this moment. This was a fact she herself was well aware of, well aware that those witches who called themselves instructors would be certain of. Instead of a pleasant few hours with her 'people', here she was near the North-Eastern shore of Casino Island. An area with not quite the best class of accommodation. In fact, rather poor accommodation's. A scent of vegetable waste struck the coyotes nose, causing her to toss her head to clear it. Normally she wouldn't be here as this area was somewhat dangerous in the daytime. Very dangerous at night. Especially for a young non-native woman walking alone. Unless she were a Songmark student. Even the drunks knew better then to assault a Songmark girl. Especially after that English harpy Amelia had ruined one attackers arm for life.

Although Liberty hated owing anyone anything, especially someone like Amelia, she had to admit that it did make her arrival to her appointment on time easier. Though that admission was to herself only, she'd never belittle herself to thank that girl. Finally locating the address that had been given her she walked up to a door who's surface needed a good scraping, then another coat of paint. Or three. For a moment she hesitated, then knocked firmly.

When the door opened it was the same older woman who had brought her the message. This time she was dressed as a schoolgirl, though Liberty didn't know the emblem and that yellow scarf simply did not go with the uniform at all. It wasn't a State School, thus it couldn't possible be a good one.

"He is waiting. Second door on your right" the woman said as softly as she had when they first met. Smoothly she stepped aside so that Liberty could walk in.

She found herself in a comfortable building. One needing attention yes but clean. There was only a hint of the musty smell she had expected to find. It reminded her a lot of the abandoned State Library. Comfortable but ignored. No one went to any library anymore, except on class trips to view the bourgeois books rotting on their shelves. She found the second door open and, setting her purse on a small table beside that door she walked in without knocking.

"Bad form" an unknown male voice announced as she stepped into the room. "Your parents taught you no manners?"

"My parents? My parents taught me nothing" she answered sharply. Finding a chair she sat, only to have it promptly collapse under her. Shocked, now sitting flat on the floor with her legs spread in an un-ladylike manner she tried not to cry out in pain as two parts of the shattered chair tried to cut her tail off at its root. Before she could recover a figure detached itself from the shadows. It held a firearm, the sight of which caused her to quiet instantly.

Standing over her visitor the buck Albert Garner carefully returned his pistol to its place under his dinner jacket. "You are as clumsy in life as you are in your duties. Do not attempt to rise or move in any way. Not until I tell you too." He stood there, feeling the coyotes humiliation as a man she didn't know calmly viewed soft fur he shouldn't see. Not unless she wanted him too, and Liberty certainly didn't want him too. But her tails pain drew her attention from her embarrassment.

"Your Windcrest Breeze?" she asked, forcing her voice to remain level.

"That is my code name, for you" the white-tailed deer admitted. "I have many, many others."

"Would you be kind enough to explain why I am here?"

"In a moment." He turned his attention to the skunk standing silently behind Liberty. "Callie. Be a good girl and set up the camera." Turning his attention to Liberty again he nodded. "You will do, barely. Stand, do not brush your clothing yet." Turning his back on her the buck walked to a low table, one apparently serving him as a desk. "Liberty Morgenstern" he quoted as he picked up a folder of papers. "Sent to Spontoan Island to attend the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School For Young Ladies. In that position you were supposed to discover why Spontoan has not followed your nations lead. Have you an answer?"

"I haven't been here long enough to make an in-depth study" the coyote admitted.

"But you have a good idea. Your reports hint that."

"My reports?" Liberty ignored the smaller skunk as she began setting up an expensive looking movie camera in one corner of the rather large room. "You've read my reports?"

"I am your current controller" Garner reminded her. "You will respond as you have been trained, or I shall be forced to correct your disobedience in the basement. I have read your reports. You have not been fully open within them. Have you perhaps found a local lover?."

Grimacing in distaste Liberty held back the retort she had almost given. "No sir. I have not become involved in such a way."

"Not even one of your dormmates?"

"No sir." Her voice dripped with disgust at such a thought.

"Pity. We are very much interested in making more contacts in Eri. If you were involved with Miss Mulvaney, or at least a close friend it would change things for you. Much to the better."

"Why not the Russian. Sir" Liberty asked. She fought a flinch in her leg as a splinter suddenly rubbed against a nerve, and why was that skunk setting up a camera anyway.

"Please. Russia is not a nation that your people currently has a use for. Very well, Callie, clean up that mess and bring in a good chair. Also some tea for our guest. We have little time before she is expected back so I must explain her new mission quickly. Please Liberty, clean yourself off now."

"New mission?" Liberty asked as she discreetly removed the offending splinter while brushing dust from her dress.

"Yes. Callie and I will be leaving in two hours. But there is a mission you have been selected to complete, seeing as neither I nor Callie are trained for such things. Please hurry Callie, we have little time." He waited until the skunk had gone before sitting himself. "There is a death sentence on her head I am afraid" he admitted. "As much as I have grown fond of her, soon I will have to order her to kill herself."

Liberty glanced behind her a moment as she sat. "Why sir."

"You mean you honestly don't know who she is?"

Shrugging Liberty settled comfortably on the chair the skunk carried in for her. "If it isn't part of my training, I ignore it sir."

"Foolish. Children, they send me children. That, Miss Morgenstern. Is Miss Patricia Callie Underwood. She was the old Governments darling. A diver who had aspirations of winning the 1932 Olympics."

"She... But she's dead Sir. I saw it on the newsreel, she was hung."

Garner smiled. "Actually, Callie Underwood might as well be dead. She has been, shall we say re-educated. You are apparently unaware, but she put a bullet into the brain of her closest friend. A woman whom had been her friend and trainer since childhood. Simply because I told her too. Of course it was caught on film, shown around the world. That woman who was hung was selected simply because with a little makeup and the right clothing she looked like Callie. I don't even know or care who or what she was. Only that I have Callie, who has proven invaluable. Ah Callie my sweet, on the table beside her. Then have a seat on the floor over by your window please."

"Sir. My mission?"

"Ah yes." Picking up a cup from his makeshift desk the deer walked over to Liberty, pouring tea first for himself, then for Liberty. As he returned to his desk he drank. "There are two problems on Spontoon that must be dealt with. You will deal with one, another is coming to deal with the other. He is much too dangerous for you after all. He would kill you before you had the slightest chance to harm him." Turning he bent down, picking up a photograph that he sent spinning towards Liberty.

She caught the photograph easily, turning it so she was looking at a rather plain looking woman. Though even in black and white those eyes were magnetic. "She is a very close friend of Miss Devinski sir."

"Really? I hadn't known that. Then this will be all the easier for us all. You are to deliver a small letter to her, wait for her reply then return here with that reply. Unfortunately she will be dead before your water taxi reaches Casino Island. It will be of course, poisoned paper."

Bothered by such a statement Liberty absently picked up her drink. Sipping it she was surprised at the coolness. Then she noticed that there was actually ice in the glass. "Sir?" she asked, looking at the ice.

"I am allowed one luxury each day. I choose ice today" her host explained. "Please do not waste it." He sat silently, watching as she drank more of her cool drink. A soft smile came to his face as the glass emptied. It was not a friendly smile.

Soon Liberty replaced her now empty glass on the table, turning her attention to her current superior. "You were going to explain my new mission" she stated, then paused. Hadn't she already said that? "You put something in my drink, but how?"

"Not I. Callie did. It was in your glass, hidden by the ice of course. Now place your paws on your knees and listen my new tool, because you will never remember any of this meeting."

Standing he walked over to the suddenly relaxed and very compliant coyote. "The one I'd prefer you to kill is too much better than you, so you will have to kill Killian's wife instead. Besides, the other now lives in a Hell of his own making. I feel it better to leave him there than allow him the release he so desires. What you will do should be a simply matter considering your current level of training. But I need to see just how good you really are first, and how well the drug affects you. Stand up."

Wordlessly Liberty stood, her eyes as blank as an abandoned window. "You will attack Callie on my order. She will defend herself. If you defeat her you will leave in three hours to deliver death to Mrs. Whitehall. If you lose, Callie will attend to her while I shove your body into the garbage pile next door. It will be weeks before they find your bones Liberty. If they ever find them. You understand this?"

"I understand."

"Very good. You are not to kill Callie, she is more important to my mission than even myself. She has hidden the letter you need somewhere in her clothing. You will need to find it, without allowing what is inside its sealed surface to escape." Pulling a small and very sharp meat knife from his jacket Garner dropped it on the floor where it stuck quite easily. "You will cut away her clothing with that blade to find that letter, but not cut her or the envelope. You will not pick that blade up until she is unconscious or I will kill you myself. Undress fully and place your clothing on my desk, it would be better if your clothing is undamaged. You will be less noticeable. Tell me Liberty. Why hasn't Spontoon followed your pitiful little nations lead?"

"It is a combination of factors" the coyote answered as she blindly followed her new masters orders. Like with Callie the drug cocktail had worked as expected, though not as well as the buck had hoped. "They have a great hatred of most things European. Also as a mixed race nation they do not have the stresses we had. Theirs is a national love of, as I was told, jerking the European Tourists chain. This seems to release the pressures we could not. Most importantly they have a great respect for their religion, their island and their history."

"Is it ever possible to turn them to your path?"

"No."

"Humm...." Walking away from his visitor the buck Garner stopped by his camera. He knew that the dose Callie had given Liberty would last only ten, twelve hours at most. Still that was more than long enough at the moment, and more, almost an overdose actually would be given later before they left her to watch the clock. They needed time to escape before Liberty recovered of course and he had done this scores of times before. It would be an easy, if delicate series of commands. But the time his drug would give them was important. Especially as their boat left in little more than two hours. Their luggage was already aboard. Only a wheelchair and the camera remained to be taken aboard. Callie would need the wheelchair of course, after Liberty had dealt with her. If she was as good as he hoped.

"Is there any reason we should continue supporting you in Songmark?"

"Yes."

"Name a few important ones."

Liberty hardly paused to think. "I will be making contacts with many people who's parents or sponsors are very important. My contacts will be international. Once I complete the schooling I will be a loyal strong asset for our nation. As an agent or simply a trustworthy pilot or a disposable tool. A local Priestess has taken some small interest in me. This may be very important within the year. I may be able to interest her in myself even more."

"Enough. Very well, sit again." He waited until the coyote was seated then looked to his assistant. One who had been given her 'medication' less than half an hour before Liberty arrived. "Callie, you understand your role?"

"Yes master. I am to allow her to defeat me, but I am to make it look like I am trying my best to defend myself."

'*Just like always*' the buck reminded himself. He was amazed at how dependable his drug was. How well Callie's training held. Of course when he was through with her it would all pass into obscurity as she regained her true self. That was if he was allowed to let her live. His heart pulled at the thought of Callie Underwood lying dead. Over the years he had come to like her, to love her. How, he wondered, would she take losing at least six years or more of her life. It didn't matter though. If he could get her to the United Moari Chiefdoms alive, well then they could vanish. His plans then were complex, but he had enough drug left to keep her full controlled another two years. By then he would have a child by her, maybe two with luck though she would never remember it. More if he could get that moss extract from his homeland again. An image of half a dozen children with Callie's features brought an odd, warm smile to the bucks face. "Very well. Liberty. As soon as Callie starts to pour you another drink you are to attack her." Turning to the camera he made certain it was wound fully. He then explained exactly what Liberty was to do after defeating Callie, and how, what she was to do with him afterwards. Although Liberty's possible future was interesting to her own masters, but he saw no reason to let another filthy revolutionist live. Quietly he triggered the shutter. "Callie. Begin."

Just over five hours later Helen Whitehall opened her door to the sound of her bell. Standing before her was a Songmark girl in full Sunday best. It took only a few seconds for the teacher to remember which one stood there. "Liberty. What brings you here?"

"Miss Devinski sent you a message" the coyote answered, her voice oddly flat. "I am to wait for your answer."

"Really? Well do come in from the sun. May I have the message?"

Stepping into the parlor Liberty reached into her spotless school jacket, drawing out an envelope that she offered to Helen. Accepting the envelope Helen waved to a sofa. "Have a seat Liberty. I'll be right back." Turning her back on the coyote Helen silently offered the envelope to her other visitor. Miss Devinski looked at it, looked at the waiting coyote who could not possibly have missed seeing her, then gently sat the envelope on a side table.

"Go wash your paws, then call the police. There's something wrong with her and that envelope smells strongly of skunk. Something is badly odd" the Songmark woman advised. Following Helen she too washed her paws, though she wasn't much worried. If Liberty had carried the envelope there for any real time then handled it anything dangerous was still trapped inside. Returning back to Liberty the yellow furred hound knelt beside her while her hostess called for the police, and an ambulance.

'*Should have thought about that*' Catherine Devinski thought. Very carefully she studied Liberty. That she'd been in a fight was obvious, though care had been taken to cover up as much of that evidence as

could be. Her clothing was, as always on Sundays immaculate. That meant that she hadn't been wearing it when she'd been fighting. Odd, Liberty had never bothered protecting her clothing when fighting before. That same scent of skunk hovered strongly about the coyote. Female skunk. And an underlying scent of deer. Probably a buck. That was odd too. There were no skunks in Liberty's dorm and she knew for a fact the girl wasn't interested in her own sex, yet the scent was of strong excitement. Exceptionally strong excitement. Both Skunk and Coyote. She pushed that image aside for the moment. It was the coyotes eyes that really bothered her teacher. They were blank, pupils open as wide as physically possible. She'd seen this several times before, mainly in seasick tourists. It was called ScopeEye. Even when a paw was placed directly in front of her eyes the coyote ignored it. "Liberty. Stand up."

Instantly the coyote stood. Just as a puppet would have reacted. "Liberty. Tell me what happened to you."

"I have been instructed not to respond to that question" the young girl announced.

"What questions can you answer" Catherine asked.

Quickly Liberty listed about a bakers dozen subjects, then went silent. All were subjects one would expect to encounter on a trip to and from Songmark. Biting her upper lip Miss Devinski ordered her student to sit again. She'd seen this before somewhere. It niggled at the back of her mind but she couldn't place it. "Liberty. Where were you going when you left school this morning?"

"I had an appointment" she answered.

"With whom."

"I do not know."

"Do you remember, say a code name?" the hound asked softly.

"Yes" was her students soft, short answer.

Changing her tact a bit the older woman came from a different direction as Helen rejoined her. "What was his code name."

"Windcrest Breeze" her student supplied.

"Windcrest Breeze says to tell me everything you know" Miss Devinski ordered. Liberty's reaction caught her by surprise. Instead of answering she simply collapsed. By the time an ambulance and the police arrived Helen and Catherine had determined that Liberty had simply fallen asleep. It had been a trap, a trap set to trigger a set command to make further questioning impossible and Miss Devinski was furious with herself for falling to such an obvious ploy. A simple preset command within her brain should the trick that her teacher used be tried. It could have been worse, she could have been commanded to simply stop breathing. Nothing would have saved her then. Nothing.

After the police had finished and taken the suspect envelope with them Helen returned from her son's bedroom. "Fame, fortune or attempted murder. He still needs his lunch" she told her guest. "You will be going to the hospital?"

"It can wait" Catharine answered as she reached over to Helen's blouse, carefully closing and trying to button it. "Thanks to the use of your phone Mrs. Oelabe and Miss Blande are already there. I will wait here until Illie arrives. Besides, we still haven't finished that game of Cribbage."

Helen laughed, pulling back before Catherine could half complete her self appointed task. "You don't trust the police do you" she asked, turning to their game.

"Not where your concerned. I have very, very few rich friends. Especially ones who would sell my school a Ju 86D for rock bottom prices. Who's deal is it?"

"Mine." Sitting in her chair across from her guest Helen leaned over the table to gather in Catherine's cards. "I do have a Murphy bed" she reminded the Songmark tutor as she started shuffling. "If you feel you need to stay near your student for a while. My word I will not enter that room while you are sleeping."

Gathering in her cards the hound glanced up at her hostess. "Sorry. I can't quite trust myself that far" she admitted. "And I'm not quite certain if I want to commit myself yet. You see, I've still some reservations."

"Accepted" Helen agreed as she laid down the unused cards. "I am still quite young and like you I do not want to step into something I might later wish that I hadn't. Still" she laid a card down. "I am already very certain in this case." She playfully wiggled her upper torso just a bit.

Breaking her stare Catherine laughed. "Did you ever know that your almost as dangerous as Oharu" she asked.

It was dark outside when Liberty Morgenstern awoke. A single sniff told her were she was, a hospital, even though her brain felt more like a wad of cotton than soft tissue. That, and she needed a drink. A serious drink. "lo" she managed through her parched throat. Trying to open her eyes she discovered that they were covered by something and both her paws seemed held down by something else. Was she a prisoner then?

For almost a minute nothing happened. Then a sound like that of a book closing, followed by the sound of said same book being set down came to the confused coyotes ears. "And how are we now" a very familiar voice asked.

"Dink" was all Liberty could manage through her raw throat. Even that left her with a wave of pain the likes she hadn't felt in a very long time.

"Drink. Its only warm water dear. Best thing for that throat. Unless that is you want to sear the flesh off it. Open a little."

A taste of glass came to Liberties swollen tongue, strange she thought that glass should have a taste, but it did. She sucked and water from the deepest ice fields of the arctic ocean tumbled across her tongue, slid down her tongue until it reached her throat. Then it became lava. It was all Liberty could do not to scream.

"I see" said that same dispassionate voice. "Well we can cross Datura from our list. It doesn't have that after effect. Try again dear. It should be easier this time."

Trusting that voice, though her training screamed not to Liberty drank again. This time her throat didn't quite rebel. In truth other than a slight itching sensation all over her body she felt a lot better. "Mrs. Oelabe" her voice managed, though her throat still complained. "Where am I?"

"Meeting Island Hospital dear. Under the care of Doctor Kiwi. Where are you supposed to be? And please do not tell me your dorm."

Liberty sighed in defeat. "31 Kono Way" she admitted. "I was to meet with a member of my..." she paused, sipping the water Mrs. Oelabe still held ready. "Government. I am responsible to them still you know."

"I see. Child. Your eyes are covered to protect them from the light. Your arms and legs bound because you tried to tear your own pelt off. What is the very last thing you remember?"

Liberty relaxed, letting her mind bring up the day. "A couple of ferrets whistling at me, some course remarks in rather good English. The sun was on my right, it was a warm morning with a soft breeze. Perhaps five miles per hour. I turned a corner, left, there was a very bad smell then." She stopped, retraced her words, started again then stopped at the exact same point. "Nothing after" she admitted.

"You are certain" the Songmark nurse asked.

"Mrs. Oelabe. You as a faculty member have asked me for a report. My response could, probably will determine part of my grade somewhere. I am being honest with you. Nothing. It is as though I smelled that bad scent, rotting vegetables I think, then I woke up here. I simply have no memory of anything else."

Mrs. Oelabe sat the glass of water on an end table next to Liberty's pillow, then reached over and unbuckled Liberty's left paw. "Water on the table to your left, next to your head. Level with the bed. You remember nothing, not even that you arrived at Mrs. Whitehall's home claiming to have a message from Miss Devinski. With Miss Devinski standing right in front of you?"

Liberty's face changed as two emotions, fear and concern passed through her mind. "Mrs. Oelabe. The last time I saw Miss Devinski is when she dismissed us from Punishment Class Saturday afternoon. I have not seen her since and, Mrs. Whitehall? I haven't seen her since she made that offer to the school about true aviation stories. I don't even know where on Casino Island she lives."

"I see. Do not try to scratch where it itches, those are stitches dear from when you tried to tear your own flesh off. If you tear those stitches I will assure you of some rather hideous scars and this is not a warning to a child. They will be quite hideous. Now, what do you know of Ricin?"

"Ricin" Liberty repeated. "A very stable poison derived from the castor bean plant. A white powder, slow acting in lower doses and extremely effective. Death occurs within thirty-six to seventy two hours of exposure of 500 milligrams or more material, depending upon type of exposure. It can be delivered as a powder, a mist or a pellet or it can be dissolved in water or a weak acid then left as a coating on an object, or mixed in a drink. It comes from the seed of the Castor plant and is in the waste after removing the castor oil. It requires a very small amount to kill. I do not recall any valid medical usage. There is no antidote."

"Very good. You have been paying attention in class after all. Where on Spontoan would you get Ricin?"

Liberty was confused now. "Ricin? I would guess a chemist, if he would sell it to anyone but a Doctor or Policeman. If you could find a castor plant its fairly easy to dissolve out. I think there is a castor bean plantation on North Main island but I could be mistaken."

"You've never been there?"

"Mrs. Oelabe. Songmark students who are intelligent do not wander around Main Island without a guide. Not if they wish to live long enough to become Songmark graduates. Not even Amelia or Helen wander Main Island without a native guide."

"I see. Well thank you. I must confer with Miss Devinski now. A doctor will be in soon to examine you. Don't worry my dear. Your embarrassing examinations will be done by Doctor Riverstone, who is a woman. Of course I will be here as well. To insure you are not, shall we say mishandled? Rest for now."

"Yes Mam." Liberty laid back into her pillow, relaxing. There was nothing to do now but go over the information she had and try to find those missing... She turned her head after the nurse left, lifting one bandage enough to see and surprised at how painful even the low level light of her room was. She gasped at the time. "Fourteen hours" she whispered, replacing her bandage. Fourteen hours of her young life. Simply gone.

Outside of the girls room Mrs. Oelabe walked quickly to a conference room. Several people waited her there and on a table was an intercom speaker. "Comments" a female bobcat asked after the nurse's report.

Doctor Kiwi and Doctor Riverstone looked at each other, the otter giving her superior a nod. "A classic case of action under a very strong hypnotic" Dr. Kiwi began. "One administered very shortly after her encounter with that smell. No more than five to seven minutes after. Yet there was at least a second compound, Dr. Riverstone's laboratory work has proven that. Possibly a third. What it is we don't know. By the time her blood sample got to the lab it had metabolized almost completely.."

"Could she be lying" the bobcat asked softly.

Dr. Kiwi looked to his much younger associate. "Dr. Riverstone?"

"No" the otter answered. "Certain hypnotics, very rare hypnotics are so powerful that one given such would sit in a bonfire and sing pleasant songs until they died. It is the nature of these drugs that all short term memory is lost. Now we don't know that much about short and long term memory yet, but there appears to be around a five to seven minute lapse between experiencing something and that memory being sent to long term storage. That library we call our memories. As long as the drug is active, no matter what the victim does or has done to them they will never remember. They can't, because it never went to real memory and short term memory is erased every five to seven minutes depending upon the individual. It's the complex actions she completed by herself that frightens me."

Elizabeth Sapohatan leaned forward, spearing the otter with a gaze that could cut through armor plated steel. "Explain" the bobcat snapped.

"Simply put. While under this drugs effects the victim will do anything they are told. They will even kill their own children without hesitation. But the person controlling them has to remain near them. That didn't happen here and the orders she followed were extremely complex. They showed that some kind of long term memory was in action, but not her normal long term memory." She stopped, looking to Dr. Kiwi in desperation. He nodded, taking up the line.

"Liberty followed an impossible series of actions upon being released to do so. She should not have been able to complete more than five or six minutes of activity before her short term memory flushed, then she would become nothing but a mindless zombie. One obeying anyone who spoke to her. Scopolamine is a possibility, her eyes are the first clue of that drug. But the aftereffects she experienced were not all present. It's a anticholinergic deliriant. Hysteria, hallucinations and such would be suspected. Yet in many ways whatever was used acts exactly like that drug. I suspect a derivative, or a complex mix of drugs. But whatever it is I would need a fresh, uncontaminated sample. Liberty's body had destroyed through natural action too much to make analysis possible."

He paused then, gathered his thoughts before he continued. "We've all spoken to the water taxi woman who brought her over. Liberty chatted with her about the water, weather, even another taxi that came a bit too close. Although she seemed a bit hazy, as it was put, she seemed normal. At least normal enough to not catch this woman's interest. Upon arriving to shore she walked directly to Mrs. Whitehall's home, though she has just admitted to not knowing where it is. In fact to believing that Mrs. Whitehall lives on Casino Island. Yet she ignored the fact that Miss Devinski was standing in plain sight when she told her target that the message was from Miss Devinski. She waited for a reply, though once that letter was opened there was a good chance there never would have been a reply. There was enough Ricin in that envelope to kill everyone on Meeting Island and then some. Probably everyone on Spontoon if it came to that. In fact, anyone within that building including Liberty and Miss Whitehall's child would be dead in minutes. Then there is the fact she followed a pre-planned action when a certain trigger was reached, that of falling into a sleep nothing we tried would break her out of. No Mrs. Sapohatan, Liberty Morgenstern had no more control of her actions that we do of the suns."

Turning her look from the two doctors Elizabeth studied first Mrs Oelabe, then Miss Devinski. "Thankfully Mrs. Whitehall isn't here. She is not to be told these things. I know her history. This is not something I feel she could accept. Dr. Kiwi. If I were administered this concoction exactly what could you make me do?"

"Mrs. Sapohatan. Anything I wanted you to do, up to and until the drug ceased being effective."

"Anything?"

"I could order you to kill your husband and you would. I could order you to tell me every secret you have and you would. I could tell you to skin yourself alive and you would."

Annette Riverstone nodded in agreement. "Mrs. Sapohatan, as an example. Your aware of a situation between the Priestess Oharu Wei and the Songmark student Molly Procyk?"

"Who on this island besides the tourists isn't" the bobcat laughed.

"Its this way. Dr. Kiwi, please correct me if I am wrong. From the evidence we have gotten by Liberty's actions should I give that drug to Molly, I could then instruct her to be deeply, hopelessly in love with Oharu. I could instruct her to marry Oharu, publically declare her love for the woman, withdraw from Songmark, renounce her American citizenship and swear, publically, to obey the mouses every desire. To sign a document that would forever. Forever bind her to the mouse. I would be on another island when she did this, or even on an aircraft hundreds of miles away. She would do this several hours after I instructed her too. Depending on the dosage maybe a day or two later. Now that may seem impossible to you, but she would do it."

"Likewise I could order Oharu to kill Molly, cut her head off and mount it at the gates of Great Stone Glen and she would try, though we all know Molly is the better fighter. I would simply end up with a crippled doe and a very dead mouse. Both would follow my orders, hours, days later without hesitation. Upon the drugs wearing off neither would have any memory of anything that occurred. Nothing."

"My God" Elizabeth whispered, an expression of horror coming to her face. "There is someone running around Spontoon able to do that? There is a drug able to do that kind of horror? How do we protect Spontoon."

"We can't" Mrs. Oelabe admitted. "Liberty, well we all know why Liberty really is here. She's not a spy, a political revolutionary yes. A bad one but not a spy. But she's been trained by her own people and myself, and she's a full blooded coyote. She would have noticed any drug before she ingested it so this must be tasteless, odorless, easily given. Doctors, I'm only a nurse but as I understand it nothing will block a hypnotic from acting."

"There are certain compounds that would" Dr. Kiwi corrected. "But they are extremely powerful, only effective after the fact and very short lived. Much too dangerous and short lived to give wholesale, and certainly much too expensive. It is my displeasure to admit that there is no possible defense in this case. It could be simply dropped in a cup, then allowed to dry. Days, weeks later a simple drink would rehydrate the compound, releasing its full effects. I don't believe there is a defense."

"If" Miss Devinski added. "Such a compound could twist two minds as strong as the two you used for your example. Then I cannot see how we can more than tell Liberty what happened and warn her from visiting that person again. What.."

Her words were interrupted by a phones ring. Instantly the younger bobcat picked up the handset. "Sapohatan" she snapped, then listened. After a time she nodded, her eyes closing. "Find out what ship or airplane. Who, and where they are going. We have to get them. Failure. Failure is not a choice." Hanging up the phone Elizabeth looked around the room. "A couple, a skunk female and a white tailed

deer, male. Their gone and not quickly. This was well planned. It will take a while to track them down but we will."

"International law" Annette whispered, only to have Miss Devinski's paw grip her own.

"Honey" she whispered, only to remain silent. For Annette though the hounds eyes told volumes.

"Are you ever going to make me an honest woman" the otter suddenly asked.

Laughing the Songmark woman turned to her school nurse. "Now we have a mind reader on the islands." But she refused to answer that question.

First class the next morning found Liberty still slightly befuddled, still uncomfortable from her self inflicted wounds and unable to stomach more than water. But her mind was as sharp as ever. What she had been told had cost her her balance but she would get it back. Sitting at her desk, waiting for the instrument navigation lecture to start she couldn't help but think. What had happened yesterday while she was drugged. Why did she feel like she had been through a major battle and had the bruises for it, and why had both Dr. Riverstone and Mrs. Oelabe been so worried after her examination. What had happened. What had her own people done to her. She was a loyal Revolutionist. Why would they throw her away like that?

When the lecture started she pushed her personal worries aside. Songmark gave no second chances, everyone knew that. No questions. A single mistake and one was simply gone. She had tried to kill the friend of one of the schools most important people, right in front of her. Yet here she was. What was going on? Why hadn't she been sent home. What had that Priestess meant by her words. Liberty needed time to think, but class was not a time for personal introspection.

Chapter Thirty-Five

June 28th, 1936

About the same time Liberty Morgenstern was approaching her own destiny on Casino Island the Spontoon Priestess Leokau heard someone arrive at the Glen's gateway on Main Island. She had been carefully cleaning those steps, ancient broken stone slabs that ran from the Glens waterfall to its gateway. A gateway never closed, yet for rituals sake must exist. Knowing that someone was waiting she kept a tiny smile on her face but finished sweeping those stone steps before looking up. When she did, after returning to the gateway Leokau found what she expected. Before her stood a young Songmark girl looking rather smart in her school uniform. Its color was not complementary to the Russian Sables dark fur, yet the young sable appeared quite comfortable wearing it. Huakava had warned the otter of all whom she was to expect while Oharu was gone, thus she smiled to the Euro. "Oharu has been called away" she greeted her visitor in near flawless English. "May I be of service to you?"

Tatiana Bryzov pondered that question. Her pass, more like orders was to study with Oharu. Not another priestess was mentioned. Yet wasn't she supposed to adapt to any situation? "You are" she asked more calmly than she could have managed upon her original arrival upon these islands.

"I am Leokau. A student of High Priestess Huakava as is Oharu. Also a priestess as is Oharu. Huakava has directed me to care for Oharu's responsibilities. Until her return."

That then answered Tatiana's nagging question. This Leokau was to take over Oharu's responsibilities. As she herself was one of those responsibilities, her quandary was easily settled. "I have come to meditate. Such as I do each Sunday" she explained.

Leokau stepped aside, leaving the path into Great Stone Glen open. "Be at peace" she offered. "Should you need guidance call upon me. I am also expecting three young students this day. They will be building their home here. For Oharu will be their teacher as well. Will this activity bother your meditation?"

Taking two steps into the Glen Tatiana paused, closed her eyes then inhaled deeply before answering. Why was it, she wondered, that every time she came here she felt completely safe. Yet each time I leave, though I check carefully I feel I have forgotten something important. Remembering the firing line, and that unmistakable sound of the American Molly Procyk's favorite weapon Tatiana shook her head no. "I need only the waterfall" she explained. "I have other duties here too. Waterfall though always first Oharu has instructed me." Nodding a friendly goodbye to the otter Tatiana carefully made her way down to Oharu's small hut.

In perfect peace, for Leokau had known nothing else in her entire life, not even during childbirth, the older Priestess watched while Tatiana carefully undressed. Just as carefully the Russian folded her Songmark clothing. Laying it in a careful pile upon a small woven reed table within the hut before taking a native designed, simple cloth dress from a waiting shelf. Unlike such clothing meant for tourists, this one was of somewhat muted colors. Colors that managed to enhance the sables natural beauty, much as the correct frame enhanced the beauty of a painting. Nor were there any derogatory remarks woven into the cloth. Only a single symbol had been added, one known to Leokau. It was a symbol for the name WEI, and had thus been added by Oharu herself. Once dressed Tatiana made her way to the waterfall, pausing only to bow ever so slightly towards the great splinter of stone that named this place.

Turning back to her duties Leokau quickly placed the sable from her mind. Her absolute lack of curiosity or disappointment at how Tatiana had treated the Glen's guiding spirit was exactly why Huakava had not chosen Leokau to take her place. None too oddly, Leokau had taken that decision with the same peace

she had taken watching Tatiana change her clothing. Nothing in her life had ever upset or excited her. Nothing ever could, for she was unable to understand either concept.

Tatiana though had noted the otters emotional lack, filing the information away as she did every new fact she discovered. She had met such before in her life, usually those for whom all hope had vanished. Yet unlike their hopelessness the otter had been serenely calm. There was something wrong with the otter, she was certain of that. But Hopelessness was not part of that problem. Settling down on a stone she had long ago chosen Tatiana Bryzov, one of Russia's best, brightest young agents silently began entering that calm place Oharu had shown her. Beside her the rivulet, which once had been a torrent to sweep her away without effort now bubbled over ancient stones. Its song was of peace. It was a song Tatiana had come to desire.

Several hours later three more figures arrived at the Glen's gateway. In their late teens they were a single male and two slightly younger females. Unlike Tatiana they did not pause long, making their way down to the small hut somewhere between the gateway and splinter of stone. There they found Leokau with several of Oharu's sketch books. "We have come" the boy stated bluntly, only to be tapped, hard, on his shoulder by the oldest girl.

Leokau looked up from the wonderful pictures she had found. "You are Oharu's students" she responded. "She has been called away. It will be at least a week before she returns. Perhaps more." Carefully closing the book Leokau sat it aside, walking past all three juveniles. "Come."

Together the three followed their hostess, walking past Oharu's hut on to a freshly made clearing no more than thirty feet by twenty. "Here you will build your hut" Leokau explained. Waving a paw towards the pile of fresh cut bamboo and vine the otter looked to her visitors. "You have that, whatever tools you brought, nothing more. You may not approach Oharu's hut when she is not here. Even then only by her leave. You may not touch any carved stone no matter where you may find it. I will teach you the basic rituals you need until her return, such as how to care for each shrine. I will also test each hut you create until you complete it correctly. Good day."

"But... Honored Mother" the youngest girl called.

Stopping, Leokau turned to give the speaker her full attention. Squirming under that gaze, for it was as though nothing in the universe existed but her the young girl stammered. "H...he... I...I mean..."

"There are two females, one male. It is not an unusual combination" Leokau observed.

"But. We are not a family" she protested.

"No, you are not. You are students. Students of a powerful Priestess. One who may take High Priestess Huakava's place. Or not. I was told that if you have not determined your positions by now, Oharu will when she returns. One hut, one room" She pointed behind her. "Necessities are there" then changed her target. "Water there. Do not bother the woman meditating, it is impolite. There is also this. She is Songmark. She is under Oharu's personal protection. Thus she is truly dangerous. Oharu nor I will protect you from her should you anger her."

Stepping forward the young man took a breath. "What about food? We brought all we could but there is only enough for two days of heavy work. Three if we stretch."

Leokau nodded in agreement. "As Huakava did to me, as has been done to all students. As will always be done. Food is a students problem. Not the teachers. I brought nothing with me when I came to learn. It was a long two days before I found food. You do good not to be as trusting as I was. Time passes." Turning away from the three she returned to those wonderful books, and the amazingly lifelike art they held.

Behind her the three looked at each other. "I have a hammer" the boy admitted.

"We have our blades, and we have built before" the oldest girl reminded her companions. "Though not a hut."

"There are stones. Then we build" the youngest girl agreed.

"That's tha refuelin done" Nikki yelled to her co-pilot. "Yah about ready tah go?" She glanced back at Mildendo Island where they had re-fueled and rested for half a day.

"Ja" the German responded, coming around LOUISE's nose into Nikki's sight. "Ve ar ready to fly."

"Wha... Where did yah get that getup" the mare asked, staring at her friend Mark Brown as though he'd appeared out of a puff of sulphurous smoke. "And why the cheap accent?"

"My real name Isbraun" the fox reminded his fillypino friend. "Or something like that. Grandfather was a touch cagey about the truth where our family was concerned. This." He pulled at the German Naval Officers uniform, "Is courtesy of some rather drunk officer who found himself surrounded by friends of mine. I can assure you Nikki, it would have been after noon before he escaped those girls. If even then."

"Okay. So why tha uniform and accent?"

"That you will have to ask your pet Priestess" the fox admitted. "I am to speak broken English and German only. From takeoff until we return here unless there is an emergency. If someone speaks to me in German I am to happily bend their ear asking about the homeland, as I have been attached to Lady Oharu since 1934. I very much miss home. Home being Wurzburg, where Grandfather came from."

"I see, makes kinda sense. But, wha about me?"

"You speak English, broken also and your native language" Oharu's voice answered from behind her. "Plus whatever language you and Malou share. I will speak best English and native language. When you I must speak private, Spontoon. Mark not speak Spontoon unless emergency. What language your lady speak?"

"Chinese and Portugese" Nikki supplied. "Ah learned Chinese, is more useful. Ahn don't sneak up on me lik that. Its dangerous."

Oharu walked to Nikki's side holding out an object. "You must wear this. Until we return."

"That's ah slave bracelet" the mare argued. "Ahm no slave."

Oharu didn't even blink. "No Nikki, you are no slave. Other than to heart. As am I. You wear this, it says you belong me. You not be bothered. If trouble you be brought to me. Captain Hans Isbraun of German Naval Intelligence, as Allie has no trouble. You, as fillypino. You be treated as dirt."

"I warned yah what'll happen if yer country invades mine" Nikki reminded the mouse, but she took the bracelet, snapping it onto her right wrist. Once closed it would have to be cut off, but that would be easy with the tools they carried.

"Yes" Oharu agreed. "I still say Main Island defeat Casino Island in three hour."

"I'm gonna tell Molly on yah" Nikki warned. "She'll spank yah real well. Righ after she's kick's Main Island tail by 'erself." At the mouses expression though Nikki's laugh died. "Sorry" she whispered.

"It is simply my season" Oharu reminded her friend, embarrassed by the sudden cocking of her own tail. "As such I am... susceptible."

"Everybody aboard, we're takin off" Nikki yelled, changing the subject while almost throwing the smaller mouse into her aircraft. "Spies, bunch of crazy play actors." As her co-pilot closed the hatch behind him Nikki tapped the fox's back. "Did ah tell yah we're all gonna die?"

"Fräulein?" the fox asked, rubbing his forehead.

"Maganda" Nikki cursed as she headed for the cockpit. Settling in to her pilots seat she reviewed their odd course. They had flown from Spontoon to Mildendo Island in order to hide their true course from any watchers. She would now fly towards Cranium Island for twenty minutes, then turn West. They would be avoiding Dioon by flying well North of the somewhat popular island. On their return it would be Midway and the Delmonic Islands for refueling and finally a direct course for Dalian. They really hadn't needed more than one refueling, not with the special tanks she'd added to LOUISE more than a year ago but it added to the camouflage.

Though their round-about course added over a day to their trip it would hide their true intentions. Right now anyone asking certain persons would be told that the Priestess Oharu was traveling to Cranium Island. Her mission to investigate certain reports brought back by the Priestess Saimmi. It wasn't even that complicated a deception. What they would be doing in Dalian though, now that was complicated. Mark as a German liaison attached to the now Lady Oharu by someone Oharu herself called Lady Tsukiyama, was supposable studying the Japanese military. Specifically their Navy. She herself would be acting as property of the Lady Oharu. Property, that brought a snicker of amusement to the mare. Hadn't she just sold a Russian Sable to the mouse? At this moment with Nikki's agreement Oharu was presently the forth biggest legal slave owner on Spontoon. If this kept up... She giggled again, then turned to her fox co-pilot who had finally found a comfortable adjustment to his flight chair for his tail. "Ready? Herr Major."

"Ist Captain" Mark responded curtly in his faked German accent. "Ist ready. Go go little slave girl."

Sticking her rather long tongue out at her old friend Nikki returned to the duty at hand. Later they would land and repaint LOUISE's markings, but not until they were well out of sight of any prying eyes..

Back on Main Island Tatiana had finished her introspection for the day. Leaving the waterfall she was going over in her mind the duties Oharu sometimes gave her, deciding which one would best help her own internal strife when she spotted the three teenagers busy building a small one room shack. Silently she walked closer, finding a place to settle down and watch. At the same time she made certain that she was staying out of the way. Songmark had taught her one thing that she felt was very important. When one had the chance, one watched those who knew what they were doing. Building a hut of nothing more than bamboo sticks and still green vines was something she still stumbled at. Even her lean-to's were less than glorious constructions. Yet from what she could see, these three were having very little trouble.

That was until the Priestess Leokau walked over to examine their work. Without a word she walked around the structure while the three were hard at work. As Tatiana watched in silence the woman reached over to a single vine that was stretched between the structure and a Moi tree. Releasing one knot she stepped back as the nearly completed structure shifted, twisted and with a groan collapsed.

"Free standing" she heard the priestess say. It was all the sable could do not to laugh. She had wondered what that vine was for, having almost convinced herself that it was simply a place to hang clothing. Oddly none of the three argued, complained or otherwise revolted. All something Tatiana knew that she herself would have done. Instead they began cleaning up the mess. In less than fifteen minutes they were laying out a new structure.

"That is a common failure by beginners" Leokau's voice said from beside the sable. "To brace a home until it is built, then add more braces before removing the support."

Between her Russian and Songmark training Tatiana showed no reaction at the older otters sudden appearance beside her. "Free standing?" she asked, not bothering to turn towards the other woman.

"As ones soul must be free standing. Stable, by itself, no matter the outer forces that may be placed against it. It must bend to those forces, yet not break or fall. It is why Kahuna Wei has not fallen, even with the weight of a doe's soul upon her."

"Molly Procyk seems to be everywhere. Perhaps I should send her away. Da?"

"Da means?"

"Yes" Tatiana explained.

Leokau placed her right paw gently on Tatiana's left knee. "She is Wei's life. Were I to send Russia away, would it change that weight that crushes you so?"

Tatiana did look this time, only to glance at the paw that warmed her knee. "We all have challenge" she admitted. "For those three, it is shelter. For you it is?"

"Wondering what love is. What hate is. I am unable to feel any real emotion. My husband does love me greatly, this others have assured me. Yet even holding my newborn children in my arms I felt nothing but simple relief that the pain was over. Because of this I cannot take Huakava's place, though I was selected for it before my birth. Yet even disappointment I cannot feel."

"Yah endure."

"I endure. Yes." Looking to the three the otter cocked her head. "I fail to understand why they do not dig postholes. It is the most stable way to build a hut."

"Why not tell them" the sable asked.

"This is a learning experience for them. Though they have watched long houses built, though they have slept their lives in them they have missed the obvious."

"Unlike yourself?"

Leokau lifted her paw, looking first to Oharu's unusually built hut then into Tatiana's dark eyes. "I have no emotions beyond those most simple" she reminded her younger visitor. "That has been compensated for by the Gods. I miss nothing. Neither Oharu's soul crushing attempts to prove herself useful to my people, or her pride in how you have progressed."

Tatiana stood then, brushing off the native dress Oharu had provided her in order to save her Songmark uniform. "Pride? I'm her slave."

A gentle almost smile touched the otters lips. "You are mistaken Tatiana. Do you not know that the symbol she placed upon your dress is her name? To her eyes you are her daughter. Now I must attend my students. They really should have strung their building first. It is not rectangular." She cocked her head again, looking towards the newest structure. "I believe that it more resembles a trapezoid."

Walking away she left Tatiana speechless.

"Daughter?" the shocked sable finally managed, her fingers absently touching what she had taken as a good luck charm. "Nichevo" she whispered, walking towards the ruins with a shrug of her shoulders.

South of Cranium Island the LOUISE circled. "Ah see it Mark" Nikki announced as she straightened out her flightpath. "Looks like ah cabin cruiser wallowin. I'll make ah low pass, see if yah spot anyone." A paw on her shoulder caused her to look back. "Better strap in dahlin, we might be making ah landing."

"There is a problem with LOUISE?" the mouse asked.

"Nah, driftin cabin cruiser. If anyone's visible we gotta land. International Law. Now sit down please?"

Soon the amphibious aircraft known as LOUISE was floating near the drifting craft. As Mark was preparing to take a small rubber dingy across the short distance Oharu abruptly grabbed his shirt. "No" she ordered. Looking up into the mouse's face Mark was stunned to see pure fear reflected in her eyes. "We must leave. Now!" Shocking the larger fox, Oharu yanked him out of his little boat with one paw, trying to reach out and grab the aircrafts hatch at the same time with her other paw. "Nikki, we have GO!" she screamed, yanking furiously at the dogged hatch as Mark stumbled behind her.

Hurrying back to find out what the commotion was Nikki was just in time to see a horribly sunburned paw reach out of the water, grabbing the aircrafts starboard float. "Mark, get ah float. He's still alive. Mouse, get out of my..."

Whatever she was about to say died as the priestess turned to face her. Only in her dreams had Nikki seen such fear. "Is living demon" Oharu screamed. "Kill it."

Her attention taken from that paw for a moment, Nikki missed what happened next only through chance. LOUISE shifted in the water, then there was a heavy thump at the hatchway. Looking past Oharu Nikki found herself staring into a horror movie.

Once handsome, Biff Armstrong's face and naked upper body were blistered beyond belief. His eyes were nearly burned away, while his lips were nothing but swollen bloody sausages. There was a scent of corruption and filth coming from the Doberman while his body had lost so much weight that once tailored clothing hung like old sack. What was worse, he was looking directly at the mare with obviously blind eyes. It was as though he could see her perfectly.

Oharu turned, pushing against the Doberman's chest with both her paws. Smoke escaped from under her paws, along with a soft blue glow. She might as well have been pushing against a stone wall for all the good it did her. In answer to her attempt a single bloody paw snapped out, striking the small woman in her chest. That blow lifted her up, tossing her hard into the aircrafts port seats. "Yohhhhh..." husked the monster, reaching for Nikki. "Yohhh..." To Nikki's horror a pink goo exited the Doberman's right eye socket, extending into a long tendril even as the Dobermans free paw grabbed her shirt in a death grip. Ancient horror stories told by her grandmother froze the powerful mare in her tracks, easy prey for what was coming. Behind her Oharu lay unconscious, her head having impacted one of LOUISE's duraluminum ribs.

"Ungeheuer Nein " Mark Brown snapped from behind the mare. In his paws he held the luger that had come with his stolen uniform. One shot. A second, then a third filled the aircraft with thunder and cordite smoke. Biff Armstrong's once heart breaking handsome face exploded at that third shot, the back of his skull erupting into a fountain of bright pink goo that sprayed the ocean behind him. For the first two shots it seemed as though it would be impossible to stop him. At the third his paw holding the hatch opening released. Nikki's thin shirt ripped away as the body fell. With a heavy splash Biff Armstrong's body impacted the ocean, to slowly vanish from mortal sight. Seconds later Mark closed and sealed the hatch, taking only a moment to shove a still terrified mare into a seat before hurrying to the cockpit. Within two minutes LOUISE was again in the air, climbing hard for high altitude. Only then did Mark look back,

seeing Oharu still curled up on the deck. She looked dead to his eyes. Nikki he noted looked more like a Greek statue than the energetic mare she usually was. Once on course again he set the auto-pilot, then returned to help his two companions.

Behind them Biff's body drifted down into cold darkness, blood leaking from its two chest wounds. Still mostly within the shattered skull, itself injured though not as badly as one would suspect, the creature that had attempted to take Nikki struggled futilely. All it could think of through its own pain was that, unless it could escape soon simple water pressure would kill it. That in the end wouldn't turn out to be a problem. Certainly not once the sharks arrived.

Back on Casino Island a door slammed open, allowing an Otter to enter. With her jaw set in anger Annette Riverstone walked into Kathleen's hospital room. "You live" she announced. "I escort you to our Embassy as soon as you can walk. Then your out of Spontoon. If you ever come back. Kat, I can't do anything if you come back."

"I can walk now" the other otter lied, not wanting to appear weak in her friends eyes. Carefully pushing herself into a sitting position she studied the blackfur standing before her. "When I grew up, I was taught that your people had no honor. You were dumb, ignorant, barely able to take care of yourselves. That without our careful guidance you were doomed to return to the jungles to live like untrained animals. Know something Nettie? My parents are self centered, bigoted, narrow minded specist. When this is all over, when I can come back. Or you can return to America. I want.. Well.. I want to be your friend again. And it's a Consulate, not an Embassy."

Turning away from her patient Annette opened the rooms single door. "Wheelchair" she told someone waiting outside before returning her attention to Kathleen. Her anger had ebbed at those words. "I'll go with you until the gates. I enter those gates I'm dead. Or so I've been warned by those who should know. Kat. We still are friends. Write me. Will you?"

A wide smile opened up the other woman's face. "You bet I will. Not as often as I'd like but I will write. When I know, I'll send you the address you can write me. Anything that will come there will get to me. Eventually. Somehow though I think that I'll be spending ahn awful lot of time in Washington now. I'm useless as a field agent anymore with this crippled arm. So I guess we better go then."

"After I check that wound. Then you might want to get dressed, unless you want to be ogled a lot. That outfit barely covers the important parts from the front, and that's only when your standing. We're going to be walking by the Double Lotus after all. Its an um... an all girls bar." She giggled. "Maybe I ought to take you in and buy you a drink. Turn around will you?"

"If you want" Kat agreed, surprising her friend. "I like Scotch, no rocks. Ow..."

Annette studied the wound, nodded to herself before replacing the bandage. "As long as some idiot medic doesn't mess with it you can have those stitches out in a few days. Three, four would be better. No flying for a month. I mean it. That kind of pressure change would play havoc with that deep a wound. It'd heal. But you'd feel pain from it to your dying day. Now lets get you dressed."

Somewhat over six hours and many drinks at the Double Lotus later, those watching found the two easing up to a wrought iron gate. On its face was the emblem of the United States of America. "You want to go in don't you" Kat asked when Annette paused.

"Wouldn't you? If our positions were reversed I mean."

"Yeah. Look. I'll do what I can. I can't promise anything. You have too many things stacked against you. Especially after saving my life a second time the way you did. But I'll never stop trying."

Annette laughed softly. "What are friends for? I'll try the same for you. Maybe one day I can host you at my house. Almost every beach here is great, as long as you stay upcurrent from the repair shops and the sewage plant."

Kat tried to stand, found she couldn't. "I'll have them return the chair" she sighed. "I'll be visiting you and that mouse of your's?"

Absently Annette let her paw slide across Kat's face slowly. "She said no again, even after. I know now she means it. Some things you can't fight Kat. Some things are just too big. Here comes your ride. Take care of yourself." Removing her paw from Kat's face Annette started stepping back slowly as an impressive looking cougar walked up to them. He reached the chair, nodded to Kat, then stepped behind it taking its handles in his paws.

"I'm supposed to force you to come too, if I can Doctor" he said, not looking behind him at the slowly retreating otter. "But your bodyguard has a bead on me. I really do like breathing. Just like you and Kathleen here. Thanks for saving her life, both times. We owe you. Big time. We don't forget that. Ever." Then he started walking towards the gates, pushing Kat's wheelchair in front of him.

"Bodyguard?" Annette asked herself. She looked around but all she saw was the daily traffic. Nothing seemed out of place. Just a normal day on Casino Island. Shrugging off the cougar's statement she headed slowly back to the Lotus. Maybe a few more drinks would make her feel better. She'd been given the rest of the day off anyway and tomorrow was her normal day off. What the heck, maybe she'd even run into someone interesting. Oharu wasn't the only female mouse in Spontoon. It wouldn't be a mouse though who captured Annette's attention that night.

Unseen by the otter, high on one of the many roofs a bear carefully uncocked his weapon, soon slipping down an access door into the building beneath him. Personally he liked the American Cougar, he played a mean but fair game of darts. Having to shoot him would have been a shame.

June 29th, 1936

On the Western small island of Pair of Dice it was still dark outside the buildings windows but a pilots bar was a pilots bar. They never closed, not as long as someone had coin in a pocket for drink or food. Still shaken from her earlier encounter with the creature, a creature that had once been an old acquaintance Nikki Benevedo downed a tenth, or eleventh bottle of the weak American import beer sold here. Across from her, a bandage around her head sat the mouse priestess Oharu. "Yah scare me" the mare suddenly admitted. "Mark said he shot ah tha paw shaped burns on Biff's chest. You did that, dinnah yah?"

"Yes" the mouse admitted, her voice softer than normal. Loud sounds still sent needles of pain through her skull, even the mares softest voice was a booming drum in her head. Luckily they were the only ones in the bar right now, Mark having had gone to bed several hours ago. If they left tomorrow he would be flying of course. By morning Nikki wouldn't be anywhere near flyable. Oharu knew that her own head wasn't capable of high altitudes.

"What are yah? Some kindah witch?"

Managing not to grimace at the old question Oharu took a sip of the cool water before her. Only then did she answer. "I am nothing you can not be. I am nothing Saimmi isn't. I am nothing the two Songmark girls will not be, and much more soon. Would you or anyone with fair mind train as hard."

"Me? Ah witch? Nah thanks."

"Then let me take bottle of aspirin. My head aches."

Nikki sat her now empty beer aside, standing as quietly as she could. "To bed with yah. No flying for you for tah days. Doctors orders." She walked around the table, gently helping her sick friend stand. "Could'ah been worse" she admitted.

"How" Oharu asked.

"Could'ah been me."

Grimacing the mouse punched her larger friend, though her blow was without any strength. "I would kill you. But I do not like horsemeat."

"Ahn ah don't like mousemeat tha much. Com'on. Beds waiting. Nice expensive air conditioned bed." She helped her friend towards the bars wide door. "How long" Nikki asked softly.

"For me? Sixteen years now" the mouse answered.

"Tha's how long I've been flyin, one way or nother" the mare admitted. "So tah be good at somethin takes tha same time. What yah mean by Amelia ahn Helen bein more?"

"Huakava has mentioned warrior priestess" the mouse explained. "Of all I know, only they and Tatiana fit that label.

"Tatiana? She'll nah be ah witch. Too much poly-ticks inner brain."

Oharu pressed against Nikki's side, drawing warmth from the much larger woman. "Tatiana. Nikki. If she would accept.... She could be so much more. As much as I perhaps. It is in her. That power. That drive."

"Buh losif Starling has 'er heart. Til that bird's wings er clipped she's noh gonna listen tah yah."

Oharu almost made the mistake of nodding in agreement, only catching herself at the last instant. "Would seem" she admitted. "Not my place clip any wings. Who was he?"

"Who?"

Oharu ineffectively punched the mare again. "Living demon. Before that. Who?"

"Biff? Biff..." Nikki negotiated the bars doors, turning towards their hotel. "Biff was ah adventurer. In his mind tha is. Handsome devil he was, even interested me couple times till I unnerstod him. Gold'n tongued. Had all tha ladies hangin off him. Liked tah take 'adventuress's' tah tha local smaller islands. Show 'em tha sights. Mainly him ah think. Never hired tah a man, only women. He wasa clutz tha. Couldn' even tie ah good knot. No loss."

"Would he have gone say. Cranium Island. By himself?"

"Biff? Cranium? Only if tha gold was good and tha lady fair ahn very, very willin. But keep quiet till we're in tha room. Its better yah not talk much for ah few days."

"Say you?" Oharu asked.

"Me, Mark anna doctor" Nikki replied. "Threr gainst one."

"I surrender to that triad" Oharu agreed, again pressing against the mare for heat.

Or was it more? It was, after all, her season and she had been pressed sorely. More so than perhaps she expected. Only Nikki's personal sense of honor kept her from taking advantage, even though the injured mouse pressed against her all night. Lovers were easy. Friends, true friends who would battle against Demon's bare pawed for you. Those were rare. Rarer than snow on the sun.

Oharu did not get the answer to her question until late the next morning. No sooner had Nikki pulled the covers up to her neck than she'd slipped into a deep sleep. Concussion's were known to do that. Especially when one had overused one's strength. When she did wake it was with Nikki's scent in her nose and the fox male Mark sitting in her room, a copy of the New Amsterdam Thymes in his paws. He noticed her when she tried to sit up.

"Please wait" he asked, folding the paper before standing. "My wife will rip me to shreds if you are harmed in my care. She respects you, which is saying much. She respects only those more powerful than herself."

"Accent" the mouse whispered softly.

"This is an emergency. So not until you are well. What is it you need?"

Oharu sighed in defeat. "Water closet" she admitted.

"I see" the fox said. "Can it wait a little? Nikki will be back with lunch soon."

Oharu let her thoughts observe those messages that her bladder was sending, bit her upper lip and pushed at her covers, ignoring the fact Nikki had placed her in bed with nothing but her own fur. "lie" she answered, noting his look just before he averted his eyes. She repeated in English. "No. What species is your wife." She hadn't even known the fox had a girlfriend, he certainly didn't act like a married male.

"Ratel" Mark admitted, closing his eyes to help Oharu stand. "She liked me even though I'm no honeyguide. She claims that she respects me. Funny thing is I believe her. We've three kits, two boys and a girl." He eased open the bath door by touch. "Can you make it the rest by yourself?"

"Yes" Oharu whispered, shutting the door behind her. Considering how she had reacted when he had touched her Mark was unsurprised to hear the door latch as well. Quietly he returned to his paper. It was only three days old. Amazing he thought. How American's could move materials around quickly. When they wanted.

June 30th, 1936

"An impressive feat of Engineering" Lady Tsukiyama noted to her maid. It was just near sundown and Madden Lakes massive dam was beginning to vanish into darkness behind IJN Tone. Beside her stood her maid, the rabbit Atsuko. Her ears were fashionably pulled back to lay in the 'Falling Water' pattern favored by her mouse owner as she too looked out at the waters of Lake Gatun. In her paws she held a pen and pad, though in truth Lady Tsukiyama needed no such aids to her own memory. Atsuko though did. "It is a pity that such must be damaged should war become inevitable. You have selected those of the special crew I asked for?"

"Yes Lady" her maid answered. "They are ones Rear Admiral Hiroki has assured me his Captains will not miss, should ill times fall upon them."

"Incompetents then. They will do. Insure that all groups leave tonight. You are aware of your own mission?"

"Yes Lady. I am to obtain all available tourist information. Take all available tours. My camera is to be ready at all times. For anything I suspect may be of value. I am to take no dangerous chances. To press no one."

"Very well. You will return to me in the condition you leave me. I have limits to the lengths you may go to insure the success of your mission at this time. I have many more uses for you, uses I would prefer to attend to myself. Unfortunately I am too easily watched." She turned to catch her maids eyes. "Atsuko. In America I will be sending you on many trips. Your love of travel and sightseeing will prove of great worth. I may even demand that you use your body. I prefer not, yet I warn you I may have to demand this. Here though never. I could ask for no better servant, even though you do report to certain people who wish the Emperors favor."

"My Lady" the rabbit gasped in shock, unconsciously taking a step back.

"Do not fear Atsuko. There is no shame in protecting your own families interests. Just as long as those interests do not affect my mission. Or our Emperor."

"You have known long" Atsuko asked, accepting that her believed secret agenda was just that, believed.

"I chose you because I was so informed" Lady Tsukiyama admitted. "All maids spy, only a few do so as well as you. Knowing your heart it was easier to keep those things you should not pass on from you. We are friends Atsuko as much as our social positions will allow. I look forward to seeing your children when you marry. Only I warn you, from this moment on not everything that you learn may be passed on. From this day forward I must see your reports before they depart. I would be greatly saddened to have your head removed, turned into an inkwell and placed forever upon my writing table. Though it would be beautiful to look upon you always, to me you are almost irreplaceable." She turned her back on her maid then, looking now towards IJN TONE's sistership IJN Chikuma. "Almost" she continued. "Now attend to your duties."

Her blood now as cold as frozen water the rabbit hurried away. She had been so certain of herself. How had she been discovered? Who had turned traitor to her. There was now no way to warn her family yet she was also certain that Lady Tsukiyama, with her own family now near nothing found the entire affair acceptable. It was some comfort knowing that her situation was understood, if not fully accepted. It was somehow comforting to know her head would serve her Lady should she herself fail. Still it would have been better, had she been allowed to continue to believe her secret safe. How she would have felt had she known her eventual fate to come. That though was a different matter.

Helen Whitehall reached up, turning on the lamp over her desk. She was grading papers in her home on Meeting Island and though it was getting darker later as the Summer Solstice approached, she knew better than to strain her eyes. Checking multiple choice tests was easy, she simply had to place her homemade key over each test, her red pen marking in all missed answers. It was the three different essay questions she given her classes that took time. Penmanship hadn't appeared to have been highly stressed in several cases, those mainly locals. This surprised her as everything else about the Spontoon educational system had seemed extremely professional. Some had obviously hurried, but there were a good bakers dozen who couldn't even write their own names legible. If it hadn't been for their printed student numbers she would have been lost.

"You have problems" the voice of her friend, the Calico feline priestess Kura asked.

"Reading some students writing is difficult" she admitted. "In a couple of cases, down right impossible."

"May I see" the woman asked, reaching up from her cushion on the floor.

Silently Helen passed the offending papers to her feline visitor. A visitor she had noticed, that seemed to spend a great deal with her lately. "Any ideas" she asked, waiting while the priestess worked through each page.

"These two write wrong" the feline decided. "Write right pawed, are left pawed. See way letters are twisted? Others just lazy."

"Really? I never noticed" Helen admitted. She took the pages, looking up those students names. "Why would anyone do something like that?"

"Is belief in some European religion. Left paw devils paw. Come from old French words. Dexter for right paw, Sinister for left paw. Many narrow mind people decide mean left paw evil. You should look. I think you find something interesting in backgrounds."

Setting those two tests aside Helen accepted the others return. "So I've eleven lazy students and two with probably family problems. Kura, I'm only a teacher. I can't interfere with family life. Certainly not the Church."

Kura stood slowly and Helen noted it was like watching one of those new stop motion movies of a plant lifting from the earth. "I am only a priestess" she reminded her hostess. "Your son is waking. May I see him?"

"Certainly. In fact why don't you bring him it, its his feeding time." Helen watched the grass skirted feline walk towards her sons bedroom. No overly swaying hips, no coy poses. Kura was as always professional. Why she had such an interest in her son Helen wasn't certain, yet something, some female instinct told her that Kura's interest was benevolent. Returning to her papers she waited for the priestess to bring her son to her. It was comforting she suddenly realized, to have people around you that really cared. That you could truly trust.

July 1st, 1936

"This is Cipangu Butterfly Flight requesting landing permission" Oharu said into the mike. As they were approaching Dalian she was speaking her native language, as neither of her companions knew more than a pawful or three of Japanese. In any case her own accent was so thoroughly from Honshu that it couldn't be missed.

"Butterfly Flight. This is Dalian Military Control. State your name and mission or be shot down" came the rather rapid response.

"Dalian Military Control. This is Tamagusuku Oharu, my mission is service to Lady Tsukiyama under the Cherry Umbrella. I may speak no further over this channel."

There was several moments of silence while the three waited. "Thay gonna believe your ah Tamagusuku" Nikki asked.

"It is common clan name" Oharu answered. "Little reason to disbelieve. Papers all say Tamagusuku. Oharu is also common name. Very few know about Lady Tsukiyama, that will be checked before we allowed full access. Cherry Umbrella ancient code. That too mean little other than I know some codes."

"When did yah learn those" the mare asked, scanning outside her cockpit for hostile fighters. It wouldn't be long before the coastline came into view and she was well aware that they had no fuel to turn back.

"Lady Tsukiyama teach me several things" the mouse answered. "I not know why, only that she say I will need this many times. That she owed me this. It is something I still not sure of." She shrugged. "We

could be dead, or safe. I put trust in Lady Tamagusuku.”

Nikki snorted. “Putting yer trust in sommon yah met fer a pawful of hours. We’re all dead.”

“Nikki. I have known Lady Tamagusuku all my life. She never say this, she does not want me to know official, but I know. I remember well her voice. Her name. Her scent. Her face. You would know own sister, yes?”

Before Nikki could stop sputtering the radio became very active. Oharu listened, replied once or twice then offered the microphone to Nikki’s co-pilot. “Flight of three fighters arrive soon. They escort us to landing. I step out first. Remember plan. Ears will be everywhere. Not friendly ears like Spontoon. If worst happens I fail, you two make for interior. Safest. Try find way home.” Standing as much as one could in Nikki’s aircraft Oharu made her way back to the seats, careful not to knock her still bandaged head against anything on the way.

A little later over twenty solders stood at the ready as the parked aircrafts engines stopped. All eyes were on the nearby aircraft, as if a thousand mad screaming Chinese were about to barrel from it. Each soldier was ready, waiting. Though their weapons were in sling it would be a fool who thought that they could not bring them to bear in seconds. If not them, there were more solders waiting. All just out of sight. Abruptly the hatch opened and a tall, powerful looking mare stood visible for a moment. Then she vanished, only to return with a small set of stairs. Out of the much modified Sikorsky S-38a stepped a smaller figure, this one also female. Though dressed in Western style her face and hair told them she was of Cipangu birth just as they were. Her blooded bandage told them she was injured. Quietly she walked up to the Captain in charge and held out her right paw. A ring glittered in the sunlight, a reflected ray of emerald green sparkling in the sunlight. From his position behind the officer Private Koga could easily see the emblem carved on that ring. A moment later his body slammed into the tarmac, all consciousness having fled. For Private Koga, a simple boat builders son had never dreamed to stand so close to one who served the Imperial Court directly.

Oharu ignored the fallen soldier, just as the officer before her did. “My aircraft must be refueled, supplied and guarded. I will be leaving on the morning of the fourth day. Sixth at the latest. You will personally escort myself, my maid and my guest to your base’s commanding officer.”

There was no question in the young woman’s voice Captain Ito noted. Nor her accent, which placed her as somewhere from the island of Honshu. Most likely the Tohoku region he decided. It was not an accent easily faked by outsiders. Her voice though was certain of one thing, that he would do as she requested. Without question. Bowing deeply he turned to his men. “You will guard this aircraft. If any non-Cipangu approaches they are to be arrested. If they touch this aircraft, you will not enjoy your punishment. Corporal Sato, you are in charge. Sergeant Yoshida, bring the staff car. You will drive.” He returned his attention to the woman in front of him, taking in her features. Fine bones, of very ancient stock yet she had seen hard times. His well trained eye noted where damage had healed, the discolored fur around her neck, how her mouth was slightly wrong. It was the teeth he realized. A very good dentist had replaced many of them, but he had not been a master artisan. Someone had treated this woman badly, yet she had survived. Considering the ring she wore he had no desire to discover that person’s final fate. “It will be but a moment Lady Tamagusuku.”

“Simply Oharu” Oharu corrected gently. “Like my sponsor, I no longer use my birth name. Unless needed.”

“Lady Oharu. Though I do not pretend to understand, I do not pretend to ask why. Ah, here is the car.” When his vehicle drove up he opened the back door, waiting until Lady Oharu, her German companion and that fantastic dark furred mare joined her. Even considering the situation Captain Ito could not keep his eyes off that fantastic dark tail as it vanished into the car. Then he entered the vehicle, sitting in the front. “You know where sergeant” he ordered. Right now his mind was still absorbing his experience, still trying to get back on track after being derailed by such a magnificent woman as the mare was. Of course

he had been warned that the arriving aircraft claimed to be an Imperial Observer, but to actually meet one, while himself still only a Captain. This was certainly good luck. And there was the mares scent filling his vehicle, causing his mind to wander down paths best left un-trodden.

General Yamada arrived to his office a good three quarters of an hour after Oharu. Passing two soldiers on guard he entered his office, stunned to find a German officer calmly going through his secret papers. A small well dressed mouse-fem at his desk, her head bandaged, quietly being assisted by an obviously outland mare. "What is going on here" he snapped as he approached his desk. In answer the mare, *'my she is an impressive female'* he thought as Nikki caught his eye, *'for an gajin'* approached him, holding out a sealed envelope.

"My credentials" the mouse explained without looking up. "I would not assault Nikki if I were you. I have authorized her to defend herself as she feels fit. As she cannot understand more than a few words of our language I do not think she would recognize your cries for mercy. I must also warn you that she has a great dislike for our race General. With great cause.

Taking the envelope Yamada wasted a moment to stare into that mares eyes. There was fire there, restrained fire but fire. Her scent filled his senses and even though he was aware of her feelings the thought of bedding such a woman lit a counter fire in his own belly. Satisfied in that knowledge he turned to the envelope, first reading its seal, then ripping open that seal to read the single page held within.

"You are Lady Oharu" he announced as he read. "Servant to Lady Tsukiyama, who is Court Servant to the God-Emperor Himself." He barely restrained a gasp of awe. "I am to be replaced?"

"I would not have that information" Oharu admitted. "It is not my place to know such things. Do not worry. I assure you that neither of my companions speak more than a few dozen words of our language. They will probably not understand. I can assure you that Nikki will never release your secrets. I own her soul."

"And this other?"

Oharu looked up from the letter she was reading, glancing over to the fox who was busy ignoring their conversation. "You are in the presence of an Allie. This is Naval Captain Isbraun. Mark Isbraun. He has joined my mission in order to better understand our military. Specifically our Navy, though all things military are of interest to his government. Thus to him. When he has the information his country requires he will return home. Please sit."

Still holding the paper Nikki had given him General Yamada sat in the visitors chair of his office. "I must know" he explained while folding the letter. "Am I under investigation?"

"Lady Tsukiyama's official mission to Washington is a mission of peace" Oharu explained. "So is her interest in Dalian. My main mission is to recover an agent who's usefulness in Dalian is at an end, should she still be alive. My secondary mission is to obtain from you and selected, by myself, officers exactly how things are going here. I have no interest in official reports. Lady Tsukiyama has another to read those for her." She laid aside the letter she had read. "Your wife is a very loyal woman General Yamada. Tomorrow I will send my servant Nikki to recover this agent. You will supply twenty troops to guard her and an officer intelligent enough not to disobey her."

"This is not fully the truth" the hound observed.

"Correct. I was chosen partly because I am an awful liar. It is not my taste to tell anything but the truth. Thus when I am debriefed it is known that I will be unable to lie, for or against anything. Trust me in this General. You do not desire to know my full mission."

"Your injury?" he asked, politely changing the subject.

"I was assaulted. It has happened before. Herr Isbraun saved my life. Had Nikki been available I would never have been attacked. Still one cannot be prepared at all times. I will require a small sum of English pounds to replace those we used for my care. Regrettably, though we left our last mission with enough funds to reach our next destination such a base assault was not foreseen."

"I will of course be delighted to extend you those funds" the hound admitted. "Once I have cleared your mission with Tokyo."

Nodding in agreement Oharu held out her paw, allowing the General to carefully examine her ring. "You will be told what to look for. If this ring does not match what will be described I believe you are quite capable of assembling a firing squad before morning. Of course only after the expected normal torture and signed confessions have been dealt with. We require two rooms. One for Nikki and myself, the other for Herr Isbraun. Preferable attached. Nikki has an interest in the good Captain. It amuses me to allow her this pleasure, though she will be upset when she discovers this agent is female. I am afraid that the good mare has certain... Fantasies."

General Yamada had the excellent graces not to visibly react to his visitors comment. "I will have billeting locate acceptable quarters for your party Lady Oharu. Will you require anything more today?"

Pushing the wheeled chair back and standing, her action triggering the others to set aside what they were doing Oharu smiled to her host. "Once you have determined that I am who I say I am I would like a tailor. Most of my clothes were stolen or otherwise made unusable during that attack. As were those of my companions. Thus the need for extra funds. I am afraid that the American officer I intrusted our aircraft too was less than honorable. It matters little for today Major Biff is less than alive. If you would instruct our escorts, I will be delighted to speak to you later this afternoon."

Leaving the office with Nikki and Mark in toe Oharu felt like someone was pointing a gun at her belly. She had done everything her older sister had instructed her to do. Now it depended upon events completely out of her control. By tonight she would know if she had been successful. If not, her back would be feeling the whip again before sunrise. It frightened her, to be where the truth she so loved would cause her a not so instant death.

On Moon Island, in the Technical High School that had been built there a class was in session. "Harcourt. Would you please come up to the board and complete this equation?"

Standing quickly a gangly stallion half walked, half stumbled up to the classrooms massive blackboard, his fingers jerking away as if electrified as she offered him the chalk. "From where I stopped, if you please" Helen Whitehall instructed. Without turning she pointed backwards. "Sara, please write 'I will not make faces at my fellow students' five hundred times. I would like it before end of class. The rest of you, pay attention."

Walking to her desk Helen sat, turning her chair to watch both class and student. Far be it for her to let out her secret, why the nickle plated clock set just above her blackboard was kept clean. Very clean. With good eyes one could watch certain trouble makers. Still it was hard to fight back a smirk of pleasure at having caught the class clown in action, with her back turned. Steepleing her fingers she watched in silence as this classes smartest, and shyest student worked on an equation meant for second year college students. Harcourt. What idiot stuck the boy with that name she wondered as she watched the young stallion work out his problem. Probably his mother she decided, not that it mattered.

Eventually the boy stopped, stumped. "I can't remember" he admitted, staring at the board.

"Mimi, please come up and help Harcourt, will you?" Helen had chosen the skunk for two reasons. She was almost as intelligent as Harcourt, though she fought to hide it by being the third best hula dancer in S.I.T.H.S., and the stallion had a major case of the crushes for her. As Mimi approached Helen turned to the class. "Until they have finished we will deal with the volume of a pyramid knowing only two

measurements. Height, and angle. One may assume an angle of forty four degrees for this problem, a height of 245 meters.” She looked up at the groans. “First person, other than Sara who is today not qualified for our competition, and the two working at my blackboard to get the correct answer without help wins a free sandwich and drink of their choice at Marcos. My tab. Shall we begin?”

It was another strike at the cobra. Sara was well known to have a weakness for Marcos cooking. Helen doubted that after today the young woman would clown around in her class. It was a nasty thing to do, but it was an effective way to maintain discipline without using force. Helen still cringed at the memory of holding Teresa Conroy's tail up as twenty strikes were given. It was an event she wanted to avoid repeating if at all possible. Teresa had straightened up. She still was still a problem but not in Helen's classes. After their talk the otter had found respect for her half-breed teacher. Once the story got around, so did several other normally troublesome students. Word had spread that Mrs. Whitehall was fair. Give her half a chance and she'd treat you fair. Don't and she'd throw you out of her class, with no chance to ever return.

A paper landed on her desk. Amused, for it had only been ten minutes Helen picked up the sheet, lifting a reversed sheet on her desk to check the answer. “I'm sorry Hans, this is incorrect. Close, but not quite there.” A groan of dismay answered her as the young man went back to his seat. He'd been so sure. Helen had learned to keep Harcourt and Mimi out of these tests. They were simply too good. Still right now the stallion was in heaven, though how Mimi felt Helen wasn't certain. She'd have to ask her young student, after class one day. It would be wrong to keep throwing the two together like this if one was not acceptable.

In Dalian it was near sundown when a knock came to Oharu's door. Looking to Nikki and unable to hide her concern the mouse waved to her companion. Wither Nikki was worried or not didn't show. As easily as if she were walking into the Double Lotus the mare made her way to the door and opened it. Outside stood a Captain, a case in his paws.

“May this unworthy one enter, please” he asked, giving a bow that meant nothing to Nikki but everything to Oharu.

“Enter. Be welcome” the mouse answered as she stood in greeting. “I am to understand that the dragon will not feast upon my bones this night?”

“No Lady Oharu. This night the dragon will sleep with an empty belly. Your credentials were verified by Lady Tsukiyama herself. She is aboard IJN TONE, currently within the Panama Cannel. I am to tell you that she sends her warmest greetings. That she is looking forward to reading your report.”

Only by turning away did Oharu hide her stunned look from the fox. Even so the hairs on her tail bottled out though being a mouse they were not quite long enough to be seen from under her dress. “I see. She is still unhappy about my last report.” Gathering herself, though her pounding heart had to be audible to everyone within the room Oharu turned back to face her visitor. “You have with you?”

“Ah yes Lady Oharu. I have with me letters of credit. Letters signed by General Yamada.” He sat the case on a small table, quickly opening it to withdraw several folded pages. “Also papers for the three of you and an apology. He has been called to Xlazha. Information about a missing Geisha has surfaced. This was a great cost of face for his predecessor. He should return by tomorrow night. He has expressed great interest in sharing dinner with you.”

“Dinner yes” the mouse agreed. “I would be honored to share a meal with him, to learn about this missing woman. Even one as humble as I have heard some rumors of her loss. It will be delightful to find her, or deal with her abductors should she no longer be recoverable. We must remember her honor as well.”

A smile blossomed on the fox's face. "I will inform the Generals adjacent of this. This is all I have to give you tonight. A local tailor of some renown awaits outside. Shall I send him in?"

"Give me a few minutes. I must first explain things to my companions. Tell him that Nikki will let him in when we are ready. And Captain. Thank you for your kindness."

Bowing again the fox made to leave, stopping only to look towards Nikki. "Lady Oharu, you must watch this one. Already half the officers are dreaming of her."

"They may dream" Oharu answered. "On their lives they may never touch. I have too many needs for her to allow her to be so used."

"I will pass your words to those who will need the hearing. Still she has already gained a great following, even among some of the women. Goodnight Lady Oharu." Stepping out he bowed slightly one last time before Nikki shut the door.

"We live?" the mare asked in Spontoon.

"We live. Though I many years have lost. You are much desired by those officers." Walking over to the table Oharu suppressed a laugh at Nikki's response to her popularity among the male officers. Opening each paper she finally offered one to Nikki. "Your pass. With this you go anywhere. Without it you do not leave these rooms and live. This one" she held out another. "Belong Mark. Please bring him in."

"I have tah look lovey dovy?"

"There are eyes. There are ears."

Grumbling her distaste Nikki opened the adjoining door and stormed through.

Five hours later Nikki and Mark returned to the adjoining room to 'relax.' Though if anyone thought their idea of relaxing involved touching each other they were in for a real surprise. Signing one of the letters of credit from General Yamada Oharu glanced toward the old man who had shown such understanding of women's needs for loose clothing. "You will require?" she asked.

"Three uniforms, a suit. Four large dress's, two kimono's, two other small dress's, the special dressers for she who is not with you and her mother. With only four days I will have to stop work on everything else" her lupine visitor answered.

"Honored sir" the mouse said, her tone of voice telling the rabbit that she truly meant what she said. "Had I the time I would grant it." For a moment her eyes wandered. Three young women of different sizes had come with the tailor, all three obviously related. One though... She fought her body. Did she have to be a lop eared rabbit? Did she have to show interest? Did she have to have such an enticing scent the mouse asked herself. Bringing Molly's eyes to her mind she managed to force away her desires, barely. She was full in season and hungry. So very hungry. "I have not" she continued, well aware the older male had noted her hesitation, her interest. "You will have the time for this commission?"

"In truth honored young one. Yes, should we drop all other projects."

"Then your price. I must apologize for I am exceptionally tired and as you can see. I have incurred a head injury. Though I would truly love to bargain I cannot afford the energy. Please. Your honest price Honored Elder.

"Ninety seven English pounds" the Chinese rabbit answered. "Yes I am taking advantage. After you write that number my child I will have another offer."

"Offer?" Oharu asked, confused. It was true her head was hurting and the light was beginning to be too bright. But offer?

"You show interest in my granddaughter."

"An interest I have held within check Honored Elder. I mean no disrespect. Though my people now rule this land it does not give us the right to ignore courtesies. To my misfortune it is my season. I have little control."

"For a Cipangan you show more honor than any other I have met before. More peace. I was unaware you were of the separate ones. This explains your difficulty. Yet I do wish my granddaughters to escape the madness here. Wherever you are going it will be better than here. For your people do kill my people like dogs. I do not wish my granddaughters to have such a fate."

"I see. I am sorry but I have no place for her in my mission. Even should I have the ability, what of your other granddaughters?"

"I have seen two escape, three die. All my grandsons are dead. As is one of my sons. To see another escape. I will sell her to you. I would sell her to Kuo Han if they thought her worthy."

"Honored Elder" Oharu actually stood, shock evident in her face.

"Please. Understand. She cannot leave, perhaps not even under your powerful umbrella. Not free. There is one from your diplomatic group who finds her most desirable. He is extremely powerful. Qi understands. She will make you an excellent, unreserved servant. When you are done with her I ask only that you release her in a land where she will be safe. You are a poor liar. I have seen this. Anyone with open eyes can see your distaste for untruths. If you gave me your word you would do this, then you will do this."

"Honored Elder I have a slave. She is more than I can handle."

Laughter answered her. "That mare is no ones slave" he observed.

"I do have a slave" Oharu continued. "She is Russian. I think that she would not be happy for me to return with a Chinese slave."

"Still I offer. Take Qi and I assure you that your clothing will be the best. No Qi, I cannot hold for the rushed quality."

"I can have you killed for that threat."

"You will not. My offer is valid. It is good. Qi will cool your season and after you are so cooled, needing her no longer you will leave her. She will not have to meet your Russian slave. Who cannot cool your season."

"Because I do not ask her too. Buy your granddaughter. You think I am made of gold?"

"No. General Yamada is." Laughing again the older rabbit waved to Qi. "I will sell my beloved granddaughter to you for one hundred fifty pounds. This is the cost for her sisters passage to the Fillypines. Qi will serve you until you release her, or until her dying breath. Whichever you choose. I swear this."

"And what does Qi say about this?"

For the very first time since Oharu first saw her Qi spoke, and in nearly perfect Japanese. "Death here, after becoming a rag for many, or life with you as a willing happy slave. I not a fool Lady Oharu. You are not an evil woman. My life I will freely give you, to leave this pit of death."

Shaking her head only lightly Oharu filled in the paperwork, holding it out to the tailor. "I will give you my answer in the morning. If you lie. If you deliver faulty goods. Then I will do the most evil thing I can think of to your family."

"That is?" the tailor asked as he accepted the page, covertly slipping another into the mouse's paw as he did so.

"I will marry your granddaughters. All three."

An explosion of laughter filled the room as the tailor collapsed. "Evil? Oh please Honored Lady do so. Then they will be your problem forever." Still laughing he waved to his other two granddaughters, making his way slowly to his feet. "You are a good woman Lady Oharu. Would that we had met in less cloudy times. Qi will remain here to help you.. Make up your mind. You will not tell me your decision tomorrow, for I will be busy insuring your clothing is the best. I will return in two days with samples. Alone I think. I would be most happy to return to my shops the same way. Alone."

"Perhaps you will. Goodnight Honored Elder." Watching silently she waited until the three had departed before turning to her new 'property.' "Just what am I to do with you" she asked Qi, now holding hidden in her paw the paper given her by the old Chinese.

Standing Qi reached for her Qi Pao style dress's single clasp. "Mistress. I will think of something" she answered in a sultry voice.

Sometime later Nikki entered the mouse's bedchamber to ask her a question. One look at what was going on brought a satisfied smile to the mare's face. Stepping back out she gently closed the door.

July 2nd, 1936

Albert Garner leaned back in the long, native made deck chair while he watched the sun rise above Guam Island. His latest target had been easy, the old woman deciding Samoa was a better place to live than Guam. Setting up her tragic 'death' at Two Lovers Point hadn't taken but a few hours. He'd seen her off on a small freighter headed to her new home with a warning. Never again write anyone she had known back home again. Protecting her was dangerous, and if she were to 'suddenly appear' again he would have no choice. His employers would want her head pickled in wine and delivered to their chambers. Then probably his as well.

Why those revolutionaries had wanted the ex-librarian killed made as little sense as that reporter's wife. He had read the report of Liberty's failure, it had been half expected. After all she had failed in so many things already. That was all the woman was, a failure. Well at least he made a large sum from his film. Such things had a worldwide audience. Illegal in most countries, still people bought them. In his pocket he held tickets on the next passenger ship to the Solomon Islands. One last target there, then he and his pet would vanish into the United Maori Chieftdoms forever.

Discovering that Callie Underwood was with child had stunned him. It had taken a day of intensive searching through her currently limited mind to discover the how and why. When in Alaska he had given her a large number of instructions to remember. As her brain, under his drugs control could hold only a limited number of commands he had inadvertently overwritten what were to him important safeguards. That had changed his plans. He had intended several other 'stops.' But Callie would become less and less useful to him as an agent. Better to find a safe place for them now than chance her being injured, or losing his fawn.

A door behind him opened and an American bloodhound stepped onto the porch. "Everything you claimed and more" the older male announced. "How long is it good for?"

"You should dose her again before noon. Twice a day, noon and midnight, or within two hours of that time. No more. Never less. At that dosage you have enough drug to last you six months. More than enough time for what you want."

Settling down in a chair across from Garner the bloodhound let out a long, well contented sigh of relief. "Six months. Then she wakes up in a institution. I'll have all her money, all her property and she's left with nothing. Beautiful revenge."

"Perhaps" Albert admitted. He looked over the hound, resplendent in his naval uniform with the bar ranks of Captain on his cuffs. "What if you are suddenly transferred? She will escape your revenge."

"Not likely. I'm in Personal. I see the orders before anyone else. I'll have plenty of warning. Liked that little film of yours, your pet and who?"

"A willing young Spontoon canine named Liberty Morgenstern. I didn't even have to drug the lass. She was all for the action."

"I'll have to look her up next time I'm in the area. I'd like to see her and my new toy in action. So our business is done then. Your suddenly cleared to leave, no questions and I have a new chew toy. All in all a favorable trade."

"Callie" Albert called, to be almost instantly answered by the younger skunk. "We leave now." Standing he half saluted his host, then entered the buildings interior to join his assistant. Being on a military base there was no worry about transportation. A military car had been waiting the last quarter hour, it would deliver them to their ship then vanish. Albert did dislike having to lose a potential half year of Callie's life, until he noticed the bulge in her blouse. Good, she had switched all but one bottle with ones filled with colored water. Captain Sherman Hokes was in for a surprise in about a month.

As they traveled through the smaller villages Albert ignored everything around him. He didn't have to bother as Callie was a perfect early warning system. Currently her every sense was set on his personal safety, though last night he had made slight adjustments in her commands. No more would she place herself in danger to protect them. His fawn was too important to allow any injury to its mother. Thus he was little surprised when she informed him that they were being followed.

"Captain Hoke most likely discovered your switch" he explained. "I will have to make up a cover story..."

"It is not American's sir" Callie interrupted. "They are islanders, but not this island."

That did get his attention. Turning in his seat he looked behind them, eventually picking out a decrepit looking car that seemed to always be just within sight. "Which Island" he asked seriously.

"Sir, the distance. It is too great" the skunk admitted.

Albert turned to the jackal driving their vehicle. "Driver, we are being followed. Can you lose them?"

"On Guam sir? Not likely. That's Santa Rita just ahead. Maybe I can lose them on a side street. I take it their not friends of yours?"

"Not in the least sailor. I think they are enemy agents."

"No problem sir."

Suddenly Albert was shoved back into his seat. Within seconds they were going faster than he would have credited the Navy issue vehicle capable of. Unseen behind them, hidden in a sudden cloud of dust the battered vehicle pulled over. A canine figure leapt out, running to a pay phone. Albert's car might be able to outrun their vehicle. It couldn't outrun a telephone.

Oharu woke to a most pleasant scent and the feeling of another body beside her. Opening her eyes she found Qi laying there, her head held up on one paw watching the mouse. "You do not snore" the rabbit told Oharu, her oddly accented Japanese giving her words an exotic taste.

"You have not heard me when I am ill" the mouse countered. "Like an aircraft engine. I wake myself."

Qi smiled, running a finger through Oharu's chest fur. "I think this something you have needed long time. For beginner you show much talent."

Those unexpected words of praise caused Oharu to blush deeply. "I will release you as soon as you believe yourself safe" she countered, pushing the conversation into safer waters. "Now I must dress. I have much work to do today." She started to get up, only to be enveloped by the larger rabbit.

"Not quite yet" Qi purred, sounding exactly like a contented cat who has captured a delicious prey. "Not... Quite... Yet." Each word was punctuated by a kiss, the last being long. Very long.

A white tailed buck stood at the ship's rail alone. He was watching as the island of Guam slowly vanished into a rain squall behind them. He was safe Albert Garner decided. Callie was safe. Samoa could whistle in the wind, plans could change. It was time to retire. He stood there, remaking plans as time passed until he realized that the squall was going to envelope his ship. "Ah well" he whispered. "Rain will cool the air." Deciding to return to his cabin he was surprised to find his way blocked by two rather hefty men when he turned around. Islanders he realized. Not from Guam though, their faces were different but their stance was certainly not that of a European. He decided to be polite.

"Good day gentlemen. There is rain coming, I suggest you find cover." He started towards them, expecting one or both to make way for him.

Neither did. Instead they both pulled out rather nasty looking, and very long knives. "You're under arrest" the canine announced, his feline companion simply watching him. "Please turn around." He made the mistake of flashing a badge.

Albert's answer was to leap back, twisting his ever present cane to release a nasty looking blade. "I think not. International waters and all that you understand" the buck shot back. He scanned the ship quickly, but with rain on the way everyone had vanished. Any help from the crew would probably be a long time in coming. Snapping his blade into position he waited for his attackers to make their move.

It was the canine who moved first, surprising Albert. He'd picked the silent feline to be his first attacker. Instead the tabby stood back, blocking his access to Callie. Blade struck blade in a singing dance soon covered by heavy rain. Almost blinded by the water Albert found his opponent more than equal to the challenge. Equal too, but not any more than that. Albert had fenced since he could hold a blade, so with a long practiced move he sidestepped, his opponent sliding past. There was hardly a sound over the pounding rain but Albert's blade came up bright red, his opponent sliding across the deck to vanish abruptly as his dying body slid under a rail.

Saluting the feline Albert readied for this challenge, a challenge interrupted by a hatch opening behind his opponent. "What's this?" a female voice called. With a snarl the feline flipped his long blade around and threw it.

Deflecting the incoming blade with his own Albert moved forward, only to have his world explode. Deflected in pounding rain the blade had turned wrong, spinning inwards rather than outwards. Its heavy brass pommel almost shattered the bucks forehead at impact. With hardly a groan Albert Garner collapsed to the rain slick deck. His cane following the first attacker as a womans scream filled the air.

Chapter Thirty-Six

July 2nd, 1936

When her shop's bell again rang the Siamese feline Malou hardly looked up. She already knew it would be a Japanese soldier simply from the way her door had opened, by now she also knew what he probably wanted. Several children had run by a moment before dragging tin cans on a string, it being the new warning that a patrol was coming. His smell struck her as he stepped in, that musty, bittersweet smell all soldiers had no matter what their nation. She had by now come to accept what would happen next as part of her new life. Setting aside the ledger she had been writing in the young Siamese automatically stepped aside to allow easy access to her ledger, and herself. When she finally looked up it was to find a wolf with a Captain's rank looking at her from the front door.

"This is the business of Shaiming Fang" he asked. His Chinese was credible, his voice though caught her by surprise. He was more respectful than any before him. This truly surprised the young woman.

"It is Honored Warrior" Malou replied, bowing deeply to the man. "He has not yet returned from his business trip. I now fear that he may never. I am his Granddaughter Malou. Your needs are?" She didn't need to ask. She was young, still pretty even after several beatings and had no male to protect her. Nor had her stomach swelled enough to dissuade an interested soldier far from home.

"None" he answered, his words stunning her. He then stepped aside to allow several soldiers entry to the display room. Completely out of her normal experience they ignored her as they fanned out, searching every room.

Malou though ignored this discourtesy. Once she had complained, an act that two long days in bed waiting for her injuries to heal enough to walk again had taught her the mistake of. Now she simply waited. Waited for the soldiers to return. No matter how different this was they would return to drag her back to her own bed chamber. With any luck it would be over soon. Perhaps she would have time to clean up, to repair any damage and still reopen for the evening shoppers. Malou had learned what was expected of her as a still pretty, unattached Chinese woman. To keep breathing, to keep that dying hope alive she quietly allowed her body to be seen by the Japanese.

"That is enough" a powerful, well remembered voice snapped in Chinese from behind the Captain. Where as Malou's eyes widened in unbelieving surprise the wolf's tail actually tried to slip between his legs. Striding past the cowed officer a long remembered mare's form entered Malou's small showroom, returning to her life. Nikki's scent struck the feline like a long forgotten dream. A welcome dream. "Your men. Out" Nikki Benevedo ordered. Behind her the officer snapped a pawful of words in Japanese. He had once, as they marched here, reached out to touch this black furred Goddess in flesh's flank. Only to find himself on his knees with his wrist stretched near to the breaking point. He had been warned, her move had proven that warning correct. That had been enough for him. Moments later the two were alone, the shop's door closed and guarded. From the outside this time.

"Nikki..." Malou began. Only to have the mare silence her with a single raised paw.

"Hold your report. We can be heard" Nikki announced, still speaking Chinese. "Lady Oharu has sent me to gather you. Bring all you will need for your next posting. Tools, books, samples, supplies. You will be plying your trade in new place. You will never return here. Or this country. To this I give you my word." There was absolutely no trace of any accent in the mare's speech now.

"I am with child" Malou half whispered, her eyes casting down to the floor. "I am no longer worthy to be your property."

Dark clouds filled the mares eyes at those words while lightning seemed to gather about her as her anger threatened to become rage. "Who" she demanded in Spontoon. Her voice was now that of an arctic winters dark promise.

"I can not know. So many. I will never know. So many" the Siamese admitted, herself now speaking in broken Spontoon/Chinese.

"Then gather all you need. All. We go home. As a family." Turning on her hoof the mare crossed to the door, actually ripping it from its frame in her rage. She then tossed it outside into the street, causing several solders to scatter for safety. Stepping out she glared at the waiting men as though she could determine who had so harmed her love. "CART" she finally snapped in Chinese. "NOW!" All who heard her were instantly aware that her mood had altered. Altered for the worse. None wished to become a lightning rod for that volcanic anger.

July 3rd, 1936

It was very early morning as two figures looked over a soon to be vacant plot of land on South Island. It was so early that no European yet walked these streets, not even the drunks. Abruptly a male voice spoke sharply in the darkness. A darkness that was nothing for the two standing there. "They wish to leave a Calvary. They think us fools."

Huakava, High Priestess of Spontoon stood in front of a decrepit building with her companion. She was looking at a building that claimed to be a religious site. If one looked closely under the year old paint one saw that it bore more resemblance to an abandoned wreck than to what it claimed to be. Beside her stood a Wild Priest, though which one only she knew. There was no hierarchy among them, yet this male was considered greatest among them. Elsewise another would be here. They were to determine what would be done with this site, once the Europeans had finally abandoned it as they had accepted. "A sacred shrine to their Gods" the panther agreed. "They wish to retain this place, even as they agree to abandon it. Such do all Europeans speak. From both ends of their bodies."

"This has not ever been a sacred place" her companion reminded her. Wild Priests were not known to speak in long rambling sentences. This male was no different that any other in this matter. "Not even before our coming."

"Then we shall make it such. I have one within my shadow who's heart will know what to do. A sacred building" she shook her head, feathers flickering around her grey furred form from the costume she currently wore. "I have seen ten season abandoned sheds with more strength. These people do not care for that which is important to them."

"True. Meeting Island?"

"That place will remain. It is a solid, well cared for stone building. A future has already been decided for it. A future its last guardian has agreed too. There will be no interference there by you or I." She abruptly twisted, her body doubling over in pain. Those watching from the darkness were shocked to see the Wild Priest capture his taller companion within his arms. Wild Priests did not usually touch anyone. Certainly not a Priestess. Their powers were opposites, as they had to be. To so touch could invite disaster for both. Yet Huakava could no longer stand upon her own. With a grateful look to her companion she allowed his strength to become her own. At least until the pain passed.

"It will not be long" the male, his species indeterminate in the darkness warned his companion. "I will much miss you."

"As you do Selvana" Huakava reminded her companion.

"Selvana, Te'ree, Karolina and Hine" he added. "Hine was older than you when I was called. I have seen many rise among you. Selvana was greatest in my life. Hine was not long to be High Priestess when I took my vows. I look forward to meeting all again."

"Greatest so far" Huakava countered. "There are many greater yet to follow." She tried to breathe, felt the pain as sharp as before. That worried her. She had not yet chosen. She had delayed because of her new students promise. Delayed hoping her new student would accept. Now she knew that she must choose. Very soon.

"I will see but the next" her companion warned her. "Not she who will follow her. My time comes as well."

"I thought you all immortal" the High Priestess whispered. Her voice, though weak, showed she was not serious.

"We are few. We gain longer life by our vows. No one would desire immortality. It has been hard enough. To see so many days pass. So many friends pass."

"And war comes."

"Again, yes. Again. I will not see it."

Huakava breathed deeply again, feeling the pain lessen enough. Lightly touching her companions paw she stood slowly, aware that though he moved away from her he remained at the ready. "This place must be purified. Returned to us fully. Casino Island may be corrupted, no other of our lands shall be. Never again." Leaning more heavily upon her staff than she preferred Huakava, High Priestess of Spontoona turned away to walk alone towards a waiting water taxi. Of her companion there was no sign. It was though he had flowed away with the morning mists.

"One day" she heard from the mists. "Casino Island shall also be pure."

She had originally thought to visit the Hoele'toemi household while on South Island, but the effects of her attack would not have passed before noon. To allow that family to know. From them had come many Priestess and at least one Wild Priest in her lifetime. Of all the families on Spontoona their line had brought forth the greatest number of those who served. Even new priestess's now gravitated towards that family. So powerful was their pull that even the outlander Oharu had been drawn to them, in her own way. It would not be possible for Huakava to hide her illness from them. It was important they not know, for what they knew their daughters knew. All their daughters. For their daughter Saimmi was one of the four that she must choose from.

Breakfast was a far from normal affair on Dalian today Nikki noted. She and Oharu had spent the night with Malou, a night trying to ease from the battered woman her worst emotional pains. All night Mark had stood outside, carefully guarding their door along with two rather professional Japanese soldiers. Poor Mark the mare thought. He was an actor, it wasn't his nature to play soldier. Yet he had to impress two professionals and it had not proved to be an easy task. Yet he was one of Spontoona's best actors. Somehow he had managed. Somehow those two found respect for the German they believed to be one of them.

Their efforts had proven fruitful as Malou was in much better spirits this morning. She ate now not for one but two. *'I'm going to have a family'* the mare kept telling herself. Privately she hoped Malou's child took after its mother, not its father. Either way she would accept it as she accepted Malou. Accept and protect. Malou would not die young as Louise had. She swore that on her soul.

Oharu on the other paw was still in a somewhat embarrassing situation. Far from cooling her needs Qi's energetic approach had only fanned the mouse's flames, until now she had almost no control around the rabbit. Yet there remained a haunted look in her eyes. A haunted look the mare well understood. One slip. One mistake. For her own life the mare knew that Oharu cared nothing. It was her companions who worried her. For there was nothing that could be done to the mouse, other than death that had not already been done. Privately Nikki would not be surprised to discover that even death would not be new experience to this Priestess. Now that Malou was here and obviously not in good physical condition simply running was out of any question. Only total respect for the Emperor, and not much less for the battered mouse herself had kept things under control. Still they had to get out. Within days, not weeks. Upon all that she knew the mouse could not forget a certain doe. Not forget, and was probably ashamed for not being true to her. Ashamed for trying to cool her season with another. Ashamed of not holding herself pure for her true love. Yet it was that love which allowed the mouse to even partly function during the daytime. What strain it was putting on her soul Nikki had no idea. In truth did not want to know.

Even though that doe cared less for Oharu than she did the sand in her fur. Perhaps someone should speak with that doe. Privately.

"You will see Doctor again?" Nikki asked in badly broken English. Her words taking her out of that dark thread of thought for a few minutes.

"Yes. Perhaps I will have bandage off" Oharu answered, also in English. "He was most unhappy with how back healed."

"That is way things" Nikki admitted. "Beyond help. One lives, dies. You live. I live. No one do such to you again."

Oharu's answer was delayed, as Qi had picked that moment to begin feeding her new mistress. Today Qi's grandfather would return. If all his work was acceptable then they could leave in two days. Three on the outside. Everything hinged upon a special radiogram arriving at the right time. Everyone was on edge, even Mark, though he was last seen snoring gently in the room he and Nikki 'shared.'

"No one know future" Oharu finally answered. "Have mission for you."

"Yes?" Nikki put just the right amount of blood thirstiness in her voice. In truth she wouldn't mind gutting a few Japanese solders. Not many of course. Just every one that had ever breathed. Would ever breath.

"Take Malou agent. Get new clothing. Mother clothing."

"But..." Nikki tried rather well to act insulted. "I your guard. Not hers."

"You my property. Until want horsehide rug. You do what told."

"Yes Mistress" Nikki agreed, trying to put just the right amount of humility into her voice. Acting subservient was hard on her. She hadn't been such since she discovered... Nikki glared at Malou, using that action to again pull her from thoughts that she had no time for. Not yet. Malou, whom had she not been warned that there were electric ears and possibly living eyes would have been frightened by that look. Turning her full attention to Malou Nikki nearly growled in Chinese. "You. I. We buy you clothing. You will not be picky."

"I will not. Honored stallion" Malou answered softly. Her words caused Nikki to blush. Something Oharu suspected was as rare as snow on Spontoon. Though not understanding what Malou had said Oharu grinned at the mares unexpected reaction. Qi though acted as though she heard nothing, still slipping bits of sweet breakfast between the mouse's lips. Finally setting aside her morning letters Oharu pushed Qi's paw aside, standing easily. With fully thirty scheduled interviews today the mouse was certain she did not want to be around when those two returned. More importantly. If she did not leave right now she would

not leave at all.

Mark picked that moment to walk in with a bowl of rice in his paws. He looked at the four, taking a moment to delicately dab at his mouth with a silk napkin. "I would like to inspect that artillery position West of the city" he stated. His words, though in correct English had all the sound of someone who had practiced them by phonics. Mark was after all an actor.

"I will see" Oharu agreed. "Qi. You clean this place. Spotless or I whip. Now all have orders for day. See to them." Leaving the lop eared rabbit behind was her only choice. There wasn't any way she could manage to be professional with that one near her. Even so silently Oharu wished it had been Molly, not Qi who had shared the last two nights with her. But she believed that Molly would kill herself before allowing any woman to ever touch her again. Then there was that paper Qi's grandfather had slipped into her paw. She still hadn't had time to read it. She would have to do so in the car taking her to the office she had been loaned.

And she so wanted to throw it all away, to be in the arms of Qi. Such was the curse of those with seasons.

Later that day on Krupmark Island, which was somewhat near Spontoon two rather scruffy looking badgers were walking along a well used trail, their fur puffed out as it fought the sun. Both were loaded down with canvas bag tool kits. With practiced ease they brushed by brown-green plants with spines that could cut through leather, if you let them. "Joe. You know this ain't no good idea" the fatter badger whispered, dodging a goatspur someone had dropped on the trail.

"What" his companion asked. "Diggin through that wreck from last month? Come on Bubba, even the cheap scavengers have done picked it clean."

"So why we going? I mean, ain't nothing left. Not even dah wairing by now."

"We need some bronze bolts for our new boat. About forty remember? Ain't no one gonna care we grab 'em from here or buy 'em from 'nother scavenger. "

"Yeah. But I heard dat Karl and Louise come out here three days ago. Never come back."

"Karl likes to fish, probably on one-ah tha local fishing boats. Probably ah gonna drown one day. E can't swim fer nothin. Louise. Well yah been over tah tha hotels lately? She works there then ahn now?"

A shudder of horror overcame the larger badger. "Louise? Man, ain't no one that drunk."

"Karl like her."

"Karls just plain crazy."

Having proclaimed his greatest observation of the day the larger badger refused to be drawn into further conversation. His partner noticed a shiver run through the fatter badgers frame now and then as they walked. Well, Louise. It was said she was once very pretty, until some Chinese panda had shoved her face into a pot of boiling oil. Just because he wanted to see what would happen. They crested a final low ridge, stepping around a large fallen stone wall as the wreck came into view. It was amazing how many skippers could be fooled by a battery powered lamp during a storm. This had been the S.S. MIDNIGHT. Now it was just a pile of rapidly rusting junk, its crew dead or enslaved. Carefully making their way down the rubble strewn path neither noticed a small encampment, professionally hidden in an alcove of ancient stone rubble to their right. Nor the fact that there were supplies there not even the dumbest scavenger would ever leave behind.

Meanwhile on Casino Island Boguslaw Rictor gathered the last of his things together as he packed. The time had finally come, so he was preparing to leave Spontoan for home. It had been a wonderful vacation, much more than... well not really more than his wildest dreams. Bog was well known for a rather expansive imagination after all. No, he hadn't rescued the last living princess of some ancient civilization from being thrown into a bubbling volcano, though someone back home had suggested Hawaii for that adventure. He had though, discovered a secret. One that was worth setting aside his next Mary Wrightwood adventure for. Looking over to his bed, and to she who was busy herself there packing her one small bag he knew he would never be alone ever again. Blossom was the great treasure he was returning home with, and would her arrival stun his straightlaced parents.

What Blossom Grankvist had seen in him he didn't know. Probably he would never know. What he had seen in her, besides a shapely body and a willing lover was a fellow writer. An intelligent writer. One who's talent seemed to mesh well with his own. That and he'd fallen paws under tail in love with her. They had been married just the day before but a Christian Priest. Not some simply Judge. Bog wasn't stupid enough to let that chance slip him by. So what if she was a simple native housecat. She was his housecat and beware anyone, especially his grandmother who spoke ill of her.

"I am ready my love" Blossom announced. She stood in that native way that seemed to make her boneless. "Will we walk, or ride to the airport?"

Bog laughed. "We ride. Are you certain that's all you want to bring?"

Blossom laid one paw on her small bag. "I have little husband, unless you desire to grant me more. This is all I own." That though was a lie. Blossom had given her other things to younger sisters. Butterfly had explained carefully that Rictor would feel more a male by supplying her with those things she didn't have, so she should keep only those things she felt important to her. Besides, a letter home would have a support package on its way within hours after being read. Of all the things she would miss, her family and Goddess Priestess were most important to her. Blossom knew that mouse would never be coming with her other than in spirit, which was as it should be. A thought came to her then. *'Europeans have sent so many missionaries. Perhaps it is time we sent a few of our own.'* Inwardly she smiled. She would be the first missionary from Spontoan. To bring the Goddess's light to their darkness. Carefully though. She would have to walk that self imposed path extremely carefully.

"Then we have to stop at a shop" her new husband continued, missing her introspection. "Your going to live where people think clothing is important. Believe that it is a status symbol. I can't let them believe that I'm unable to support you. Or that you are less than what you are. My loving wife." He looked around, breathing in deeply. "I'd rather live here Blossom" he admitted. "If I had the income, or a job I'd stay." His eyes turned back to Blossom, he had found that his new wife was exceptionally easy to look at. "We will be back. I'll find a way. I think I love this land. It's a darn sight more inviting than Gnu York, though Gnu York isn't much better than New Amsterdam even though they are almost a hundred miles apart." He shook his head negatively. "I'd planned to stay longer, but longer here or bringing you home with me." He smiled towards Blossom. "I'd rather die than be away from you."

"There are the Cranium Island stories of mine" Blossom suggested. "Perhaps they will sell?"

Bog grinned. "Mrs. Rictor. We shall spend our future time writing furraining stories of adventures lost in trackless three yard jungles, with unbelievable monsters behind each turn of the path. Even so you spend your time writing horror stories of adventures in places where even the plants move. Between us we shall become rich, return here and live our lives in peace."

"Not in peace. Certainly!" Blossom gasped.

"Not in peace?" the rabbit asked, confused.

"You, my loving husband, have never lived with children." Blossom gave her husband a come hither smile he would never be able to refuse. As he slid into her arms she whispered softly "I wish to be a mother. Of many, many of your children..."

Thus it was that Mr and Mrs Rictor were the last to board their ship, even then having been forced to run down the dock to board before it left without them.

"Lloyd" the larger badger called. "Ah found ah rug."

"Rug? Bubba, what tha heck..." Making his way over to Bubba the badger known as Lloyd shone his electric lamp on the pile. "God Bubba. That aint noh rug. Turn it over."

Rollled over the 'rug' turned out to be a madfur. "Tha's Karl!" Bubba cried, stumbling away from the drawn back lips, mostly broken teeth well evident. Karl's eyes were bugged out so far they looked like someone had pasted ping-pong balls on his face. His paws, their bloody broken claws still extended were held tightly next to his chest. Yet what was most horrifying was not that he was alive, but the dry calm ghost of a voice that issued from his mouth.

"Out there. Ate Louise. Ate Louiise. Tried tah ate me. But ah got it. Ahhhh got it." A mad gibbering laugh issued from the shattered mouth. To both badgers horror one paw moved, reaching back into the darkness. When it returned into that pool of light made by Llyods flash it held what looked like a tentacle within it. One end had been chewed through, the other. The other end held a six inch long talon of some kind. "Thought it gonna ate me. I ate it. Some. Rest got way. Ate Louise. Watched. Ate slow. Real slow. She no even scream." Another giggle came from that mouth, then a cough, like some tiny gun being fired came from its chest.

Both badgers watched in horror as dark blood flowed from their old friends mouth. Slowly, like an old candle fading that mad light vanished from those bulging eyes.

"Something ate Louise?" Bubba asked. "Somthin gonna eat us. We don't get out of here."

Lloyd found himself backing away from the body. Had that tentacle moved or was it just the light? "For once Bubba. Ah agree. Lets get our stuff ahn get out."

As fast as they could safely move both badgers made their way to a rip in the hull, their gear solidly on their backs. Between them and the beach was a strip of shallow water no more than ten feet wide, the tide having come in while they were within the wreck. Both badgers leapt into the water without a thought. After all they'd done this a hundred, two hundred times before. Lloyd, being the smaller was in front. In case he slipped the larger, stronger Bubba would grab him as he'd done a few times before. As fast as he could move Lloyd made his way to the beach and safety. Once there he turned to look back, but Bubba was not to be seen.

"Bubba" he yelled. "Bubba!" His answer was a snake fast tentacle rising from the ocean to strike him full in the belly. For a moment he felt pain, then nothing. Not even his own body as it slammed into the sand. His eyes were still open and through them he watched in helpless horror as his now limp body was slowly dagged back into the surf. He didn't even feel the pain as sand slowly filled his open eyes.

July 4th, 1936

"Thank you for your thoughts Captain" Oharu was saying as a knock came to the door of her borrowed office. "'Your words have been very enlightening." She waited until the ringtail left, nodding to a fox waiting at her door. "You are?" she asked.

"Major Ito. Special Information Division" the fox answered as he closed the door behind him.

"Please sit. You are Major Ito today. Tomorrow?"

"Perhaps Corporal Imagawa, of the cooking group." He sat down across the desk from Oharu. "You are Lady Oharu. Special servant to Lady Tsukiyama who is Court Agent to the Emperor himself. One of my lowly status does wonder. May I ask. Why would such an important woman come here."

"I was asked" Oharu admitted, though not saying by whom. Obscuring the truth was one thing. Lying successfully, for her? Impossible. "It was not my place to refuse she who asked."

"You speak the truth, perhaps. I believe that for this time I shall not pursue this matter further. You asked to see me?"

"Or one like you" the mouse admitted. Turning several pages of the book before her she withdrew the note Qi's grandfather had slipped into her paw. She slid the paper across her desk, well within the fox's reach. Returning to her last used page Oharu wrote quietly as Major Ito read those words.

"This Qi. She knows you know?"

"She is unaware. Yet."

"I shall have her questioned."

Oharu held up her right paw for a moment. "She is not your concern, for she is my property now. I will have her questioned myself. She will speak. Those other names, they are more important?"

"Truth, yes. Qi is most likely only a collector of information. These though. We will speak with them. Especially the Frenchman. I have long suspected him."

"They are yours to toy with" Oharu agreed, though the fox could see in her eyes that this decision brought no pleasure to her. "You will of course, cease listening to my quarters?"

"To do such would be..."

Again Oharu held up her paw. "Normal activity. Expected. Yet now I must deal with certain matters you must not yet know about. What is the reward for turning in a spy?"

"Five hundred English pounds each. I will have a draft to you within the hour."

"For the Grandfather. I shall trade him this blood gold for his granddaughter. It has been some time since Nikki has had a toy to play with. This tailor?"

Grinning the fox leaned back in his chair, causing the old wood to creak while he fingered the note. "Has now proven most useful. Yes, we will cover his actions. He has now proven most loyal to us. I will be certain that he is not compromised. Connections within the rabble such as this are very useful."

"I then must ask from you a kit. Ours was lost with so much more. Though Nikki is very good with her claws and teeth there are times other methods are needed. Also a slave bracelet. A very good one."

"You will keep this woman after she is questioned?"

Oharu touched her book, looking down at its pages. "Nikki is easiest to deal with when she has a toy to play with. When I reach Lady Tsukiyama it will be with information. Not a slave. I may even have use for her, yet she must not only be broken but humiliated. I will have her place that bracelet upon her own wrist.

When I am ready.”

Smiling the fox folded his paper, pushing back his chair. “I would not wish you as an enemy. All your request shall be here within the hour. It has been a true pleasure.” Standing he bowed most respectfully, then left.

Oharu watched him go, forcing her stomach not to empty its contents into the waste can beside her. What would have to be done to protect Nikki, Mark and Malou turned her stomach into knots. Yet it would be better than what that fox would do. Will do to those other names. Qi, otherwise known as Karen Davies would return to England alive. Perhaps somewhat less than when she left, but alive. She would walk the agent to the English Consulate on Spontoon herself. Pressing a button on her desk she waited until a fat little gerbil came in. “Send a message to my quarters. My servant Nikki is to come here instantly. No others.”

“Yes Honored Lady Oharu” her temporary servant agreed. “The next officer?”

“Give me ten minutes. Then send him in.”

“Yes Honored Lady Oharu.” Another bow, much deeper than what the fox had given her.

Staring at the closed door Oharu felt tears fall from her eyes as pain filled her soul.

Nikki arrived somewhat more than an hour later. She stepped in after an Army officer departed, shutting the door behind her. “My apologies Mistress. They found us returning from shops” she explained in English.

“Kneel, position” Oharu ordered curtly. “It matters not. Qi is English Spy.”

“Spy?” Nikki’s eyes widened for more than one reason as she dropped to her knees, clasping her paws behind her head as she fell into a position one could only classify as ‘totally available.’ It was the first position she taught her clients. All her clients. Her surprise was caused by many things. First, she hadn’t suspected the Chinese woman. Second, if Oharu was telling her this way then the knowledge was public. Third, the mouse’s first two words were a code she herself had selected. They were suspected. If they were suspected... An image of Malou’s lifeless body laying in the bottom of some ditch filled her mind. It caused her blood to freeze. Fourth, all this meant that Oharu had been pushed into a corner. Whatever options they had been left, Oharu had already chosen the one that would best allow them to survive. Survive and with luck escape.

Oharu herself was more than somewhat surprised by the position the mare assumed. She had never in her life seen such a thing. For a moment she stared, burning into her mind the image. Should they make good their escape Malou would receive a rather personal drawing the mouse decided. Finally gathering herself she stood from her chair. “Qi’s grandfather exposed her. Three others. Those three Major Ito has, will have.” She walked around the desk, her right paw flinching in revulsion as she picked up a small green canvas bag stamped with an Intelligence seal. “Qi now is your toy. Break her. Before I return tonight.” She dropped the bag in front of Nikki. It made a dull thump as it struck the wood. Letting a paw wander the mare’s body in ways that would please the suspected watching eyes she walked carefully around Nikki, as if playing with her. “Do not fail. Before I return tonight.” Bending down she brought her lips close to the mare’s ear. “I not think she is well trained. As gently as can” she told her friend, at the same time letting her paw wander a place it had been only once before. There were watchers she was certain. They had to be fooled. “Please.” Stepping away from the kneeling mare Oharu straightened up, looking down at that canvas bag with revulsion. “Now take. Go” she ordered in a normal voice.

Gathering up the bag Nikki studied her friend’s face. Was she serious? One good hard look answered that question. Answered and told her the mouse was fighting her own soul regarding this. “I obey Mistress” she answered, herself standing to tower over her friend. “I take this burden. Not you. For

Malou." she continued in a voice Oharu could hear but not any microphones. Turning hard on her left hoof she marched out of the office, her own soul now in turmoil. One life verses five. One of those a child yet unborn. Gritting her teeth Nikki made her decision. One life against those weights was nothing. Not even the weight of a leaf in the wind. She had already sworn that Malou would not be another Louise in her life. Not even at this price.

Leaning back in his chair a portly rabbit smiled in pleasure as he tasted his drink. He patted his jacket pocket, feeling the letter that his office had forwarded to him. Spontoon truly was the paradise he had falsely been lead to believe of Hawaii. Hawaii, who's native government had been crushed by selfish money hungry American businessmen. Who's history and culture even today were slowly, methodically being eradicated. Spontoon however had avoided that fate, though how the Pan American executive had no suspicion. Would that Hawaii had managed the same he thought. His official business here was now at an end. Though Spontoon was in a strategic position, relative to Oriental trade routes, Hawaii would always remain the hub of power in these oceans. It was larger, better placed and had more resources. Another plus was that in Hawaii PanAm could buy land, not simply lease it. There was also more to do there so he would let another run this place. He would remain in Hawaii. Where the women were still willing and his wife's lawyers could never reach him. And should that last change, there would still be Spontoon.

A soft noise and his friend, the fox Albert Flintstine settled into a chair across from him. "Good morning Bartholomew. It is my understanding that you have received an official missive from your wife" he noted, carefully making room for the attractive dancer who settled easily into his lap. "Your news?"

"Ellen has finally come to an understanding" the rabbit answered, taking a moment to sip his drink. "That being a part of the Matthews household is no longer in her best social interest. " He laughed, raising his glass a paws width. "I bid her good riddance. Let another feel the spikes she wears on her feet as she climbs the social ladder. I am well rid of her."

"I see" the fox observed. Absently he ran a paw along his mongoose fems body. Where his paw roamed would have caused a scandal in any European country. Here though it simply caused his companion to snuggle closer to him. "Will you require legal representation?"

"Normally I would say yes" Bartholomew admitted. "In this case, to be rid of the harpy I am quite willing to allow her those things she so demands."

Albert had found that he truly enjoyed his current female companion. He allowed his paw to roam further, though not so far as to cause any social upset in those about him. *'Perhaps I should take her with us'* he thought. For a moment the idea of marriage came to him. Slowly he dismissed it. Marriage, as wonderful as he had seen it could be would probably end up exactly as Bartholomew's had. As much as the idea was attractive to him the damage such an event could cause frightened him. Though he would never admit it, that was the only reason he was still single. Still the idea remained nibbling at the back of his thoughts, unlike any time before. "Her demands?"

"The house of course. All that is within it. I will miss some things. She grants me the summer house, which she hates as it is in the Rockies. Ellen absolutely abhors the mountains while I so very much love them. They are much too far from her accustomed social life in any case, and there are animals about. Also I may keep the things I may have there. That is where I keep all my important things though I honestly believe she does not suspect this." He grinned, sipping again at his drink. "Of course all our joint accounts. And her name back of certainly."

"No monthly support?"

"Oddly no." Pulling out his envelope he slid it across the table. "Read for yourself. It is, for its meaning a very thin document."

Opening the document Arthur began to read. "You'll marry your Swift Fox then" he asked.

"Susy? Dear Albert. Susy is a very pretty lady and very energetic. But marry her?" He shrugged, reaching for a freshly delivered drink. "Perhaps. Allow me some time as a free man first. Simply to be certain. Ellen was a social decision. If I am to spend the rest of my life with one woman, it is certain that I will understand her better than I did Ellen when we married. Susy is delightful, a sweet woman. But her talents and education are still somewhat, limited? If they could be expanded I would be delighted to... own her."

"There are three pages missing" Albert announced softly.

"Three what?"

"Three pages." He sat the document on their shared table. "See here in the lower left paw corner? These squiggles in pencil? Shorthand. Someone is trying to warn you. This is page one, page two and page seven. Your being taken for a ride my friend."

"And to think. I almost signed that document this very moment. Albert, what should I do?"

In answer the fox waved to a waiter. "Phone please" he ordered as the ermine arrived. "Long distance call to Boston. United States. He glanced at the papers. "Dewy, Cheetim and Howl." Scribbling on a napkin he gave it to the waiter. "Their number, my tab. We will wait." Settling back in his own chair, his companion having slipped into a light sleep in his lap the Pan American lawyer Albert Flintstine had a very contented look on his face. "I may marry her after all" he stated softly. "Though not until certain things are taken care of in Hawaii."

"Marry? You?" Bartholomew leaned forward, placing his rather plump chin in his paws. "Her?"

Flintstine nodded in agreement. "I had no idea how wonderful it feels to have a woman simply sleep in your lap. No idea at all."

"Not to mention she's smaller than you, weighs a third and as I recall, can move in some very interesting ways."

Again Flintstine smiled. "She is also very well read and can carry a conversation further than any non-professional woman I've ever met before, and has a real interest in my work. I have had few students ask questions as she does. She makes me think Bartholomew. To me that is important. She challenges my mind, my beliefs, my long held opinions."

"I'll lay ten dollars on the table you don't marry her."

"Bartholomew. Betting against me? Well, you may be right. As you said one simply shouldn't jump into such things. Still I must be honest with you my friend. In all my years this is the first woman I've found that actually makes me dream of married life. I will have to seriously ponder this."

Sipping his new drink the rabbit spotted movement. "Susy" he whispered, noting she was wearing the sarong he'd bought for her. No fancy sayings, no crass colors. It was a muted green and blue that was very easy on the eye. Then the Swift Fox's form was very easy on the eye as well. "If the lady is acceptable to your question" Bartholomew told his friend. "Remember this. You are not the only fox in this house and she isn't getting any younger."

"In short, when opportunity knocks rip the door off its hinges?"

Bartholomew was watching Susy approach. He licked his lips. "I wonder how badly Ellen could hurt me if I married Susy right now" he answered.

"Worse than waiting a few months would be worth. You've quite fallen for her?"

"Badly. Simply crashed in flames into the sea. I'm a lost cause my friend. At least she doesn't mind if I wander the field now and then. As long as I remember where home is. That though may be an act. I intend to determine if it is or not first."

"Good luck to you then. Ah, here comes the phone. So my friend. Shall we play the game?"

IJN TONE eased out of its last lock of the Panama canal, moving smoothly under the twin donkey engines efforts. She and her sister ship would wait the night anchored outside Colon, then proceed to Habana where they would spend a week for 'rest and relaxation.' After that it was Northward, visiting selected ports along the American Eastern seaboard until Lady Tsukiyama, her maid and their small military escort would disembark. From there Lady Tsukiyama would travel to Washington D.C. to settle in at the Japanese Embassy, her escort replacing the current Imperial Marines guarding the Embassy grounds who would then return home by other transportation. After that no one aboard the ships knew anything about her mission. Only one item had occurred that had raised anyone's interest. A message in code from Dalian. A message that, upon reading, had elicited a sweet laugh from the richly dressed mouse and a return coded message back. What had caused such a reaction in the normally reserved woman they all wondered. What message had been sent in reply was gossip for the entire ship within hours. Yet no one knew, not even the Lady's maid.

"You preformed quite well" Lady Tsukiyama told her maid. At the moment the mouse was sorting carefully though hundreds of photographs, carefully selecting those she found most interesting. When they reached Habana everything would go out in a diplomatic pouch. She would keep nothing that might incriminate her. Might label her as a spy. For in truth, though she was not a spy in her current and future situation it would be easy for the American's to claim such right at this instant. Lady Tsukiyama had no desire to hang from a rope, or be shot by a firing squad. There was a certain young officer of the court she was very much attracted too, though he wasn't fully aware of that fact. Not quite yet.

"These" she asked, spreading out several photos of her maid at electronic equipment, Atsuko draped in rather suggestive poses, some even showing fur none but a husband should ever see. "You did not?"

"I did not Lady" Atsuko confirmed. "To allow to be seen, as a blushing maiden who had been talked into such after several drinksd. It was the only way I could obtain such photos. I was touched yes. Kissed. Other pictures were made, with their cameras. Yet they remained gentlemanly. I was not approached to be used. I had already made that plain and there was another woman present. She they did use."

"Very good, you show more intelligence than your original master credited you with. This is the American military control center. Many have failed to obtain such information. Yet a lowly maid, by simply loosening her kimono achieved what those many times more qualified failed. I am more than pleased with this material. You will dine beside me tonight, at the Captains table."

"Thank you My lady. It pleases me that I preformed well."

"More than that. Much more than that. I am sending a letter to your father. I will explain to him that you acted fully under my orders. That no shame for any of your actions falls upon you. That I am most proud to have a his eldest daughter as my maid, my assistant. That I could not hope for a more intelligent, braver woman to be with me." She smiled as the rabbit blushed.

"You do me great honor Lady Tsukiyama" Atsuko whispered. "Great honor."

Carefully setting those prints aside, well aware that many copies would have already been passed out to other crewmen the mouse thought over the future. Her maid had shown great daring, allowing herself to be 'picked up' as the American's termed it. To be undressed for certain photographs. Great daring. She

would need careful watching. For often with great daring came a feeling of superiority. *'Guide her gently'* a voice in the mouse's head whispered. *'Guide, do not force.'* She would need Atsuko many times, and a willing, happy Atsuko who trusted her would be easier to sacrifice. Should the need come.

In Dalian Oharu had spent the day dreading what she would find upon returning to her quarters. Yet she could not ignore the results of her own actions. Occasionally, when she had time the mouse had debated upon what she would tell Huakava and Saimmi. How she would explain her actions. That she would have to do the same with the Glen's Kami more than frightened her. What little she had learned about it, other than its voyeuristic habits was that evil was very much not accepted by it. No matter what happened she knew that this was a problem that only she could deal with. Thus the weight upon her young shoulders grew even more. Though she was strong, even the strongest tree must fail at some point. Unknown to her cracks had already appeared in the foundation her soul was built upon.

As she walked back to the quarters assigned her Major Ito walked with her, four of his men following somewhat behind them. One of those four was a star nosed mole. Oharu was not fooled by Ito's words, or his apparent acceptance of her position. This was a test. Was she who she claimed to be or would he discover Qi acting, thus proving that the mouse and her people were spies. All their lives now depended upon Nikki's abilities, her understanding of how far a woman could safely be pushed without breaking. Then in this one case only, push just that little further. Years of dealing with perhaps a hundred or more tourists as well as uncounted local girls had given the mouse knowledge no schooling could. Would she be able to put aside her own rules in this case, or were all of them to be lost. It was a puzzle to the mouse. One Oharu understood that she was missing a critical piece of. An errant thought caused her heart to stumble. *'Molly will be shamed by this.'* So great was her love for the doe that Oharu believed everything she did reflected upon her love. Everything.

They entered Oharu's quarters together, the larger fox following just behind her. His men remained outside but one carefully held that door open. Within was an unmistakable scent of fear, blood and other things. It was obvious that a cleaning had been done, yet still remained that scent. She saw that Nikki sat in a chair facing the doorway, Malou on the floor beside her. Both looked less than happy. Less than healthy. "She is in your bedroom Mistress" Nikki announced as she stood. Within her voice Oharu could detect the emotions of pain, self disgust and shockingly, excitement.

Nodding her acceptance to the mouse she walked to her bedroom door and opened it, Major Ito close behind her. Here she found that all of the room's windows were wide open. Sitting on the floor waiting was the lop eared rabbit Qi. She was unbound, freshly brushed and dressed yet had made no attempt to escape. As the mouse entered Qi looked up, her eyes frightening the Spontoon priestess. There was no life within them. No resistance. Nikki had completed her task. Now it was Oharu's turn to play this scene.

"You have questions Major" she said to her companion after he closed the door behind him. Taking the room's only chair Oharu folded her paws in her lap, to all intents completely calm. "Ask them."

"Agreed Lady Oharu." He turned his attention to the rabbit. "Your name."

"Karen Lynn Davies" the rabbit answered. Her voice was as devoid of life as her eyes.

"Who do you work for?"

"The Bank of England" she answered.

"Bank of... Not the military?"

"I am a Senior Account Researcher for the Bank of England" Qi repeated.

"She is not lying I think. May I?"

Standing again Oharu gave the fox a bare bow. "I do not like these things" she told him, not for the first time that day. "As long as she tells you the truth you will not touch her. Or by the Emperors hidden name I will destroy you and your family. Perhaps even your clan. This is understood?"

"It is." Major Ito's voice carried just a touch of fear, for Oharu he now sensed was much more than a simple agent of Lady Tsukiyama. There was more about her. Her ragged voice carried within it now a taste of power he had sensed before. It came to him then. The way she spoke, how her words were formed, her paws unconscious movements. Even how she held herself as she walked. "You are a Nisou" he gasped as a deeper, much more dangerous understanding came to him.

"You understand my words?"

"I do Nisou" he answered. "As long as she speaks only the truth. None shall touch her. My word."

Again Oharu nodded her acceptance, looking to the woman who waited in silence. How much work would she have to do. How hard would it be to bring this woman back. "She is my property. I take her with me. This is understood."

"It is Nisou."

"Then call your mole, your taker of records. When you leave we will not be overlistened further ever again."

"Understood Nisou." Walking out of the room behind Oharu, who could no longer stand being in the same room as she who had been so kind he called to his men.

Signaling to Nikki and Malou Oharu walked out into the hall, turned left and headed for the outside. "Mark" she asked bluntly when they were clear of the building and listening ears.

"Has not yet returned from inspection Mistress" Nikki answered.

"That is good. You?"

"It was difficult." Nikki took Malou's paw in her's, pulling the siamese closer to her. "She will survive?"

Oharu declined to answer until they were much further from the building, out into an open courtyard. Then she did answer, switching to Spontoonie. A dangerous decision yet at this point it was important she not be understood by her 'countryfurs.' "Qi's body will live" the mouse answered. "Her mind. I do not know Nikki. I will try. If you not push too hard it is possible to recall most of her to this world. Breaking always costs, even the lightest breaking. I am no Goddess my friend. These things depend upon each individual."

Snuggling closer to her mare the siamese shivered in some as yet unexplained reaction. "You such before?" she asked in her broken Spontoon.

"Twice" the mouse admitted. "With assistance. Both never fully return. She will never be what was. Nikki. I ask as your friend only, not as Priestess. You never do this again. Not unless need great. Please?"

Nikki turned her eyes onto her shorter siamese companion, staring down into those wide eyes for a long time before answering. "I hope I never have to do that again" she agreed.

A sudden laugh caught the mare and siamese by surprise. "Nikki. Where is accent" Oharu asked.

"It is for the tourists and business my friend. Elizabeth and Louise spent three years teaching me how to speak like that. Or hadn't you noticed I'm a purebred? My family owns a large portion of Manila. More than my fur color and lovers shames them." She hugged her love, actually lifting the Chinese woman off her feet for a moment. "I refused to enter the family business. I detest mining. Ripping the earth apart for riches. Its ugly. I wanted to see if I could make it on my own. Now that I am disowned I have no choice."

They stopped finally in a grove of trees, each finding a place to sit away from preselected benches. "Purebred" Oharu repeated. "Nikki. You are the first equine I have known to speak too beyond simple temple duties. For myself, you are Nikki. There could never be another."

"My stallion" Malou echoed. "My wonderful strong stallion." She snuggled deeply into the suddenly embarrassed mares arms.

"Stallion?" Oharu asked, more than a hint of amusement in her voice. "Malou?"

Lifting her head from the mares strong arms Malou answered in Chinese, forcing Nikki to translate in embarrassment. "She is strong. She is honest. She is true. She is fare. She allows me no rules. All the things I wanted in a male and could not find. She dominates me, she loves me. She accepts what I am without wanting to change me. She is all I could desire in a love. All I could ever hope to have. That she is a woman, one must always make one or two sacrifices when finding the perfect mate. I do not think that I could touch another woman, even you Oharu. It would probably disgust me. Unless Nikki ordered it. To her I deny no thing. Nikki to me is female and male. I have chosen her, to my own amazement. She is good to be with even in the worst of times."

"So." Oharu quieted, taking the time to understand those words. To understand much about herself from those words, and their situation. Malou had no interest in women, yet had fallen in love with a mare. She herself had no interest in does, yet had lost herself to Molly. Love truly was a strange world. What one would willingly change about themselves to accept that which their heart needed. Even that Nikki and herself had broken their own self imposed rules to save their companions. For was friendship not a form of love? She thought of Mark then. One such as he would be her choice to father her children the mouse realized, were she still able to have such. Though she herself had no interest in men that way, she had no hate for them in any way. Anymore than she had hate for women. In truth she found several males such as Mark lightly attractive. Malou had no interest in women, yet had lost herself to Nikki.

And what of Qi? A lop eared rabbit she was, had always been Oharu's greatest dream though a bit tall. Yet though they had shared nights together she felt not even friendship for the now broken woman. Only shame that she had been untrue to Molly. Only shame that the English spy had been shattered. There was no love, only companionship. '*So our hearts betray our minds*' she told herself. '*Betray our dreams. I had not thought such.*' Thus she learned something important, through the words of someone she barely knew.

"Will you marry?" she asked softly.

"Wish" Nikki admitted. "Our religion's do not allow such, woman to woman. Mine declares it a sin, hers simply says no. Malou follows Confucius's teachings. Neither would sanction a marriage between us."

"Confucius. Such as May you live in interesting times?" Oharu asked, eliciting a laugh from the siamese. "There is Spontoon religion. They will marry you. When ready."

"That is curse" Malou explained. She spoke quickly in Chinese forcing Nikki to translate again.

"Malou says that the entire curse is "May you live in interesting times, and draw the attention of the Emperor. She also says that right at this moment we are living in interesting times."

"Ah. I not know full story. Then if not already married, when I am able I will marry you" the mouse

decided. "At Great Stone Glen. Will be interesting. Who wears dress?"

"Malou" Nikki laughed, accepting what was. "I wear my best flying gear. Because I'm probably taking her to Hawaii on our Honeymoon right after. Oharu. Thank you for your offer."

July 5th, 1936

Helen Whitehall walked the halls of S.I.T.H.S. on Moon Island, observing students behaving exactly like students everywhere. Spontoon's strange school year had caught her unaware. Unlike in America, here school ran during the summer. It was in the Winter that classes were closed. Closed because that was the worst storm season. Trying to get children to school across open water during a storm simply wasn't an intelligent idea. So instead of having a lazy Summer with her son she would be spending it trying to pour knowledge into skulls more interested in swimming, sunbathing and the opposite sex. In America she knew it would be different. There it would be snow skiing, sledding and the opposite sex. One reason for the schedule she understood. As an adult and new parent Helen felt better knowing that her son would be in school during most of the tourist season. Especially now that she was seeing tourism from the other side.

"Mrs. Whitehall?" a girls voice asked. Looking around Helen found the gerbille Hinatea Himee standing with her books in her arms.

"Yes Lolo" she asked, wondering what this was about. She still couldn't get her tongue around the name Hinatea yet, though she was trying.

"I've been offered a student assistant position. Should I take it?"

"Lolo. That is a question you need to answer. Not I. Study the problem carefully. Will it interfere with your school work. Or your social life?"

"I don't think so Mrs. Whitehall. I'd have to give up study hall but I don't study much then anyway. I.. I daydream a lot."

Helen laughed softly. "Lolo. As long as it doesn't interfere with your studies or life, I can't see that daydreaming will hurt you. I think you would make an excellent student assistant. And what do you daydream about?"

"Oh lots of things. Boys, adventures, different times in history. Sometimes I write them down. Mother says they make strange stories though."

"Well then Lolo. If all your going to miss is Study Hall I can't see any reason to dissuade you from this new responsibility. Though I would like to read a few of your stories if you don't mind. Perhaps you might be a budding author."

"Oh I don't think that Mrs. Whitehall" Lolo laughed. "I just write what I think about. But.. Well." She dug in her school case, taking out a stenographers notebook. "As long as I get it back, I don't mind."

"Oh you'll get it back. Next Monday I should think. Thank you Lolo, I look forward to reading your stories. Now you better hurry as classes start in a minute."

"Thank you Mrs. Whitehall. I will Mrs. Whitehall."

Helen watched the girl hurry off, almost but not quite running. "Was I ever like that as a child" she asked herself, unaware she was speaking.

"Were any of us?" a male voice answered.

Helen turned to find the school principle standing just across the hall from her. "Hello Mr. Martin. I didn't see you standing there."

"That's the idea Mrs. Whitehall" the crow admitted. "We have a beginners writing course. She could take it next year if her grades are good enough."

"Thank you sir. I will be certain to mention that to her on Monday."

"Do so. Good day Mrs. Whitehall." He turned, walking slowly down the hall towards a harried looking older man standing at her doorway. Knowing which students had that class this period Helen wondered how many tables were already upside down today. Then the bell rang, reminding her of her own responsibilities. It was time to return to her own class and student problems. At least the weekend started tomorrow.

Elsia Hoffman walked into the Western Union station on Casino Island, smiling brightly at a middle aged ferret at the counter. "Message" she announced, laying a prefilled form on his counter. "Special."

"Elsia" the ferret intoned with a low deep voice, as if he were announcing the end of all creation. "Special's only for Government."

Pulling a card from her blouse she dropped that on his counter as well. His look when he realized what it was warmed her heart. "Very well" he agreed, returning the card then reading the rather involved message. "Nine Shells for special."

Coins landed on his counter. Shells and crowers. American, French and Russian coins as well. Staring down at the pile he shook his head in disbelief. Turning his gaze on the respectably dressed Spitzmäuse he started to ask a question, thought about it, then just shoved the coins uncounted into a drawer behind the counter. "Be out in the hour. Good day Elsia."

"Still mad we broke up" she asked.

"Elsia. I am not angry. Certainly not with you" the ferret admitted. "Wanting you to cease your career was selfish of me. Still I would want that again, it is how I am. I still love you, just not the way you need me to love you. I am certain that I will find another. Just like you will. Just please, do tell me this is not putting your life at risk."

"Not this time George. Not this time. George, how are you doing?"

George managed a smile. "Catching up on my reading" he admitted. "You are a very difficult woman to get over. I will, in time. Take care of yourself Elsia."

"You too George." She turned away, walking out the door. Uncharacteristically there was no sway to her hips as she walked. Not this time.

George looked down at the paper before him. Code. Code he didn't want to understand. Taking it with him he headed for the teletype. Dalian was an odd place to send a coded message he thought. However, unlike the average Spontoon native, George Frekman, Senior keyman at Spontoon's Western Union had no interest in such things.

July 6th, 1936

Somewhere North of Guam four very tired furs sat in their hired quarters aboard the freighter LOST DREAM, each carefully going over what they had experienced. They had left Spontoon as a group of five. One had been killed aboard a steamship enroute to Samoa. A good fur that they would miss and not even the chance to bring his body back. Deathsongs were already being sung, families were feeling their losses. At least their mission had been a success. More than a success. They had killed the fur they had been sent after. They had captured the strange medication he owned. To add to their success they had captured his assistant, after a rather difficult fight. As instructed by a special wire they were keeping the skunk supplied with her needed 'medication.' Even so she was a dangerous woman to be around as they had learned from experience. Not one was without several injuries. Why, she even tried to bite their paws when they fed her.

Looking over at the sleeping skunk a wolf, nursing bitten fingers, a nearly dislocated knee and cracked ribs snarled. "Should see if can swim" he snarled, picking at his food. "Bound in net with anchor attached."

"With anchor tied to neck" a battered bear agreed, slightly modifying the firsts thoughts. He wasn't certain, but it felt like his left wrist was dislocated. He didn't want to think what his back looked like. Callie had gotten at him twice with her stubby claws. Stubby claws that had apparently been sharpened to a razors edge. It hurt even to breath.

"He wants her alive" their leader, a ferret with his head bandaged reminded them. "Ahn medicated. Rather fight her again, come back without her." His own tail was in a splint but he held no hope that he would keep it. Callie had used a move on him he'd never encountered, in the doing so had stopped his flying kick and reversed his direction. All while he was in the air. All by the use of his beloved tail. It had dislocated in four places. His wife was going to kill him he knew. Seriously kill him. She adored his tail.

Only a moan of pain came from their fourth member. She had thought that being female Callie wouldn't be that hard to defeat. Now the fox nursed a cracked nose, had already had one operation to remove a metal comb from her side (it had missed her chest only because Callie had slipped on the bloody deck) and had deep bites where no woman wanted bites. Between the four they were a sorry lot, and they had been the winners.

Callie herself was in no position to claim victory. She was bound to the metal bed so tightly she couldn't move arms or legs. They didn't even untie her for food or calls of nature. Not since she locked her teeth on the wolfs fingers, almost severing two. Between the four they had beaten her to unconsciousness, the only way to capture her. In fact the only way to survive encountering her coming out of the shower. She had given no warning. Her master had not expected visitors that day. She had finished her shower, walking out to discover four rugged looking furs rummaging through his belongings. Yet as good as Albert Garner had trained her, as strong as she was from constant exercise she had been no match for the four. Especially as he had ordered her to protect his child at all costs. Doing so had allowed the four an advantage, though they still were unaware of it. Now she lay sleeping as she was programmed to do at this time unless countermand by Albert.

Regrettably Albert had never taken into consideration that she might be captured and held for a long time. Not and kept under his drugs effects. Thus certain long term commands were causing her trouble. Exercise for one, though she had discovered a way to manage that by pulling against her bonds. There were others though. What she wouldn't give at certain times for a pen and paper to write her daily report with. To write down her thoughts and dreams as ordered. Occasionally she would look at the four, wanting to beg for such items. But other than when eating she was tightly muzzled. Unable to make more than whimpering noises as she felt those memories fade away each evening. Unrecorded. Lost forever. Now she slept, her mind, what there was under the drugs effects able to wander where it would. Wander, and somehow touch the greater mind held prisoner behind that drugs walls. At the moment it was the only existence that the real Callie had.

In Dalian an rapid knock on Oharu's door brought Nikki to it. When she opened it a Captain stood on the other side. "Urgent message" he managed to say in English.

"I take" Nikki replied, reaching out for the envelope.

"No. Lady Oharu" the hound snapped, stepping back.

Understanding that from this one she would get nothing Nikki stood away from the door. "Sit" she said, pointing at a chair. "I get Mistress." As she turned for Oharu's bedroom door Nikki noted that the hound still stood. Military pride before the Gaijin. That was a word she'd known long before meeting the mouse. A word that still brought a foul taste to the mares tongue.

She found Oharu as she had left her, deep in meditation next to the sleeping form of Qi. Picking up an empty glass the mare tapped it lightly with one nail, her act causing it to ring much like a bell. It was the signal Oharu had explained to her to use should she need her. Yet for some time nothing changed. Then little by little the mouse's breathing deepened. Her body began to stiffen as muscles woke.

"You rang" the mouse asked in English.

"Urgent message. Your eyes only" Nikki explained.

Looking to the sleeping rabbit Oharu stood. "Watch her" she ordered. Walking slowly she went to the waiting Captain. Greeting him in his native language, her birth language, she asked him his business.

"My pardon Honored Lady" the hound apologized. "Signals received this from Lady Tsukiyama. It is marked urgent and coded." He held out the envelope, allowing his hostess to accept it.

Opening the envelope Oharu pulled out a single sheet of paper. She knew that the original message had been sent from Spontoon but its headers indicated Habana. Where was that she wondered, what country. What was it like. Her messages code though was simple, one of Elsie Hoffman's old personal codes. Should anyone crack it, the actual event which Elsie admitted had already happened and was why she no longer used it the words were simple to understand.

"Return. Meet at Norfolk. America."

"A reply?" the Captain asked.

"None. I must leave. Has Captain Isbraun yet returned?"

"Not as yet. He is still with General Yamada. They are expected by morning. Lunch no later."

"Very well. Inform those in charge that my aircraft must be made ready for immediate flight. I leave as soon as Captain Isbraun returns. Lady Tsukiyama requires my return. I am to meet her in some place called Norfolk. You know this place?"

"It is in America. On the East coast Lady Oharu. It is a large military naval base."

"Please arrange charts for my pilot from Dalian to there. She has never flown over America. As this will be her last flight I prefer her to have all the information she needs."

"Her last flight? You are releasing her?"

Oharu looked at the Captain, trying to appear stern. "From this life. Yes. Thank you."

"I understand Lady Oharu." He couldn't help but glance towards the open door. "Such a waste. She is a fine female. Very desirable."

"If you like females yes. I would assume so. There are more like her in the Fillypines. Perhaps should you ever be in that nation, then you will find one for yourself. She has told me she has several younger sisters in Manila. Now I must prepare."

Accepting her words as his dismissal the Captain bowed deeply, shutting the door behind him as he left.

"Nikki" Oharu called in English.

Stepping from the bedroom Nikki looked around as if expecting to be attacked. "Tha message" she asked in her false accent.

"We leave. As soon as Captain Isbraun returns. They think I kill you soon. Look for long faces."

Nikki giggled. "Yah? Kill? Yah'll marry Molly first." She looked back at the bedroom. "Qi?"

"Comes with us. She is awakening. You did not push too hard I think."

"I hope. I better ge' Malou. We'll star packin."

"Very well. I return to Qi. I am making progress." She stopped next to Nikki. "I am still in season" she whispered. "It is so difficult, I desire her so greatly."

"Ah'd send Malou, buh yah heard her. Yer nah tha kin tah take against their will. Look for me later."

"Thank you Nikki. I hunger so much. So very much and Qi is so helpless." Then continuing her walk she returned to healing the English feline.

July 7th, 1936

Elizabeth Kathleen Sapohatan sat quietly in her pew while listening to the sermon being given in Meeting Islands church. This was the one time she could completely put aside her job, her life, her responsibilities. It was the one time she wasn't carrying official documents, surrounded by others clamoring for her attention or even with her husband. There were bodyguards within the congregation though. That she would never again be without as long as she lived. Her husband Albert Sapohatan was not with her for he walked a different path, one she had long ago fully accepted as equal to her own. This though was the path she had grown up in, the path she much loved. That it was also the only Euro Church on Meeting Island and that it would close with the passing of its priest saddened her. It was a beautiful church, built in the Spanish style it was well loved. But Spontoon's Allthing had made a decision. As an official of that government no matter how secretive her position was, it was her place to enforce those decisions. She would though enjoy each remaining sermon to its fullest.

Listening to the elderly priest speak brought memories back to Elizabeth. Memories of sitting with her parents in this same church, squirming in the hard seats while her stepmother tried to make her behave. Those memories were important to the bobcat. They were memories of her family before everyone sickened and died. Before she found herself an orphan, her brother cared for by an aunt who hated her, her own choices of a normal life slim. When Albert and his wife offered to be her foster parents she had jumped at the chance. Better a life in a backwards island nation she liked than snubbed, ignored and insulted by people in her own home town. Just because her birth mother had come from Japan not America. Now she was a Spontoon citizen. One day she would return to her home town. To see her brother but not anyone else. Her Aunt Bee's best efforts had failed to poison her brother against her. Maybe in a couple of years, but before 1940 certainly.

“..Amen” the priest said, dragging Elizabeth from her thoughts. Today’s sermon was over so with dozens of others she raised her voice in the last hymn. What had he spoken about she asked herself. Oh yes, the sin of selfishness. Well everyone was guilty of that one now and then. When she stood to leave she looked towards the confessionals, paused in thought, then turned back to the main doors. God knew what she had done wrong. He alone would decide what her punishment would be for those transgressions. One of the things she had accepted in her life was that confessionals were no longer a place that she could go. It mattered little for God watched over her. He would make plain what He wanted her to do. When she stood before him, he would make plain her punishment for her actions. No one else.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

July 7th, 1936

Oharu Wei was at the moment very worried. Nikki and Malou had already packed everything into the aircraft, including Mark's possessions. A groundcrew had refueled their aircraft and the mare was already going through her pre-flight list. Meanwhile Qi was strapped into a cot, kept unconscious due to drugs obtained from a military doctor. This had been done at Nikki's request in order to keep the rabbit from gibbering in fear. That doctor assumed Qi would not be long for this world, in that belief he was sadly mistaken. Yet Mark himself had not yet returned. He was 'delayed' she was informed. Delayed by what reason she wondered. Finally unable to stand it any longer she had taken things into her own paws, having herself driven to the base's main gates by a waiting car. There she waited none too calmly in the hot sun with her driver, though to those who did not know her she simply appeared to be meditating while she waited. Hour after hour passed, until just before sundown a convoy carrying her errant companion arrived.

With no delay she ordered the fox into her waiting car. "I must leave" she explained to the amused General, noting three cases being transferred from his car to hers. "I have been called back to the Lady's presence. You will find a full copy of my report upon your desk. I think it was best that you should be aware of my thoughts. I will tell you this, I have been much impressed by your people, your work. I feel you will have no ill will for your duty." She barely bowed to the officer before returning to her own car.

As he was driven back to his own office General Yamada laughed to himself. For all her importance even one so powerful as Lady Oharu could be yanked around by her superiors. Just as he could. It made him feel a little better, to know that even one above him was treated much the same as he was. He had found the German a good companion. Neither truly liked war or what was happening in China. Both understood the rarity of a good meal. Neither had been able to stomach what they discovered in that rich Chinese house. A house now in flames, its occupants laying gutted in the streets. It had been the fate of that Geshia who had so wonderfully attended his predecessors birthday party last year that would trouble him all the days of his life.

Within minutes of Oharu's return Nikki had LOUISE taxing towards the water. By the time General Yamada arrived at his office Oharu was at seven angels, nearly twenty miles off the coast. Not even Nikki breathed a sigh of relief until over an hour later when a radio message came in from the General. "Your report is quite fair Lady Oharu. My best to you." That was all, but it was enough to insure they had somehow managed the deception. It was a deception none expected could have lasted much longer, or would expect to ever work again.

"We have lived in interesting times" Malou announced in Chinese from behind Nikki's pilot chair. "And gained the attention of the Emperor. Yet we have survived."

"We have" the mare agreed, also in Chinese. "Let's not do that again."

"Agreed. Oharu is with Qi. Qi seems to have returned. Mostly. What is Lady Oharu. Truly?"

"Mark" Nikki called in Spontoon. "I need tah talk tah Malou ah bit. 'Bout Oharu."

"I have the controls" Mark replied, tactfully agreeing to Nikki's request. "And its gonna cost you extra." Though he joked, it was obvious that something was troubling him deeply.

"Ah case ah Nootops Blue. Ah know." She had slipped back into her accent, it being second nature to her after so many years. Following her siamese she made certain to admire the sway of Malou's hips as they walked the few steps to two waiting chairs. Nikki wondered how her love would take what she was about to hear. Malou had made it clear she had no love for the Japanese. She looked to the last seat, where the mouse held a sleeping Qi's head in her lap, appearing all as if she were sleeping herself. But Oharu wasn't sleeping, of that the mare was certain. She doubted her friend had gotten a pawful of sleep since starting on Qi's healing. As for Malou, to discover that Oharu was not only that, but of the original race. Nibbling her upper lip Nikki hunted for words.

Again Oharu was in darkness. This darkness though was nothing compared to what she had found upon her first arrival. Qi, or Karen Davies had never been trained to meditate. Had never been trained how to withdraw into herself. Thus when the mouse first began her self imposed task she had spent hours simply finding where within the dark dreamscapes Qi had retreated too. For the first time in her life she truly wished that mind reading was a reality. Such would have made her work so much simpler. When she had finally discovered Qi it had been in a nightmare that had sent shivers down the mouse's spine. Shivers that ran all the way to the tip of her own tail. Nikki had been both efficient and careful. Qi though had been stronger than even she herself had thought. It had taken the pear to shatter her, an invention of the European churches Inquisition. A hateful, horrible thing only the sickest of minds could have devised. Qi was then in a world where everything the mare had done to her was magnified hundreds of times. She would have never have escaped this madness on her own.

"Karen" she called, knowing the rabbit would be within this, the last bubbles of darkness. "Karen Davies."

A short snuffle answered her. Turning toward it Oharu felt her spirit drawn to the other. "Karen. I need you" she called. "I need your help." Within the dream planes there were no different languages. Oharu was speaking Cipangu within her own mind, while Karen would be understanding in English, or Chinese. As yet the mouse was unsure which language was superior for the rabbit. "Karen. Please?"

"Here" a tiny voice answered. With that answer a light blossomed within the darkness. A light Oharu quickly reinforced. Reinforced in order to push away this last remaining bubble of darkness. It really wasn't light of course. No such thing existed within the dream planes. Yet energy was energy. What Oharu was actually doing was filling the darkness with energy. Energy Karen's mind would define as light. It was draining the mouse of course. She should have an assistant. One to help her to replace much of the energy she used. Unfortunately the closest who could do that was on Spontoon. Thus she would have to work alone.

It would cost her dearly.

On Meeting island Helen Whitehall sat next to a pile of papers holding a letter in her paws. Behind her were three large wooden crates, crates that had arrived on Saturday. She remembered the event with some humor. She had been busy washing dishes when that knock came to her door. Setting aside a just dried plate she had wiped her paws on her apron as she walked to the door. Opening it she had found a local delivery fur waiting. "These un's from India Mam" the platypus announced as he held out his clipboard.

Accepting the clipboard Helen stood aside as the young male carefully carried in not one, but three heavy looking boxes. "'Ur husband was right popular Mam. Is there anythin else?"

"You wouldn't happen to have a pry bar would you" she had asked, staring at the three well sealed wooden crates.

"In tha truck mam. Be a moment."

When he returned it was short work to lift the tops of each box. Helen had tried to tip him but he shook his head no. "Mom' tan my britches I took extra money from ah widow. Ahn one what teaches my little sister too."

"Katrina, the artist" Helen guessed. It really wasn't much of a guess though since there was only one platypus in her classes.

"Tha's Kat" the young fur confirmed. "If there's nothing else, I gotta lot more tah deliver."

"Just one thing" Helen had decided. Turning abruptly she grabbed the young males cheeks, planting a firm kiss on his odd beak. "Thank you. You deserved at least that."

"Yes Mam... Thank you Mam.. Ah gotta go Mam." Almost running the young platypus stumbled out of Helen's house. She had smiled as she closed the door. To think, on these islands a boy old enough to have a job delivering packages was embarrassed by a simple kiss. Well, now to see what these boxes held. As will all things be, her sons abrupt, well timed cry changed her destination. Whatever was in those boxes could wait a bit more. Her son always came first.

That was yesterday. Today she was finally finding out what her husband had left in India before making his fatal trip into China. In her paws was a letter from one Brigadier Arthur Hampton, of the Dorset Regiment.

"My Dear Lady Whitehall" she read. "I do hope that these crates find you. All I have for an address is Spontoon Island. It is with great regret and sadness that I learned of Killian's passing yesterday. I do hope that he has left you with sufficient funds to live, for as I recall he was only rarely squirreling away an odd bob or two even though his work paid well. Should you require any assistance, please contact my daughter at The Blue House in Swaffham, England. Killian was her favorite Uncle, though I officially admit to no relationship. I am certain that she will be delighted to help you. I understand that she has the ear of some rather odd blokes in London with rather deep purses. Please in the least contact her. I am certain that she would want to know about how Killian fell, though having talked with his Doctor I am certain it was not a fall one like he or I would prefer.

I have shipped to you three small crates of things Killian left behind in my care when he departed for China. I had hoped he would return for them himself. I knew better, as Killian was never one to hide the truth. Yet one must leave an old warhorse his dreams that somehow his friend would return hail and well. I also enclose seven pounds six I owed him from our last cribbage game. Your husband was a mean fur with the cards Lady Whitehall, though an honest one. He could also drink any fur under the table then manage a fair start on a second.

I am afraid that I have never been to the islands where you now live. I fear that my postings have been India for some time. Yet I will retire in 1939 so please allow me the honor of visiting you soon after. That Killian finally married, what a shock. I believe that many a coin will pass between paws as this information trickles down the ranks. Please allow me to know if he has a child. That would warm my heart, and much fill my purse. There are many who felt he would never recover from his loss in the war.

Should you wish to write I will be delighted to hear from you. My address is on this letter of course. As is my London address. Be healthy Lady Whitehall. Know that your husband was well loved and deeply respected.

*Arthur Hampton, Brigadier
Dorset Regiment
India*

Lady, Helen thought. Why had he referred to her as Lady in his letter, not Mrs as she deserved. Wasn't Lady some kind of a rank in England? Try as she might she could think of no time her husband had referred to anything really important about his family, other than his father was unhappy with him, one brother had died in the war, another was a fop and his sister a self trained adventuress with a love of very tall piles of rock. There really hadn't been time for such conversations. It was more important to take all the life they could manage in the few weeks he had left. Take it and treasure each moment. Carefully setting the letter aside she started going through the first box, gently peeling away a thin lead sheet that protected each crates contents.

Three hours later she was surrounded by books, strange statues, odd pieces of kit and a battered Leica camera bearing Killian's initials. There were even a dozen or so rolls of film still in their canisters, all of which had apparently been exposed but not processed. It was a small battered photo album she was most interested in at the moment. Small, just a bit larger than a normal wallet it held perhaps twenty photographs, one of which she was looking at now. It showed a beautiful French poodle standing by an iron gate, a three story brick home behind her. It was obvious in the small photograph that the poodle was both with child and very happy. On the prints back she had found the poodles name. Babbet. It had to have been taken not long before her death. "So you were his greatest love" she whispered. Carefully she removed the photograph. There were frames available for that size picture in her office. She would have the photograph copied, one to be placed under Killian's headstone, the other in the bedroom she had changed into an office. Babbet was now part of her family, not an old flame to be put away and forgotten.

Another, lighter knock came to her door. This one though she well knew. "Come in Kura" she called, unsurprised at the calico's visit. When the Meeting Island priestess visited it was almost always around this time of day. As Helen suspected it was the priestess who entered, her grass skirt swishing as she automatically turned upon entering any European doorway, in order to clear the door as it closed. "Antonius is in the nursery, playing I think" Helen informed the feline. "Or carefully chewing his way through his crib in a bid to escape to freedom."

"You already know me too well" Kura admitted, slipping past the piles of things on her way to visit Helen's son after shutting and locking the front door. Kura stopped at the nursery door. "My youngest sister just had a daughter" she continued in a soft voice.

"Congratulations. And you want to marry my son to her?" Helen asked, a twinkle in her eye.

"Only if they fall in love" the calico admitted, vanishing into the room.

"So already my son's future is being determined" Helen laughed, returning to her explorations. She was holding an odd shaped leopard figure with four arms when Kura returned. "He sleeps" she announced, staring at the black painted brass figure. "She is?"

"Kali. From the Hindu. She is mother Goddess of India. An evil cult once claimed her as their own. The Thuggee cult, it is where we get the word Thug from. In her name they murdered tens of thousands. I do not believe she was much pleased by such actions. I know I would not be."

"She is black why?"

"Black is the presence of all colors. I'm not exactly certain as to the reasons, but true Kali figures are almost always painted black."

"You know much Helen. Yet you teach only little. Why?"

Helen sat the statue down carefully. "Kura. I am college educated. I have a Doctorate thanks to certain people accepting me fully. Meaning I've spent seven years of my life doing nothing but studying. I am full of what is to me useless information. Much of it, like this, of very little use to anyone but scholars. I do not mind sharing what I know. In truth I love sharing what I know. But I must remain low key."

"Low key" the feline asked.

"It means, well. Think of everyone upon Spontoan as one surface. Upon that surface many stand up, easily seen."

"Such as Huakava and all Songmark" Kura asked.

"Such as the High Priestess and those insanely active girls. Yes. Now many more are below that surface. They are not easily seen."

"They are then low key?"

"Exactly" the hound answered.

"Then I understand now. Low Key. So those your husband harmed will not find you. To harm you."

"Bingo my half dressed friend" Helen laughed. "Now, if you have time would you like to help me go through all this?"

"But.." Kura ran a paw across her grass skirt, then waved at the cluttered floor.

Helen understood the gesture. When sitting flat a wearers grass skirt took a great deal of space, even when rolled about them. "Let me empty one crate and you can sit on it then." She started to get up when the calico surprised her. Releasing something on one side of her waist Kura pulled her grass skirt off, revealing a tiny dark red pantlike skirt underneath. Setting the grass skirt aside in a roll to lean against the wall she joined Helen.

"I thought you didn't wear anything under those things" Helen admitted.

"Many small flying bugs this season" Kura admitted. "More comfortable this way. Especially on cold stone."

"Ah, so now we know what the Scotsman wore under his kilt." Noticing the priestess's confused look Helen explained her statement, eliciting a gentle laugh from her feline friend. Soon they were opening strange boxes, unwrapping odd statues, ringing metal cups as they examined this latest slice of Killian Whitehall's lost life. Occasionally something came up, such as a large package of black incense that Helen gave to her friend without comment. Each such present was accepted with delighted glee by the feline.

It was on Casino Island where tourists debarked that a dark cloud settled. He stepped off the boat, looking around as though he had stepped into an ill dray horse's leavings. Tall and thin for a bulldog the white suited figure swung his cane idly while waiting for his 'man' to join him. "Philip" he said as a tired greyhound arrived with several trunks in toe. "I do believe this is the place. Rather... primitive. Isn't it."

"Aye sir. Primitive. Lively though."

"Well yes. Have my luggage delivered to the hotel. Then find a local Barrister. I must be out of this place as quickly as possible. There is important business to attend to at home. If we hurry we will finish and be on our way back to civilization in two days. Soon I will officially be Lord Whitehall."

"Yes sir. Immediately sir." As he watched his employer walk towards customs the greyhound growled low in his throat. That this... this self centered mindless FOP should become Lord Whitehall. Well accidents did happen. Especially on long voyages. Turning to the three natives hauling the luggage he paid each a bit more than they had asked. "Marleybone please. Though I do not believe that there is any

real need to hurry. Customs will desire to inspect everything, will they not?" He added another five pound note to the pile. "Very carefully?"

"I donno understand" a young ratel admitted. "Norm we get paid tah hurry."

"Understand this please. I was his brothers friend. Truly this one is not worth my time. Yet I promised his brother. Thus I am bound. I did not promise to make his life easy however."

"Strange thin for ah servant tah say. Buh okay." Waving to his companions the ratel started hauling his own load towards customs while the greyhound hurried towards his employer.

Nearly an hour behind them and almost last off the ship a very athletic looking female bulldog walked to customs, laying down her own passport.

"Miss Karsten, yes" a fox said as he looked at the passport. "You have luggage yes?"

"Delivered to your establishment an hour ago. Three pieces, all dark green."

"Bill" the fox yelled behind him. "Three pieces, green. Karsten. Have them?"

"Cleared" a thin voice announced. "Still workin on tha Whitehaul junk."

"Cleared mam. Business or pleasure?"

"Combat" she answered, accepting her passport. Thanking the fox she walked through a gate into Spontoon's official reception area, leaving a rather confused fox staring after her. After all, there wasn't any war on these islands. Unless you were going to say, Krupmark. Or picking a fight with one of those Songmark girls. Picking up his phone he made a call.

"My things" Miss Karsten noted, studying the five young men waiting for her employment. "The Date Palm Hotel?"

"Marlybone better" all five announced in one voice.

"I prefer the Date Palm please. My funds would not allow the Marlybone." She pointed at a middle aged mole. "You will do. Your rate?"

"Four shells. Two fer you, two fer tha luggage."

"Rather high, I think" the bulldog responded.

"I do for three all" an small Asiatic fox broke in.

"No. Four shells will be fine." She looked carefully at the mole. "Please do tell me we will arrive quickly. With no side trips to a friends business?"

"Mah word" the mole answered.

"Accepted." Opening her purse the woman withdrew four shells, placing them in the moles paw. "Shall we depart?"

Much later Kura was leafing through an old magazine when yet another knock came to Helen's door. This one harsh, demanding. Glancing at the clock, it being nearer seven than six in the evening Helen wondered who would it be. Lifting her son she closed her blouse, walking to her door as she patted the

contented pup on his back. She found that two males were standing at her door. A rather regal looking greyhound stood silently behind a really odd looking bulldog. "Yes" she asked.

"This is the home of one Killian James Whitehall?" the bulldog asked. His voice bothered Helen. Nasal, thin, sharp. He was also sounding much too self important.

"Killian never saw this house" Helen corrected calmly. "He is buried on Casino Island. I bought it several days after the funeral."

At those words the bulldog stepped forward as though to push his way into the house. "So. You're the chippy he picked up in Indo-China. You are the tart he brought to these islands. Well golddigger I have news for you. Your free ride is over. I have come to reclaim his property, return his money to England and you are not invited. You may return to whatever pub or house that he dragged you out of. You and that bastard cur in your arms."

Helen heard Kura lay down her magazine. "Tart? Golddigger? I am his widow. Who sir, and I much use that term lightly in your case, are you?"

"I am Marcus Garth Whitehall. Lord Marcus Whitehall. I have come for my brothers property and his money. You will of course evacuate this place immediately as I will sell it on the morrow. After I inventory its contents of course. Hurry on, leave now. I have much to do tonight. Move along now."

"You are a pompous ass" Helen snapped. Her madness at Ruth's fate, and almost her own was held in check. But this...

"I take Antonius" Kura offered softly from behind Helen. Gratefully the hound released her son to the waiting priestess.

"Ah, I see you have your lover here as well. A woman at that. Well, I'm certain she can keep you warm tonight. Some grieving widow..."

Whatever the bulldog was going to say probably will never be known as Helens left knee crashed into his groin with stone shattering force, lifting him a full foot or more off the ground. That blow was quickly followed by her right fist.

Marcus first folded forward, then snapped backwards under Helen's assault. As he crashed to the sidewalk Helen's left foot caught his head in a bone crushing blow. Had she been wearing anything but soft slippers there would have been no need for any other blows. She was about to kick him again when the greyhound stopped her. "Please miss. Murder will cause you many problems."

"And you are?" she growled, turning on the taller greyhound with her claws.

"Philip Walker Rhodes Mam. A very old friend of Killian's. Currently under the employment of" he looked down to the unconscious bulldog. "That mass of useless protoplasm." Her eyes scared him. He knew this killing madness from the trenches. To see it in any woman's eyes truly frightened him. Especially those of this woman.

"So you think I'm filth too?" Helen screamed, trying to break free so as to attack.

"Please Mam. Please allow me to explain."

Forcible Helen stopped fighting, taking deep breaths until she had some control, but not much. "I lose Ruth to murderers. I lose Killian. Then this trash talking filth calls me... I'll kill him."

"Please Lady Whitehall." Philip looked over to the calico still standing in the doorway, still holding Helen's baby while dressed in nothing but a very, very short blood red skirt. "Will you help her?" he asked Dia-Kura.

"Cannot" Kura admitted. "My skill not of spirit. Oharu best can. Oharu in China. She must help other first."

At the word China Helen gasped, turning so quickly to face Kura that she broke Philip's grasp as though all his strength was nothing. "What is she doing there. What is anyone doing there. Its death to enter China. Foul evil death."

Carefully setting on the floor just inside the doorway, thus forcing Helen to look down Kura looked up into those flashing green eyes. Looked up into the soulfire burning brightly within them. Even for the priestess it was a new experience to see soulfire burn openly within another's eyes. No wonder men surrendered to the American the Priestess realized. She had never really accepted the power of those eyes, yet now. Though Kura herself had no interest in women or men, here was one who could trap even her heart were she not always on guard. It explained Illie's comment last week. That Helen would one day break through even her training. It explained the Priestess Oharu's madness regarding a certain doe. It was, the feline understood, the eyes. Eyes that opened fully into a soul so rich none could refuse it. Yet one apparently had. Had ceased visiting. Had ceased every contact. "Oharu went with two in order to save another" she explained finally, fighting to break that burning gaze that even now reached out for her. "If she did not go they would have gone alone. They would not have returned." Finally she managed to break away. Feeling cold sweat upon her back for the effort. Never again would she question priestess Oharu's mad love.

Helen fell to her knees then. "I warned everyone. Won't they listen?" But the madness was gone, held again in check. "Won't they listen?"

"I do not understand anything of China" Philip admitted. "I have never visited the country I am afraid. Still, may we go inside and talk?"

"Him" Kura asked.

"Upon meeting Killian's wife and I prefer to assume child, I believe that I have just ceased my obligation and employment with that one. Let him rot."

"Then inside. Helen, Antonius needs sleep. His bed?"

That finally broke Helen out of her spell. Standing quickly she hurried to her son, taking him into her arms before rushing past the still seated calico and back into her home. "You will join us?" Kura asked as she stood again. After the greyhound had entered the Priestess carefully shut, then locked the door behind him. They left a moaning bulldog lying on the front yard. Laying in his own vomit.

Stepping around the many items scattered on Helen's floor Philip carefully cleared off a stool, sitting to wait until his hostess returned. He was having extremely serious difficulty ignoring the mostly naked feline who quietly settled back in her place on the floor, continuing her study of several hundred photographs of Indian temples. Kura ignored his gaze as though he had never existed.

"Excuse me" he said finally. "But, did we interrupt something?"

"Yes" Kura admitted without looking up. "We going through boxes. Still very much to see. Only touch one box yet, two more still hold many treasures."

"I meant, um..."

"Anything personal" Helen completed as she carefully shut her sons bedroom door. "Kura is a local priestess. Only when it rains have I seen her in more than a grass skirt. Even then it is only a large leaf over her back." She stopped next to her phone, placing a paw on the receiver. "She has no more interest in women than you have in rotting seagulls." Picking up the receiver she dialed a number. Those in the house only heard her side of the conversation.

"Hello Sergeant Korras, this is Mrs. Whitehall. I'm perfectly fine thank you. How are you this evening? Yes, Kura is visiting. Is anyone looking for her? No? Just checking up on me right? He's fine. Well, I have a drunk or very sick male Euro male laying in my front yard. No, being two helpless women we didn't want to chance it might be an act. Yes, I understand there have been some problems. Name? Um, I don't recall him talking when he was on the ground. Yes, please. A thin bulldog dressed in a white suit. Yes, very uncomfortable in our climate. Yes, it is strange. Five minutes? Thank you. Of course I'll answer the door. Complaint? Um, trespassing of course. Making a nuisance of himself. No, I don't think chains are required. He seems awful effeminate. Thank you Sergeant Korras. I'll be ready for them."

Setting down her receiver she looked to her undesired visitor. "You have less than five minutes to keep me from turning you over as well. Start talking."

It was only then that Philip noticed the rather large butcher knife in Helen's right paw. "Of course. I told you my name. Until a few minutes ago I was rather uncomfortably bound to the service of that creature outside. You are truly Killian Whitehall's wife?"

"All legal and aboveboard. Married on Saint James island by the Emperor himself. A certified copy of our wedding vows is on file here at Spontoon. I believe the Emperor, in his kindness also sent a copy to London."

"Which is what dragged Whitehall here. Lady Whitehall. I was at the Somme. Your husband was one of the reporters attached to my regiment. Those of us who survived, and in honesty you could count that number on two paws with fingers left over, owe our lives to Killian. He dragged us out of no-furs land. He patched us up and he stood against the concussion drunk Major who tried to send us out again. We all owe our lives to him. Which is why I was stuck working for his brother. You see I promised him I'd make sure nothing happened to that self centered useless... Boy. As I was once a butler for a short period before the war it seemed simple enough to employ myself to him. An effort made easy by the grateful escape of his previous butler when I approached him about this position."

"I think I see. Look.. Captain?"

"Corporal."

"Corporal then. Look. I know nothing of the military. I grew up in the American West. Our worst non-natural problems were the occasional band of rustlers. My father and his father were ranchers. I don't recall either side of my family having anyone in the military except in the civil war and even then I think we were on the wrong side. At least we were on the losing side. Killian spoke only once of the Somme, in his last hours. But not in a way I took as pleasant."

"He said? Please..."

Helen looked to Kura, who nodded her head yes. Setting aside her knife Helen closed her eyes. "These are some of his words. I cannot forget them Corporal. *'Artillery. So much artillery. Half our trench is flattened. Captain Harver died this evening. Good man, cared for his men. I can't see. So much dust, and they've fired gas again. Damn Huns, no civility. They could at least RSVP before they blow a fur in half. I mean, in the middle of tea they start a major bombardment. How crass.'* He slipped away from me soon after those words. His body was alive but Killian was gone. I lost my husband to his memories. He'd already forgotten who I was by then."

"I remember that day well Lady Whitehall. We went over the top on the next. Lady Whitehall. Please. How did Killian die?"

"A brain tumor. Very slow, very painful. Especially at the end. It took years I understand. In the end. In the end he was taking heavy doses of opiates for the pain. At the last, in a hospital here on Meeting Island they were giving him drugs so strong he had no idea the universe existed. Much less myself. We met in China Corporal. Only months before his death."

A knock, more a sharp demanding rap came to Helen's door just then. "Grand Central Station" she laughed, though the laugh seemed hollow. Walking past her guest, stepping over the seated Kura who was still studying photos of carvings from some ancient temple in India Helen greeted her newest visitors. Three rather large members of the local constabulary stood waiting just outside her door. One, a bear, was holding Marcus Whitehall up by the back of his expensive looking jacket.

"Mam. This tha rowdy yew called fer" the ratel in charge asked.

"Yes officer. If you would be so kind as to show him where a water taxi is, I will be delighted to pay his transfer cost to Casino."

"Tha her" Marcus mumbled, trying to focus his eyes. "She urlup..." With the apparently bored ratel's night stick abruptly in his stomach the bulldog instantly lost all interest in speaking.

"Sorry Mam. Drunks ahn all. Tha male in thar. He bothern yah?"

"No officer. Corporal Rhodes was an old friend of my husband. He dropped by to offer his sorrows for my loss, and tell me about Killian."

"Good dat. Yah need tah know dem things yah doo. Fine then. Ole Euro here, he chan spen ah nit inna pokey. Then bac tah Casino wher es kin belong. G'night Mam. Honored Mother." Reaching in the ratel carefully closed her door. Not though before giving Kura a polite bow of respect. "Yah got good fren in her mam" were his last words to Helen.

Locking her door Helen fixed Philip Rhodes with a look that could cut stone. "You will tell me about Killian" she said. It wasn't a question. "And why you keep calling me Lady."

"Yes Lady Whitehall. In truth I would be honored. Yet as to the title, he did not tell you?"

"All he said about his family was that his sister Willy loves climbing mountains, his younger brother was a waste of air. That thing out there was the younger brother? I thought so. Something I now agree completely with having met him and that his older brother died in the Great War. Also something about his parents disowning him. Other than that he only spoke of Babbet."

"Babbet, yes. She was the light of his life. Wonderful girl. Her father owned a big restaurant in the town we took leave at. I was sort of chasing her. Well, we all were actually. She was very attractive after all. We were far from home and women were scarce so close to the front. But Babbet would only laugh, granting an occasional kiss on the cheek for an act true gentlemanship. That was until Killian caught her eyes. Gods, ruined it all for us he did. Walked in, just seemed to scoop the girl in his arms. That was the end of those fun filled days Lady Whitehall. Now looking at your eyes I can see why Killian fell for you. You and she, Babbet. Your both the same there. It destroyed him when she died. She and their unborn child." Philip looked towards the closed nursery door. "He is?"

"Killian's son. Killian fathered three other children in China. He was well aware of all four, though all four would be born after his death. What occurred to the mothers, if the children live I do not know, can never find out. Those mothers made us all swear never to look for them. Never to allow anyone to look for them. In any case the group they were affiliated with would make any such search a horrid, filthy suicide.

With less than a full army an impossible task. Though I would take two myself. With another of heavy artillery in reserve.”

“Your certain of this...” Philip looked into Helen’s eyes, tore his gaze away with a force of will to look at the Priestess. Again having to force his eyes away, but not because of her gaze. “You are certain” he decided. “Did he marry these women as well?”

“No. Only myself. Though they wished. Oh did they wish, did they beg. But he would not.”

“Then it isn’t important enough to put ones neck on the headsmens block for. Lady. Killian being oldest surviving son inherited his fathers title upon the old mans death. A fact which occurred over two years ago. Lady Whitehall followed only eight months ago. Heartbreak I believe, though the doctor claimed a heart attack. Marcus has been taking on airs since obviously. But until Killian was found, or his body Marcus couldn’t be accepted as actual Lord. Not legally. At least not for many more years. News of Killian’s death brought joy to the little... Boy. News of your existence moments later sent him into screaming fits. You see, though Lord Whitehall told Killian he would disinherit him the truth is secretly he was as proud of Killian as he was of Albert. Killian’s older brother. He was simply too proud to apologize for an argument caused by a misunderstanding created by a garbled report. He and I spoke many times of Killian at night. Read his dispatches. There is a hidden map even Marcus is still unaware of in the library. Lord Whitehall marked upon it every place Killian wrote of. Every place he knew his son had been. Mam. You are Lady Whitehall to me. Your son, should he live to his majority will become the new Lord Whitehall. A fact that Marcus could, will never accept.”

“What about their sister. Willy?”

Philip smiled. “With your permission I will bring her to visit you tomorrow. She came on the same boat as we. Under an assumed name and passport. Marcus would have ordered her home if she hadn’t hidden. He is that kind.”

“Ordered an adult woman home? Is Willy so subservient? That isn’t anything how Killian painted her.”

“In a way she must be now. You see Lord Whitehall feared for his only daughters future. In his will he left Marcus controller of her inheritance until Killian returned to take his place or Willy married. Now Willy has had a lot of young male suitors, but none who could stand up to her. She’s very strong willed. She simply will not accept a man who cannot stand up to her. So at twenty-six she is still unmarried and with no money but from her fathers will, forced to obey her brothers every whim or live in the streets.”

“Which I assume Marcus has been very good at whining?”

“Whining” Philip corrected. “Very good at. He hates his sister. She has always been more popular than he. More importantly to his hate, she is a woman.”

“With Antonius alive, would he endanger my son?”

“It is possible” Philip admitted. “He is rather abrupt in his decision making abilities. Usually wrong, but whoa to those who inform him of this truth.”

“He should swim off East South Island beaches” Kura offered, her voice holding no humor as she selected another photograph. “Wearing blue.”

“Kura, though I understand what you mean I won’t hold to murder” Helen decided. “You can have the photographs, at least most of them. There are some I um.. Like. But no murder. At least not in the family. Unless there is no other choice. But I won’t let anyone endanger my son. Philip I can’t leave Spontoon. Ever. When Antonius is old enough I planned to send him to an America college. After that, well he can do what he wants too. But really it would be at least oh, twenty some years before he would take over that

title. Sometime in the late 1950's probably. If he wants it. What happens until then?"

"English law is a bit confusing to Americans" Philip admitted. "Still, once everything is cleared you could assign someone to care for your sons interest until he is able to take over his responsibilities."

"Someone like you?"

"ME!" Philip stood up. "Lady Whitehall. I am a simple butler. I wouldn't know how to take care of an estate. Certainly I would not be allowed into the House of Lords. Not even were I to marry Wil... Marry your sister in law right now. No, it should be a family member. Your sister in law perhaps. Or a registered person of interest. Certainly not myself."

"How long you have been in love with Willy Whitehall" Kura asked, catching both by surprise.

"Well she is a Priestess" Helen admitted, looking at the stunned greyhound. "Please sit."

"Over three years. A butler does not approach a Lady of the nobility with admissions of romantic interest. It simply isn't done." Philip sat, but he suddenly felt like a pup caught with his paw in the shortbread box.

"As one charged to represent Willy Whitehall. Is that butler then more than before?" Helen asked.

"Of course not, but I am simply here as a friend. Not..."

Helen placed a paw on Philip's arm. "Lets say we walk this path later. It is getting late, I have classes to teach in the morning. Tell me about Killian and have his sister come here tomorrow afternoon. Say six in the evening. We'll have supper and chat. Corporal, it is I have discovered almost impossible to hide much from these Priestess's. What they hear they do not forget, and they are very, very good with puzzles. Live with it and continue. You have a place to stay?"

"Not after Marcus gets out of jail." He patted his jacket on the right side. "I've had this letter of resignation written and signed for over a year now. I think it is time to use it."

"Well tell me about Killian. I'll get you something to drink. Tea, coffee? Then we will see what happens tomorrow."

"America tea, no thank you. Coffee will be quite all right. Very well. It was in the late winter of 1915 when Killian arrived at our bivouac. He'd just returned from two weeks in England, prior to that he had been on the lines..."

He was soon pleasantly surprised to discover that Helen's idea of good coffee was just like that of certain Arabic nomads.

July 8th, 1936

A coded knock on Miss Karsten's hotel room door on Casino Island the next morning alerted the bulldog. "Still dressing" she called to the locked door. "Please wait." There was a single soft sliding knock in response, another code. Grabbing her skirt she started struggling into it. Darn these new fashions. Give her a good pair of climbing pants any day. Still one must keep up appearances and the bright yellow would put off her brother should he see her. He absolutely hated the color yellow. Probably because it reminded him of his own black soul she had long ago decided. Besides, the dress formed to her figure as though it had been painted on her. Finally opening her door she was unsurprised to find Philip Rhodes waiting patently across the hall. "Well, come in. How is my limp wristed brother doing today."

Philip stepped through the doorway, carefully closing it behind him as he moved politely away from his hostess. In that dress he found Willy Whitehall very desirable. It was an effort to hide his interest. Of course it helped that, being of a lower social rank than the bulldog any interest wouldn't be noted. Not officially. "In truth Miss Whitehall" he reported. "I have not seen him since later yesterday evening. When the local Bobbies dragged him off to a cell."

"Local... Marcus. Marcus was arrested?"

"Yes Mam. Quite efficiently. Three very large gentleman of the Law came to Lady Whitehall's home. In order to remove him from her front garden. Where she left him."

"Lady.. Then she is Killian's wife."

"His widow. And mother to his son Mam."

"Amazing. I was afraid Killian would never get over his Babbet. I'm an Aunt now. That is simply wonderful. I've always dreamed of spoiling Killian's children. Sit down and tell me Philip, how did my brother die. Then tell me about his son, his wife. Oh, after all that please. What did Marcus do that finally got him arrested and what in the world did you mean by where she left him."

Taking a seat in one of the local multi-species chairs (meaning many species could sit in them, but none would ever be comfortable) the greyhound began his story. All the while desperately trying not to stare at that stunning athletic figure of a woman as he talked.

Helen Whitehall was sitting in S.I.T.H.S. teachers lounge with her lunch, a roasted duck sandwich and glass of cool milk from the cafeteria sat before her. It wasn't much, but since her son's birth she had been fighting to get her figure back. In fact was almost where she wanted to be, though since her pregnancy her chest was much larger than she liked. Still there was no reason to go overboard as yet. As she took her first bite Mrs. Jolette, the French teacher sat beside her.

"It is rumored that there was a fight at your home last night" the poodle whispered as she sat out her own meal, a bowl of home made cold soup and imported wine.

"It is rumored that a certain French teacher has been spending long hours at a certain Police Sergeants home, giving him private French lessons."

"And well along he is with his study. He has a very talented tongue for languages. Tell me please, all the gory details."

Helen nearly snorted her milk at that admission. It had been a rumor after all, but from a very reliable source. Dia-Kura herself. Dior Jolette, otherwise known as Mrs. Dour by her students, was neither the prettiest female teacher at S.I.T.H.S. or the most friendly. At least not to her students. She had arrived three years before Helen to teach French, and in Advanced French that language was all that was spoken in her classroom. Much to her students dismay of course, especially those who had not paid much attention in the basic class. What none of her students had caught onto as yet was that Dior also spoke killer Arabic. Shifting to that language Helen none to gently explained in all its gory details her rather self centered visitors fall from grace.

"So you are a Lady now" Dior gasped in Arabic. "I must now curtsy each time we meet. It is after all the social rule."

"You curtsy to me once and I'll brighten your butt."

Dior gasped, putting one paw up to her mouth as if in shock. "Your promise you will do so? I will much enjoy it. Truly."

Both women broke down into giggles. They had started their friendship when Dior had sat down beside Helen at lunch a week after classes started with the simple question "Historically. How large a French army does it take to defend Paris." A question Helen had taken as a serious one. "I don't know. Has it ever been done?"

"Non" the poodle had admitted. "French armies are very good with the surrender." It turned out that Dior's hometown had been too close to no-furs land in the last war. Rather than defend it, her nation's army had fallen back during the night while everyone was asleep. Moving several miles away to where trenches could more easily be dug, leaving the high ground to the Germans. The High ground and thousands of very shocked civilians. That decision had left Dior's hometown, and her father's farm under bombardment for years. By the end of the war nothing worth salvaging was left. Even farming was deadly dangerous as many unexploded rounds kept being found. Secretly Dior admitted that her father had helped the Germans so that he could get food and medicine for his family, which was why she now spent her life outside France. Like father like daughter her countrymen claimed. She was apparently very unwelcome at home. With Helen trapped on Spontoon as well the two had begun a friendship.

"So you then clocked his clean?"

"Cleaned his clock" Helen corrected. "And yes, my right paw still hurts. I think I bruised something."

"Maybe bruised someone's ego" Dior giggled. "I have never been about upper society. You do not mind please, that I treat you as such? For fun?"

"My son if you wish. Not me please. At least not until I get used to the idea. I'm a ranch girl, born and bred. But I really will bend you over my knee, lift that expensive skirt and tan your hide if you do it in public. I'm really uncomfortable with it. I guess. Give me time, we'll talk about it okay?"

A short time later the bell rang, bringing groans from both women. "I have the girls education physical next" Dior groaned, returning to English. "Run, run, run. You?"

"Normally a study period. Babysitting children wishing to sleep. I've been called aside to a meeting. Something about a Goddard Club." Putting her cleaned plate back into its brown paper bag Helen stood up, rubbing her forehead. "All I know about anyone named Goddard is a groundhog in America that shoots rockets into the air."

Dior snorted. "Lady Whitehall's Rocket Club. It sounds so" she giggled, a blush appearing around her eyes. "What are rockets?"

"Long tubular things that shoot flame out one end and fly unto the air. Usually."

Dior wiped her bowl with a linen napkin before returning it, and the thermos that had held her soup into her wicker lunch basket. "I must one day see this shooting tube. Now though. It is back to the rock grinder."

"Grindstone" Helen corrected automatically, though Dior's giggle informed her that the French woman was pulling her tail again.

Later that afternoon Helen was at home grading papers when yet another knock came to her front door. Anticipating a rather ticked off male bulldog she grabbed the heavy black painted statue of Kali as she went to answer. Instead she was greeted by the greyhound Philip and a athletic looking female bulldog wearing a really bright yellow sundress. So bright it hurt the Afghans eyes with reflected sunlight.

Philip bowed slightly for a moment. "Lady Helen Whitehall. May I please introduce to you Miss Willette Elizabeth Parker Whitehall. Your husbands only sister."

"Willette?" Helen asked.

"Willette" the yellow dressed bulldog admitted. "If you use it again" she warned with a soft growl. "I shall be forced to challenge you to a duel. Ostrich feathers at ten paces."

"Willy is notoriously ticklish" Philip explained. "May we visit?"

"Please do come in out of the sun. Philip, your employer. Is he well?"

"My ex-employer? Lady Whitehall. Due to the sensitivity of those ears about me I..."

"The boys doubled over with ice in his lap" Willy cut in as she entered. "What did you use on him, a cricket bat?"

"My left knee" Helen admitted.

"Should have followed with the right. Oh well, too late now. My, what a.. delightful home you have lady Whitehall."

Helen shrugged, ignoring the clutter. "Three crates of Killian's things came in from India. Kura and I spent a whole day going through them yesterday. I think we dented the first box. There are the two from America, another large one from France, two small boxes from Indo-China, another from Australia, four from Piccupac, a small package snuck out of a rather nasty little country I won't name, a vase from Cipangu... The list seems endless. I have an entire bedroom devoted to crates, boxes, large envelopes and such. It seems that every time anyone finds out Killian died and that his widow settled in Spontoon another package soon arrives addressed to 'Mrs Killian Whitehall, Spontoon Island.' It's a bit overwhelming. Didn't your brother ever throw anything away? One box was nothing but jungle clothing. Another nearly fifty notebooks crammed with his writing. And Willy..."

"Yes Lady Whitehall?"

"If you call me Lady Whitehall one more time I am going to scream, then make you settle Antonius back down. Since you haven't any milk its going to take you a long embarrassing time. Its Helen. Please?"

"Helen it is then. My brothers son, Antonius? His full name? May I see him?"

"Antonius is asleep right now, just drifted off. By his schedule he should awaken in another three hours. I have so far found motherhood to be very tiring. His full name is Antonius James Whitehall."

"Any relationship to a certain Prussian? Friend of my late brother."

"Very."

"You're a good woman Helen. He deserved that. Killian would have felt that right, and James. Killian's name too?"

Helen offered chairs to her guests, settling down herself before answering. "He deserves his fathers name, his father deserves to be remembered. Now considering that the previous Whitehall who visited was rather uncivilized I really must ask your reasons for visiting."

Willy looked to Philip, who met her gaze, then back to Helen. "I'll be blunt. To find out if your really my brothers wife and that's my brothers son. That said" she held up both paws, palm out to forestall Helen's

expected response. "To stop my power hungry brother from ruining the one thing my brother did right since leaving England for the last time. Namely marrying for love and fathering a child."

Helen reached across her table, picking up a manila envelope. "For your first question, a very legal photographic copy of our marriage license and Antonius's birth certificate. I thought you would want to see them so I picked them up this afternoon on my break." She laid the envelope into Willy's lap. "I was very afraid I would lose Antonius. He was only five months when he was born. But he was so large I almost had to have a caesarian."

Willy started to open the envelope. "Five months is correct for an English Bulldog or didn't anyone tell you."

"Five? Its seven months for Afghans" Helen gasped.

Pulling out the two sheets of paper Willy started to read. "We're a bit larger than the average hound" she explained as she read. "Normally tougher too. With the exception of Marcus who came out like a tube of toothpaste. Should have thrown him back." She offered one sheet to Philip, reading the second. "Philips not really a butler Helen. He is a rather respected Barrister. What you call a lawyer. In truth he's been a butler for only a very little time. Since half a year before fathers death."

Silence crowded the room while Helen awaited their verdict. Finally Willy returned the sheets to their envelope, returning it to Helen. "I looked up Emperor for life Billy Joe Bob Two Toes when I saw the English copy of your marriage certificate. He's the legal ruler of Saint James and a few adjoining islands. Bit of a party animal I understand, but serious when it comes to legal papers. Helen, I fully accept you as my sister in law and Antonius as my nephew. Any claims I have on my family estates, money or any other powers I hereby officially lay aside. Philip says there may be three more children?"

"Their mothers are Chi, Sheen and Shazeer. Chi and Sheen are sisters. Pandas in fact. Shazeer is a fennec. I have no last names for any of them, nor hometowns nor where they went when we escaped. They were slaves to a group Killian was trying to expose. It's how we met. That same group had me, but no intentions of slavery I'm afraid. Those three escaped to deep China. As I informed Philip, it would take an army to locate them. Those whom they served are not good people."

"Philip informs me my brother did not marry any of these three. If that is true, though I wish my relations well they have no claim upon the Whitehall estates. In truth though I would never turn them away though. Family is important and I freely grant them the Whitehall name should they desire to carry it. Could I get a message to them?"

"If there was any way, I would be dead a week before they got it. So would Antonius" Helen warned. "Killian did not leave that group on friendly terms, though they did not know his true name or profession. Only that he was English."

"Tong?" Willy asked.

"Much, much worse. Even the Tong fear them. Please don't make me explain. All I want to say about it in warning is they killed my best friend less than ten feet away from me without my knowledge. Less that a week after our school group arrived in China and I was next on their list. After a bit of fattening up. We were selected before we left America by the instructor who sent us. Sold in fact. We never suspected a thing. They make the Thuggee cult look like angels. Killian saved my life, he gave me a new life and I intend to insure that his son grows up to adulthood."

Willy leaned back, obviously mulling over Helen's words as she looked down into her paws. Finally she looked up again. "Then this question is closed between us. I will take your unspoken warning to not travel to China. What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I teach at S.I.T.H.S. I have accepted the position as Teacher Advisor to a Goddard club. There is a first meeting after school tomorrow. I cannot possibly miss that."

Philip leaned forward. "Could you miss the first half of school?"

"With good reason, yes."

"Good" the greyhound decided. "Bring your son to the.. No, I'll meet you here at nine am. I will escort you and your son to the English Consulate. We will take those papers with us. Miss Whitehall will meet us there with her real passport and identification papers. By noon you will legally be Lady Whitehall, responsible for the legal estates, duties and responsibilities of your husbands family until Antonius is twenty-one. Before you ask, what Willy gets out of this is freedom from under her brothers satanic thumb. Though she will then be under your thumb of course. Marcus ends up with the house in Newcastle and whatever annual income you set for him. There is a seat in the House of Lords that has to be filled. If you want your sister in law can fill it or it can remain empty until your son is old enough to take possession. Willy is owed by her father a small cottage in the Eastern Fells and I believe the total was ten thousand pounds, though in honesty I do not believe that the Whitehall accounts have that much to spare anymore."

"I thought that the House of Lords is male only" Helen asked.

"Is, usually" Willy answered. "Been known to have women in it but not often. No rule against it, but we tend to get married off so our husbands take our place. As long as they are of the Gentry of course."

Helen thought over her options. A title would be worthless here in Spontoan, but it was starting to sound like fun to have. She kind of liked Willy already and was dead certain she hated Marcus. But..."Does Marcus really deserve to be cut out" she asked.

"Marcus spends his time lording over the servants, then having expensive parties for his friends. He has been spending the family fortune like water until, at this moment, we are rather tight on funds" Willy reported. "Should he continue at this rate the Whitehall family will be bankrupt in seven years. Estates sold with nothing but a worthless title to our names in less than ten."

Helen tapped her claws on the table, a habit she was beginning to pick up from her students. "Look. So he's a rogue. Certainly his lifestyle doesn't bother me in the least. But all I know about this is what you've told me and my one encounter with him. I certainly don't like him. I don't need any money or a title. I simply can't make that kind of decision on such little information. All right then I will meet you at the consulate. But under one condition."

"That being" Willy asked.

"If this turns out to be legal. If your brother really turns out to be that big a cad, and I'll want Pinkerton reports about everything first. Then Marcus gets a flat settlement. Enough that, if he handles it right will keep him out of the poorhouse just long enough to find gainful employment. No more than four months at best. If it turns out your lying Willy, and I'm not saying you are. But if it does, you get the same."

"Sink or swim" Philip mused. "You must understand that he will do all he can to return to power."

Helen tapped a claw on her table again. "Limited funds, creditors on case, no tap to your family fortune. Loss of title, disowned. Yes I think I understand. But whomever gets the short end of this stick will be crippled. If they misstep I am certain that English law is rather harsh. Listen, all I ever wanted to do after Killian died beside me was to live here with my son. Watch him grow up and then die peacefully in my bed so I can rejoin Killian. Now you three show up." She waved to the photo now mounted on her wall. "All I've wanted is this home, to share with Antonius, Babbet and I. With our memories."

"That's Babbet" Willy asked, standing to approach the photograph. "I never got to meet her, she wouldn't leave France and well, English women traveling into the war zone were of two types. I'm neither. My god she was beautiful, and her eyes..." Willy turned from the photo to stare at Helen. "You both have the same kind of eyes. You understand Helen, this is a part of her brother a sister rarely learns. What part of a woman attracts him. I'd always assumed the normal. Legs, chest, figure... but eyes. I'd never really seriously considered that." Like most, once she'd made hard eye contact with Helen she found it difficult to break that gaze, it took some effort to do so. "Wow... That's amazing. Look, Pinkerton probably has an agency here on Spontoan. I'll send Philip to find out, to get the papers so I can authorize what you want. But Helen. I've barely enough money to stay a week then get home. Will they accept my signature for future payment?"

"I'll foot the bill. Killian left me enough to start my own aviation publishing company. I'm small right now, but I'm growing. I can afford it. As long as it isn't too expensive."

Willy's giggle caught Helen off guard. "What?"

"If you were any bigger" the bulldog laughed. "You'd have, as mother put it once, endless tracts of land." She barely dodged the notebook Helen tossed at her.

Helen blushed, holding her arms over her chest. "Look, being pregnant makes you grow some. I knew that. But no one said I'd look like a tart with water balloon's under her blouse. Antonius isn't helping. The more he feeds the more I seem to swell."

"Look at Philip" Willy managed through her own laughter. Turning her head Helen realized that the polite greyhound was as red under his fur as a tomato. "Hey, I'll shrink. Some. When Antonius is weaned and I dry up. Its just..." She couldn't help it. "I'm getting all chewed up and it causes the tissues to swell, you understand?"

Philip gurked. Well gurr was the sound he seemed to make. Then his eyes rolled and he collapsed out of his seat. Willy was beside him in a second, loosening his tie and collar. "Just fainted" she reported with another giggle. "I do believe the boys never been with a woman."

"Butler, soldier, lawyer Butler" Helen ticked off, fighting not to crack up. "I don't seem to find girlfriend in there anywhere. But he was at the Somme, so he had to have been with a girl sometime. You ought to know though. Kura caught him out. He's in love with you."

"With me?" Willy repeated shocked. "Him, and me telling him all my dirty little secrets? Why I ought to..."

"Marry him?"

Willy sat again, her body still shaking with laughter. "Nothing quite that drastic. If he won't keep his muzzle shut I can always close it for him. You see I made an oath. If a man can't stand up to me, preferably in paw to paw combat I'm not about to marry him. But Philip is cute. And he has been part of a lot of my fantasies. Philip has been around our family since just before the War. But he's fifteen years older than me."

"So give the boy a fair chance. Now seriously. How bad is it living with your brother in charge."

"I feel like I'm five years old. I have to beg money just to buy new clothes to replace my old ones. When I'm not home he's in my things, reading my letters. My diary. Some of my mail never gets to me. I've had to have certain people write me at a friends home." She reached out with one foot, tapping Philip's knee. A moan was her only response. "Last Winter I overheard him talking with an Arabic man, about how much English girls sell for in Algiers markets."

"You speak Arabic" Helen asked in that language.

"Fluently" Willy replied in the same tongue. "What a delight, you do as well."

"Lover there, does he?"

"Two words, yes and no."

Helen grinned. "Well, its nice to know we can chat in front of him. How much do English girls go for in Algiers."

"Eight thousand pounds on average. Up to thirty thousand if they are maidens, from blooded families and comely. The Arabic countries have no real love for England. Holding their daughters as helpless slaves, especially important families daughters is a source of pride to them."

Philip woke, staring about wild eyed a moment. "What?" Both women ignored him.

"At least they keep their pelts" Helen slipped as she replied, sticking her tongue out at the greyhound. "Tea or coffee?"

"Coffee please. American tea is horrible."

"This is Cipangu tea, rather different."

Willy thought about it, then shook her head no. "Later perhaps. After Pinkerton's reports are in your paws." She suddenly switched to English. "Stop dusting the floor Philip, its uncomely."

"Stop what" the greyhound gasped. "I'll have you know I dropped a farthing. They are very difficult to come by. I simply must find it."

"I like him" Helen decided, still speaking Arabic.

"He does have potential" Willy agreed, slipping back into the language with ease. "Maybe I will give him a chance. A farthing, of all the cheek." Then she too stuck her tongue out.

"Seriously though" Helen asked, back into English. "How do we delay your brothers legal actions until those reports get here."

"That in itself is rather simple" Philip answered, abruptly holding up a coin. "Ah, found it."

"Don't play cards with him" Helen warned Willy. "If he's half as good as Killian was..."

"I taught Killian" Philip announced proudly, returning to his chair as he pocked the coin.

Willy laughed again. "Which explains how Killian took nearly eight hundred from father the last time they played. Before the disaster. Now tell me my dear Butler. How do we distract Marcus for the weeks it will take Pinkertons to do their investigations."

"Find him a companion. He averages four weeks of undying hopeless love before he drops them."

"Well there are some girls with hunting licenses I know" Helen admitted. "I can pay them, pay to keep you here four weeks. There is a resort who's name was given me, if you don't mind no servants. About middle of the road quality but no one asks where your going or when you'll be back."

"Not girls" Philip corrected softly.

"Oh... Uh..." Helen looked to Willy. "Forgot. Guess we ask Kura then. She must have some contacts. Of course I could ask Illie to put him in the hospital." She stood, heading for her kitchen.

"Illie?" her visitors asked in unison.

Helen opened a cabinet for her coffee pot, enjoying herself. "Arctic white fox. Assassin. Speaks Cantonese, re-learning Spontoon. Killian saved her life as well. She claims she owes him her soul, and the only way for her to repay him is to serve me when I need. I saw her work once. Twelve ferrets. Slit their throats every one. Not a single sound."

"Sounds like my Aunt Lucy" Philip grumbled. "That's true?"

"Its true, but she's actually a very nice woman. She was captured at five then turned into a slave. She hadn't any freedom until Killian gave it too her."

Philip reached out to touch Willy's paw. "That kind of debt" he warned the bulldog. "Its never paid. All right. We better go now."

"I promised Willy coffee. You can go Philip but I want to chat with her first." Crying broke into their conversation. Setting the water to boil Helen headed for the nursery. "Probably needs a dyper, and lunch number three."

Standing up Willy joined Helen. "You've nothing to worry about Helen" Willy announced. "I will personally insure that my brothers life is filled with hedgerows concerning you until this is over. Now please, may I see my brothers son?"

Marcus Whitehall hobbled across his room on Casino Island to the toilet. It was getting late and still Philip had not returned from his mission to send that message. He missed the envelope laying in plain view on a table as he painfully made his way across the room. Where was the man. "I will fire him upon our return to England" the bulldog announce to his empty rooms. "Then I'm suing that tart for whatever she has after I take my dead brothers property from her. Then maybe I'll just shoot her." Satisfied he made his way to the loo. A few minutes later a blood curdling scream came through that closed door as an abused urinary tract met acidic urine for the first time since feeling returned.

It was going to be several days before Marcus Whitehall felt like leaving his rooms. By then his advantage would be long gone.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

July 9th, 1936

Escorted by Philip, Willy and Illie, the latter who had shown up that morning as though the mist had brought her, Helen Whitehall carried her son and papers into the English Consulate on Casino Island. It was an eerie feeling for the American. She had in her life never been to England, yet according to international law she was standing on English soil in the nation of Spontoon while in the middle of the Nimitz Sea. She was also an English Citizen, and a member of the nobility.

"May I help you" a middle aged female hedgehog asked. A nameplate next to her declared her as Alice K. Heartford.

"Yes, of course you may" Willy answered. "I am Willette Elizabeth Parker Whitehall. This is Lady Helen Maggy Whitehall, her son Antonius James Whitehall. Heir to the Whitehall name and Estates. Lady Whitehall's personal friend and bodyguard Illie and our family Barrister. The Honored Philip Walker Rhodes. We require the time of your Consulate General, if we may."

"Lord Farrson has a rather busy schedule" the hedgehog explained. "If you could come back next week? I'm certain I would be able to schedule you in for half an hour."

"Meaning he over drank last night and desires not to be bothered until the afternoon" Willy commented. "Please inform the distinguished gentleman that this is a matter of inheritance, family obligation, the House of Lords and..." She pointedly looked to the Arctic White Fox standing just a step away from Helen. "Possibly his head. Both of them. If he does not see us within five minutes."

Standing in shock the hedgehog pulled herself up to her full, perhaps four and a half foot height. "Miss Whitehall. One does not simply walk into ones Consulate to threaten the Consoler General."

"Told you we should have brought Kura" Willy remarked to Helen. "Instead of your pet Assassin."

"Assassin!" the hedgehog squeaked. "In the consulate!"

Turning back to the woman Willy simply grinned, showing teeth. "Oh please. She's only killed a couple hundred furs single pawed. It isn't like she's really that dangerous or anything."

Illie turned to Helen. "*What is she telling that woman*" the fox asked in her winter dark voice. "*She is most frightened. She should not be.*"

Helen pulled her son closer to her, answering in Illie's Cantonese. "*She is trying to use you as a wedge. I believe she might even suggest you might want the hedgehog for lunch. Or as lunch. I do not approve of this, but I don't know how to act in high society. I'm just a ranch girl.*"

"Lunch? No thank you. Too many quills" Illie explained. "Now that cat over there." She pointed to a young female tabby who was watching them, dozens of folders in her arms. "*She is pretty. Perhaps I might one day find a friend who could help me look pretty like her. Perhaps even her. She is very cute.*"

Helen gasped, turning pale. "You wouldn't."

"Words cause fear, not harm" Illie explained. "*I have no desire to harm anyone. Certainly not to eat anyone. My only desire is to protect you and your son. But truth is Helen, I am most lonely. I have never*

been alone in my life. Now I find I must live in a hut alone, as even my mother is uncomfortable with me. You have shown me a need for companionship I was not aware of."

She had, Helen noted, completely avoided the original question as she had many others. Turning away from Illie she switched to English. "Willy. I believe we are going about this all wrong. May I speak please?"

"Of course Lady Whitehall" the bulldog agreed, stepping aside and back one step.

Turning her full attention to the still frightened hedgehog Helen offered her best smile. "Please, Illie is here only to protect my son and myself. It is an obligation she owes Killian, my deceased husband. I am a widow, these two came to my home to determine if I was legally married to Killian. If so it would mean that the family estates, responsibilities, duties and such fall upon my shoulders. I was born in America but I'm an honorary Spontoon Citizen. A resident in asylum. My son currently holds Spontoon, American and English citizenship. I'll be honest with you. I don't care about all this but its Killian's bequest. I can't ignore my son's rights. Now please. Is there someone official we can chat with who can help us? I have to be back at S.I.T.H.S. to teach my Physics class by one pm."

"Killian? The news writer?" Coming from behind her desk the hedgehog brought with her a smile. "I had the biggest crush on him when he spoke at my school during the war. This is his son?" She missed the change in balance as Illie prepared to defend if need-be.

"His name is Antonious" Helen repeated. "You are" she asked, nodding towards the nameplate.

"Alice. Alice Heartford." She reached out to gently touch the small furry bundle in Helen's arms. "You have no idea how many young female journalism majors wanted to be in your shoes. To have a child by the great Killian Whitehall. Your so lucky." Stepping back she stared at Willy. "It is certain your no Lady" she told the bulldog. "You are correct of course, it will be afternoon before the Consoler General is functional. Still I can get you in to see the Assistant Consoler. He's busy shining his shoes if I recall his schedule. A few minutes?"

"No lunch?" Illie asked, catching Helen off guard by her unexpected humor.

"No lunch" Alice replied in perfect Cantonese. *"Though I will be most certain to pass your special interest on to young Millicent. That snobbish little fluff of tail could use some taking down. She and her airs. You'll find her wandering the upper class areas when not in the Embassy. Should she vanish for a weekend none would bother hunting her. As long as she returned unharmed Monday morning."*

Helen giggled. "Shot down in flames" she managed, seeing Willy's expression at Alice's assault, and her knowledge of Cantonese.

"A bit aggressive am I" the bulldog admitted. "I have had to build up a great deal of aggression since fathers passing. Regrettably, I seem to be now taking it out on those who do not deserve it. Very well, I shall do my best to curb my anger. My apologies Miss Heartford. It was uncivilized of me. I am simply very pressed for time."

"Accepted" Alice agreed. "Its Mrs. My husband is working down in the ultra do not admit it exists secret potted plants area, so please don't tell anyone I told you. Now let me get your little army in to see whom you need to see."

A touch less than ten minutes later the five were settled in to a spacious, but cluttered office. While there were plenty of seats, Illie excused herself to stand just away from the door and to one side. Otherwise it appeared as any such meeting might.

"I am sorry that Lord Farrson is indisposed" a middle aged border collie offered as he settled down after greeting them. "I'm Jacob Dassher, his second in blame, chief toady and primary scapegoat. Now Lady Whitehall, or until we are certain, supposed Lady Whitehall." He glanced toward Willy, managing a smile. "Legalities please Miss Whitehall. In truth we have been expecting this meeting ever since a certain marriage certificate arrived. London has expressed interest, wondering what has taken so long for Mrs. Whitehall to press her claim. No one suspected that she was completely unaware of her position. My failing I must admit."

"Lord Farrson's failing" Willy corrected. "As I recall one of his grandsons is a very close friend of my brother Marcus. I believe that would be Frederic Wilhelm something or the other."

"Ah, I was unaware of that fact. It has been years since I left London. I am afraid that I am quite out of the social scene at present. Being here one tends to see life with a much different view. A slower view I am afraid."

"Nothing has really changed" Willy admitted. "The same back stabbing, garroting, offers to send supposed friends daughters to Saint T's for education."

"I see. My sisters best friend went to Saint. T's for a birthday party last Summer. She's still learning how to walk again." Jacob opened a drawer in his desk, bringing out a large official looking package. "It may surprise you Mrs. Whitehall but in some areas English Civil Service does excel. These are the reports we have on you, your husband, St. James Island, your friend Illie there whom I have no intention of angering thank you. More importantly exactly what happened to your friend Ruth. What blade hangs over you, how your husband was involved in it all."

Helen gasped in horror, holding her son so tightly that he whimpered in his sleep. "If you know then they know. I'll have to leave Spontoan. Right now."

"Not true Mrs. Whitehall. You see a lot of this data came from the Spontoan government. Governments do share information about groups of interest and trust me. That group is very much most governments interest. It may please you to know that Madam Xiùme's group is, as of a few days ago known by the Japanese Army. Thanks very much to the activities of one small group of Spontoan citizens. I believe that Honored Mother Oharu is among them. She does seem to create quite a stir wherever she goes. I do not hesitate to say that within the month that establishment will be cleared out. To a fur. Your name isn't in these reports. Actually official and unofficial reports have it that certain books were located in a wrecked aircraft on the New Guinea coast, that three badly burned bodies were buried beside that self same wreckage."

"If you know so much, why not do something about them?"

Jacob's expression became very serious. "Please Mrs. Whitehall. These furs are world wide. In a good, and I mean good year we might hear rumor of one agent. Once a generation mayhap a House. Once we hear of them, we have to track down which country, where in that country. Do they have ties to the government, most do. It is extremely hard to track these creatures down. If they get even a hint any law enforcement might suspect them they vanish. Or more often the investigators vanish. Much of the Orient, especially China, Manchuko and Indochina are impossible to enter. Which is why these places, and others in Africa and South America are haven's for them. Your husband's books told us not only of the China House but of one hunter in Australia. Even a name. That one no longer breaths I am happy to say. Also that there is a group in a certain American city. This is more solid information at one time than we have had, in total over the last thirty-five years. By we I mean the entire world community. Yet we suspect that there are over a thousand such Houses world wide. If we released all the information that has been collected in over a thousand years it would only cause world wide panic. Millions would die, nothing useful would occur and they would still be in business. They have been in business since before China became civilized, long before they became a single nation. Much before according to what we know. Perhaps even back to our stone age."

"I see. I..." Helen absently scratched her sons ear, causing him to press against her fingers in his pleasure. "I hadn't thought about that."

"It's nice to see someone understands. Now that we have that filthy business behind us, your paperwork is in full order. What I need is a Whitehall family member to swear that you are who you are, your son is who you say he is. Once that is done I will send the original files off to London by diplomatic pouch. Seeing as my superior apparently has a personal interest that you not become Lady Whitehall I believe that this information will simply slip him by."

He turned his attention to Willy. "You are Willette Elizabeth Parker Whitehall, only daughter to Lord Arthur Kingsman Phillip Whitehall and Dame Judith Harkness Burns-Whitehall?"

"I am" Willy agreed. "Though I prefer Willy."

"In other conditions I would be delighted to call you Willy Miss Whitehall. As long as my wife is with me at the time. Now, your Barrister?"

"Philip Walker Rhodes sir" the greyhound answered. "I must warn you that I have not stood before the bench in over three years."

"Doesn't matter. Once a Barrister, always a Barrister. What is your place in all this?"

Carefully Philip explained all he had told Helen, finishing with "Now that my employment with the remaining adult male Whitehall is at an end I have decided to return to the Law. I find it a much cleaner atmosphere to deal with."

"So. No love lost with the brother Marcus" Jacob observed. He pulled out a large folder from the legal case on his desk. "Mr. Rhodes. If you would be so kind as to read through this. Miss Whitehall, you have your passport?"

"Passport" Willy echoed, placing the document from her purse on Jacob's desk. "Copy of birth certificate. Copy of fathers will. According to Marcus I am not supposed to have even that."

"Very good. This will save time. Mrs. Whitehall?"

"I don't have a passport or a copy of my birth certificate" Helen admitted. She nodded to Willy, who dug in her purse again. "Marriage licence, Antonius's birth certificate and my papers allowing me to live and work on Spontoan. Please be careful with those, they are the only copies I have."

"How hard would it be to get a copy of your birth certificate" Jacob asked.

"Impossible. Any attempt will alert the man who sold Ruth and I. He would then notify that House."

"Which means it will only be a bit difficult. Well, I know the exact man for that job. It isn't that important of course. By the way, do you know the name of your antagonist?"

"It would have to be one of four men, any of whom could have done that filthy deed. As to which, I don't have a clue."

"Write their names down, I'll pass the information to Two Red Stones. You never heard that name from me. Write down where your birth certificate can be found, I'll turn that over to the Major. He's quite the smooth talker. Someone living above their means will vanish from that school. This I will assure you. Now..." He pulled several forms from that same file. "Miss Whitehall, would you fill this out. Mrs. Whitehall, yours please? Basically all they are saying is what has already been said here. What is the truth."

Helen looked at the pile of forms, shifted her son, then looked to Illie. "*Please hold him*" she asked.

For the first time since Helen had met the fox Illie looked completely out of her depth. "*Not like a sack of potatoes*" Helen laughed, standing to settle her son in the other women's arms. "*Like this.*" Happy with how Illie was holding her son she turned to the forms. "Triplicate right?"

"Correct, please fill each form out exactly as the others are."

"Two questions" Willy asked as she started filling in the first page. "If you will allow."

"Certainly. What interests you" Jacob allowed.

"You are not a simple Assistant, are you."

Jacob laughed. "Are you insinuating that the Consular General is not fully in power within his own Consulate? Please Miss Whitehall. I will not feed your curiosity with false information. Your second question?"

"Very well. All this is very complex. It certainly wasn't put together in a few minutes. Not even a few days. Who warned you we were coming?"

"Ah. Well, for that I must refer you to your Barrister. It seems that he and my father served together during the war. A word to father became a demand to me." Jacob smiled grimly. "The Great War cost us a generation of young men. It also created a bonding between classes that has never existed before. Your brother was a famous man among our troops, even more so after the war when he exposed many errors caused by certain hereditary leaders. Trust me in this Miss Whitehall, there is not a serving officer who knew him that does not worship Killian Whitehall. News of his death struck many of them hard. It was after Gallipoli, he had reported there the entire campaign, that he arrived at the Somme. Miss Whitehall, your brother's bravery. An unarmed non-combatant dragging eight badly wounded soldiers from no man's land, himself injured by shell splinters, then standing up to Major Gyward with the idiot swinging his saber like a toy trying to send injured troops from the aid station back over the top. To those troops and others he was a figure of awe."

"If you do not mind my asking, where were you during that war" Helen asked, herself now interested. This was something else she hadn't known about her husband.

"At five thousand feet usually. Flying whatever rickety kite was available at the time. I must admit I was never anywhere near the Somme, though I was twice shot down behind enemy lines." He paused, chuckled. "Okay, once shot down, once so sick from acrobatics after combat that I mistook my landing field. But you didn't hear that information from me either. No, I never killed anyone. Simply wasn't good enough I guess."

Sometime later Willy sat her pen down, flexing a cramping paw before talking. "I believe we are done here for now" she announced. "We have one more place to go, with very little time. If you will allow?"

"Certainly" Jacob agreed. "Though you will have to hurry Mrs. Whitehall. It does take a specific amount of time to cross from Casino to Moon Island."

Standing Helen straightened her dress, amazed that her son had slept through it all. "Not always. There is always a certain tug available."

"With your son?"

"No, not with my son. Illie would take him home." She noticed the stricken look on Illie's usually impassive face. "*Oh come on girl*" she continued in Cantonese. "*He's just a baby. It's not like he'll pull a gun out*"

and shoot at you."

"*So you claim*" the fox answered.

Helen shrugged. "*Well, it does depend upon how you use the word gun. And I thought you didn't understand English.*"

"*A few words, like baby*" Illie admitted. "*We will go now?*"

"*One last stop, then back to work.*"

"*That is good. You take son now.*"

Helen laughed. "*Your like a frightened little girl sometimes. The rest of the time you scare my soul.*"

"*As it should be.*"

Looking back to Jacob Helen winked. "Big bad assassin is scared to death of babies" she explained.

"I shall recall that, should she come after me. I should have some answers for you all in a few weeks. Until then."

Pinkertons was anticlimactic. A laid back clerk took their information, accepted a bank draft from Helen then wished them on their way. "When we have something Mrs. Whitehall we'll send an agent over to your home. Until then, please do not make any legal contacts with any persons involved. I do warn you that you should find yourself a lawyer." As they left Helen was unaware of the flurry of activity occurring behind her. Or the runners headed out to local agents.

Somewhere in the Eastern Naguma Sea on an unnamed islet Nikki worked on her aircrafts engine while Oharu and Mark lay under the shade of a wing. This little islet was one of tens of thousands in the ocean, too small to have more than a pawful of trees and no fresh water other than that thin layer of rainwater just under the sand. Certainly not a place anyone with brains would try to live, though the ruins of a stone building proved that there were always furs with no brains. It was a wonderful beach, sliding very shallowly into a warm ocean. Currently Malou and Karen Davies were enjoying playing in that water. Karen was acting more like a little girl, though more often now the adult shown through.

"You did ahn artful job Honored Mother" Mark observed. "Ah wouldah thought she was lost forever. Yet you brought her back."

"Not all" Oharu admitted. "Much still remains hidden. She must finish journey herself now."

"No miracles then?"

"I am not Goddess" the mouse reminded her groups only male. "I may lead, sometimes. I cannot pull from darkness everything."

"And she'll always fear Nikki won't she."

"Nikki. All mares" Oharu admitted. "It was her free choice. Death or this."

Mark looked up above him, admiring the mares well shaped lower half from below. "I'd rather die than lose part of myself" he decided.

"As would I. Yet choice was her's. To hide within false life created for mission, or take to grave all she and group learned. A very hard choice to make."

Mark stopped his impossible fantasies about Nikki at Oharu's words. "False self? You mean she had a cover story?"

"What is cover story" the mouse asked.

"It means that you go into something as someone you are not. Say, as a photographer. People build an entire life around you, background, work, friends, family and employment. All false. If someone looks into your supposed past it seems real."

"That yes" she agreed. "It was cover story. As you say."

"So they got nothing after all. What a rip."

"Rip?"

Mark sat up, he'd rested enough from the pounding sun and by now Nikki would need to recover from the heat as well. "It means a fine joke." Standing he walked around the wing, brushing sand from his fur as he moved. "Nikki, what have you found?"

"Someon stuk water inna fuel" the mare reported. "Ah got that water out, but noh from tha tanks. Yah can get yer eyes offa mah tail long enough tah do thah?"

"Me?" Mark gasped. "Watch your tail? Nikki you wound me. I thought we were friends."

"Ahn chrome steel's lik ah mirror. Cannayah get tha drains?"

"I will and I apologize."

"Oh don pologize. Ah mah noh be innerested, buh ah do lik tha be looked aht. Jus no touchin. Lookin yah can do all yah wahn, yer ah gran frien."

Opening a wing access panel Mark searched for the fuel drain. "Nikki. When I'm ready to have my head ripped off and shoved up my tail I'll touch you. Ah..." A sound of liquid hitting sand followed.

"Yah pinnin?"

"Pah'leeze..." Mark answered. "In front of an Honored Mother? I'd rather try to steal a kiss from you Nikki."

"Jus jokin" the mare laughed. She returned to her work, mounting a new fuel filter in place of the waterlogged one. That one was currently on the wing with its twin from the other tank, both draining and drying out though they were black as night not the orange tan they should be. That worried the mare more than water in her fuel. Still there was no reason to throw away something that could be used in an emergency later. More importantly she had only one more fuel filter in her spares locker.

Meanwhile Malou was watching Karen. Though the English rabbit seemed all right now there were times when she would suddenly stop and look around, as if hunting something. With Nikki out of sight working on the plane's ailing engine Karen had seemed calmer. Yet there was at least another day, perhaps two before they would reach Spontoan. Even flying the most direct route. "*There is something you need*" she asked in Cantonese.

"I am not certain" Karen answered. *"I feel something or someone should be with me. I cannot remember."*

"I am with you." There was nothing else the Chinese woman could do, so she just smiled and remained close. Though here the water was only hip deep, further out it dropped to neck deep then rose again to another, much smaller islet. But the current between those islets could be dangerous, or perfectly safe. Not knowing the Persian decided to assume it wasn't safe, so she gently herded the confused lop eared rabbit away from any possible danger. Getting her back into the aircraft with Nikki's scent heavy about was going to prove a serious challenge.

"She's almost looks lost" Mark noted from the opposite wing where he and Nikki had moved to purge the second fuel tank. He wasn't talking about the rabbit, his eyes were on Oharu who had walked to the islets other end.

"Don bother er" Nikki explained, lowering her voice. "'s upset aboh wah I don tah tha Englinder. Thin's she's responsible. Ahn er season is still stron. She's fightin both."

"I see." More water started draining from the second tank. They had landed several hours ago so by now most of the hated water had settled to each tanks lowest point, where the purge lines were. "Honored Mother could use some R&R of her own I think." He tasted the draining water. "Fresh, at least no salt problems. I'll kill the chap who did this. We paid good Japanese confiscated English pounds for fuel. Not water."

Nikki shook her head violently, her dark black main tossing as if in a windstorm. "Beher idea. Les jus warn eveone. No business, nah money. Teach 'em."

"I guess so. Can we make it to our next stop with this trash in our tanks? Even if we got it all out your going to need an overhaul."

Nikki patted the aircrafts skin with one paw. "LOUISE will ge us ome" she promised. Then she looked back at Oharu, now standing as near the ocean as Nikki had ever seen her. She did look lost. In fact she looked like she had the weight of Atlas on her shoulders. Yet by the time they were ready to go the mouse looked as fresh as anyone. That more than anything bothered the mare and her partner. To be overburdened was no shame. To hide it invited total failure. "Yah gonna sleep tah-nah" she ordered the mouse. Turning to Malou Nikki placed her paws on the feline's cheeks, shifting to Cantonese for a moment. Knowing Oharu understood not one word of that language she informed her love of what had to be done. *"Yah mak sur she sleeps. Whaever yah gotta do. Whaever. She's still in seson. Unnerstan?"*

Malou nodded, looked back to the aircrafts tail where Karen Davies was hiding in the farthest seat, then to Oharu. *"She will sleep my love. On my word."*

They had barely taken off when both pilots grimaced. Something was still wrong with their fuel from the sounds their engines made. Mark pulled out a chart. "Saint James is about half an hour away" he quickly announced. "Better head for there. I'm certain now that we need a complete purge. Twelve degrees to Starboard."

"Prob' overhaul tah" Nikki agreed. She leaned out to yell to her passengers. "M'Lou, hol tha thought. Everone buckle. We gots problems. Headed fer 'aint James." After that she turned her attention to nothing but flying her ailing aircraft. "If ah ever get hopl..." she cursed as she fought for altitude.

July 10th, 1936

Fridays were always looked forward to by all students and teachers. Helen Whitehall had nothing over any other teacher in that respect. Both she and her students were looking forward to the weekend,

playing, getting involved with the tourists or nothing more than helping at home. So far the weather had held well though there were occasional showers. At the moment those showers were late at night and welcome for their coolness. Checking her class roster Helen flicked her tail. Last class of the last day before weekend and she would have to assign special work.

"Class" she stated, looking up to face those expectant young eyes. "It is my regret that I must assign work for this weekend, as I have with all my classes this week. This fault is my own. I apologize for it. Had we remained upon schedule you would be free of me for two days. Do to my personal problems we are behind." Walking away from her desk she turned to face the blackboard, fully aware of the groans. Without remark she wrote the work needed to be done, then turned to face her class. "Any questions?"

A dozen or more paws shot up instantly. She paused, then chose her worst student. "Yes Mr. Whitecrow, your question?"

Standing, the cougar coughed, a deep sound even at his age. "Mrs. Whitehall. A review of Chapter twelve, in its entirety?"

"Of course" she answered. "I expect everyone to be conversant upon its contents by, oh, next Thursday I should think."

"Next... Thursday?"

"Yes Mr. Whitecrow. You have until next Thursday to turn in your work. Are there any other questions?"

Her statement brought a serious release of held breath. They were halfway through Chapter twelve already. It would normally, by her schedule, take another three days. But the schedule she had been given demanded that they start a new chapter every week. Thirteen would prove easy as it was basically a review of the first twelve chapters. A more in depth overview of the Solar System perhaps, but nothing of major significance. After that it was exo-solar objects and most of her students in this class were like the cougar. No interest in Astronomy at all. It was going to make teaching them a serious challenge she knew.

"Mr. Whitecrow. If you will. Please inform the class as to when Pluto was discovered and for whom the planet is named." she abruptly asked.

"Pluto" the young cougar squeaked, bringing a light laughter from her class.

"Yes. Farthest planet out from the sun please. If you would be so kind."

Standing again the cougar closed his eyes, a sure sign the stones in his head, as he himself put it, were moving. "Um.. 1930" he answered. "For some God I think."

"1930 is quite correct Mr. Whitecrow. I am very happy. You have been listening while I flap my gums. You are also correct. The God Pluto is from the Ancient Roman and is the ruler of their underworld. Now, for a weekend free of any work in this class or a by on the coming test, tell me something strange about Pluto." Helen was really hoping he would remember its orbit, release from weekend work was one of her little gifts to students who shouldn't be understanding but were trying their damndest to understand. She was after all teaching some of S.I.T.H.S. most advanced classes.

"It may not be a real planet. I mean, it might not be what we think of as a planet" Whitehall suddenly announced. "Something about its orbit." His answer stunned Helen, she had said that exactly once, while she'd mentioned Pluto's eccentric orbit four or five times and the theory was from a very tiny group of astronomers.

"Please sit down Mr. Whitehall. You have, I must admit quite surprised me. I was thinking about Pluto's strange orbit yes. As I mentioned only once before, several astronomers believe it is nothing more than a Kuiper-belt object. Does anyone know why Pluto may one day no longer be referred to as a planet?"

Two paws were raised, Helen nodded to the female red fox known only as Oolah. Standing Oolah brushed her lava-lava straight. She was a favorite among the boys, leaving crushed hearts everywhere she stepped without trying. Yet her smile could heal them again in an instant. "Pluto was named after Mr. Lowell, I can't remember his first name."

"Percival" some young male voice called. Probably in an attempt to garner this young goddess's attention.

"Thank you Oscar" Oolah responded in a voice that sounded like sweet honey before she continued. "If I understand this, Pluto's orbit suggests that it may be an escaped moon of Neptune. If so it means something larger is out there."

Helen nodded in agreement. "Logic says no, but astronomers are rarely logical when it comes to planetary bodies. Yes, Pluto is, hold that thought..." She flipped open her own notebook. "See my students, even I have to look things up" she murmured, garnering her another round of gentle laughter. "Ah, here. Pluto's diameter is currently unknown, which isn't strange as it is so far away at present. Perhaps in 1989 when it makes its closest approach we will discover that. With an inclination to the Ecliptic of seventeen point nine degrees, one greater even than the asteroid Ceres there is little chance that it is a normal member of our solar system. We do not know how large Pluto is as yet, nor will any telescope currently on Spontoon tell us. We do know that Neptune and Uranus reflect a bluish light, while Pluto's reflected light is yellowish. What does this tell you. Class?"

Only a few paws went up this time. "Kilroy?" she asked.

A rather tiny shrew stood, having to stand on his chair to speak clearly. "Uranus and Neptune are gas giants. This suggests Pluto isn't. Perhaps a Mars sized planet covered in some strange ice?"

"Very good Kilroy, its nice to see you awake. You are so seldom here with us. Yes, at that distance any gas would be frozen. Thus it is probable that Pluto is much like Mars or Mercury. A small rocky globe with frozen gases on it. Most likely sulfur tinted which would explain the color. Tell me Kilroy, what is the definition of a planet?"

"A body revolving around the sun" the young boy announced.

"Is Ceres a planet?"

"Um... no Mam."

"Phobos, Demos, our moon?"

"Uh..." Kilroy blushed. "No Mam."

"Then, other than your pocket dictionary's limited description. What do you think is a planet?"

Kilroy sat down. "I don't know Mam" he admitted from behind another student.

"Anyone? No? Well, here is a project for all of us, myself included. Anyone who wants to try, here is an extra credit project. Define in two hundred and fifty to one thousand words what a planet is, what it is not and what is, in your opinion, the smallest possible size of a planet. You may base your opinion on fact, fantasy, legend, mythology, religion or simply a guess. Your theory though must make sense. It must stand up as a single object and it doesn't have to be right. I will award one to ten points on your final

yearly grade, or a by on the next test. Whichever you want to anyone who turns in a paper.”

She looked up at a suddenly interested group of students. Ten points could mean the difference between passing and failing this class for almost half of them. “My suggestion is this, think logical. Your theory has to hold together just like a water taxi headed into the wind with rich euro tourists aboard, because I’m going to be hitting it with everything I can. I’m not limiting how many get those extra points either. You can bounce ideas off each other but you cannot work together. Nor do I expect to hear two theories as alike as peas in a pod. If I catch collusion, those involved will not get any points no matter how good their argument is. Questions?

She waited but there were none. “Well, seeing as we have eleven minutes until school is over, feel free to bounce ideas off each other. But keep it quite. I mean ideas, not rubber bands Miss Butterfield” she finished, staring at a young golden furred purebred filly sitting near the door. Sitting down Helen looked at her own notes. Just where did that entire argument come from she wondered. Astronomy wasn’t her profession. Who really cared if a snowball was called a planet or a moon. But it’d come and she was too good a teacher to let a chance to teach slide away.

On Saint James Island Mark and Nikki stood by watching as Three Duces Engineering steamed out LOUISE’s fuel tanks. One of the owners walked up to them, a sealed bottle in his paw. “Rubber” the gopher announced. “Cheap stuff. Prob ah contaminate from sum freighter’s cargo. Who sold yah this crap?”

“Parkers, in Brightwater” Mark answered. He could see that Nikki was much too angry to answer any question civilly.

“Not lik Parkers. Do business wid um. Jake care fer yah, or was it Wilma?”

“Neither” Mark answered. He dug out his wallet, taking out a receipt that he offered the gopher.

“Fem-Fem? Never head oh him. Ah’ll ge ah gram out tah Jake, see wha’s goin on.” He returned the receipt. “Lik as no Jake’ll cover som oh tha cost. Reputations yah know. Mam.” He walked off, talking to himself. He didn’t sound happy at all.

Looking to his companion Mark could tell Nikki was reaching her limit. That someone had put water in her tanks, well that happened. But rubber contaminated fuel? If he lit a match the mare would probably vaporize and take most of St. James with her. “Nikki, I’ll take first watch. You go see Malou. Make sure Oharu really is sleeping but don’t wake them. Have something to eat then come back around eight.”

“Yeah. Yer righ” the mare agreed, fighting not to grind her teeth. “Fuel lins, prob have tah break don tha engines. Can we ford that much work?”

“With what Oharu turned over yes. That and rooms for at least three days along with new fuel for the rest of our trip yes. With tons to spare. We’ll be kinda tight for time now though. Unless we cut corners on our flight plan.”

“Runnin late ah-redy. Souns like ah deal. Straight from ere tah Spontoon. One tank trip right?”

“Right. I’ll set up the flight plan while Three Duces gets the job done. Superior Engineering can give her a full going over when we get back. You’ll still have cash left over, even after I snitch my share.”

Nikki abruptly did something that stunned the fox. Turning and bending down she grabbed him, lifting him up in a chest to chest hug that left nothing to his imagination. Nor did the kiss she gave him. Setting Mark back on the ground Nikki grinned at her fox friends stunned look. “Yah earned tah.” Then, while he was

still trying to catch his breath she trotted off towards the hotel that their three passengers were staying at.

"My wife will never believe me" Mark whispered, his eyes following the mare as she trotted away from him, her long black tail swishing invitingly behind her. "Come to think of it. I don't believe me."

July 12th, 1936

Helen was playing with her son when the next visitor knocked on her door. Setting her son into the locally manufactured playpen she'd bought, with a quick check of her tail she straightened her blouse as she went to see who was there. Her smile vanished at the bulldogs appearance. "And" she asked, arctic ice in her voice.

"As you can see Mam. I have brought with me a local Bobby as well as a local lawyer" the effeminate bulldog announced. "May we come in?"

"No. You cannot stay either. I am alone with my son. There is no way I am allowing three males into my home. Not even if one is a member of our local police force. Make an appointment."

"Helen..."

"Don't use my name you two bit slanderous cur" Helen snapped. "I didn't give you permission." Her anger was so apparent that the police officer smoothly moved in front of the lawyer.

"Mam then. I have court papers here that authorize me to recover my brothers things. Property, funds, whatever. Then return them to his home in Britain." He took a deep breath, obviously being civil was something he wasn't used to being.

Helen leaned against her doorjamb, looking directly at the lawyer. "Legal in Spontoon" she asked.

Pushing himself forward the lawyer, a rather old grey owl, bowed ever so slightly. "Mrs Whitehall..."

"She hasn't proven that cheap claim" the bulldog snapped. "I refuse to accept her as my brothers wife. Bedtoy maybe, like that French poodle he played with during the Great War. But not his wife."

"Please sir" the lawyer broke in. "If you wish to retain my services, then keep your muzzle shut in front of this woman."

"Muzzle..." Growling his anger Whitehall stepped back. "Deal with her then Montrose. I never want to see her again." He turned and walked away much to the police officers relief.

"Mrs. Whitehall. Please." The pudgy looking panda adjusted his spectacles as he gestured at a porch swing. "May we sit?"

"All right." She looked to the law officer. "I am officially asking you to keep that foul mouthed Euro off my property" she told him. Her voice was kind, but even the officer winced when she said Euro. With a nod to her he turned to follow the bulldog. Turning to the lawyer Helen grimaced, took a deep breath than tried to smile. She failed. "And?"

"You won't sit?"

"We sir, are not married. Not even introduced. I do have some morals."

"Ah, yes. I am Herbert K. Montrose, attorney at law. To answer your question. No Mam, those papers are not legal in Spontoan. We are not a colony of England. Not legal at all unless a judge accepts them. That can't even start to happen until Monday at best. At worst, three or four weeks."

"I see. I need to check on my son. Would you like tea or milk."

"Oh tea please Mam."

"English or Spontoan style."

Montrose smiled. "Spontoan style please. I simply cannot abide hot tea on a day like this."

Giving the panda another smile Helen returned to her son, to find him trying to gnaw his way through the bamboo bars. "Teething already?" she asked her son, hoping not. For if he was, feeding time was going to be a very different experience. Retrieving his juice bottle from her dinner table she placed it in his little paws, watching in pride for a few long seconds as he curled up with the watered pineapple drink. By the time she had made two large teas he had fallen asleep, as all young children tended to do when they were warm and content.

"Thank you Mrs. Whitehall" Herbert said as he accepted his drink upon her return. "Ice? Oh what a wonderful delight." As Helen settled on the porch railing to watch he sipped his drink, pausing for a moment before swallowing. "Ah, if I were not already married..."

"The answer would be no" Helen finished softly. "I'll never love another man, not after Killian."

"Ah, the loss is to all men then. Your husband, I have read about him. He was quite a reporter. Well liked, internationally known. Quite respected. Nothing like my client."

Reaching behind her Helen pulled a folder from her belt, having had only two paws it was the only place she could put it. "Saint James marriage licence, Allthing certified. My sons birth certificate. My special allowance to live in Spontoan and on Meeting Island as long as I break no major laws. What else do you need."

Accepting the folder Herbert paged through it, nodding to himself now and then. "This Illie, she was witness?"

"Yes. A Spontoan citizen we rescued from slavery in China. She lives with her family somewhere on Eastern Main Island."

"Thank you." Returning her folder Herbert sat his tea aside carefully, then picked up his leather carrying case. From it he pulled his own folder. "Please understand that I usually deal only with Euros against Euros. I had no knowledge that the Allthing had placed you in protected status. Had I, I would have refused the commission. However I am a panda of my word. I must do my best. In the time given."

Opening his folder he adjusted his glasses again. "You sold your aircraft to Songmark, all legal with payment in full. Mr. Whitehall will have no claim to that. He does claim all funds in your accounts, any property you may have and any business you may own. I note you have started a small publication and have several employees. Is this currently making a profit? I can't see it in the public records."

"Oh when times get tough we sell a girl or two to Cranium Island" Helen answered. "Usually tourists who go where they shouldn't. Most of the time I brand them at the office, sometimes here when I want to play a bit first. It isn't like they will ever be coming back after all. Want to see my branding iron?"

"MRS. WHITEHALL!" Herbert gasped, acting as though he had been underwater for weeks.

Helen stared at the shocked panda with no pity. "You want answers like that, only under oath" she continued. "What is in the public record is public. Anything else, I suggest a sledgehammer and dynamite."

"I see. Well..." Putting away his papers he managed a smile. "I think Mr. Whitehall has a very tough battle ahead of him. Your solicitor is Mr. H'shoshon as I recall."

"Yes."

"He does not handle cases like this. I know him well. I bought my office building through him. I can assure you that he will know exactly whom you need to hire. Listen to him, he is an honest person."

Helen smiled. "A bit randy, three wives and all. But yes. I did find him delightfully honest."

Herbert drank from his tea again, relishing the luxury of the ice. "I have heard that there is a young Doctor from Hawaii he is watching. It may be four, if he feels he can afford to support her equally and she agrees. Mrs. Whitehall. Having seen your papers, having studied this case as well as I could in the time allotted I have no fear that you will lose. Your case is solid. Still it will be dragged through the courts."

Helen stood up from the rail, looking down at the older panda before her. "If you believe that, why bother?"

"For many reasons Mrs. Whitehall. First, I agreed to take this case. Before I knew all the facts yes, but I agreed. I do not hold my word lightly. Second. If I did step away he would only hire another. By this afternoon everyone in my profession will know about this case and the public facts. Only those of very unsavory professional values would accept his shells then. Third, I really need the money. My mother in law has been very ill this year. Our medical bills are very high. So yes I will fight for my client. I will fight cleanly, but I do not expect to win. Emperor Billy Joe Bob may be a lush, may be a skirt chaser but he is a very honest ruler. If he signed that paper it wasn't because someone paid him a bribe. You can get away with a lot on Saint James, but false marriage isn't one of those things."

Helen giggled. "Besides, we so love to yank the Euro's chains."

"We? You feel Spontoon is your home?"

"Wyoming is my home Mr. Montrose. It always will be. But I can't go back there. Not ever. If I'm going to be marooned someplace I can't think of a greater paradise than Spontoon. I miss the snow, the high peaks, horse riding in the winter and curling up with a good book with the wind howling outside a wood plank home late night. But I'm beginning to love an awful lot about Spontoon. Especially teaching the children. I'll probably never arrive as I understand the saying. So I will never be a full citizen. But if I can't have Wyoming, then Spontoon is the best choice anyone could hope for."

Finishing his tea Herbert stood carefully, setting his glass on the porch rail. "Mrs. Whitehall" he said, looking up at her. "I look forward to being waffle stomped by your lawyer. Very waffle stomped. Now if you will accept my apologies please, I really must find my client now. I simply must discover just how deep his pockets really are. I wish you and your son a pleasant day."

"You as well Mr. Montrose." Helen watched the panda make his way off her property, look right, then left and walk away. Walking into her home with both glasses she was soon dialing Mr. H'shoshon's number.

It was late evening now on St. James and, as usual for this time of year there was a beautiful sunset. Mark was leaning on a float, enjoying the play of colors as the sun slowly slipped behind the horizon. It wasn't that often he was able to do just this, not with a family to support now. At the moment all he wanted to do was relax, watch the sunset and hope that Three Duces Engineering would get that

carburetor rebuilt before Nikki arrived. It would be nice to get out of here before sunrise. He hated flying into the sun, even if it would be on his right paw.

Hoofs crunching sand woke him from his reverie. Expecting one of the engineers he was surprised to find a pot bellied pig approaching him. It was difficult not to laugh at the sight, as the fellow was wearing a business suit that had gone out of style in 1910 at least. Cocking one eye he waited until the pig had decided he was close enough.

"You are Captain Hans Isbraun?" the pig asked in fairly good German.

"Jah" Mark answered, remembering his supposed alter ego. "You have news of Wurzburg?"

"Nothing new" the pig admitted, speaking fairly fluent German. "I do have some German magazines a previous flight left behind. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Tullio. I work, well mainly for the Italian military. At this moment though I am working for a party who's name may not be spoken of."

"Not the Emperor?"

"Emperor Billy Joe Bob? My goodness no. He will never deal in what I am here to deal with. I have been instructed to tender you an offer."

Mark shrugged in indifference. "I am sorry. This aircraft is not mine to sell. For that you must approach Lady Oharu."

"Yes, the Japanese spy. I do not speak Japanese, only my native Italian and this poor German I speak to you with. My offer is not for the aircraft sir. My current employer would not need such. My employer wishes to ask how much your Lady desires for her slave mare."

"Nikki?" Mark sat up, brushing a bit of sand off his Chinese manufactured uniform. "She would not sell her. I think that she has plans for the mare. I do know that Lady Oharu has always wanted to know if a horse is able to fly. Without an aircraft."

"My employer is unaware of this.. Niki? Niki's worth to the Jap. She is willing to pay five thousand English pounds. I think she may even replace her with another of her mares for such an experiment."

Ah, Mark realized at the pigs slip. So there is no love lost between Italy and Cipangu. This is interesting information. "To offer so much on opening. You give away your paw sir. I will speak with Lady Oharu tonight. Perhaps we might come to some agreement after all. Five thousand English pounds is nothing to sneeze at."

From the pigs body language it was obvious to Mark that he was upset about his slip. "Let us just say her pockets are deep, and her hunger strong. She has never had a Fillypino mare of such beauty, such power, such obviously fine bloodline within her hunting grounds. Properly trained such a mare will prove valuable at certain... Competitions."

Mark reached into his shirt pocket, taking out a small pad and pen. Carefully writing on the pad in German he turned it to show to the pig. "Your name, opening offer" he told the pig. "Correct?"

"Correct. You will take this offer to the Lady" the pig asked.

"Nikki relives me in less than an hour" Mark explained. "I will take the offer to Lady Oharu immediately. If you will wait until after the supper hour I will insure that she will speak with you tonight. I can not guarantee she will sell, in truth she may not. One never knows though it never hurts to ask. I would bring a translator as Lady Oharu speaks neither German nor Italian. Her English is only slightly fair."

"A translator, yes one is available. I will see you at nine then. Until then good evening."

Mark watched the pig depart into gathering darkness. Someone wanted to buy Nikki. As to why he was smart enough to put together the slipped information. There was a mad neo-carnivore loose on this island. That was always dangerous news. "We should have taken that bracelet off first thing" he whispered. Neither Nikki nor Oharu were going to be happy with this news.

Several hours later Oharu, wearing one of her newest outfits sat across a table from three furs. One was the pot bellied pig who had introduced himself as Tullio. His companion, a well dressed lemur was acting as Tullio's interpreter. Behind them stood a female skunk with no more life in her eyes than a ten month dead cooking fire's ashes. On her right cheek was tattooed two musical notes. Having been around certain people the mouse was fairly sure what those notes meant. The lemur had given no name, nor was Oharu interested enough to ask. "I am sorry" she told the pig, knowing his interpreter would translate her Cipangu words to Italian. "Nikki is not my property. She belongs to the Lady whom I serve. Thus I am unable to sell her. I will though take your interest and offer to her. She has sold her property in such ways before. Just as often she has not."

Oharu waited quietly as the two males spoke between themselves, then her answer came. "My employer is very interested in your slave. She has a taste for horseflesh that cannot be sated. This woman has flamed her desire in such ways no other has ever managed. How then do you propose to communicate between us?"

"That is simply done" the mouse answered. "You will give me a radiogram address where coded messages may be sent. Nikki will be referred to as a ship. Should My Lady decide to sell a mutual place will be selected to transfer ownership and payment. If she should decide not to sell you are out nothing as we will send the initial message. Is this acceptable?"

"I will have to ask. More, how much time do you expect to pass before sending your first message?"

"It is over a weeks flight time to Norfolk on the route I have chosen. I cannot approach my Lady with such an offer for at least twenty four hours after arrival. It is protocol. Nine days, eleven at the outside. Perhaps Tilamooka might be suggested as a transfer point, should your offer be accepted. I must know. What is this insatiable taste your employer has?"

"She is a lioness" came the answer. "She has a taste for the hunt. The old hunt." Answer enough both men noted from the mouse's expression of disgust when she connected the dots.

"A poor fate for anyone" Oharu decided. "I shall take your offer to my Lady. I can not say what her answer may be."

"That is all we I may hope for. More than my employer had expected. Lady Oharu. I cannot help but note your interest in the slave with me. Would you perhaps desire to purchase? It is after all available."

Caught by surprise, for she had ignored the skunk since noting the tattoo Oharu hesitated. "It is true I have recently lost my own personal servant" she admitted, stressing the last word. For by now Tatiana would have paid off her debt, thus having freed herself. "Yet as you are aware I have been forced by bad fuel to make extensive repairs to my transportation. It is also true I find her interesting, as one would find a zombie interesting. There is no spark in those eyes."

Shifting in place the lemur looked back into the face of his female companion. "Yes. Well, she has seen many of my employers hunts. Not all were equines after all. She has been this way since a special hunt several months ago. I feel that she has lost all interest in life. Which is why she is not acceptable as prey as she had been scheduled to become. I had brought her simply as cover, to appear as though we were doing other business regarding her. Still I am authorized to dispose of her. For a sum."

"That sum being what" the mouse asked. It would have to be little, her share of the money that General Yamada had given her already been spent on repairs. She had no desire or need for money after all. A rich priestess was a priestess who easily lost touch with her people, her land, her Gods and herself.

"One hundred English Pounds I should think" the lemur answered.

'*Five hundred shells*' Oharu converted in her head. About the cost of an average slave from what she had been told. Still. As a gift to a certain group, if this one was whom she thought it would be worth it. "Unacceptable. She is shattered. Her worth is no more than ten pounds. If that."

"Shattered yes" came the reply. "Yet even shattered she is unique. There are many who, knowing her past, knowing what those notes mean would spend much for her. Ninety."

"What past could possibly be worth ninety pounds? She is useless, possibly unable even to relieve herself without orders to do so. I require a servant yes, not a puppet. I will offer you twenty-five."

"Twenty-five pounds? She was trained to please. Though her mind may be gone I assure you that her skills remain, having been pleased by her before coming here. So she would not defend herself, what of it. Why, if nothing else you could sell her to Cranium Island for twice what I originally asked. Seventy."

"Twice?" Oharu asked. "She is of little interest to those monsters other than to fill their belly. They would offer no more than forty, which is all I will offer."

"Forty..." For a few moments the two males spoke among themselves. "For one from that school. Yet you are right. She is destroyed. She will be of little use beyond that of a skilled a bed warmer. Forty it is then. You have of course the cash?"

"Of course" she answered, surprising both men at her sudden acceptance. "After all there are sometimes dangerous things I need done. Dangerous things that one with a thirst of life would hesitate in the doing." Turning to Karin Davies, who was standing behind her she ordered the woman to run to the LOUISE, collect those funds then run back. "You have fifteen minutes" she told the English rabbit.

Karen left immediately.

"She acts much as a slave. Yet wears no collar, no bracelet" the lemur noted. "Yet I believe that should I attack her I would be the loser."

"She is one of my agents" Oharu explained. "Well trained. Valuable to me in certain places. As is the Siamese currently awaiting my pleasure in my rooms. Tell me about this skunk I have so foolishly purchased."

"To start, she is descended of course. I was told she came from an island named Kurdmark...."

Oharu listened, forcing herself not to react at many of the things she was told. Why, she wondered, was she suddenly being surrounded by so many women in need? If one discounted the fox Mark her group was completely unnatural for this day and age. Certainly for this area of the world. Were the Gods trying to teach her something, or simply using her as a focal point. Whatever the truth, and she knew her chances of uncovering that were slim the mouse found herself looking forward to her tiny glen. Her Glen and the three students who should be awaiting her. She hoped that this would be her last trip from Spontoon. If she never left the islands again it would be too soon. Of course her chances of remaining unused further by Huakava were slim as well. Still, it was a useful dream.

"...last few hunts she has turned into herself. I will be honest Lady Oharu, you bargained badly. I was authorized to sell her for ten pounds. She has become almost useless to my employer. Not even worth a

practice bout any longer.”

“Perhaps you speak the truth” Oharu admitted. “Perhaps I am a poor bargainer. Perhaps I allowed my shortened time to press me or perhaps I am simply being kind as I have no idea if my Lady will sell to you.” She leaned forward, staring into the lemurs eyes as she drew upon her training, blanking her own soul from her eyes. Causing the blue fire to lift from the fur of her paws. It was an energy draining action, but she knew that she had to leave a lasting impression. “Or perhaps I too hunt, only a different prey and find myself in need a sacrificial animal.”

Her act, for it was an old act, garnered more fruit than she had hoped. Leaning away from her the pig gasped, bringing his paws in front of him in some complex manner she did not understand. That it was meant for protection she was certain, for his sudden fear burned brightly within his eyes. Not even smiling she covered his paws with one of her own. “Useless” she whispered, pressing lightly against his paws, letting her claws unsheathe to prick at his own skin. “Had I desired you you would already be mine. Mortal.”

Releasing him she leaned back, feeling her body react to the foolish use of energy she needed for Karen Davies healing. As his interpreter spoke she saw his fear increase, until with a cry of anguish the pig collapsed. His eyes rolling up as he lost consciousness.

“Am I to be your prey then” the interpreter asked softly, fear now evident in his own voice. Though its strength much less than the pigs.

“I hunt hunters, when my Lady allows” Oharu answered. This acting was getting easier with practice she noted, though she could still not lie. Bend the truth to a point, yes. Lie? No, that she would never be able to manage effectively. “I am not so allowed now, else I would be hunting a certain lioness at this moment. Leaving both your bodies cooling on this floor. Most mortals I have no interest in as prey. You are like the leaves in late fall drifting past in the wind. Often a delight to behold, never a challenge. No. Hunting your kind would be as challenging as you hunting that skunk behind you.”

“Mouse against cat?” Looking over to his current employer, who was still trying to gather himself the lemur pursed his lips. “If this should happen. Would you be so kind as to allow me to take the betting?”

“Why?”

“I am a very poor man with a very large extended family” the lemur explained. “Your victory would release me from all my debts.” Reaching over he helped the pig sit up, at the same time signaling for a waiter. “You must realize he never believed in vampires.”

“Then he is a fool. Nikki has fed me for some time. My Lady ordered I return her alive and well. Else by now she would be a rotting corpse. Her blood is strong. Should my Lady sell, your employer will discover her prey very dangerous. Not undefeatable, simply deadly. Sometimes my lady simply gifts, to one she herself will hunt later.”

“Whiskey” the lemur ordered after waving a waiter over. “Triple. Two.” After their waiter vanished he returned his attention to Oharu. “I believe that his employer will rethink her interest. Perhaps she will hunt you instead.”

“Tell her I would look forward to such” the mouse answered. She noticed movement behind the two. “My agent has returned.” Forcefully she adjusted her own inner balance, again allowing her eyes to show life. Such things tired her for she was unaccustomed to them. They would have their uses Oharu realized, understanding that she should practice this act. One could never know when it might save another’s life, as it most likely had just saved Nikki’s.

Karen Davies came to a puffing stop next to Oharu, speaking several words in English as she offered a canvas bag. Accepting it the mouse checked its contents, placing the bag within Tullio's reach. "You will supply the radiogram address before we leave, which will be two hours before sunrise." Standing Oharu bowed to the two males then turned and left. Behind her Karen Davies followed at a short distance. A very few words from the pig and the skunk followed quickly.

'What horrors exist in our world' Oharu thought as the hotel elevator took her to the third floor. *'Such madness. Vampyres? How foolish. The last Vampyre had been cast out over a hundred years ago.'* She stopped her thoughts. The last Cipangu Vampyre that was. There would be others of course. Not on Spontoan though. Their kind could not long survive there. Even if not hunted down. But here. Could there be, or have recently been a vampyre here? It was not a thought she liked. At this time Oharu knew that fighting a vampyre, even a young one, would be near the edge of her abilities. Nikki had been warned by Davies and with luck they would be long away from here by sunrise. Nikki though should never return here. Not with that kind of interest in her. Oharu herself had no desire to return. So exhausted was she from her display that Karen had to help her into their rooms. It would be time to leave before she woke again. Woke with the new slave wrapped around her.

July 12th, 1936

Helen thought it seemed strange sitting in a Lawyers office on a Sunday. Yet here she was with her son and all the legal papers she had referring to her problem. "So, this here English bulldog has been causing his own form of mischief" Oscar Kildar asked while reading her papers.

"Yes sir" Helen admitted. "It is getting quite difficult to even think of the future with this over my head. Is there anything that may be done to quiet him?"

Looking up from Helen's papers the mastiff grinned. "Well. Ah could have him exterminated. Problem there is tha Allthing simply frowns on such behavior wit'out reason. Have you heard from yer snoops yet?"

"Not as yet sir" Helen admitted. "They informed me that this investigation could take weeks."

"Sounds about right. After all, we are talking about halfway around tha world and in semi-civilized parts o' it at that." Oscar sat her papers down. "Mrs. Whitehall, these here papers support your claim fully. Supplied to an English court there would probably not be any problems. France, now those people are pure dumb crazy. But tha English, they have a lot o' brains over there. What ah can do is apply for ah restrainin order. That would keep that sweet brother-in-law of yers on Casino Island cept for purely legal actions. Like appearing in court. Now seems mah dear uncle Cornelius is ah Judge. I'll just wander over an invite myself to lunch, his wife makes a mean lau lau. I'll see if he'll sign ah restrainin order, then set a rather late date for a hearing. Course, since we're so closely related he'll have tah recuse himself, which will further delay things."

A smile on a mastiff was a scarey thing even to Helen. "You must understand that in these here islands, sometimes that wheel of justice sorta rolls ah bit slowly? I'm really certain that your little snoop report will have plenty of time tah get here. Say, about how much money does your dear sweet brother-in-law have with him?"

Helen was caught by surprise. "How much? I honestly do not know. Why?"

"Well, this here charge can go both ways. I'll just have my Uncle write ah little order an drop it off at the Bankers law offices on Mondah. Since he's tryin to take all your money, we'll just lock him from anything not already in his pockets, and course anything he tries tah transfer from England. Cept through his Embassy's accounts. Can't touch that. What's good for that goose..." He laughed. "Oh, I'm so going to have fun with this here case. You'll pay me of course, but I'm gonna have fun."

Helen was more than a bit worried. "Won't... Won't he do the same? I mean, lock my accounts?"

"He could" Oscar admitted. "He won't. 'Cause yah can't block a woman with children an no family from the money she needs tah live. That's law."

"But you can a man?"

"And a woman without children" Oscar added. "Yah see Mam. He can always fish, live in ah grass shack, take employment for cash darn near anywhere. Same for a woman, though most people just go home to their families until its over. Law can be funny you understand. Very amusin. Now if there isn't anything else it's awful near lunch time." He pushed her papers across his desk into Helen's reach. "You just leave that there fighten to me. If he's on the up and up, well we can drag this for years an years. If he's wrong, send him home on a tramp steamer wear'in ah used grass skirt. Iffin that."

Taking her papers Helen hugged her son as she stood. "My sister-in-law?"

"Between yah two. Nothing I need tah be involved in, lessed yah say so."

"Then good day Mr. Kildar. Until we meet again." Insuring her son was secure Helen turned and left the office with a lighter heart than had been her's when she entered two hours before.

Eight Thousand Feet

"Your collecting aren't you" Nikki asked as she fingered the cut sections of slave bracelet in her paws. They were flying somewhere West of Spontoon and expected to arrive very soon. She had dropped completely her false accent for this discussion, it was much too important to her for misunderstandings. "That English rabbit, now this skunk. Your officially almost sort of broke and you've got at least one slave that can't possibly survive on her own. Until I cut this bracelet you were tied with this years top slave owners on Spontoon. Legal slave owners I mean. Who is she anyway? With that cloth over her head I can't see anything."

"No. I not collecting" Oharu countered. "I am being used."

"Used? By whom? Not by anyone I know unless you mean Huakava."

Oharu looked up at the aircrafts ceiling. "By those I serve, or those some way connected with them."

Nikki snorted, almost laughing. "Priests, Priestess's. You all speak as though we have no free will. No one uses me."

In answer Oharu pointed to Malou who was watching intently, though she could not follow all their fast spoken Spontoon words. "She?"

"Fine. I'll grant you Malou has, is and always will use me. I love her, how could she do less. But I decide whom I will help, whom I want to leave stew in their own morass."

"As do we all" the mouse agreed. "Nikki. I am being guided to those who need help, whom can help. I do not know why. I simply am. Yes I have choice to ignore them. I could have ignored Tatiana had so wished. Perhaps I have ignored some already. Yet I am Priestess, in training yes, but still priestess. It is not within to turn from the helpless if I am able to give aid. Ignoring those in need not something my soul will allow."

Nikki quieted. Mark was flying, would fly the first half of this last hop. As she sat there thinking she was also listening to her precious aircrafts engines. They purred, quite unconcerned with the confusion that held their owner. "So who is she" the mare finally asked.

"Skunk, come here" Oharu ordered softly. While the skunk carefully made her way forward Oharu shrugged as if in defeat. "I was given no name, yet there about her something that may very much be interest to you Nikki."

When the skunk had arrived she automatically kneeled, facing her new owner in that position the mouse now knew was titled *Position One*. Gently Oharu reached over with one paw, lifting away that temporary veil she had ordered the woman to wear since waking with her. "Look upon her right cheek, that really what I thought I saw that night? Nikki, did I err my decision to buy her?" She went on to explain the hints she had been given of the skunks origin.

Nikki looked, looked and thought. "Those are the symbols any second year has the right to wear" she admitted finally. "Yet Oharu, it is a symbol anyone would know. Could have been placed upon her for any reason. Simply because she wears such does not make her such."

"Are any second years missing" Oharu asked gently.

"Discounting those who failed, and yes I do keep up with my old school. There is one second year who failed to return after break. It was thought she went home or ran off with a lover. That was two years ago mouse. If this is her she has lead a horrible life." Nikki looked again into those lifeless eyes. "You brought Qi.. Karen Davies back. Could you do so with her? At least enough to discover the truth?"

"I do not know" Oharu admitted. "Certainly I may not attempt such until have finished with Karen. There are others, better than myself should try first. Huakava or Saimmi for example. Skunk, how old are you."

"Twenty-one mistress" came that flat voiced answer.

"About the right age" Nikki admitted. "Truth is, there is a standing Kuo Han offer of fifteen-thousand English pounds for a graduate, delivered whole and alive. Perhaps someone decided to foist off a second year as a third year? I don't know priestess but I want to know. If this really is a second year, then there will be many souls greeting their dark Gods before we are finished."

Oharu patted the skunks shoulder lightly. "Return your seat, try to enjoy this flight" she ordered. Turning back to the mare Oharu steepled her fingers. "Nikki. Why would anyone want someone enough pay seventy-five thousand shells. That enough live in comfort for lifetime."

"About thirty years" Nikki corrected. "It is because of what we know, what we can do, what we are inside. We are that which most males cannot abide. Strong, intelligent, mistress's of our own lives, unfettered by some male allowing or not allowing us to do things. We thrive against any challenge, while our simply being threatens the status quo. We show all women that they too can stand upon their own paws, hoofs, whatever. That they don't really need males for protection. By shattering even one of us they believe that they would be able to claim to those women that we are nothing more than deluded helpless females. This one may have been nothing more than a test."

"So you must be diligent, lest one end up as that one? Truth this world madder than I ever suspected as mere Miko. Now I see more, I find is not a world I wish to be part of any longer."

"There Oharu you have the better choice. As a priestess you may withdraw. Only the maddest slaver would think to try and take a full priestess. And there are limits to what people will do in most cases." She leaned back, her eyes flickering from Oharu's face to that of the skunks. "Her name was Henrika" Nikki said softly. "Greek, some long involved name starting with Poly. Everyone called her Alphabet. I didn't

know her or her species. If that is Henrika, what will you do?"

"What I may, if asked to help. I too have limits Nikki. I am not Goddess. With Karen I have walked almost far as I am able. She must now finish that path alone. All I can do for now strengthen her inner sight, that she may find correct path with ease. That one. Nikki. Where would start? At best could only hope give her heart of frightened child."

Nikki sighed in defeat, looking out the window between she and the mouse. "Where to start? Where you must take her. After you have taken the rabbit to her destination. Mouse. I find that I believe you. You are being used. Perhaps it is your Karma, perhaps it is in punishment for something. Whatever the reason you are being used."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

July 13th, 1936

It was nearer nine pm than eight when the radio in Spontoan Islands control tower crackled with a familiar voice. "Spontoan Island Approach Control. This is Spontoan Flight Kay Tee Zero Zero Three Am-Phib, out of Dalian. Requesting landing instructions."

A young canine known as Thomas sat his mug of coffee (two sugars, no cream) aside. Last November he had been rattled by an emergency. One coming from the same country as he well remembered. Now he'd seasoned and he knew who he was talking to. Pressing his mikes switch he answered. "Spontoan Tower to KT dash zero zero three. Winds are fifteen to twenty from the South-East. Wave heights five to eight feet left I repeat left crossing seaplane way 346 and building. Skies are patchy, visibility six miles and dropping. I repeat Six miles and dropping. Ceiling is twelve hundred feet dropping slowly. Suggest you use land Runway 180 West. Repeat, suggest that you use land runway 180 West. Its going to be a messy evening Nikki."

"Spontoan Control. Understood. Ground landing. Runway One Eight Zero West. Winds fifteen to twenty."

"Correct Nikki" Thomas answered. No one knew, but he had a serious and very hopeless crush on that untouchable mare. Along with half a dozen other males it seemed. "Any problems? How many aboard?"

"Six souls, one an Honored Mother. No disasters to declare. Request VIP lounge for Honored Mother and two guests. Please inform Superior Engineering their getting LOUISE ASAP. Inform Customs we have inbound cargo, private. Some belonging to Honored Mother."

"Understood" He checked a slip of paper that had popped up in the vacuum tube carrier. "RL has you at twelve miles." Leaning over his panel he brought the runway lights up to 100%. Not that a pilot like Nikki would even need runway lights, she was a Songmark graduate after all. Still it was in the book so it was done. Picking up a blue phone he woke up Customs, noting the aircrafts origination point, special passenger and its request for the lounge. That done there was nothing else to do but wait until KT-003 came into sight. With the storms and late hour, scheduled flights were already thinning out.

Nikki glanced over to Mark who had finally woken at the weather report. "Need that rain for the crops" he whispered. "But after we land."

Nikki grinned, "Nah lik yah haven lahnoded inna gale" she reminded her co-pilot.

"That was different. One of the engines had torn off and the other was sputtering. It wasn't like I had much of a choice in the matter."

"Buh yah kep her onna runway. Wit nine passengers. Tha's pilotin. Yah can fly with me anytim."

"Oh yeah" Mark pulled his cap further down over his eyes. "Fly in a cramped cabin with the hottest mare this side of anywhere. With a wife who'd rip me to shreds if I touched said mare." He yawned, preparing to fall asleep again. "Not to mention what said mare would do. No thanks Nikki. I'll just fly the safe cargo. You know, things like outdated overheated mining grade nitroglycerin."

Nikki laughed, reaching over to pat the fox on his knee. "Well, After this, yah can even watc me baith from nah on, sa'lonmgs yah don touch."

Her words got the reaction she wanted as Mark sputtered, ripping his hat off to stare at her like she'd gone mad or something. As he did she leaned over and kissed him again. "Yer ah rare kin oh man" she whispered, trying not to wake her passengers. "Malou wan's a pup by yah. Talk tah yer wife, kay?"

Mark could only sputter in further confusion and stare as Nikki, the islands acknowledged male hater from Hell turned back to her flying. This was a side of his friend he'd never seen, and somehow knew he'd probably never see again if he angered her. As he settled back into his chair he grinned. "Gonna hold you to that bath thing" he whispered back.

"Goh, try Main Islan wah-fall in ah week. Sah Satday. Jus affor falsh sunup" she answered. Then she was all pilot. Mark though, was all male and hating himself for it at the moment. But when he got home...

LOUISE, Kart-Tooms Flight 003 made a near picture perfect landing on runway 180 West, eventually following the Follow Me truck as rain fell. Light at first, it was a steady drizzle by the time Nikki shut off her engines. Sometime after they debarked someone above opened up a firehose outside.

"Will only last half an hour" the weatherfur announced. "Spotty showers after that. By morning we should only have an overcast, breaking up by two pm. Unless this low stalls again."

"Ahn ahm a Martian invader" Nikki countered, looking out one of the buildings windows. Oharu was out there with Karen Davies. They were headed for Casino Island but how the mouse expected to cross in that weather was beyond her. Oharu was terrified of salt water, even within Spontoon's protected harbor. Nikki wouldn't be so worried had she seen the boat Oharu decided to hire though. No water taxi, it was a deep sea fishing boat.

"For across to Casino an back" the ships ferret Captain-Owner asked. "Dangerous, expensive, even for Honored Mother. Why, teres pirates out in those waters. Nasty dangerous third year Songmark student pirates."

Opening her small belt purse Oharu held out two ten pound notes. Money had never meant anything to the mouse, it was simply an end to a need. Nothing more. These ten pounds were most of what she had left. She would be just as happy with nothing. "Enough?" she asked. "Is most important."

"Honored Mother, well more than" the ferret admitted. "Half would be nough, an is all I'm taken."

"Two of us. Important we arrive soon. I double cost" Oharu countered.

Sucking his lip the ferret agreed, accepting the money as he yelled to his crew. "But I pay you change later" he reminded the mouse. His was a deep belief and though he would, and had bled tourists deeply he would not dare do so to a Priestess. It would be beneath him to do so.

At the same moment on Meeting Island Helen Whitehall looked up at a popping sound, noting with pleasure that her tiny fire had not thrown a coal onto her wooden floor. Near her, sleeping with his down furred face towards the fire was her son Antonius. A fire Helen thought. When she had life-leased this house it had come with a fireplace. Small of course, but fully functional, freshly cleaned and inspected. Why she had wondered, would she need a fireplace? Yet with the winds as high as they were and the rains bringing cooler temperatures into place she now understood. It must be below seventy Fahrenheit outside. Her small fire was making a big difference in the comfort level of her home at a very small cost. Besides, she loved small fires.

With the storms arrival all electrical power had eventually vanished as well. Not that Spontoon had less than professional electrical lines of course. I was simply that even though they tended to bury as many lines as possible certain high voltage lines had to be in the air, and broken limbs had to fly through that

same air. Short circuits were inevitable. Now her home was well lit by two large oil 'hurricane' lamps. Lack of electrical power didn't bother the Wyoming bread hound. It was a very little known fact she had seen her fifteenth birthday long past before power lines were finally run out to her parents ranch. Turning back to her letter she continued writing.

It has been an interesting week father she wrote. I am not certain how, yet I was able to come up with an essay that interested my most challenged students. Read that father, as the ones more interested in sports and mating than an education. Not that they are unintelligent, certainly not that father. Spontoon take's education quite seriously. Why even in the S.I.T.H. school there are four levels of students. As all teachers I have classes in all four levels. Until Friday I was much challenged in my last class, Introduction to Astronomy. Or as my students call it, Stargazing one oh one. Not only is it a subject I personally did not do that well in, it is also my D class. D students are those who seem to have no real interest in learning, yet are still doing well enough to remain in school.

Do not ask me how this came about as I honestly do not know. We were speaking of planets, specifically the newest solar body Pluto. Now I do admit that I offered a one to ten point addition to their final grades for this essay, a point addition that for many will determine if they pass or fail my course. Yet I assured them all that it was a completely voluntary essay. Regarding my subject, what determines a planet, what is the smallest possible planet what is the largest and why. I was quite surprised to watch as the majority of my class became quite animated. It will be very interesting to discover what crosses my desk Monday afternoon.

On other news, I am afraid that I have been forced to obtain the services of a lawyer. Yes mother, I well know how you and Grandfather feel about lawyers. Yet I have no real choice in this matter. While tar and feathering them is very much frowned upon here in any case. Killian's young brother has arrived, carrying with him papers from an English court granting him everything. It is, or was his intention to throw Antonius and myself onto the beach with not so much as a stitch of clothing between us. On the other paw I have also met Killian's sister. Unlike her brother Willy appears to be very nice. In the tradition of our family I have reserved judgement in her case until all the facts are in. Still she has done everything right that one would expect. I will write more about her when I have news.

Antonius is doing well. I am enclosing his latest photograph in this letter. Killian would be so proud of him. I cannot believe this but he is already beginning to cut teeth. Though no tooth has yet fully erupted, still it has made feeding him rather, well interesting. I will have to arrange for ice to be delivered thrice a week now in order to store my milk. A bit of pain is one thing mother, but Antonius is like his father in that he has very powerful jaws.

Catherine I fear has turned away. I have heard nothing from her in some time, nor has she accepted my phone calls. Father, I do know that I was pushing a bit. I did not believe I pushed that hard. Perhaps it is for the best, though I miss her dreadfully now. As does Antonius I believe. What ever the problem may be I fear I have no way of repairing it. Therefore I have chosen to be silent and to wait. Wait and hope.

You both remember the fireplace I spoke of several letters ago. Astonishingly today I have a small fire burning within its hearth. It is not that the weather is cold, I do not feel that it is much below seventy or so at worst. Certainly no lower than sixty five. I must purchase weather equipment when this storm is done. Not knowing is frustrating for me. Yet in my time here I have become somewhat acclimatized to the eighty to ninety degree days, with evenings dropping no lower than seventy five or so. With these storm winds it currently feels cold enough to see ones breath, though that of course is not the truth. Yet when one has shed much of ones fur, one does feel the coolness. I cannot believe that a furless creature could survive long without heavy clothing in such weather. Certainly not in a traditional Wyoming winter. Even with heavy clothing. I myself would not survive a single Wyoming winters night, only with the thinness of my fur at this moment. One must also be careful of the sunlight. I have twice now lightly burned my skin, what with my fur now being thin enough that a light wind parts it easily.

I also spoke to you of the nutmeg smelling oil used here to battle insects. I am now able to report with certainty that it is very effective. Ones nose becomes used to the scent very quickly, while the oil itself seems very effective in caring for ones fur. I have not noticed one split end in my hair or fur since beginning its use. Nor have I or Antonius suffered infestations of fleas, beetles or other little nasties grandfather always used bear grease to cure himself of. I have been warned that there are certain bugs who will ignore this oil, yet they are all on Main and South island. Within what the natives call a three yard jungle. This is something I have decided not to investigate, as the oil used to defend against those bugs is rather thick. It has a tendency to ruin ones clothing with stains as well as leaving ones fur rather stiff.

I think this covers events for now. I will most certainly write again soon. With Killian gone, with Catherine no longer visiting I fear that were it not for these letters I might soon go mad.

Your loving daughter;

Helen

Signing her letter Helen waited for the ink to dry then carefully folded it, placing it within a waiting, dated but unaddressed envelope already holding a small black and white photograph of her with her son. Satisfied everything fit correctly she sealed it tight. Standing silently she looked down to her sleeping son, then returned to her bedroom where she opened a locally made wooden box, slid the letter inside along with dozens like it. After that she locked the box. Perhaps one day she might send those letters, but that would be a long day in the future. If ever.

It had stopped raining some time ago yet Oharu and Karen still stood within the entryway of Spontoon's English Consulate on Casino Island. With them stood an English soldier. Another rather young looking greyhound in an immaculate uniform. He was currently holding a rather overly polished rifle that most likely was fully functional. Oharu was certain that he had made no major move since sending for a runner. Finally more running footsteps could be heard on the walkway outside. As the outer doors opened Oharu noted a middle aged border collie standing in the opening. From his condition he had started in the rain, though that had now reduced to nothing more than a fine mist. It would return all the harder by morning.

"Ladies. Honored Mother" the collie said in greeting. "I do not know if it is a pleasure to meet you again" he finished as he pulled off his heavy Mackintosh. "We were not properly introduced the last time you were here, I am Jacob Dassher. Lord Farrson's second in command." He looked at Karen, quickly noting her poor dress, her physicaly battered look. "We should take this inside. I should think" he decided.

As they entered the building proper Dassher dropped his wet coat on an empty chair without thought, heading further into the buildings maze of chambers. Unlike Oharu's last visit they did not go down the hallway with so many amazing paintings but the opposite direction. Dassher himself opened his office door, turning on the rooms light before allowing his visitors entry. An assistant materialized from nowhere, as though by some archaic device of Emperor Ming. "Hot tea for myself and the rabbit" Dassher announced. "Priestess?"

"Sloe gin" Oharu announced, eliciting a rather surprised look from the collie. Motioning to Karen to seat herself Oharu settled herself on what was normally used as a foot stool. Such was easier to escape from than a comfortable chair. Anyway, her experiences with chairs was still less than that of a five year old child.

Dassher managed a quick smile. "I see. Well, I will have to remember that request when next you visit." Settling down himself he decided to pass time while waiting their drinks. "And how did you find China" he asked.

"With compass" Oharu responded.

"A... ah yes. Why do Englishmen allow women through doorways first. I do remember. To be serious, how is China these days?"

"Dangerous" Oharu answered. "Most certainly for Chinese, even those who are not, long as claim to be so."

Dassher grimaced a moment. "I see. As I understand it your mission was to bring back Miss Benevedo's love interest. That is the current rumor passing through these halls. Am I correct to assume that your mission was successful?"

"Exceptionally so" the mouse admitted. "Is my hope never leave Spontoon again. I find world is not safe place for peaceful ones as myself."

A sharp knock on the door turned Dassher's eyes that way. "Ah, Wilfred. Very good. On the sideboard please. I will serve."

"Very good sir" a rather ancient looking hedgehog agreed as he made his way to a piece of furniture larger than Oharu's bed, and very much better built. Sitting a silver tray on its surface he bowed slightly to the Collie, the women, then left without another word. Standing Dassher walked to the tray, waiting until Wilfred closed his office door behind him.

Picking up a goblet he carried it to Oharu, soon returning with a cup of hot tea for the rabbit. Gathering his own tea last Dassher sat behind his desk before breaking their self imposed silence. "And this lovely lady" he asked.

"Karen Davies" Oharu answered. "Introduced to me name of Qi." Turning to the rabbit Oharu took a sip of her drink, relishing its soft taste. "Karen, you are with own people. Now is time you to talk."

Still holding her untouched tea the rabbit began to talk. Within ten words Dassher was writing on a pad. Within thirty his expression had become exceptionally serious. Finally Karen ceased speaking, calmly sipping her tea as though nothing more than the days weather had been discussed.

"Who ordered her breaking" Dassher demanded.

"I" Oharu answered, her voice no stronger or weaker than before.

Dassher stood, fire burning within his eyes. "You are an Honored Mother. A Priestess. Why do such a thing."

"To save lives."

"Explain." His voice was hard, his anger barely under control.

Oharu however paused just long enough to finish her drink and sit the goblet aside. "As are many things Mr. Dassher" she started. "Answer is both easy, difficult. Cleanly I had two choice. Shatter Qi or be unmasked. Shattering Qi meant chance of loss of one mind but not life. Being unmasked was death to Qi, Nikki, Mark, Malou and Malou's unborn child. Miss Davies too."

"But no death to yourself. You would have lost nothing."

Standing slowly Oharu stared directly into the collie's eyes. "Death? Oh, I wish for death. Take many years before this body die. I not like pain Mr. Dassher. I certainly not like being taken apart, finger by finger. Toe by toe. Used by any want. Burned little more each day. No Mr. Dassher, I not die clean. So I order Nikki break Qi. She do so, under protest. Strong strong protest."

Under Oharu's calm assault Dassher sat, stunned. "Why choose Nikki. Why not Mark or Malou? Why not do it yourself."

Placing both her paws flat upon the ornate desk before her Oharu kept eye contact. "Nikki push many women edge of shatter. She know when near edge, when pull back. After all. Shatter tourist not come back next year be so pushed again. Nikki know when Qi at edge, when gentle push send Qi soft madness. When guide Qi into false person. Save real person. Shatter Qi into Karen Davies cover story. But not push so far I not able return her to sanity. Major Ito break, nothing left to draw back. For Major Ito break mind, soul, body. Nothing left but dead body to bury. I sorry three males taken. I save what could."

"Then you did well" Dassher admitted, forcing himself to break that eye contact. "I most sincerely apologize. To you. To Nikki. To all involved. Now what happens?"

"Karen Davis your problem. Not real name yes, I not want know her real name. Ever. Now I have one more. I leave now. I return to Eastern Island. Soon maybe I return home Great Stone Glen where students wait. I help Karen Davies, I help Nikki, Malou. Perhaps I help you. That one thing is most important what Priestess does. Part why she exists. Have you no more questions, I leave now. Karen Davies she stay. You help her."

"Do you know the three males names" Dassher asked softly.

"Barrow, Long and Lavigne."

Dassher turned his attention to the rabbit, who's face had somehow softened. "Karen, were any of these men your husband."

"No Mr. Dassher. Long was my husband's assistant. Barrow and Lavigne were working together." She turned to Oharu. "Does this mean my husband may still be alive?" There was more life in her voice now than any time since Nikki had had her way with the English agent.

"Only names on paper were those I spoke" the mouse answered. "All means is he was not known to your grandfather. Not yet."

Turning her attention back to the collie Karen hesitated. "He really was my mothers father. Being such, I assumed that I would be able to trust him. It was a foolish assumption. For while I was with him he sold two of his granddaughters to the Japanese. As he sold me to Oharu, thinking her nothing more than another invader come to China for her own gain. I admit Oharu was a better owner than I had expected, or perhaps I was desperate. I could not escape my Grandfather. I had sealed my own fate by accepting his roof. I do not believe even my mother ever understood what he truly was. Though my interest in Oharu was false at first, I soon learned she was more than I thought. I came to... to.." She looked hopelessly at the mouse. "I would wish you were my sister. Please Oharu, understand I meant you no harm. I do not like women as you do. It was fully an act, only to save my own life. I found that I was willing to do anything in order to live. For a hope of freedom."

Oharu nodded in agreement to the rabbit. "You think I not know difference" she asked. "Was my full season. I took release where could. Now you go home. You forget Oharu. You wait for husband return. Love him Karen Davies, love him as he deserves. As you deserve. Now I must go." She turned away from the two, walking quickly towards the door.

"Wait" Dassher called. "How may we ever repay you?"

Oharu turned the doors knob. "Help another in need" she answered, then was gone.

Jacob Dassher looked to the closed door, then to the woman, no, secret agent sitting in front of him, then back to the door. "Oh no Honored Mother" he said, a grim look still on his face. "That is much, much to simple a payment for what you have done for Crown and King. Much to simple a payment. Mrs. Davies, please. I need to get you to a doctor then to debriefing. If you will grant me the name I need and your real name I will send a message to China inquiring of your husband. I will add a side note as to your present location. And here I thought I was going to have a calm night."

July 14th, 1936

Miss Catherine Devinski had no idea why she was at the Songmark school gates so early in the morning. Only that she had woken from a dream knowing she must be here. Already the storms had broken, leaving nothing but wet grass and mud behind. They would be back before noon of course, heavily as the low above them moved further. Taking into consideration Eastern Islands geological makeup, before her first students awoke it would be nothing more than cool damp earth to walk on. With school ending soon, within days in fact things would calm down a great bit. It was as she was watching for the Eastern sky to lighten in a false dawn that the hound smelled her visitors. It was the mare Nikki, that mouse priestess Oharu and an unknown female skunk. But the skunk's scent though strangely weak was familiar in some way, though why? And why would those two be bringing a girl to Songmark's gates at this hour. All of her students had returned from their secret excursions hours ago.

"Open the gate. I will meet them outside" she instructed her two students. Both were surprised. Miss Devinski's arrival had been accepted as a snap inspection, not unknown but for two tired students a bother. To be let out even before false dawn? Still they quickly complied, carefully latching Songmark's gate behind the hound as she walked out.

"Nikki, Oharu" the hound said in greeting, having met the trio over twenty yards from Songmark's gates. This was well out of hearing range of the two guards as long as they spoke softly. "Oharu. Was it you who invaded my dreams?"

"No" the mouse answered softly. "I would not ever do such. Not to you or Molly."

"I see, then it is that one again. Very well. To what do I owe the honor of such an early visit?"

"Tah Oharu" Nikki answered.

Miss Devinski frowned. "Nikki, please lose that simply awful false accent. I had enough trouble following your Tagalog in classes. This false accent you have taken is maddening."

"Very well then my dear, it shall be as you require of course" the mares voice had abruptly softened to cultured tones, tones one would expect to find only in the very highest society. "As you must have needs to know my dear Madam. Oharu did graciously accept my invitation to a..."

"Nikki..."

Grinning the mare giggled very lightly. "No accent, drop a lifetime of social training. Ah Miss Devinski, as much effort as I put into it I was never able to please you."

"I was never interested" the hound shot back. "To the meat of this matter. False dawn is very soon. I've students to crush still and one who's dreams will soon be shattered forever. Whatever reason you are here, it has to do with this silent woman between you. Lets have it."

"Oharu bought her on Saint James" Nikki explained. "Its not like your thinking. We were coming back, someone sold me tainted fuel. I will send you a full report as soon as I get some sleep. We had to stop at

Saint James for serious repairs. Rubber contamination.” Nikki was pleased to note the expression on Miss Devinski’s face at those words. “While we were there some people made an offer to Oharu. For me. They brought this girl with them as cover. Something our little friend noticed about her caused her to buy the skunk. Now she’s brought her here to give to you.”

Miss Devinski looked from Nikki to Oharu, then to the skunk, her face still covered by the cloth Oharu had given her to hide her identity. Certainly her clothing was little more than rags. “I don’t believe in slavery” she said curtly. “This isn’t a gift I would ever accept. For any reason.”

“I do not much like myself” Oharu agreed. “Though I have use for same, rarely. Like Tatiana. There is about this one you must see.” Gently she pulled the unresisting skunk forward until the two were within a few feet of Miss Devinski. “Nikki has shaved face fur so you may see easy mark captured my attention.” She pulled the dark cloth off her companions face.

Miss Devinski though needed no mark to know who was standing before her. “Henrika” the hound gasped. “What has happened to you?”

“She was captured” Nikki answered. “At Krupmark. I got this much out of her. Some male she thought she was in love with.”

“So she never quit. Damn it Nikki I’m helpless. What can I possibly do?”

It was Oharu who answered. “Is not Songmark responsible. Until return home or twenty five? This one only twenty-one. This certainly not Greek lands.”

Seemingly to fall into herself the hound failed to respond, not until false dawn began to color the Eastern skies did she answer. “Yes, we are Priestess. And a horrible position Songmark now finds ourselves in. We cannot turn our backs on Henrika any more than we could on any of our students” she glanced at Nikki. “Not even those who’s current history we find unpleasant. Still even I must admit we haven’t the ability to help her. Do I drag her into the compound to parade before our students? First its Helen Whitehall with her news of China. Now you two with this. We can’t protect our own students. You Oharu. Lars and Molly. You know what Lars eventually intends for her. What he has tried before. In your heart you do, even though you won’t let your mind admit it. Can you stop that?”

“If she can’t” Nikki admitted. “I will.”

Oharu waved a paw in front of the larger mare. “No Nikki. Molly’s fate is in own paws. I may watch. I may aid in small things. I am yet forbidden great changes.”

“Karen Davies wasn’t a great change?” Nikki snapped.

“No” the mouse answered, leaving it at that for now. She turned her full attention upon the hound, a fact that Miss Devinski found oddly unsettling even with her own training. “I am unable to aid her, there nothing now to aid. Nikki cannot care for her. If not you then whom. Should you send her home? You have her money, her address. Should we give her to ocean? Miss Devinski, please. I much respect you. Respect your school. Respect all instructors Songmark. Yet until I am full accepted by Sacred Island my abilities limited. My choices bound tightly. I am forbidden Great Changes until accepted. Until then. Even so, this one is lost. Even Great Change only return helpless child.”

“There is one I think I can trust to care for her. At least until school is out, which is very soon. I had hoped to break from her draw. But...” Catherine shrugged. “As with you and your doe, Nikki and her Malou I find it impossible. I will give you her address and before you arrive I will call her. This girl was called Alphabet, mainly because it was very hard for most to remember her name. Henrika Polychronopoulos. Try to remember it. And know this mouse. You have returned to Songmark a lost child. That cannot be forgotten.”

"It must be" the mouse demanded, trying with only her will to force the older woman to agree. "I only serve. Only serve. Alphabet then. Address?"

Helen dragged herself from sleep wondering what that screaming nightmare monster might be. It was when she finally drifted halfway between the veil of dreams and reality that her mind identified that horrid sound. No, Antonius was not crying. No, it was not her alarm clock nor rapping at the door nor any aircraft. It was nothing more than her telephone. Having identified that sound she pulled herself fully from her dreamworld, leaving behind those days at college with Ruth. Dreams even today she still was uncertain were pleasure or nightmare.

Bitterly falling out of bed she landed on all fours, her long tail still held snugly by her bedcovers. Covers that tugged slightly like a lover gently playing. '*Come back*' they seemed to say. '*Come back, Ruth has more to say.*' A moan of regret escaped her, yet her phone still shrilled. If she did not answer it quickly her son Antonius would wake. Then her night would truly be over. Pushing away those seductive calls of her bed Helen Whitehall managed her feet, then half walked, half stumbled into her kitchen where she had the homes single phone installed.

"Whitehall" she answered, still pushing back those wisps of dream that even now brought both pain of loss and pleasure of having been. At the sound of that others voice Helen woke fully, absently tugging her nightdress straight as though Catherine Devinski was in the room with her. "A favor? Kitty you ignore me this long, then drag me out of bed in the middle of the night for a favor?" She listened further. "All right Kitty, we can discuss this later. Until the end of this week when your students have left. Nikki? No, I have not yet made her acquaintance. Oharu yes, once briefly. All right but you'll repay me. Money? Don't be a fool Kitty. I'll never accept money from you. You'll pay me by sitting down and settling this. One way or another. Please? All right. I need to get dressed now."

She hung up, not quite wondering why she had agreed. Keep a freed slave here until the weekend. A slave. Slavery was illegal in American, mainly illegal in Spontoon with very well marked out exceptions. Mainly one year debt indentures. But she trusted Devinski. Trusted? Hell, she loved her. Helen paused, working that word over in her mind. Not love, Hell. Yes, love was Hell. She'd loved Ruth, she'd loved Killian. Then had lost both to that scythe carrying figure in black. A figure mortals could not defeat, but if he came for Antonius or Catherine. There then would be a fight to remember. Oh would there be a fight. Win or lose Helen decided she'd show that so and so just what a half-breed American Western girl could do. But first to get dressed. Best change Antonius as well and a new warmed bottle. It would keep him comfortable and quiet just a little longer. There was the visitors bedroom she had set up for Catherine, though all she'd put in it so far was a bed and chair. Little enough, it would have to do.

A bit over an hour and a half later there came another of those knocks to her front door. '*Thank whomever I haven't a doorbell*' Helen decided as she went to answer that summons. Antonius had woken while she changed him, wanted feeding, proved a tooth was breaking free. He'd make a fine vampire his mother had decided, dabbing at the dot of blood her son had caused. That was a while ago and he was asleep now. If only these visitors would be quiet ones. Opening her door she found herself facing three very different figures.

"Nikki Ibarra Lily Benevedo" a huge mare announced softly. "Oharu Wei, Priestess" she continued, placing a paw on top of a small mouse's head. "Henrika" she finished, moving her paw to a skunk at least a head taller than the mouse. "Miss Devinski called?"

"She most certainly did" Helen admitted. "If you would come in from the cold. My son is asleep so please keep your voices down. Honored Mother and I are already acquainted Nikki."

"Nah ah problem" Nikki agreed. Nikki entered last, quietly shutting and locking Helen's front door behind her. "Wah you decid" Nikki asked before sitting.

"I will care for her. But please, what is her story?"

Oharu answered that question while Nikki settled herself on the only object in Helen's house able to take her weight, a large footstool. "Henrika is lost Songmark student. She was enslaved during break between second, third year. I chosen to bring her back. She is lost. Not within self. She lost. Of no danger to you, your son. This I certain."

"So you are her owner" Helen asked. "I remember Kura speaking of you Miss Wei. I'd like to thank you for that again. From what I have learned it must have been very dangerous for you. I hadn't taken you for a slave owner though."

Oharu's answer surprised the hound, for she had expected denial. "I own when need own. No other. Tatiana need own to help find way. Now she free. Nikki need own, cover real reason for go to China. Henrika need own bring back. Else stay at Saint James be sold someone else. I not like Slavery Mrs. Whitehall. I accept it when need. Henrika need, for this short time."

"I... I see. Your more than I had expected. Its Honored Mother isn't it?"

"Oharu just as good" the mouse answered. "Preferred."

Helen digested this. No honors just like Kura. And just like the calico Kura she had avoided a part of Helen's question she did not wish to speak of. Better to move on, perhaps she could approach the question from a different angle later. "What is wrong with Henrika. She doesn't even move."

Gently Oharu explained what she knew, what she suspected. Finishing with "Has passed on, leaving body alone. She has shown reaction only here, in Spontoon. Only when near Songmark. Nothing else."

"Could she be cured? I mean..." Helen searched for the words she wanted. "Is it possible to bring her back to what she was before?"

Oharu's answer was definite. "No."

"Then why not just kill her. I'd rather be dead than like that."

Nikki broke in with a cough. "It possible tah heal 'er sum" the mare explained. "Mahbe give some life back. Songmark don't ignore her children. We gonna do wha we can. Time heels all wons."

"No Nikki. Time does not" the mouse corrected. "Time only allows wounds to harm us more. Perhaps a Henrika may be woken. She will never be Henrika from first day first year. Never again. That much has been stolen. That Henrika is gone. Will never return this body."

"Ahn tha thieves ah gonna be rit sorry fer it too" Nikki finished. There wasn't venom in her voice. There was thick, dark, death.

"You're a Songmark graduate" Helen gasped, finally putting together the few facts given her.

"Ah yep, ahn I'm still here. Just cause ah gradated don't mean ah'm successful. Don mean ahm easy either." Leaning back slightly Nikki sighed. "Songmark's ah good school, buh it don gurantee yer gonna get rich. It means yer gonna survive ahn tha counts big time in ah male run world."

"I see. As in any schooling. Such endeavor, no matter how successful holds no guarantee of success. I myself hold several degrees. I needed only to finish that nightmare dig in China to receive my doctorate. As with you Miss Benevedo. I found myself choosing either fame or breathing. I believe that breathing is much more important than a single footnote in history regarding a new species. So, as I understand this someone decided that Miss... You did not give me her surname."

"She is Greek" Oharu answered, as if in those three words all secrets of the universe could be understood.

"Greek. Meaning as I recall my own schooling days, she is referred to as Alphabet?"

"Give tha teacher ah rubber ceegar" Nikki agreed softly, so as to not awaked their hosts infant child. "Poly somethin or other."

Very well then. Henreeka you said?"

"Henrika" Nikki corrected gently.

"Henrika then it must be. I shall note that in my diary. Someone then decided upon an experiment I believe. To determine what it required to break a completed second year Songmark student. Obviously they were successful. Yet I must say this Nikki. Apparently it is not as easy as they believed. For no third year is missing are they?"

"Nah tha anyone is aware of" the mare admitted. "Ahm certain tha school will be checkin."

Turning to the silent skunk Helen asked the single question no one had yet asked. "Child. Do you remember how this was done to you?"

Henrika turned to Oharu, searching for permission to speak. "Answer" the priestess ordered. "Fully. Hold nothing away."

Just as slowly returning he gaze to Mrs. Whitehall Henrika swallowed to clear her throat. "Every moment Mistress" she answered.

"Who was responsible for your fall" Helen asked, still keeping her voice that of a teacher worming information from a shy, frightened student.

A flicker of fears flame came to the skunks eyes, yet she had been ordered. "I may never speak their names" she answered.

"Never?" Oharu asked.

"Never" the skunk answered.

"You were a second year student child. Exactly how were you taken?" Helen asked.

Henrika shook her head no. "I am forbidden to speak of such" she admitted.

"Oharu" Nikki whispered, only to have the mouse also shake her head no.

"It would be a great change Nikki. I am still forbidden."

"Ahm beggin you" Nikki responded. "Please. We hafta know."

"Henrika" Oharu called softly. When she had the skunks attention she smiled in as friendly a manner as she knew. "Please take nap. You seem tired."

To both the other women's stunned surprise Henrika lay back against the couch's back, closing her eyes. In seconds she was truly asleep. "How" Helen asked. "I would love to be able to do that with Antonius on occasion."

"Do not use her name" Oharu warned. "Woman has been trained, do as ordered without question. Will sleep until called by name or species, even if die in sleep. Have seen many time before. Too many time."

Turning her attention to Nikki the mouse rubbed her paws together for a few seconds. "Nikki. I once Miko. Could be Shinto Priestess. Difference between full train Miko, Priestess less than difference walk from one room to another. Yes, maybe could break open all block. If Shinto Priestess. I give that up. Throw away that future. I learn now to be Spontoon Priestess. Huakava careful to explain rules I must live under. Unless I accepted Kami... Spirits of Sacred Island, spoken to by spirits I am limit to what can do. Greater changes not permitted except extreme case. Qi, Karen Davies special case. I was cause her fall. Thus I was cause her recovery. That is not major change for I was cause. But may be impossible break through walls, if strong enough. All depends on what caused such."

She worked out her further words while the rooms other occupants waited in silence. "This one. She is far, far gone. So far it take months just to find good memories. Something she experienced, saw, cause her to withdraw. Always such things violent. From what I told woman who wish to buy you Nikki, she hunt for meal. Want to hunt you for meal. For blood sport. I not know but this probably what shatter woman's last hold. Maybe last victim was friend, even family member. Is why she turn from life, leave body behind. How any can find her I not know. Gods yes, mortals? Spirits? No I think. It nothing I ever experience. Read about in history scroll yes. Actually have experience with? No. I not Goddess Nikki. I think not even Kami can do such. Must be God or Goddess."

She looked over to Mrs. Whitehall. "Your problem small. As Miko I many times deal with. Spirit not willing to pass, or not willing restart. Try take body of living. That one simple to defeat, she have no training. Only great desire. Desire rarely stand against long training, skill. Never defeat for I have no like of such. Gave no chance to other. I asked by native Priestess help you, thus allowed. But..." She looked to the sleeping skunk, then back to Nikki. "Even if Huakava order. Such effort very long. Very difficult. She never return to what was, not even if herself hungry for such. Once spirit shattered never heal fully until next life. She now walks spirit world. Maybe already return, new life, new body. Never this one."

She swallowed, still holding the mares eyes with her own. "I make major change without true need before allowed. Nikki then I must be judged. If ignore rules I agree too I thrown out of native religion. I must become hunter, pleasure walker for tourists. No other choice given me. If I not thrown off Spontoon fully or given ocean. I lose all. Forever. Please not to ask this again."

"Ah dinnah know" the mare admitted. "Ah understan now. Yah hav mah word on this. Tha said, how could she ah been caught?"

It was Helen who came up with an answer, so obvious it was to her. "You understand love" she asked the mare.

"Nah, no one understans. In love yes. As bad as Oharu ah think. Luckier, she lovs me bac."

"Very well. Your love is?"

"Malou."

"Very well. Let us say for the purpose of argument that your Malou is secretly a slaver. Now then. Let us say she worked for, or contracted to someone on Krupmark Island. Am I clear so far?"

"Yer ah teacher. Crystal" Nikki answered.

"So. You are a Songmark student much in love with Malou, yet she insists that her heart yearns to say yes, yet before she can make a decision you must meet her parents. To gain their acceptance. An acceptable request?"

"Course. Ahd... Oh, Ah thin ah see..."

"Yes. You then arrive at your prospective in-laws home. Knowing the reputation of Krupmark you are unsurprised by events you find there, are on your guard as best as Songmark is able to prepare a second year. Yet Malou's family greets you with open arms then welcomes you into the family. This would lower your guard. In at least regarding them?"

Nikki turned her eyes to the sleeping skunk, then to Oharu. "Ebak" she cursed, fire in her voice.

"I think I prefer not to know what that means in English, Arabic or Cantonese" Helen admitted. "Very well you are welcomed into their home. You are given permission to marry their 'daughter.' Perhaps you even spend some special time alone with her. Sometime, perhaps at tea, or say a celebration dinner. Sometime a drug is slipped into your food or drink. What would then occur Nikki."

"Ah unnersatd. Ahn ah bet thas how... Oh dear God in Heaven..." She turned to Oharu. "Amelia ahn Molly... Lars is Krupmark. Tha coul be that third years Krupmark has wanted fer years an years."

"I cannot" the mouse answer Nikki's unspoken question. There were tears in her eyes, still she looked directly into the mares eyes. "Unless asked by one self I cannot. She cannot ask for she would first hate my soul. Even if I were full Spontoon Priestess. Interference in ones life choice is forbidden." She swallowed, looking down a moment then back up into Nikki's eyes. "Forbidden. I would not be cast down, I would be destroyed. With no effect upon their fate. We are holders of knowledge. Guides. Teachers. We make no mortal law. Enforce no mortal law. Rule no one. We serve only at pleasure those who support us."

"One would wish that all religion's felt as this" Helen commented. "My own birth religion feels no qualm in digging their sticky claws into anyones life."

"Same fer tha Roman Catholic Church" Nikki agreed. "Oharu. Yer forbinnin. Ahm noh."

"I forbid you" Oharu answered.

"What?"

"Nikki Ibarra Lily Benevedo" the mouse announced. "By all debts you owe me I forbid you interfere in Molly Procyk's life decisions. Please. If understand love I have for her. Do not do this."

"Mouse.... This is Songmark" Nikki growled, dropping her false accent for clarity. "You do not stand between me and Songmark. Ever."

"I forbid" Oharu repeated, speaking each word carefully. "You to interfere in Molly Procyk's decisions" she repeated.

"For.. Molly..." Nikki slowly calmed. "Ah righ. Ah don mess with Molly less she begs me. Onna 'er pawss ahn knees grubbin inna mud. Callin yer name wit love inner voice. Yah have mah word. Buh Amelia I watch likka hawk."

"Amelia not my concern at this time" Oharu agreed. "She is Saimmi's student. We are then at agreement?"

"Yep. Mrs. Whitehall. Hen... that one needs ah place tah stay. Ah'll compensat yah in shells, Brit pounds or gold. This here Priestess lft me wit lots morin ah need. Miss Devinski says she ahn tha other instructors be here after school year ends. Take her back, tah try an help her. Can yah accept tha?"

"Under but one condition" the afghan answered.

"Bein?"

"You Nikki. You will come to me in one month. You will report to me her situation in full depth. If you feel she needs something, if it is something I may be able to supply then you will never hesitate to ask for such."

"Tha's two conditions" the mare noted.

"Do not play the fur splitter with me young mare. Least I bend you over my lap and tan that fine hide of yours. With Miss Wei holding your rather beautiful tail out of the path of my paw. Are we understood?"

Nikki looked to Oharu. "Teachers" she remarked dryly. Returning her attention to Helen she allowed a smile to show. "Agreed."

"Very well then. I will care for your shattered eagle as though she were my own. Miss Wei. You must, I believe, transfer ownership to me? In order that she will obey me?"

"No need" Oharu answered. "Watch. Learn. Henrika. Wake fully."

Quickly the skunk opened her eyes, looking directly to Oharu for instructions.

"Henrika" Oharu explained softly. "I selling you to Songmark. You understand this?"

"Songmark" the skunk repeated. There was a difference in her voice, as though the faintest of memories had been woken.

"Yes. School you attended. You my property until Songmark arrives. You stay with Mrs. Whitehall. She my agent until Songmark collects you. Sunday I think. Perhaps Saturday. You obey her as obey me. As you will obey Songmark. Understand?"

"Yes Mistress. You will sell me to Songmark. I will serve them as I served you."

"Obey" the mouse corrected.

"Obey" the skunk repeated.

"Nikki we must leave. I am falling asleep. Mrs. Whitehall. Please to meet you again when awake." Oharu stood, abruptly swayed, then righted herself with obvious difficulty. "I would much like to meet you again."

"As I would like to speak with you further" Helen agreed. "Nikki you must take her to her home. I do not believe she could manage that alone. Not in her present condition."

"Consider it done" the mare agreed as she too stood. "Comon witch, we gotta get yah to yer home afore tha sun rises tah high ahn turns yah into dust. It'd be ah mess tah clean offin mah clothes."

Helen watched the two walk away from her home, mornings early light showing an apparently drunken mouse trying to walk, until abruptly the mare scooped her up and carried her out of sight. "They are very good friends" Helen said to herself. Shutting her door she turned back to her charge. "You have eaten today?"

"No Mistress" Henrika admitted.

"All right. Here is your schedule for today. You will eat from my kitchen what you want until you are full. You will then relieve yourself in the bathroom and bathe in the tub with fresh warm water and soap. You will then dry and brush yourself, spending the day in my guest room relaxing. You may brush your fur,

sing, write or whatever you favor for pleasure as long as you do not bother my son. A woman will be here while I am gone. When you are hungry or thirsty you will go to her and ask for food and drink. When you need to relieve yourself you will do so by using the bathroom facilities. You are to do no work. You are not to leave this house. Is this fully understood.?"

"Yes Mistress. Are there further orders?"

"Remember Songmark. The good times. Now lets go get some good food into that skinny belly of yours. Oh Henrika. Do you need scent sponges?"

"No Mistress. I was fully descented during my basic training."

"Fully... Oh my poor child. Your claws?"

"You have no fear Mistress. I have been fully declawed. All four paws as well as spayed."

"Henrika."

"Yes Mistress?"

"Would it upset you very much, should I arrange the death of your trainers?"

"Mistress. They are untouchable. Should you be noticed by them and they desire, you will no longer be my Mistress. You will be as I am, if you lived. Please do not attempt such a thing."

"Right. Breakfast." Warnings from those who had been there were to be listened too, and Helen Whitehall no longer ignored warnings. Nor thought of herself as invincible.

It was almost two hours later that Nikki carried a sleeping mouse into Great Stone Glen, for the weather currents had been hard and she had been forced to carry the mouse from water taxi to Glen. There she was met by three teenagers who quickly took Oharu from her. "She's unhurt Honored Mother, just exhausted" Nikki reported to Leokau. "She should sleep days."

"I must assure you that she will not" the otter explained while watching Oharu's female students help their teacher to her bed. "There is a mad drive within her. It will not allow her rest."

"Really?" Reaching into her carry bag Nikki withdrew a small tin bottle. "Thought we'd need this for Henrika. Didn't. Two drops in her water or juice. Juice is better, it hides the flavor. No alcohol, dangerous that way. Every eight hours. No more than three days then send this back to me." Again she had dropped her accent for clarity. *'Ahm getting in a habit round that mouse'* Nikki thought.

"It is" Leokau asked, not reaching for that offered bottle.

"Chloral Hydrate. Makes yah sleep. Tha use it in Shanghai a lot. Or used tah."

"Ah, a Micky. Certainly, with my thanks." Now accepting the offered bottle the otter almost smiled. "I have used this before. Would you like to rest? Some food or water?"

"Thanks nah. Malou's waitin, ahn iff in yav' used tha before ah aint stikin around. Take care of 'er."

"I will assure you. She will have the rest her body so needs. Thank you. You are her true friend."

July 19th, 1936

A slightly windy but otherwise quite Sunday morning greeted the natives of Spontoan. Unusually, Nikki was sitting in Kart Toombs office relaxing while waiting for business to come to her. She was aware that in her small home Malou had begun to settle in, changing things. Nikki's normally Spartan little home was already becoming quite a different place under the Siamese's touch. Nikki had heard from one of the guides who had returned her bottle that Oharu had truly slept three full days, waking refreshed if not a little upset with a certain mare. Meanwhile Kat-Toombs business was steady, all their aircraft were in good repair and tourists were still spending good money for foolish flights over the islands. Why, at the moment Katherine was taking a large group of brightly dressed, loud mouthed Italian tourists to a local 'private island' so that they could truly get away from it all. Considering why that island was private, well lets just say that having no real protection from the waves tended to make it less than desirable as a homestead during storms. It did though make a good party location during tourist season when the weather was decent and as long as the Allthing got their cut no one cared what went on there.

Her offices front door opened, a bell set above it ringing when struck by its opening and closing. Standing before Nikki, her eyes adjusting to the lower light levels inside was a dormouse. Nikki noted that her clothing was strict, worn almost like armor. A single small suitcase was held in one paw while her hair was pulled back into a strict Librarian's bun. She was wearing glasses that did nothing for her face, though what little the mare could tell of her body seemed promising. "Can help yah" Nikki asked, sniffing for the woman's scent. Old books, a Librarian, Writer or Scientist.

"I truly hope so" the woman answered. "I am looking for a woman named Nikki. Could that be you?"

"Sure hop so" Nikki admitted. "Else ahm inna wron body. Looking fer ah flight?"

"No thank you" the dormouse answered. Reaching into a pocket of her too strict jacket she withdrew a folded paper. "I am Alexia Susan Finesilver of the Portland Oregon State Library. Research Stacks. I believe that I have a three week contract with you." She offered the letter. "Mistress."

Oh yes, things were looking up the mare decided.

Later that day Helen Whitehall welcomed her five visitors politely, only stepping to her kitchen long enough to bring a pot of coffee and cups. It was late but her son was still awake and busy playing in his pen, mainly by diligently attempting worm his way out of the pens tightly woven walls. So far it had resisted his best efforts, but Helen held no illusions as to whom would eventually win that battle. Given a few more months of growth and Killian's son would be a force for the pen to reckon with. She returned to her drawing room, setting her service on a low table meant for such things.

"Although I was chosen to be leader of this invasion, I would like to introduce my fellow instructors" Catherine Devinski announced. "This is Miss Nordlingen, Mrs Oelabe, our nurse, Miss Windlesham and Miss Wildford." As she spoke each name one of the woman would raise a paw, indicating to whom that particular label belonged. "Honestly Hel, we are at a loss as to what to do. This simply wasn't something we ever planned for."

Helen offered Mrs Oelabe a cup of coffee, which the nurse gratefully accepted. "Songmark? Not being prepared? I thought you were like the Girl Guides. Ready for anything."

"We adapt" Miss Wildford admitted. "That a student would be enslaved. Yes, we knew that would eventually occur. More than once as our students are all quite... healthy. To that end we have many plans already filed, to be modified as needed. Several have already been used over the years. That one would be returned to us so shattered, you called her our Shattered Eagle didn't you. That we would have a shattered eagle so broken that she is unable to function. No Mrs. Whitehall. No one would expect that kind of tragedy."

"Yet you now have such on your paws" Helen observed, relaxing with her own coffee. "You have had time, though limited due to when this occurred to think about her future. Tell me, for it truly interests me. What will occur to her."

Miss Devinski sipped her coffee, setting her cup down before answering. "In truth Hel, we thought about putting her down. Sending her body home with some concocted story of tragedy beyond her ability to control. We discarded that plan almost instantly. She deserves better. You are aware of events in Europe at this moment?"

"Quite well aware" Helen admitted. "It is a minor interest of Dia-Kura's, so I try to keep current. She is difficult to surprise I find. Your point?"

"If we were to send her home alive her best hope would be placed in a private institution. Most likely she would be 'treated', experimented upon is the better word. Like a laboratory animal. Even Cranium Island would treat her better than that, for all their own madness. We are certain that there will be war. Any European war will draw Greece in with it. With a great deal of good luck she would be struck by a bomb and killed."

"That option was discarded as well" Miss Nordlingen added. "As were all ideas involving our students possible death. We have decided upon a tight grouping of actions. We would though like your opinion. You have after all been with her for some days now."

Helen carefully looked into the eyes of each of her visitors before answering. "I made a change to my will Friday" she announced. "That should I ever be in that situation, someone is to place a bullet in my brain. Two if need-be. That though is my choice as an individual. As a mother I would do anything I could to have my child back. Even if that required the expenditure of all I have, will ever have. Even if that cost was my own life."

Catherine smiled in a way Helen had never seen before. "You would have Songmark bankrupt, for one life?"

"What is a life worth Cat. What is my life worth to you? I know what yours is worth to me. I believe that you know what your life is worth to me. Someone loves her, cares for her. Someone is wondering where their child is. Their happy, forward looking bright young daughter whom they trusted to attend a school thousands of miles from home. What happened to her. Why hasn't she written or come home. What is her life worth, to your soul. To all your souls."

"Agreed" Miss Wildford answered. "I have not slept well since learning of this."

Catherine looked at her coffee cup, deciding not to play a certain card again just yet. "There are several options open to us Hel. One is Spontoon's special Hospital. It is normally only for the Gunboat War victims, yet it also on occasion takes special patients. She would be well cared for all the rest of her life. Another is to take her to the shrine at Songmark, though what would happen there none of us know. A third would be more direct, less desirable. There is a Euro clinic on Casino Island, they preform electroshock therapy..."

"And lobotomies" Helen added, her comment so dry a desert would seem a garden. "Horrible. Considering what has already been done to her."

"A useless procedure" Mrs Oelabe agreed. "It destroys the personality. Our student at this moment has no personality. What has been done to her?"

Softly, with as little emotion as she could manage Helen explained all that she had learned about her charge. Songmark breeds strong stomachs she decided as she finished, for none of the women in her home more than winced at her report.

"Very well" Catherine decided after Helen had ceased speaking. "I take it Casino Island's clinic is discarded?" She looked to each of her companions, seemingly relieved at their silent responses. "I understand that Oharu brought back a woman who had been broken. That she ripped from you a madness not your own. We have too long lived in these islands not to understand what is possible. What our parents denied is commonplace here, and other lands. Hel, the local religion isn't something that any of us are fully versed in, though we have all studied. We all have our own paths of course. There is simply too much to know about our world to understand it all. Why, until Oharu visited all we knew about Shinto was that it is a ancestor worship. Foolish thoughts, we knew better of course. Knew that it had to be more. She explained, thus it has helped greatly in the dealing with certain students. That this could be done was unknown to us. I know that you have a special friend. Would she look, see if our student could be returned?"

"Kura has already spent several hours with her" Helen admitted. "Your student has passed on. Recalling her it is beyond her ability. She thinks that it is currently beyond any priestess's ability. Even this Oharu. Kura is much taken by Oharu. She respects her greatly. I believe that Asian mouse is her hero. If she feels it is beyond a hero's reach..."

"We could at least ask" Miss Nordlingen said.

"I think it would be a waste of your time right now." Carefully she explained what Oharu had said while visiting her home. How adamant she had been about her current limitations, the rules she freely lived under. How long she thought it would take to simply find the girls memories, even had she the right to make that try. "It is amazing how these Priestess voluntarily limit themselves" Helen continued. "At home, even the rawest just out of school preacher would make the try, then blame his now destroyed subject for his failure. Here on Spontoon they could rule just like in Europe. Completely, yet every one I have met desires only to serve. Kura suggests that you speak with Oharu before making any final decision, though I'd bet a cookie she sends you up her own chain of command."

Miss Windlesham pushed her empty cup and saucer aside. "Perhaps that would be our best choice then Mrs. Whitehall. We spoke to you because of your previous experience, your time with our student and because Miss Devinski vouches for both your intelligence and discreetness. I myself can see she was correct. May we meet her?"

"Certainly" Helen turned her body, looking down the hall of her home. "Henrika. Come please" she called. In seconds a sound of bare feet was heard, then Henrika entered wearing a modist, brand new soft blue cotton dress. She quickly fell into that position Helen found distasteful and had not been able to break her of. "Henrika, Songmark has come for their property. I will release my control of you to your new owners now. You will obey them?"

"I will obey."

"Very well. You have been a pleasure to care for. Now it is time, I release you fully. Go to them, you are now their property."

Henrika moved quickly to a place equally between her one time instructors, falling again into a position Oharu would recognize, having seen Nikki in the exact same position once before in China. "I am yours to do with as you wish" the skunk announced, falling silent.

"Goddess no" an undeterminable voice whispered.

"Henrika, stand" Miss Wildford ordered, her own voice filled with shock. Instantly the skunk stood, though as always her eyes never made contact with anyone. "You are to return to Songmark with Mrs Oelabe. She will give you a full physical. Inform her of even the slightest problem, slightest pain your body may have. This is a test Henrika. You will be graded. Remember that." Wildford's voice had become stricter as she spoke, yet there was no reaction from Henrika other than acknowledgment of her orders.

As soon as those two had left the remaining four woman stood. "We want to thank you for your care of our student" Catherine told Helen. "And I will return as soon as I can. S.I.T.H.S. has finished its school year for the break?"

"Classes yes" Helen answered. "We are in break, a month until next term. I have grading yet to do, local teacher training. Quite a bit of reading to do regarding the subjects I teach but yes. For my students Friday was the last day. Until mid-August."

"Then I will see you sometime next week, as you bargained. I will also tell you what we have decided." Gathering their slim belongings Songmark's instructors made their way out. It was only after they had left that the young fox Kura stepped out of Antonius's bedroom.

"They have a difficult path ahead" the priestess observed, her grass skirt rattling slightly as she spoke.

"Other than death. Are there any easy ones" Helen asked her friend.

"No."

As Helen had suspected Oharu had referred her visitors to Huakava. Not only referred, but guided them to her home deep within the islands oftentimes confusing interior. It was mid-afternoon before the party of six, four instructors, a priestess and guide arrived at the High Priestess's home. Oharu entered the small compound alone while the others waited outside, taking the opportunity to observe Sacred Lake from above. Entering a shine was one thing, entering the High Priestess's private compound simply wasn't done without an invitation. Sometimes not even for a Priestess.

"Why have you come daughter" Huakava asked. She was sitting at an ancient wooden desk, a warm drink beside her. Her single servant had vanished to leave the two priestess's time to talk unrestricted.

"I was presented a problem I cannot solve" the young mouse explained. "It is beyond my abilities."

Huakava took up her drink, taking a larger than normal swallow. Her body craved warmth now, what with the storms and her homes altitude. Old bones chilled easily. "That is a lie my daughter. I will allow you nothing that is beyond your abilities" the panther responded. "Why do you deny their need."

"This is perhaps, will perhaps always be beyond me. I am not full priestess Great Mother. A mistake. Small, would destroy more than heal."

Setting her cup aside Huakava slowly, painfully turned her body to face Oharu. "I am asking you to take my place when I have passed on" she announced abruptly. "I have weighed carefully those four whom I feel are acceptable. You are my choice."

To her credit Oharu barely reacted to Huakava's statement. "I refuse Great Mother."

"Why?"

Such a dangerous question, using but a simple word. Oharu looked around her, burning into her artists soul what was about her. "Many reasons. I am still much untrained. There is much to much that I do not yet know. I could not possible lead those who know more than I. Yet all that aside, I am an outlander. Arrived yes, still I am an outlander. No outlander, no matter how dedicated, how trained, how talented. None may draw upon this land as a true daughter may." She pressed her kimono against her body, one of the few signs of nervousness that those about her understood. "Setting even that aside. A Great Mother must be accepted by all. As outlander there will always be some who, in heart of heart cannot accept. Even if mind says yes. I would weaken my sisters without meaning too. In peace, perhaps that would mean nothing. In what is today. Will be tomorrow. Such weakness cannot be afforded."

"You speak well my daughter. Yet you are still my first choice. Dwell upon my offer. We will speak of this again later. Now tell me about this problem." Huakava listened in silence while Oharu explained what she had been asked, what Songmark's problem was as she saw it. "You have looked upon this problem from many sides, that is good" the panther finally decided. "Should you address this problem from your Shinto training, what would be the result. As you see it."

"Great Mother I was a Miko. As such I dealt with similar situations. Nothing as bad as this. It is possible, yet what help I could offer. Very limited. She has withdrawn. Her body lives, she no longer does."

"Are her Guardians yet fully aware of their loss?"

"I believe not. For they are of the kind who never lose hope. At best a child might be woken. Never anything greater than a child. She is lost."

Huakava again took her drink into paw, letting its warmth ease aches that had come to her fingers. "What shock could have done such to her" she wondered. "I have seen such before, in my own youth. Not of late though. Never since the Gunboat Wars. Have you knowledge of what shock would cause such a one, for a Second year Songmark girl has a very strong mind, to turn away from this world?"

Quietly Oharu explained what she knew. What very little she had learned. "There is emotion, there is, perhaps, a glimmer of new life. Henrika as known before is gone. She walks now those paths all who have passed on walk. Perhaps a God could return her to what she was. I do not know."

Huakava sipped her drink. "Some claim their Gods can do anything. Some, as you, claim they are limited. Oharu no one knows what a God or Goddess is capable of. They show us what they want us to know about them. We but stand as children within their shadows, doing all we are able. You Oharu are so much more than many of my other daughters. Perhaps you are my greatest daughter. Still, as you say you are but a child in so many of our ways. Are you certain, within your spirit. That you could not, even released fully draw her back to this land of life. As you did the Englishwoman?"

"I am certain" the mouse admitted.

"I see." Huakava eased herself from her chair, standing on age weakened limbs she found her walking stick. "That but leaves them with few choices. You are certain they will not let her body pass beyond this life?"

"I am certain. For they have, as admitted, looked upon such. Rejecting it."

"Let us meet my guests then." Slowly, with a much concerned Oharu close to her lest she fall Huakava made her way to the waiting women.

Miss Wildford spoke this time. "Will you help us" she asked, respect for the ancient grey furred woman before her heavy in her voice. In her stance.

"You have left yourself but three choices" Huakava announced, her voice that stern, strong sound used only when giving a decision. "As you reject the passing of her body they are thus. You may surrender her to Spontoons medical care where she may be given the best life possible considering her damage. You may keep her as a slave as she is trained to be. As she, you yourself must suspect is now happy to be. Or you may take her to that which resides upon your lands. Those are all the choices I may offer you."

"Would you explain" Miss Devinski asked. "She was a promising student. Intelligent, lively. She held so much promise. Can you not return at least a part of her too us? We would care for her as long as she lives, we all swear this."

Huakava nodded in agreement. "You have always taken care of your children" she agreed. "Those are the choices I give you. You may choose from them, or find another."

Looking to each other the instructors spoke quietly for some time. Huakava and Oharu simply stood in silence, awaiting their decision. "There is no way to return her" Miss Nordlingen asked softly.

"There is nothing to return" Huakava explained. "At best a child. Henrika as you knew her has passed on."

"Thank you for your time High Priestess. We will discuss further those options, and any others we may discover. You have been most helpful."

"Your guide will return you to the nearest water taxi" Huakava explained. "I must speak further with Oharu. And those who did this evil deed?"

"It will take time" Miss Devinski admitted. "I promise we will find a way to repay them. Even if it takes years." She and the others bowed slightly to Spontoon's High Priestess before turning to leave. They could not know that their paws would have nothing to do with justice for Henrika. Justice that would come at the end of a rope to those who had done this. Yet, in its way justice would come. Soon.

After they had left Huakava turned her attention to the waiting mouse. "You are doing well with your students" she commented. "As little time as you have had with them. I worry greatly of the weight you carry, yet I must add to that weight. After Sacred Island you will take a month to yourself. To ease that load you carry and hide so well. Now come, there are several very important rituals I must teach you."

Together the two returned to Huakava's home where two cups of warm drink now waited.

Chapter Forty

July 21st, 1936

Doctor Annette Riverstone had just left a patients room when, as often happens in such cases one of the local nurses stopped her. Annette was serving on South Island this week and was quite enjoying her work here. Especially since there seemed to be much fewer tourists to molly coddle to. "Doctor Riverstone" the nurse called softly, easily catching the others attention. "Doctor Kiwi called. He needs you on Meeting Island. Immediately Mam."

"Meeting Island? But who will take care of my patients" Annette asked. She had a waiting room filled with various ailments, as her instructor in school termed it. She however looked at it as a room of people who needed her help.

"Doctor Monotega is already on her way" the older nurse reported. "She will arrive within the half hour."

Doctor Monotega. Annette had heard nothing but good about the islands only other full time female doctor. To date though circumstances had connived to insure they hadn't met, though she much wanted to compare notes with the woman. Here again they would probably pass on opposing water taxis. "I will inform my waiting patients first please" she decided.

"It has already been done Doctor."

"Then I best be off. I do not think that Kiwi would call upon me like this unless he truly needed me." She went to the single office that all visiting doctors shared on South Island for her purse. It was going to be a long boat ride to Meeting Island, but if she remembered correctly the tide would be with her at this time of day. That would certainly speed her travel. She hoped. *'I am becoming more like the natives'* she thought as she walked. *'Thinking in terms of tides and currents rather than distance and time.'*

On Casino Island the sable Tatiana Bryzov simply could not believe her luck. She had just passed her second year course and Songmark was closed for the season. No more instructors to watch over every little thing she did, to take away privileges or assign extra work. That they would be watching her the Russian was aware, but only if she was really stupid would anything she did cause her to be cast out of school. There were still all sorts of tourists about, the Schneider Trophy flights had yet to finish and she had a paying job. A real job. Even though it did not include flying experience, or work on any aircraft. Well, not every student could manage a flying job during break the Russian had to admit, though she would have preferred such. Her new job though insured that she would not have to return to Mother Russia this break. A trip she was now almost certain that she would never return from. Not after her critical mistake in Vostokiye. If Iosif Starling had even the least shred of proof then she was a dead woman. In truth though, when she had first reported Major Hawkins offer to her and his physical interest (though that it was a sham she kept to herself) to her barely educated controller the bear had nearly exploded with glee.

"Dah Dah. You must take position. You must let decadent Englander loose heart to you. You must. Is impossible good luck. Tatiana Bryzov. You are excellent agent. You have native witch under paw. Now have English Major. Iosif Starling will give you order of Lemon when hears about this."

Order of Lemur she corrected in her mind. As if she wanted anything from that murderess Georgian peasant. Let him crawl back to his slum home in Gori and die. Those were her thoughts about him now.

Her spoken words however were much different. *"I but serve Mother Russia"* she had answered. *"Am I to retain my Russia stoicism, appear a fallen decadent fool or something between."*

That question had calmed her controller only long enough for the bear to make a decision. For in this situation, simply saying 'act yourself' wasn't the right answer. Even his dense brain could quickly understand that. Acting herself would cost her the position in minutes. *"You have feelings for this Major"* he asked seriously.

"None Comrade. Remember also this. I am currently supposed to be showing certain feelings of friendship towards a specific charlatan mouse. This Major has though shown some interest in myself. Interest I have so far allowed him to feel was perhaps returned. But nyet comrade. He is simply an English fool. One I would happily shoot in the back."

"If he has interest. Allow him to believe you desire him. He is your key to this position. We have never gotten agent into this complex. That you have managed" he laughed. *"Oh yes. You will bring Mother Russia much glory."*

"As long as my efforts bring us closer to liberating our world of their oppressive masters, I need no glory" she remarked. *"How far must I allow this English Major to advance."* Mother Russia free of gangsters yes Tatiana admitted only to herself. That mad gangster known as Iosif Starling. Never.

"As far as you must Comrade Bryzov. As we allowed the French to take all they desired. Until we could cut their throats."

As far, Tatiana thought. *If it hadn't been for that blessed Winter from Hell there would be no Russia today. "As far."* She drew upon her acting training, training given her long before her arrival to Songmark. *"And should I carry his pup?"*

"Then he will be raised Russian. Made well aware of his mothers sacrifices for the Motherland."

"As you command Comrade. Is there anything else?"

For a moment the bear had glanced at a well used sofa in his office, then remembered that the last time he had attempted that Tatiana had broken three of his fingers. Without any apparent effort. *"Nothing important. Yet. A question. Why are you are taking a room at the McGee resort?"*

"It was suggested to me by Priestess Oharu. As a place I would not be bothered by nosey servants. It was suggested somewhat strongly, for she has feelings for those capitalist pigs. To continue having influence with her I accepted. It is also one of the cheaper resorts with almost no luxury. Was I mistaken?"

"No no my dear Bryzov. You have acted most correctly." The bear smiled, a bloody filthy smile. He obviously had never brushed those teeth. *"When we free this nation you will be given the prize of cutting her throat with your own paw. I will have the McGee rates checked. You will have sufficient funds transferred to your account immediately. Do not fail in this Tatiana Bryzov. You are a promising agent. Yet remember always that there are others. All waiting their chance."*

"Then send them Comrade. See if they have the luck I have had. The skill I have. Send me home to Mother Russia. I much miss her."

"Now now Comrade Bryzov. I was simply reminding you. So as you would not take into your head that you are irreplaceable. Report to me weekly. You well know the drop. Success comrade."

Tatiana had left the office at that point. Success comrade was as close to goodbye that her controller ever got. As to comrade, cold enemies was more like it. She was well aware, though the bear wasn't aware she knew that he would gladly cut her throat. For the poorly educated peasant hated women to be outside of their homes. Women were for keeping house. Carrying children. Warming a bed. Nothing else. What he wanted her for was obvious. As was what he wanted her to do. An image of her slitting Oharu's throat came to the sables mind. It was no longer a pleasant image to her. It was not an image she now felt would happen. *'I am changing'* she had realized. *'Spontoon is changing me.'*

Now she stood on the steps of her new employment. The Royal British Consulate at Spontoon. There stood on guard as always a single British serviceman. Waiting. His brass was polished, his uniform sharply pressed. She wondered how he would fare against an equally trained Russian. Accepting of course that today in Russia, in truth, there were no equals to this single Englishman. Starling had ruined her country. Had crushed their own army. Songmark and Oharu had opened her eyes to that. Accidentally yes. Still it had been the mouse who had calmed Tatiana's disquiet. She had opened those closed eyes fully, then just as easily illuminated another path for her. Russia was her heart, her soul. That gangsters ruled it were not her fault. Throwing herself to the headsman by going back, for it was almost certain that by now Starling would know she had been fooled in Vostok by the White Russians would be a fools choice. No then. From outside yes. Perhaps she could make a difference after all. Lemur's Communism was a good policy she still believed. Only if used correctly. Making one last check of her brand new outfit she started up those steps.

"We finally have her" Doctor Kiwi announced at Annette's arrival on Meeting Island. "She arrived just this morning."

"She?" Annette asked, somewhat confused. "Which she?" the younger otter asked.

"Ah yes. I forgot. You do of course remember our case with that young Songmark girl. She had been drugged, remembered nothing?"

"Yes. Now that you remind me. So she is back? Has she been drugged yet again."

Doctor Kiwi shook his head no, his tail thumping the floor in mock anger. "We have the skunk Doctor Riverstone. We have her still under the influence of that drug, along with a small sample of that drug as well."

A light of understanding blossomed within the otters head at those words. "Where is she now?"

"I'm taking you to her" he explained. "It is all in the Hush-Hush of course. Come, we need to walk quickly now."

Their walk turned into a vehicle ride, then into another walk as they entered a certain crater through one of the many ancient tunnels carved within its walls. Annette noted that they were not too far from the veterans hospital. That special place that held those who had survived the Gunboat War. Yet they were far enough away that a very long stretch of unimproved crater floor lay between them and the building they finally entered. It was a miniature hospital, and more she noted. Not much larger than two average longhouses it had been built within one of those forgotten carved out caverns. As such it was completely invisible from the air, even though sunlight shown through many openings she was certain no pilot could spot this place.

"How many are tortured to death in here" she asked abruptly, remembering her own experience aboard the Gummy Rose.

"None Doctor. Not one to my extensive knowledge" Kiwi answered. "I have been here many times. This is a place meant for those who no longer are able to survive outside. Such as a Cranium Island patient

we have had here for many years. As I recall she arrived very strangely. Simply appearing from nowhere, nearly mindless. You must meet her, but not now. As to your torture chambers Doctor. I am absolutely certain that such a place exists. I am also absolutely certain they are not within these crater walls. They would be no where near the Veterans hospital. Of that I am most certain."

That news surprised Annette. "Refreshing that someone admits their Government will resort to torture if required. Not that I enjoy the idea of having my claws removed slowly, one at a time. To change subject now. You are saying that Cranium Island sends medical cases here? I was under the impression that they simply fed their rejects and weaker members to the local monsters."

Kiwi laughed. "I am quite certain that those stories are circulated simply to keep unwanted visitors away. Much as our own legends are made to fit our needs regarding certain tourists. It isn't scientifically possible to create the things supposable lurking on that island. Nor did they send this one. As I said, she simply appeared upon a beach one afternoon. In full view of everyone. Poor girl has been babbling every since. More importantly now our Miss Underwood was brought here for security reasons. If I understand her story correctly, and you know it as well as I do, upon coming out from that drugs control she will return to whom she was before. Opinion?"

"From what I know you should be correct" the otter admitted. "We need a second subject. A control. To test that theory first though. But why drag me into this sir. Your quite capable of handling this case alone."

"Miss Underwood is, as I recall an abused female" Kiwi answered. "She is also expecting a child. I happen to be male. You happen to be very much female. Your nations customs are not much different than hers were, before that dark revolution. Now come, we are expected. We are late."

Doctor Albert Garner woke to a drug dulled pain. His last clear memory was that of being attacked upon his ship as it left Guam. "Callie" he called, stunned to hear the weakness in his own voice. There was no answer. That meant Callie was either dead or in as bad condition. If the latter she was no longer under his drugs effects. That meant he either had to get her the drug and fast, or escape. In either case right now Albert felt that his best option was to act the innocent tourist who had been attacked. Without bothering to open his eyes the buck allowed his body to relax. Not true sleep, yet a healing rest that he'd long ago learned was best for any injury.

Some time later two people entered his room. Scent told him one was a vixen, her scrubbed to the skin cleanness obviously that of a nurse. The other was a bloodhound. Considering where he had been when attacked he knew who it was most likely to be. How long had he been unconscious he wondered. He might as well face it now, there was nothing else to lose. If Callie had woken all was lost anyway. Opening his right eye, his left seemed to be blocked he looked up at the ceiling. Typical white painted hospital ceiling. "Callie" he asked again, this time an act.

"He did ask for the lass earlier" the vixen said softly. More than likely talking to the bloodhound. "Tis only his first time tah open his eye. Of this I am certain."

"Leave us" the bloodhound ordered.

"Sir?"

"Leave."

Albert sensed, more than heard her hesitation. '*Military hospital*' he decided, with the bloodhound well over ranking the vixen. She left, quietly. "Captain Hokes?" Albert asked weakly, guessing.

"Tha same. Your gonna live, but you'll be blind in that left eye forever" the bloodhound reported. "If he'd thrown a little harder you'd be buried by now. Your Callie. They took her."

Albert groaned in frustration. So many years of training. All thrown away for nothing. "Why" he asked, finding talking a bit of more pain than he liked.

"Two guesses" Hokes answered, moving a chair. "They hit my place tha same night. Only took my drugs. And all the drug. I barely got Juliet back to the base ahn her quarters before it wore off. Now she's trying to figure out where three days went. I've inspected your cases, found your hidden stash. Its still there. Either they just wanted your drug or wanted tah stop you. More than likely both."

"Either way sir. Without my Callie they have most likely succeeded" Albert admitted. Hokes knew his cover story, he'd go with that instead. "Perhaps someone who we crossed in passing. There have been several deals such as yours in the past." That though was a lie, there had been no other such deals. No reason for them.

"More like Kuo Han. Those slavers av' always wanted a perfect drug. Dose a fur, they travel on there own tah a waiting ship or plane and vanish. God knows how many would be lost before we wised up. Military wise this is a disaster. Is there a cure?"

"To that drug? No. None I know of. Grapefruit juice will ease the withdrawal effects to near nothing. Other than that. No. So" Albert coughed, his throat dry. "You will put me out of my most terrible misery now?"

"Hell no Albert" Hokes answered, moving to bring a glass of water to the bucks easy reach. "You and I, we have an agreement. You held by yours. My dad. He always said you let yourself be bought, you stay bought. Or someone's gonna slip you some steel one night. They took your woman. Took her ready bottle. Between that and what they got from me, how many could they dose with what they took?"

Albert fought the pain in his head as he drank. Cool water easing the rawness of his throat. Callie had switched the drugs, but no reason Hokes needed that knowledge now. "One time dose, fourteen to sixteen hours. Maybe two, two fifty" he admitted. "If they had gotten my main supply, two or three thousand depending on weight and species." He turned his head slowly until he could see the bulldog, who was now looking at the rooms single door. "Why?"

"I want my lunch ticket back. I want all mah tickets back. You need a place to hide and medical attention until your back on your feet. This hospital isn't any safer than that ship. I have a friend who knows of a forgotten series of buildings hidden in a secret cavern. Way back in the deep jungle. Or you could try it alone."

Albert closed his good eye. Even with Callie gone he easily still had enough drug to train a new servant. Maybe. Might be able to get more of the moss, if Katrina was still swooning over him. Split it with this bulldog. Go into business with him? Prussia and his other employers would be hunting him of course, unless... "My employers will hunt me unless they think I'm dead. So will those who have already attacked. How would you handle that?"

Laughter answered him. "Small news release. Gravely wounded tourist died from infection of wounds received in assault. Still searching for missing skunkette assumed to have been attacker. These things are easy. We have a deal?"

"I'm going to need a nurse for my health. Have you any suggestions?"

"Lt. Dunne is rather cute. Noh as pretty as your little skunk, but she's cute enough. For an Irish girl. She was tha one you saw when you work up."

"All right Captain. Then we have a deal. I will trust you to insure my medical needs. But tell me. Why bother? You know the correct dose. You have the drug. Bought or not, a simple act would insure my eternal silence."

"Mr. Garner. Sir. There is a difference between understand something an being a master of that something. I'm smart enough to know when I'm not smart enough. I have no intention of starting a slave operation or anything like that. But ah few carefully crafted reports by higher ups and my rank will become something worth having. You've noticed my grammar is not what the Navy considers socially acceptable. For a high ranking officer tha is. Also, right now at this rank mah actions are watched carefully by the U.S. Navy. I have to play the squeaky clean. Yet I have always preferred the good life. A few choice mating selections, a couple of horrible accidents with the best alibi available and I'm a tycoon bulldog. Then politics. With you around I can be certain that we both get exactly what we want. Maybe one day your Callie will show up again. Probably not though but I'm certain you'd like to hold her chain in your paws again if you had the chance. I'll have you out of here tonight. Once we can get back to the United States inna few years then things can start moving faster. Right now your nurse needs tah be made ready. I'll arrange her dose later ta-night. When your settled in, my pet too. Then while you heal we plan out our next offense. There is one more reason I should remain with our original agreement that you may have forgotten."

"That is?"

"You're the only one on this planet who knows how to make this stuff. Where to get everything that's needed. Probably tha only one who knows how tah get it. Even if I knew all that, I couldn't manage something as involved as you've run for years. I'd blow it. Somehow. Someway I would make a mistake. Probably get overconfident. With you around, it will work."

July 23rd, 1936

Five figures were sitting around a table large on Meeting island. Large enough to hold three times their number. Before each of them were stacks of papers while a small mobile tray filled with bottles sat between two of them. "Your report is" the female bobcat asked.

Dr. Kiwi cleared his throat, pressing down the fur on his arms that nerves had caused to rise. "All but two bottles were fake" he reported. "Nothing more than colored water. Of the other two bottles, perhaps five ounces of liquid remain in total. To date nothing we have used on our subject has defeated this drug. Nothing. There is another matter. A very important matter. She is with pup. There is no way of telling what this drug is doing to her unborn. That it will affect the pup in an undesirable way is obvious, but it isn't known if the damage is reversible or not. Or even if it is already too late to do anything about it. Her false mind has finally cleared itself of all previously given orders. She does nothing other than care for basic body functions unless ordered by Doctor Riverstone. I chose her to be the woman's new controller until we finished our studies, which we now have regarding the skunk. It is our opinion that she should be removed from her drug cold turkey as soon as we make our final experiment."

"Granted immediately. So, what do you plan to do now" the bobcat asked.

"We would like to preform a last experiment before waking this woman" Annette answered. "A willing subject, fully aware of what is going on will be given the drug for a period of two or three days. This subject will be given complex orders, all of which will be absolutely against their normal morals. These orders have already been decided by my college and I. From that subject we hope to determine what advance notice an agent might have that they are affected."

Turning to a male fox beside her Elizabeth quietly asked a question. She seemed to accept the answer given. Turning her attention back onto Dr. Kiwi she asked her next question. "Who?"

"Doctor Riverstone of course" Kiwi answered.

"Why her. Why not one of our agents?"

Kiwi raised his eyebrows. "Have you any medically trained agents? By medically trained of course, I mean as trained as Doctor Riverstone currently is."

Elizabeth conceded defeat. "You should know we don't. Medical knowledge beyond emergency first aid isn't in our training program. Annette. Are you certain you want to do this?"

"I have studied Liberty's records carefully Mrs. Sapohatan. Trust me in this. If I didn't already trust you with my life I wouldn't even consider doing this. A lot of these orders are things that I know I would rather die than do. Or would be so humiliated at the doing I could never complete them. Others are things I would avoid if at all possible. I selected these things because I know what I will and will not do. We could never be certain of this with any other volunteer. I'm putting my soul on the line here Mam. One dose, a thousand doses. I won't be able to control anything once I'm under if what we fear is the truth. I am trusting you not to abuse my trust. That I won't wake up old and grey in some backwater prison waiting to be shot, completely not knowing what I'd done for the last forty years. I'm fairly certain that's exactly what this skunk is going to discover when she wakes up. In the least she's going to wake up several months pregnant. That of course would be a shock to any woman. Having someone who at least understands what happened to her, has experienced it should be helpful. I do not believe that her owner, and he could be considered nothing but an owner had any intention of waking her before he had no more use for her. That means she would be dead. Probably by her own paw. Besides Mam. We really have to know."

"Where and when will you conduct this experiment" Elizabeth asked.

"Here" Kiwi answered, picking up a stopwatch.

"Now" Annette answered, picking up a small glass of water in front of her then drinking it.

Kiwi started the stopwatch as soon as Annette swallowed. Annette immediately began counting backwards from one hundred.

Two Red Stones was a very unhappy cougar. His report on the loss of 'The Commander' had not been easily accepted by certain higher ups. Now two agents were on their way from Washington to investigate the entire event. Well there was nothing he could do about it. His records showed exactly what he had and had not done. That the fool had been caught with an illegal weapon outside an all woman's school by locals wasn't Red Stones problem. That he had attacked and almost killed an undercover Navy agent would have had him shot anyway. Besides, there was a signed document refusing the cougars assistance so he was covered. The American Consulate General however, his tail would be deep in the dirty grinder. First he traded an expensive Navy aircraft for a badly wanted spy, then killed her before asking a single question. Along with that he then had one of Americas most successful (if generally hated) agents killed in his area of responsibility. Yep the cougar decided as he sipped his coffee. Old stove pipe was in for a rough ride. Right now though Red Stones was busy with another project. He was busy officially watching for the doe Molly Procyk to wander by all alone. After all, he was charged with attempting her capture. Alive or dead.

Molly Procyk though never came to the Double Lotus. Though from where Two Red Stones sat, the view was rather delightful anyway.

"He's still out there" Becky Viper laughed as she turned away from the Lotus's door. She was in a good mood today. The Lotus was well into the black now with Tatiana finished repaying her 'loan.' As one of the owners of this bar its financial situation was very important to her. Along with its condition. High over her in the buildings 'cathedral ceiling' (meaning that they never replaced that rotted second floor when they

moved in) several carpenters were busy locating and fixing a leak. It wasn't any good to have a dance floor if it was soaking wet every time it rained.

"He's waiting for a certain doe" Elsia Hoffman explained from her seat at the bar. Though not technically Sappho, the little spitzmouse wasn't exactly limited in her companions either. However she felt at night was pretty much where she went. Lately though, after a rather difficult experience she'd been spending more time at the Lotus when drinking.

"Molly never comes here" Becky remarked as she returned to her post behind the bar. "He ought to know that. Everyone knows that. It's the only reason Mother Oharu still comes here."

"He does" Elsia laughed. "He just likes the view."

Becky snorted, grabbing a rag. "Crazy Americans."

"Not really" the little private detective observed. "He's supposed to arrest her. Nah, that'd get him serious bad ju-ju right? So, he spends his time 'hunting' here. Ah place he knows where she'll never go. So, he does what he's told and he doesn't have any swimming accidents."

"Or seriously anger a certain mouse. Not that he believes she can do anything."

Elisa stared at her hostess. "Hon. He's Amerindian. He believes. Oh Do the boy believe. More than he does and he's seen what her kind can do."

Three hours had passed while Elizabeth and her staff members watched in silence. Silence so as to not cause anything to conflict with Doctor Kiwi's pre-set experiments. "Annette" the older male asked. "What were you doing, December second, 1935 at eleven oh nine AM." He settled back, watching the otters eyes flickering from side to side, waiting. "It's apparently like a library" he explained softly to the other three. "Everything is there. Everything is completely available. But we have replaced a veteran librarian with one right out of school. Unlike the older, slower librarian who occasionally forgets things she can tell you anything. But you have to give her exact times and dates to tell you about, or enough information to find that information."

"This isn't as useful as we thought" Elizabeth admitted. "I was hoping we could find out about missions, not just specific events. And it takes so..."

"I was putting on my freshly ironed uniform" Annette abruptly announced. "My flight was leaving China at two PM. We had been ordered to arrive two hours before every flight due to several hostess's being late. I discovered that my blouse was stained. I had..."

Dr. Kiwi snapped his fingers, a signal he had earlier told his subject meant to stop whatever she was doing and wait for further orders. "That's fine Annette. Thank you. In front of you is a pad and pen. I want you to write down everything that happened on the volcano with Oharu that day you say she looked into the lava. Start thirty seconds before you realized that she was in danger. Stop at the moment you began running away with her."

Annette's eyes started flickering again. "If you don't have a specific event, you can still access it I believe. It just takes longer." He waited with the others until eventually the otter leaned forward and started to write. It had taken Annette five times as long to access that memory he noted as he stopped his watch.

So far they had watched as Annette performed actions in perfect calmness that she would normally have at least hesitated to do in public, including speaking in specific clinical detail of her wedding night in front of two non-medical males she had never met. Elizabeth whispered to her two companions. Moving silently they stood and left. "This is too dangerous" the bobcat decided. "I've ordered them to destroy the

drug. Other than what you have with you. That is the amount you need to finish this experiment, and maintain the skunk as well?"

"Yes but..."

At Kiwi's shocked look she grimaced, pushing a paper to him that she had written on earlier. "Order her to do these actions when she finishes writing."

Kiwi opened the paper, read and grimaced himself. "Do you mind if I leave before she starts the last" he asked. "I would not like to watch as my favorite student has her head ripped off by you in self defense."

"No. You may not leave Doctor. For you have to snap your fingers at the right moment" Elizabeth reminded Kiwi. "Or I will have to hurt her. I need to know if what happened with Liberty Morgenstern is completely due to the drug, or if she was allowing some deeper side to act. Like drunks do. Believe me Doctor, this young woman couldn't hurt me unless I wanted her too. Annette couldn't hurt anyone, not the way those words instruct her too."

"Major Hawkins Sir please. I understand fully your reasons for employing this Russian" an ornately dressed greyhound admitted. "Yet you fail to understand my own position. This woman is a known spy. A Russian spy. We have every reason to believe that having her working here at the Consulate is a serious security breach. Now please sir. Would you kindly explain to me just why I should not have her taken to the lower chambers right now and shot in the back of her thick head out of paw."

Major Thomas William Hawkins studied his claws before responding. He wasn't in a good mood today, though outwardly his emotions were as flat as the stereotypical Englishman. A letter had arrived from his wife. Her health was failing, her doctors were certain she would not see the next Yule. At this very moment he wished to be upon the fastest transportation home, yet his mission required a toehold in this Consulate. Tatiana Bryzov was his chosen toehold. As an obvious security leak the mole within this complex might just make his, or her move. Once that happened another serious danger to the Empire would be corrected. "Captain Berber. Let us not consider for the moment that I very much outrank you. In military rank, social position and that rank which only we two are aware of. No, let us not speak of that" he answered. Standing he turned to look out the Security Chiefs window. A rather interesting view of a certain street, and another Consulate building. Which window there held this greyhounds opposite he wondered.

"I am empowered to place a street beggar within these walls should I desire Captain. You are aware of that. You foolishly ignored standing written orders when you cabled to double check those orders. IN CLEAR!" His anger drifted to the surface for those two words only. "Now. I have made a serious investigation of the lady in question my dear Captain. Quite the in-depth investigation." There he thought, let him believe that we are lovers. "You will use her to translate your special intercepts. She has absolutely no love for the White Russians. Give her those intercepts. They are after all the overwhelming number of your Russian work. I am fully aware that she will pass on to her people anything of interest to them. I fully anticipate her doing that. I would not trust her if she did not. That works in our favor. After all Captain. Any difficulties Starling cleans up for us saves our resources and lives."

He turned to face the rather upset greyhound. "She will of course attempt to penetrate your security. I have carefully instructed her to do so in every way that she can think of. Knowing that in advance I will hold you personally responsible should she ever slip through your guards. If once, even once she turns over information to me that she should not have I shall have you shipped to one of our Byrd Sea stations." He decided to smooth this bitter pill a bit.

"Captain. You are not being picked upon. I have been traveling all around the Cook and Abyssal sea. You of course are aware of a certain Army Generals sudden transfer from Hawaii to the Falklands I am certain. It is my responsibility to test every security section assigned to me. My Tatiana will be with you

only until Songmark opens again. A short time. Though I have given her orders to make contacts within this building, then to maintain those contacts. Bloody Hell man, she may even find your mole. Have you thought of that? In Hawaii I was forced to replace the Station Chief as well. She now sits daily behind a rather large rock in the Byrd Sea taking applications for visa's to visit the Sahara Desert. From penguins. I am quite certain that you are well aware how difficult and boring a position that is."

He turned away again, staring out that window. Double pane glass he noted, with the inner glass of a slightly lower quality. Angled slightly, perhaps only a degree. Image distortion. Subtle, still highly effective. Pointing to the glass he raised an eyebrow.

"My sister, should you believe that, read about such in a detective novel" the Captain admitted. "She mentioned it to me in a letter. I felt it worth the effort."

"More than worth it Captain. I shall send orders that this be installed in all Embassy and Consulate windows with your name attached as the originator. Impressive Captain. Honestly impressive. I am quite certain that you will deal with Tatiana effectively. Overwhelm her with work. Assign your most difficult useless aide to her. Do not expect that to stop her. Slow her yes. Stop her? I chose her because she was the best available. Now it is up to you to use her to shake out your tree. See what falls to the ground. I give you one more warning Captain. Should she suffer any fatal event, even a simple illness. You and I will meet one last time. When I place a rope about your neck. Are you fully in understanding of my needs?"

"Fully Major. I am to make her mission as difficult as I can. Without placing a guard upon her day and night. But. What if she turns one of my people?"

"I suggest Captain that if this worries you, that you only allow her contact with your female staff. Tatiana is not the most beautiful woman I have ever met. She does though have skill, and a natural earthy attraction that is difficult for any male to deny. She would not have been initially selected by the NKVD if she did not have some natural advantages." *'I will have to replace him, and very soon'* the bulldog decided.

July 25th, 1936

On cranium Island a female mink stopped at a doorway. "Father" she said softly, almost a question in her voice.

Looking up from his microscope a white furred mink studied his daughter and her ever present native assistant Titto. "Yes Sarah" he answered, standing straight for the first time in hours. His back instantly complained, in fact his whole body complained.

"Horace has sent a written apology for that power outage. He has located and corrected the problem. A rodent burrow undermined our transmission dish. That last windstorm moved it slightly, thus the power loss when it misaligned. He assures me that this will no longer be a problem."

"I see. And my failed experiment?"

"Father. She is simply one vixen. I have reports that three groups are on their way here at this moment. Supposed archeological groups. Our first group should arrive within the week directly from Japan. There should be several replacement animals among them just as useful as Miss Huntley would have been. Speaking of her father, what is her prognoses?"

"I am afraid that she is useless to me now Sarah. I will have to dispose of her. When we lost power she was in phase two of regeneration. I have waited this long to be absolutely certain of what may have happened to her. My results have been disappointing. Exposing her again would result in an unknown change. Thus invalidating any future experiment I might attempt."

"May I have her father? Titto is hungry."

"Titto." The male mink once respectfully known as Professor Jural Jenkins looked to the golden eyed woman standing just behind what he believed was his sole surviving child. "Just what part of a living creature does your assistant eat" he asked.

"Their soul father" Sarah answered. "She eats their souls, leaving a completely functional body behind. I shall send that body to the Murder Forest. It has been some time since those Pirates wandered into that place. They must be getting hungry."

"Then she is yours. Under the condition I have first choice of those adventurers who will soon arrive."

"Agreed father, and thank you father." She turned and left, her servant, after a searching look at the Professor, followed her. She was the only creature on Cranium Island that the Professor feared. Probably on the entire planet. Why she had studied him Jenkins well knew. His interest in his own daughter was less than fatherly. More experimental. That look had been a warning not to look further upon his daughter as a laboratory animal. Having watched Titto walk through the murder forest alone and untouched was a warning he most avidly intended to take very seriously.

Two hours later three women stood before a thick bronze door. With Titto's assistance Sarah removed a huge wooden beam holding that door closed. On the other side a ragged looking mink waited, a mink who bore a striking resemblance to Sarah. "My feeding time is early today" Megan Jenkins observed, stepping back away from the golden eyed woman who entered first. "Sarah? It has been a long time. I take it you wish to garner further samples from me?"

Sarah looked to her sister, stepping aside so that another woman could enter. This woman was the vixen Louise Huntley to be exact. She looked tired, as though she had not slept in a very long time. "It is time for you to escape Megan" Sarah explained. "Titto will take you and Miss Huntley to the village. You will arrange escape on the first aircraft away from here. Please sis, don't come back."

"Sis. Then Titto has dined upon your madness again" Megan noted. "How long will you be sane this time?"

Sarah leaned against a wall rubbing her eyes. "Six, seven hours at most. Like last time. More likely five or six. Its just long enough for you to escape if you hurry. Please sis, it'll be a month before Titto hungers again. I don't think you will be alive in a month. Not if you stay here. My madness, it wants you for something new."

"Come with me Sarah. Please. You and Titto. We can find doctors..." She stopped talking, knowing that she was wasting her time. "You've been to the Guardian's chambers again. Haven't you."

"I was hoping I could still save Bill" the younger mink admitted. "That Guardian, its quite insane. It rubs off. Only Titto is immune. I think that is because she eats madness. Bill is gone, mother is gone. All our friends who came with us are gone. It is just you and I now. I don't count father anymore. Father and I. Father and I are beyond redemption Megan. Only you remain. Please. Gather your things and leave."

"Her?"

"One of fathers failed experiments. She... She heals. I read his notes last night while cleaning his office. He shot her. In the heart. She healed. He burned her alive. She healed. He cut one of her paws off, it grew back in a few days. But it tired her badly. It wasn't what he wanted. He hadn't a use for her so he was just going to discard her. I fooled him. If he finds out then I'm dead. I don't care. When I'm sane sis, I want to die. Please. Take her with you. Help her get home. Just..." Sarah shivered. "Just hurry. I don't want to be mad sis but for me. It is just too late."

Not quite seven hours later Sarah Jenkins stood alone as she looked out over the walls of a tower. Looking down into the living jungle that protected her from invaders. She had been a fool. A fool to allow her sister to escape. A living woman she needed, a future mother was gone. Two when you counted the American. For a while she had debated chasing after them, finally discarding the idea. Without Titto she wouldn't survive ten seconds out there, even though she had helped create it. Only Titto, and those with her were safe. It was water over the dam. There were new subjects arriving soon. Certainly there would be healthy young women among them.

"And how are we feeling this afternoon."

Doctor Annette Riverstone looked up from her bed, slowly turning her head to study the way too perky nurse standing by her bed. "Tell you what honey. I'll let you go through the same thing, then you will tell me."

"Oh no thank you Doctor. Your recovery was, to be rather open, difficult. I don't even drink, its bad for my fur you know. Now Doctor Kiwi is waiting to talk with you. Are you ready?"

"Send the butcher in" Annette answered. She relaxed her body as best she could. It felt like little knives were cutting into her skin. She had wanted to scratch so bad, but her paws were well bound to the beds rails. Something they had learned from experience with Liberty's recovery.

Moments later she was joined by her superior, who sat quietly for several minutes before asking his first question. "The itching?"

"Nerves firing wildly" Annette reported. "Its like they are trying to reconnect to a circuit and don't know exactly where they are supposed to be. Not too bad now. It was pure murder earlier. "

"What, exactly is the last number you remember saying" he asked, reaching over to release her paws from the restraints.

"Seventy-three."

"Very well Annette, that fairly matches what I observed and we expected. You counted down to thirty-two, seventy three would have been about the last number your long term memory would have kept. It's the twenty-fifth Annette, before you ask. I kept you down for two days. Just as we agreed."

"Two days. It only seems like a few minutes since I drank that stuff. Dr. Kiwi, how did the experiment go?"

"How? I couldn't have asked for a more compliant subject. It was, well it wasn't like you were hypnotized. You reacted normally in most cases. Your emotions were suppressed as we suspected. I could order you to show emotions and you would. I sent the men away before you preformed those rather personal actions of course. You signed those slaver papers, signed the marriage papers to Nurse Williams and kissed her, signed your life away a dozen ways or more." He pulled a folded sheaf of papers from his coat pocket. "You might want to burn these. They are quite legal you understand. Should they get into the wrong paws there would be nothing that could be done. Nurse Williams has already destroyed her copy of the marriage contract. Your not her kind of woman after all, she prefers foxes you understand though it did take a bit of arguing to get her to agree. She does like you as a friend." Setting them on the bed he looked away, as though thinking. "The Lady. She wanted absolute proof. You will find that certain muscles are quite tender right now. You see you tried to kill her. With her own knife. She's fine. I don't think that cut will scar."

"I cut her" Annette asked as she picked up the papers. "I shouldn't have been able to come close to someone like her."

"Which is true" Kiwi admitted, turning his head to look at Annette again. "Or take her own knife from her. She should have been able to wipe the floor with your tail. It was a very sobering discovery. For her, for myself. You have a great deal of rage hidden within you Doctor. I strongly suggest you find a way to let it out. Other than trying to emasculate another woman, if that truly is possible. Mrs. Sapohatan was quite impressed though I am afraid that she will be walking with a limp for some time."

"I see." Annette fingered the papers in her paws, as if determining what to do with them. "How does this help our patient. What did they do with the drug?"

"That drug. You know how governments work. 'We destroyed it', only to have it appear years later. At least there isn't much left. I accidentally spilled half of it. An accident, upon my professional honor. For our patient though, her last dose was half an hour ago. She will awaken later tonight or early tomorrow. Her withdrawal symptoms may be much harsher than Miss Morgenstern's and yours, so I will keep her under sedation for a day. I fear for the safety of her pup. As with you and Miss Morgenstern she will remember nothing and for her years have passed by. I have a Priestess with her now, waiting. It is the best we can do for her until her mind and soul make amends. She will need you of course. When you are ready."

Annette sat up, ignoring the fact her blanket fell away. She was wearing a hospital gown after all. "You place a great deal of trust in these Priestess's of yours Doctor. Why not a Psychiatrist?"

Kiwi shrugged. "She needs mothering, not exploring. If her mind later needs exploring there is a very good Doctor on Casino Island to help her. Now you need to get dressed. Get some food into your belly and go home. You've had a rough time of it. Be back tonight."

"Yes father."

Kiwi had been getting up. "No one has called me father in over ten years" he whispered as he finished standing.

"Then maybe its about time someone started. In private. Now get out you old fool, before you see me in my all together. Your heart would simply explode."

Accepting his own dismissal Doctor Kiwi left. Neither mentioning the fact he had seen her 'in her all together.' As part of the drug test. Seen absolutely all of her.

July 26^h, 1936

Outside Songmarks buildings the weather was simply awful. Rain poured down in sheets while the wind whistled through every crack. Inside two women talked, a black lacquered suitcase between them. Miss Devinski was much unsurprised by the suitcase that Nikki Benevedo had brought with her. It was to be delivered to Molly Procyk just before her first useful pass after third year started. Knowing her own third year Nikki was aware that it would be at least late November before that occurred. "She isn't giving up, is she" the Labrador asked. "What has she sent this time. A bomb?"

"Clothin" the Fillypino answered. "Tak ah look. Yer gonna swoon wishin it wa yours."

Accepting Nikki's permission Miss Devinski opened the case. Thin brown paper greeted her eyes. Lifting it, she gasped. "That is real gold thread isn't it" she whispered.

"Yep. Best silk in Dalian. Stuff was adjusted fer Molly's measurements. Nough hem left tah let out after this last year, if need tah."

Lifting a blue dress so dark it could be black the hound gasped. "Two hundred pounds" she read. "These price tags simply must go. First tell me dear Nikki. Where would Oharu find Molly's measurements?"

Nikki grinned. "Seems ah stumbled cross 'em at ah certain tailors. Seems tha left tha book open at tha righ page."

"And how much silk did you bring back from Dalian for them" the hound asked.

"Five bolts" Nikki admitted. "Buh Oharu paid fer it, so yah can't say I bribed 'em."

"No. No Nikki. Of all the things you were guilty of as a student bribery was never a weakness of yours. Oh my, this black outfit. Something is missing isn't it?"

Nikki walked over, gently taking the aforementioned item from the hounds paws then pressing it lightly against Miss Devinski's body. Not only was a certain part of the hounds upper body uncovered, the skirt itself ended well above the knee had she been Molly. "Nope. Oharu specifically asked fer this. Three of 'em tah be exact. All showin tha left side. Guess she figgered what with Molly bein right pawed, any attacker'd be staring at her left... side."

"Nikki. There is a package here with my name upon it."

"Yah. She though she owed yah somthing after all."

"Clothing. My measurements?"

"Same fergetful tailor."

"I shall have a word with them. Oh my. Nikki. I cannot wear this. It is indecent."

Nikki raised an eyebrow. "On Molly its intersatin. Oh yah its indecent. Mah, yer a strange one. Its fer your Helen tah see yah in. Not tah take student's onna climb with. Sides, it sorta covers more than Molly's stuff."

"Barely, just barely" the hound admitted. "But the stomach. Its open. Why?"

Nikki reached into a pocket of her rain gear, taking out a small package. "Little peirchin ahn this goes in yer navel. Gotta sho off yah know. Malou sent it. As a than yah fer teachin me how tah think. Malou will do tha honers. Jus com by after this storms over."

"That's a Tigers Eye isn't it. Oh my, will the surprises never end. Thank you Nikki. Tell Malou I said thank you as well. No, I can do that myself, can't I? Now I best pack Molly's things shouldn't I. After all, neither of us could hope to fit into them."

Miss Devinski though carefully removed all tags before repacking the seven items. "I do very much hope that Molly will not destroy these. I am certain that there are several in her own year who would kill to own something like this. Nikki. Is Oharu mad? She could give the girl this entire world and receive not even the smallest of smiles from her."

"Lov is ah madness" Nikki admitted. "Ah well know. Nothin we can do but minimize tha damage. Noh this is don. Wha are you doin about Henrika."

"Henrika." Miss Devinski placed both her paws on the now locked suitcase. "If I were her I would want my throat cut Nikki. I trust you to do that for me if I'm ever in the same situation. We've studied our choices as well as we may. She was taken to the shrine last night. Her fate now rests in the paws of whatever inhabits that shrine. We will know tonight when we return for her."

"Which shrine" the mare asked.

"Songmarks."

Nikki stepped back in surprise. "There's nah shrine at Songmark."

"You do not know everything my former student. Why not ask Oharu about it sometime. Or Huakava."

"Huakava? Yah thin ah wan tah be ah frog? Nah thanks. Still, let me know, when yah know. Noh Malou is waitin. She's huntin ah place tah open a jewelry shop."

"Try the Three Bean Soup Kitchen on Raindrop Avenue. They folded yesterday. Don't tell anyone I said this, but they made very bad soups."

Nikki nodded as if in agreement. "Ah'll take 'er there then."

Cold wind washed through the office as Nikki left, reminding the hound of another time. Another problem. Both long in the past.

This day Oharu had gladly followed her students to their home village on Main Island. Although it would allow her students to visit their families Oharu's desire was to visit with the village Priestess. That, and Huakava had sent word that she must not be at the Glen until late in the evening. As to why Oharu did not ask. There was a reason. She apparently had no need to know that reason. Settling down with the Priestess who wore a bark and feathers outfit Oharu took out her ever present book.

"I was instructed that you are a record keeper" the older fox admitted as she offered a cup of water.

Accepting that cup Oharu studied its surface. She could see the finger marks of its making, the simple inscribed decoration. It was ancient, it had not been formed on Spontoon Island. Whomever had made this had not spent a great deal of time in its making. Yet it was no worse or better than any of the pottery she could see carefully displayed. "If am to understand. I must know all" she admitted, taking a sip of cool clean water.

"Such as why I did not instruct the three now your responsibility."

Oharu looked over her cup to the vixen. "No." she answered flatly.

"If not that. What?"

"Songs. Rituals. History. Whatever you may tell me that I may better understand Spontoon. Her people."

"I am Helga" the vixen explained. "Eleventh Priestess of this village since its founding..."

July 30th, 1936

Dr. Annette Riverstone was sitting at her borrowed office desk, quietly reading a patient's chart when a knock came. Looking up she checked her wall clock, nearly ten pm. She should be in bed she knew, tomorrow started at seven even though it was her day off and all interns needed sleep. Even if they were called, and did serve as full fledged Doctors at the same time. Well, one last visitor. Then she'd go home and get some sleep. "Come in" she called.

Her office door opened allowing a male wolf entered. His clothing told her he was a water taxi driver, a tiny twisted curl in the fur of his chest told her what he really was. A fact she wouldn't have known until a special meeting with Sandy in her new role as Mrs. Albert Sapohatan. "And what might a Doctor do for one who so faithfully serves a certain ferret" she asked gently. "Or is your master a bobcat? Please have a seat."

"Energy pills" the wolf answered in lightly accented English. Annette already knew that his Cipangan was probably just as fluent. "These Songmark girls are getting to be too much for me."

"Or your getting to be too old?"

Laughing the wolf leaned back in his chair. "Ask my wife about that. She's expecting in three months. No Doctor Riverstone. It is what I may do for you. It is why I came so late."

Annette leaned forward, her paws on her desk. "You've discovered how to make Oharu marry me" she asked dead panned. "If so. What is your price and when may I pay it."

"That is beyond even my wife's mothers grandmothers ability to manage" the wolf admitted. There was a touch of true regret in his voice Annette noticed. "I think though you would be good for her. Yet I do come with a possible solution to another problem I was informed you have."

Annette settled back into her chair. It had been a forlorn hope that he might have news of Oharu. At first it had been a surprise, discovering that she still loved the mouse. Loved her even more so than before the mouse had left her in Hawaii. That her chances of touching this Priestess's heart seemed to be almost zero had aggravated her to no end. "All right. Who do I have to kill."

A sly smile came to the wolfs face. "There is always one much too nosey Songmark girl. No. As I remember. You are in charge of the new Air Ambulance service. Correct?"

"Very" the otter admitted. "As I seem to own the craft. To be honest though. If it were not for those military men we'd be grounded by now. I just don't know anything about aircraft and we have almost no money even for parts. I can't find anyone willing to work for the slave wages we can pay right now."

"Two shells a day is very little" the wolf admitted. "Yes, I have heard what you may afford until the next Allthing. Even after that more money is not a certain thing. Yet I may have an escape for you. If you are willing to hire someone who is down on their luck. Someone running out of their own options?"

"Sir" Annette sighed. "Right now I'd hire a drunk tourist as long as I could be certain someone would be around the DUCK at all hours. It is a highly... pilferable item. Even with certain parts nightly removed for safety."

"Then I might have your answer. You will find them at Pier nineteen, dock seven on Casino Island. A ship named Black Rose. Be kind Miss. Whitehall, they are young. They are still somewhat innocent." He stood, bowed slightly and left as smoothly as he had come. At Elizabeth's 'suggestion' Annette had never asked him or anyone with that special mark their name, though she knew that this wolf spent much of his time 'accidentally' being available whenever Oharu needed transportation. According to Elizabeth he had apparently adopted the mouse. Though as to why neither woman cared to wonder. Gathering her things, and the card that had appeared on her desk as though by magic she stood. '*Note to self*' she thought, '*never play poker with a certain wolf.*' Having decided that she headed home.

July 31, 1936

At Casino Island Two female voices could be heard from within a docked sailboat as Annette approached. "How much longer" one young girls voice asked. She was answered by a voice that was only slightly older, different mainly in that it was obviously tired.

"Two days. By that time our choices are simple. We either sail home or sell the boat. Selling Black Rose will give us another four months. That is a long time yes. Still if Songmark hasn't even one opening we will both have to return home with our tails between our legs in defeat. Father will be quite amused. Mother of course, very disappointed."

"I have no care what mother or father feel" the more energetic voice admitted. "We should return to our pirate days. It was, as I recall quite profitable."

"Tina. We are no longer on a private lake within England's most civilized borders. Our pirating was nothing more than play acting as you well know. Profitable were the tiny caches of costume jewels and theater tickets father left hidden for us to stumble upon at the correct time. It is we who might find ourselves stripped of our ship, of all we still own should we attempt the real thing. Let us not forget the shame such actions will bring to our family. Even should we be successful, which I most strongly doubt. Should we capture a few ships where would we sell the booty? Certainly not on Spontoan. Nor could we hope to ever be accepted by Songmark. They simply will blackball us. Forever."

"May I come aboard?" Annette's much older voice called, breaking into the sisters conversation. Much to the otters delight a pair of pretty mink girls popped out from the sailboats cabin. They looked at her with distrust and though she could not see their paws, certain muscles on their shoulders told Annette they were talking to each other with their fingers. Exactly as she and her brothers had done many times in the past. She decided to call their perceived bluff. "Come-come. It is very impolite to use hidden paw signals when a prospective employer stands before you. And what of that invitation to come aboard?"

Both girls looked at each other in surprise, finally the older stepped out of the cabin. Her clothing Annette noticed was stylish, though designed for the hard work involved with sea travel. From what she could see of the girl her muscles were very well developed, through hard work though. Not lifting lumps of cold iron. Both girls fur was sun bleached, an effect that both washed out the brighter colors and enhanced their natural beauty. Most likely the younger sister was as well developed she knew. "What style of employment" the older girl asked.

"Certainly not transporting illegal cargos from Spontoan to Krupmark, or worse Kuo Han. A destination where I am assured you that both of you, as well as your fine boat would find yourselves upon the auction block an hour after your arrival. Never to be seen again. Alive. Perhaps not even dead. My name is Doctor Annette Riverstone. I am an American citizen working with the medical establishment here on Spontoan. I have come into possession of an aircraft that we. By we I refer to the medical profession of Spontoan, are trying to convert into an air ambulance."

"We are not pilots yet" the older girl admitted.

"Or mechanics" her sister Tina added. "Songmark refused our applications."

"I am not as yet looking for a pilot" Annette admitted. She looked pointedly at the ships deck.

"Please come aboard Dr. Riverstone" the older girl finally agreed. "This is Tina, my name is Alexia. We are sisters. I am the older by some eighteen months. Our family name of course is Humber."

Stepping carefully aboard the craft Annette looked around. Though needing a bit of cleaning everything seemed shipshape. There were no hanging clothes, no clutter on the deck and the brass was well polished. Even those ropes every ship needed were carefully coiled, ready for instant use. Selecting a place to sit Annette studied the two girls. Looking to Tina she pursed her lips. "Seventeen or eighteen" she asked abruptly.

"Tina turned seventeen on the voyage here" Alexia answered. "I am half my way to twenty. Our ages in honesty mean nothing between us."

"I see. Did Songmark offer you any reason as to why they would not accept you?"

"Immature." Tina squeaked as Alexia pinched her. She glared at her sister who finally relented. "We felt that the interviews were going quite well" the younger girl explained. "Until we mentioned having played as pirates upon the lakes at home. How much we had so enjoyed the doing."

"I'm surprised" Annette admitted "That Catherine did not gut you both right there."

"Catherine?" both girls asked.

"Miss Devinski. The one hound at Songmark. She is a very close friend of one of my patients but she is not why I am here. In truth, to my knowledge she has never spoken of the girls that are not accepted at Songmark. It is open knowledge that her first class went air pirate. Thus now she has a great hate for that kind of person. You are very lucky I should think."

"Is it true a third year failed her finals" Tina asked softly.

"Yes. I have heard that. Everyone has. I do not know who or why. Even had I that information I would never tell you or anyone. I do not betray trusts. Now. Would you like to hear my offer or should I depart?"

Both girls sat, Tina glancing at the cabin hatch then to Alexia. "I'm sorry" Alexia admitted. "We may only offer you water. We are almost out of everything."

"We were discussing selling our boat and flying home" Tina added.

"I see." Annette studied the two carefully. "Water will be fine." She watched as Tina stood, returning below deck. Quite a bit of effort had gone into teaching her how to walk just that way, especially on a floating ship the otter realized. "I take it then that docking fees are rather expensive?"

"Rather" Alexia admitted. "We resupply today and leave tomorrow, or we sell the Black Rose and fly home in a few months."

"An embarrassing option either way I believe" Annette agreed. She accepted a heavy cobalt blue pottery mug Tina brought to her, taking a sip of warm clean water before continuing. "If I could guarantee one of you a position in Songmark today, at the cost of life-long slavery for the other. Would either of you be interested?"

"Do we throw dice...." Alexia started.

"Or draw cards to find out who goes" Tina continued.

"And who wears your chains" Alexia finished. Both Annette could see, were deadly serious.

"Neither. I cannot guarantee such a thing. No one can. I can guarantee you another chance next year, with possibly a better outcome. Of course you may also return home and reapply next year without anything from me. I certainly would not stand in your way. Songmark is an excellent school. It is only a possibility that working for me may help you. It would require you to work for near slave wages but you will keep this boat. You would remain in Spontoon sponsored by the medical establishment under my direct supervision. Also my direct responsibility. It will also give you a year to better understand this nation, perhaps make friends and learn some of the language. Are either of you interested?"

"We would like to hear your full offer" Alexia admitted.

Annette smiled. For the next hour she explained everything that the hospital and she wanted. How the buildings they had been given were in very poor repair, that the Black Rose could tie up at the same pier as the DUCK for no cost. That food, shelter and some work clothing would be made available. Yet their days would be long and hard, at least at first. When she had finished both girls looked at each other for a long time before commenting.

"Downside, as we can see this" Alexia admitted. "Is that one of us must be at the site at all times. That we must do all the work required to repair everything and that we will be paid a grand sum of one shell a

day each. One fifth of a pound should I remember the current exchange rate correctly. With no Holidays, no time off and we are not allowed to have male's upon the property. Also. Absolutely no guarantee that either of us would be accepted at Songmark next year."

"Upside" Tina continued. "We receive free room, board and work clothing. We will be given official workers visas as long as the hospital employs us. Free medical care and free docking for our boat. We will have time to mature, to meet the locals and learn new things we could never learn at home."

"Correct. There are other..." Annette stopped talking as both girls held up their paws. "If you will give us an hour, please?" Alexia asked softly.

"Very well. I will return in an hour. I must have your decision then."

"That" Tina answered in a very carefully trained voice. "I most surely guarantee you we will have for you Miss. Riverstone."

Accepting the minks decision Annette carefully made her way off the boat. It was rumored that Oharu occasionally visited the McGee's Resort on some afternoons. Though the mouse continually refused Annette's advances Annette knew that everyone had their breaking point. Even that hard headed Priestess. She had to have a breaking point. She just had to.

Behind her both girls returned to their ships cabin. Instead of discussing their options both started writing letters to their parents. Songmark had refused them yes, as their father had warned them was possible. Yet the Air Gods had smiled. They had been sent a second chance. Both looked at each other over the shared work table. In the next year they were going to learn that maturity Miss Devinski had said they needed. Even if they had to become almost slaves to do it. No other chance was worth the effort. At that moment the same thought crossed two minds. Considering how close they were to admitting defeat, why had such a chance arrived so opportunely. Just how close of a friend was this Doctor Riverstone to Songmark. Had in truth she been sent? Had they made an impression. Had Songmark decided to give them a chance? Perhaps they would never know, but nosing around to find out the truth both knew would be a mistake.

Annette returned an hour later, having to her dismay discovered that Oharu had visited the McGee resort yesterday morning. That she was not expected today as she would be on South Island. Perhaps tomorrow, but Annette had to be on Meeting Island all day tomorrow. Of course if she really wanted she could just travel to where Elizabeth's marriage had occurred, but she wanted to be invited. She wanted to be.. Wanted. "Hello aboard" she called when she arrived at the boats mooring. Again both girls appeared together. "Have you a decision" she asked.

"Yes Mam" Alexia answered. "We have both decided to accept your kind offer of employment. If you will have us."

"Very well. You have a current chart of the islands?"

"Yes Mam. There is an ebb tide in twenty minutes that will make unpowered sailing difficult. We have taken a full tank of petrol aboard. If you will show us the destination Tina will notify the Harbor Master while I prepare for departure."

"Well. I hadn't expected such efficiency. May I come aboard?" She discovered that Alexia always spoke with a slightly more earthier voice than her sister. It was a way to tell them apart on the phone of course, for now.

"Certainly" Tina agreed, her higher, sweeter voice cementing Annette's observation. "As our employer you may come aboard at any time without asking."

Stepping aboard Annette indicated the cabin, for it was beginning to blow lightly and the loss of a chart would be embarrassing. "As your employer ladies. I will never step aboard your boat without asking, unless it is an emergency."

"Thank you Miss. Riverstone" both girls replied.

"My name is Annette."

"Yes Miss Riverstone" both girls again answered.

Sometime later, after having shown the girls where they were to dock Annette was again aboard a small water taxi. Unsurprisingly a certain wolf was piloting. "You hired them" he asked while keeping his eyes on traffic.

"I hired them" Annette answered. "Thank you."

"Do not thank me. A certain Kou Han agent had started watching them. Now she will look elsewhere. It is unhealthy to attract the attention of a certain ferret."

"Or his bobcat wife" Annette guessed.

"Quite so. Unlike her husband she kills with her own paws. Do not cross her. Spontoon is everything to her."

"Thank you for the warning but I'm afraid that Elizabeth has already impressed me with her abilities. I would rather stand in Oharu's way than her's."

For some time there was only the sound of their engine, then the wolf spoke again. "If you must anger one. Anger the bobcat. She cannot harm you nearly as badly as any Honored Mother may. Certainly not the one you speak of." For the rest of their trip no further words were spoken.

Only when Annette lay in her own bed did the wolfs soft warning hit home. Elizabeth would kill me to protect Spontoon and I wouldn't hate her for it. But she can't harm me as badly as Oharu can. For a long time the otter lay in her bed, images from her deepest nightmares fluttering through her mind. Oharu had spoken to Pele, a Goddess who Annette's own church claimed could not exist. If Pele existed then... Eventually the otter found her sleep. But this night it was not a sweet sleep.

August 1st, 1936

Still tired after a night of poor sleep Annette found her way to the new SPQR compound on Meeting Island just after sunrise. At the pier was her brightly painted DUCK. On the piers opposite side the Humber's well cared for boat was also tightly moored, though the girls themselves were no where to be seen. Suddenly a soft oath came from within the building meant to hold her DUCK, once its roof was no longer ready to fall in. Walking into the great open space Annette looked around after her eyes adjusted. She found that Tina was sucking her fingers while her sister was looking at a heavy window. "I suggest that we rebuild this also" Alexia observed.

"I most certainly agree. It almost smashed my very fingers when it fell. That roof is simply dreadful as well. In truth. I believe it may have more holes in it than Grandfathers barn."

"Simply not possible" her older sister disagreed. "Grandfather tests splinter bombs in that barn."

"Still..."

"Ladies" Annette called. "I believe that breakfast is in order first. If you will come with me the hospital serves a very good breakfast to its employees." She was amazed. Neither girl had jumped at the unexpected sound of her voice, yet she was certain that neither could have know she was there. Had she thought though, Annette would have realized that as she entered her body had blocked the sunlight for a moment, thus warning both.

"Hospital" both asked.

"Yes of course. As new employees you must be examined first. Before you may officially begin work."

"Songmark passed us" Tina offered in defense.

"I understand. I have met Mrs Oelabe several times. She is an excellent nurse and I will be referring with her about you both later today. Yet she is only a nurse. I however am a doctor. There is, as I was once told when entering medical school. A very slight difference between the two professions. Now come along. We have a very long day ahead of us."

"But..." Alexia gasped.

"I am now your employer. As such, when you again apply to Songmark I will be sending a letter of my own regarding your employment history. Should that letter state you refused a simple physical examination?"

"No Mam" Tina shot, grabbing her sister. "Come along Alexia."

"But..." Alexia managed one last time.

Chapter Forty-One

August 2nd, 1936

The American Afghan Helen Whitehall found herself again unhappily sitting at her dining room table, facing her latest visitor. This time it was the elderly Rabbi from Casino Island who had arrived over two hours before, having come representing her deceased friend Ruth Leibowitz's family. A family who were at this very moment visiting Ruth's grave on Casino Island. "Please to be very certain I have not threatened your secrecy my child" the grey furred mink promised her. "Yet you must understand that I have no choice. I must ask this. Her family very much wishes to talk with the one who brought her out of that place. Will you not, even in just this one time step forward?"

"I cannot Rabbi" Helen answered. "Though I am certain they know which of Ruth's friends brought her out, the fact that she still lives must be forever kept a secret to the world. Not only my life would be instantly forfeit, so would the life of my son. Against that truth Ruth's parents must understand that I cannot endanger my son. For anyone or any reason. They may not even know that my son exists. Tell me though, please. Have you informed them how she died?"

"As is our way. No parent may have held from them the truth of their child's passing. No matter how vile the death."

Helen closed her eyes in pain. "Would this happen to my son, I would rather you cut my throat before telling me. How are they handling this?"

"They are, as do all in their own ways, learning to cope" the old mink answered. "I kept nothing from them other than your name. A name they already know. A name they have promised never to speak in this century. They are aware exactly how you brought their beloved daughters remains to these islands. They believe that I am now talking to the one person who might have an ability to contact you. To protect your sons safety I informed them that you have moved to a nation far to the South. My child. You have done our daughter Ruth a great service. Will you not accept even the smallest of rewards for such actions?"

"I will accept nothing Rabbi. I loved Ruth. Maybe I loved her as much as I loved Killian. In the end though it was all I could do for her. Would that I had died instead of her. You know, thinking about what happened I find that I would have preferred that. Rabbi. My actions were those of one who loved another. Not of one who desired any possible mortal reward. All I ever wanted from Ruth was her love, I settled for her friendship. To ask more would be to shame the memories that she left me."

"I understand child. It is rare for one not a daughter of Abraham to care so much for my people. I have been instructed that Ruth will remain here. As much to rest as to be a lesson to others. For until we again have a homeland one place is as good as another. In this though, perhaps this place is better suited for her than any other. There is one here who loved her, who still cares deeply for her. One who willingly will rest with her for eternity. Ofttimes this is more important to the soul than any special land." He paused, deciding. "I will convey your answer to Ruth's family. Helen, they are honored by the monument you created for her. Certainly with that waiting grave it is obvious that you have every intention of joining her again." He rose then, his long black clothing rustling as he moved. "We will speak again. In the passing of time. Until then daughter, go with God."

"It doesn't bother you" Helen asked, her words causing the Rabbi to pause. "A woman in love with another? I mean. Well, Ruth never returned any of my affections. Still I did love her. I did want to have her heart and mine join."

Looking down at the seated Afghan Rabbi Hirsh Miller smiled. "It is not within Gods words who may love whom. Only that such love must be true. That Daughter Ruth did not return your feelings does not mean she did not understand them. Nor does it mean she did not accept them. That you did not force yourself upon her proves to me that your love was true. Live in Peace Helen Whitehall. I will forever hold your secrets safe."

Helen waited until the old mink had left. Then slowly, as though all the weight of the world was upon her, she bent her head and cried.

Seven minks stood waiting quietly at a certain grave on Casino Island. Seven minks of various ages, of both sexes. They all looked up as Rabbi Miller rejoined them. "He has informed me that she left specific orders. For her life she will never resurface" the Rabbi reported to them. "For the safety of her own family she will never speak to another. I am sorry. Her life is in constant danger. Should those who did this discover her" her moved his paw towards the grave beside him. "She has no choice but to hide. Hide, or join your daughter in the same manner."

An old mink, older than even Rabbi Miller lowered his head, his long beard sliding easily down his clothing. "I am much sorrowed to hear this Rav Miller. There is no way even a message might be sent to her?"

"None I am afraid. That may change in the future. I can not say. She left frightened beyond thought."

"Such it must be then. We will leave Ruth here, where she has been given a grave worthy of her spirit. Those who did this are now dead?"

Rabbi Miller looked away, towards Main Island. "Believe me in this. Ruth's friend sent she who ordered this to her grave. In the exact same manner Ruth had been forced to walk. Within those hills of Main Island lives a local Priestess who traveled to China not those many days ago. Her actions, those of the two who went with her. They have sent the rest to their graves. To their graves or scurrying away to hide in crevices to live as the animals that they are. Nor may such hunters ever breath long upon these lands. This I may be certain of."

Following the Rabbi's gaze one of the younger minks cleared his throat. "And her. May we convey our respect to her?"

Rabbi Miller thought carefully on that request. "Not at this time" he finally decided. "She has entered a time of her own testing. It would I think be a mistake to interfere with her now. Next year would be better. When she herself has less pressure upon her soul."

"And the others" a young female voice asked.

Miller smiled. "I think it best Nikki be left alone. Not only did this trip test her own soul, she is not a safe woman to be around. Certainly not for another woman. Their third member. He has agreed to await you just outside these gates. Be careful though how hard you push him. For he too is still recovering from what he found in China. This was not a task that ones soul passes from unmarked."

"Then we will leave a letter to both before we leave. One to the priestess, the other to she who loved our Ruth enough to do these things. In the hope that one day you may deliver to our daughters guardian our truest feelings. That she loved her is written in the very stones that mark this grave. That we never knew such shows her honor, her respect for our ways. Now we should speak with this gentleman, though in the softest of words."

August 3rd, 1936

Doctor William Fletcher shivered against the bitter cold of Antarctica as he watched a last few stones being moved. Impossibly his group had stumbled upon what at first had appeared as an ancient natural cavern. Only with the help of Professor Lustig and his amazing ancient map had this place been discovered. Not for the first time Fletcher patted himself on the back for having linked up with the German expedition in Nunui Hale. Together they were much more effective than alone, and Lustig had brought so many young, strong men with him.

"Koffie?" Lustig offered, holding out a vacuum thermos.

"Delighted." Fletcher accepted the container filled with fresh brewed coffee from his own stores. The German drink was stronger, but somehow tasted slightly oily. His though. Brewed from beans his absent master navigator had exposed him too back in Hawaii was enjoyed by all. Mindy might be a geologist he thought as he poured a cup of steaming fragrant black brew, but she still made a killer cup of coffee. Returning the thermos to his dachshund companion he indicated the men working. "How much longer?"

"Any moment more perhaps Herr Fletcher. Then we shall see what we see. Ja?"

"Yes. Those outer carvings are intriguing, even though they are almost impossible to view anymore."

"Ja. Erosion. Ruins so much. Maybe deeper in?"

"Maybe. If this cavern hasn't collapsed completely. We may only hope. How old? Twenty thousand, thirty thousand years?"

"Unknown" the German answered. "I am not Geologist. My field is other... Ah, Karl. He signals. We may enter now."

Together the two learned males moved forward into the unknown.

August 7th, 1936

Feeding had become much more difficult for the Cranium Island creature since its arrival at Krupmark island. It was as though all the dry creatures were avoiding entering the wet. Not even those dead things that normally carried two or three dry creatures were to be found. Hunting was very poor and now it seemed that it needed more food than before. It felt heavy, having more and more difficulty remaining close to that barrier between wet and dry. Being the first of its kind there was not any way that the creature could know it was heavy with eggs. That its burning hunger was simply due to its body burning fat in order to bring its eggs to maturity. A maturity that would not require a male to fertilize them for they would be fertilized as they were laid by their own mother. Abruptly an odd splashing carried to it, causing it to move left of its present course. It was a kind of splashing the creature had never encountered before, yet by its sound must indicate a large food source. Expending energy better used finding a shallow water nest for its eggs the long tentacled creature moved towards that vibration.

On the Western shore of Bottomless Bay over a dozen furs were hard at work. There upon a short rocky cliff a paw driven water wheel had been mounted, its old paddles expanded with various scraps of wood leather and cloth. Every so often two hefty furs would make a dozen or so turns of the wheel, their efforts causing a random series of splashes in the dark blue water.

"You really think that this will draw it here Doctor" a well dressed fox asked. Beside him stood a smaller groundhog, one Professor Flumbulger who by way of Spontoon Island was from Rain Island's Biological Research Station.

"Certainly. These sounds of are a large animal. One apparently in distress. You do have live bait to keep it here until the nets close?"

Looking up towards an ornate campsite the Coyote brushed at his silk jacket. "Oh yes. We do have live bait" he answered. "Enough I should hope."

At that campsite a fat, elderly panda watched with little interest the events below him. Around him were staff and servants to insure that his slightest wish was instantly gratified. For bankrolling this hunt he had demanded but one thing, a display using some of the creatures parts. A mermaid display he had explained to the good Professor. One to bring more business into his restaurant-bar. Filled with book learning the Rain Island scientist had agreed, though in truth he had misunderstood what a mermaid display truly was. Behind the panda, under heavy guard were two once very pretty furs. Now they were only somewhat attractive, even after hours of primping by his best people. One was American. A tourist who had some time ago lost more at his tables than she could pay. These last two years the rabbit had been working off that debt, at a dollar a day. A rate that would take ten lifetimes to repay what she owed, for no member of her family had bothered to open her letter of ransom. A letter neither she nor the panda was aware had never been sent. Kneeling beside her was a Rain Island woman. A private investigator who had placed her vixen nose through one door too many in the search for a missing pleasure cruiser. She had simply vanished. Her employers were even now still hunting her whereabouts. Lately they had begun to get closer to their goal. Thus both were liabilities he no longer desired to afford. Both were now to be live bait and knew it. But not for what. If they had, they would have ripped each others throats out with their own teeth.

August 8th, 1936

"Amazing. Simply amazing" William Fletcher announced while he poured over the latest rubbing of those symbols they had discovered in that frozen cavern. "Your certain of the age Mindy."

"As certain as I can be outside of a laboratory Professor" Mindy Saracen answered. She tapped a typewritten page on the desk, her nails no longer neat and tidy after four long days of sampling stones. "It takes a specific amount of time for that kind of deposit to form. My educated guess is the Neogene epoch. Anywhere between three and twelve million years ago. Your carvings sir, are at least three million years old. More likely six to ten."

"But that is impossible Mindy. Why, civilization is only ten to twelve thousand years old."

"I know sir" the housecat admitted. "But true science never lies, it can't and I'm a geologist not a historian. Those plaques were partially buried under a stalagmite that in the least took three million years to form. Probably twice that considering how slowly water melts here. So either someone has built a time machine, to which I demand a ride in or there was some kind of civilized being that long ago. Figures do not lie. Sir, as much as I know the history of our people those tablets were made before we ever stopped feeding upon each other."

"Amazing. Simply amazing. I must speak with Professor Lustig about this. Perhaps he has made further progress with his own research."

"Sir" Mindy said, grabbing the canine's shoulder she held him from standing. "It would be better if we wait. Until we are returning to Nunui Hale at least. I do not trust them."

Fletcher ceased trying to stand. "Mindy. Is this because they are young men, or because they are Germans" he asked softly.

"It is because of the way they look at all of us. You they treat well, the rest of us. We could be slaves for all they care."

Professor Fletcher was by no means stupid. After all he'd been teaching college students for over forty years. At the same time he had been dealing with faculty members in a rather cut throat environment and had over a dozen expeditions already under his ample belt. "Very well. Your carbon copies of all your material. Those I will turn over to Professor Lustig when we step back on to Nunui Hales shores. We are outnumbered here and even our expeditions strongest member is most likely not any competition for his weakest member. I will take it careful, and Mindy. Its never wrong to offer a warning. Make up a report that lies. Twist your numbers, make it a simple math mistake but make it look as though they are only twenty-five thousand years old at worst. Now go." He watched in silence as his employee first collected her notes, then left. They were alone and here there was no government to help them. It was probably nothing, but years of expeditions had taught him a hard lesson. Listen to your people.

August 10th, 1936

"I believe this is simple" the fat panda explained to the two bound women through his interpreter. "You will be taken to the water. You will swim across. If you make it across alive you will be returned to Spontoon Island free women. Alive and uninjured."

"Should we not" the Rain Island fox asked.

"Then you will be dead."

Looking to her companion the Rain Island investigator shrugged. "We are dead" she explained to the American. "If we do not swim, we die very slowly. Probably as Kara and Conchita did. Or worse. We swim, we're eaten by sharks is my guess. At least its faster."

"Then it shall be sharks my friend" the rabbit agreed. "Being baked alive is not the way Katrina Elizabeth Faberge or her best friend should pass from this world. I shall swim beside you, for you have been a good friend." She turned her attention to the panda. "Now you know my real name you petty little thief. Remember this truth you filthy fat fur. It is the truth that you threw away the life of a woman worth five hundred times more than all you have. One who would have paid as much for this woman's freedom as for her own, had you only believed. Come Sally, we leave this world for a better place. Maybe the men there will be more handsome than the garbage we have been forced to share our beds with. Certainly the company will be."

Turning to follow the guards while the interpreter tried to explain the rabbits words to the panda they left the tent. By the time he understood, by the time he'd countermanded his orders it was too late. Unknown to him a certain trusted employee had vanished upon hearing those words, running up the path to report to her real owner. Later that night he would be visited by a representative of those who truly ruled Krupmark. His grandson would, after a period of prolonged morning (lasting perhaps three seconds) take his place the next morning. After all, by morning the five year old cub would be the only surviving male of that family.

Even as the unnamed panda was screaming new orders both women slipped into the water. For the first time in years they wore no chains. They did not give up easily, in fact both made the middle of Bottomless Bay before the rabbit simply vanished. Seconds later, a rescue boat nearly at her side the vixen too slipped under the water. Foolishly the boats occupants leapt into the water, blades drawn in a fruitless attempt to save both already dead women. They never surfaced either.

Certain now that the creature they were hunting was in Bottomless Bay orders were called out. Metal nets closed over a relatively shallow entrance by furs braver than most. Sticks of dynamite hit the water, to drop down and explode at various depths. By the time Professor Flumbulger managed to arrive from his hotel the creature was already ashore. Of those who had been taken by the creature there was no evidenced, other than their blood within the creatures once transparent belly. It eggs had been recognized by expert fisherman and were already in a waiting bonfire even as the groundhog came panting down the

path.

There would be no more creatures like this one. Not at Krupmark island.

August 20th, 1936

On Meeting Island a very angry fur was confronting his native born lawyer. "Is this the best you can do" Marcus Whitehall yelled at his lawyer. "I am forced to have money wired from my private account to the English Consulate, which only has a specific sum to dole out at best. I am to return home with NOTHING? How am I to live?"

"Carefully" the owl answered. "I am sorry Mister Whitehall..."

"That's LORD Whitehall" Marcus corrected.

"Were you not listening sir? That is not a title you may ever carry. Your own Embassy... I correct myself sir. Your own Consulate General surrendered a letter sent directly from London by diplomatic pouch. Lady Whitehall's claims are completely valid and registered in London. You are I am afraid left without a half-farthing it seems."

"But..." He turned to look at the, to his eyes, smug American afghan holding her son in her arms. A woman who had just successfully torn his entire life away from him. Ruined his plans, made him a pauper. Something twisted inside of the bulldog and his mind abruptly snapped. Screaming madly he drew his sword cane, rushing up the steps towards the defenseless woman and child. Marcus managed three steps before a white furred female figure wearing skin tight metal mesh armor stood in front of him. His last memory was of Lady Whitehall yelling something in a weird language, then the world vanished.

Illie looked down at the battered madman at her feet. Idly she tossed away a section of broken sword cane. Marcus Whitehall was not a problem for anyone anymore. At least not until he woke up. Turning back to Helen Whitehall she gestured to Marcus's body. "*It would have been better for all if he died*" she explained. Her words spoken in the only language she was yet fully comfortable in.

"*Better yes*" Helen agreed, slipping into Cantonese to speak with her friend. "*But you would have been guilty of murder. He could have no more hope of equaling you than I have of equaling an active volcano. I will not have you charged with murder Illie. You are too important to me, to my son. He was simply mad with loss. Maybe he will recover in time.*"

"*I am happy I was here to protect you*" the arctic fox replied. "*You speak the truth, he is mad.*"

"*Illie. You have no idea how happy I am you are here*" Helen admitted. "*I would have no other as Godmother to my son. You will teach him how to protect himself?*"

"*And to protect you*" Illie agreed. "*I do not think I am longer needed here now.*" She looked towards the bulldog, now being carried away in a stretcher. Well strapped to said stretcher she noted. "*Him?*"

"*Cut off without a penny*" Helen decided. "*I'll eventually settle his bills here, but he's responsible for his own problems back home. You will visit more often?*"

"*I will see you tonight. Goodbye. For today.*" With those words Illie seemed to simply vanished, in the middle of a crowd.

Helen walked over to Marcus Whitehall's lawyer, who was watching helplessly as his client was being carried away. "What will they do with him" she asked softly.

"Oh. Hospital. Eventually deported home by the cheapest transport available" the owl answered. "Expensive loss. For both of us."

"After he has departed these shores send your bill to my solicitor sir. I will instruct him to pay you. In full." She almost laughed at the lawyers gap beaked look. "I will not have it said on these islands that a Whitehall cannot pay their bill. Any information you have about Marcus Whitehall remains your secret. To do with as your soul desires. I though wish to know nothing. Over these last days I have learned all I need to know about him."

"I see Lady Whitehall. My thanks." He bowed slightly with true respect, then turned and left.

"Marcus" Willy Whitehall asked from behind Helen.

"Will remain here at least a week Willy. I will try for months. Tickets on a very fast aircraft to London will be delivered to you two before close of business today. My solicitor has already been so instructed. First class, both of you." She turned to look at her sister-in-law. "Killian spoke of you rarely, but always with admiration. You will visit?"

"When I am able yes" the female bulldog agreed. "My instructions upon reaching London?"

"When we are in my home please" Helen instructed.

Sometime later, with her son now happily playing in his crib Helen rejoined her two visitors in her parlor. Settling down she tasted her coffee first. Only then turning her gaze to the male of their threesome. A greyhound who now refused to meet her eyes. He had learned not to, though Helen herself still did not understand the why. "Philip. You have read the papers my solicitor gave you last night?"

"Thoroughly Lady Whitehall. Quite thoroughly."

"Good, Willy you are to sell all holdings of one disowned creature once known as Marcus Whitehall. That money is to first replace the Whitehall funds frittered away by said creature. If anything remains, though from the reports that Pinkertons produced I do not think there will be, you may place it in the account of said Marcus. Should any of his creditors come to you, turn them over to Philip. He has his instructions."

She paused to sip more of her drink, not liking one bit what she was doing but knowing to save the Whitehall name, Killian's name, her sons name it had to be done. She had to take the title of Lady though she would release it to her son upon his majority. Wither he wanted it or not. "Willy... You will as my only legal representative outside of Spontoon take the Whitehall seat in the Chamber of Lords. Or whatever you call it. I charge you with all the duties of a Lord or Lady to keep the Whitehall name clear, to improve the estates and strengthen our position in all ways. I understand that we have holdings on the continent?"

"Quite a few Lady Whitehall, even after Marcus's actions." Willy held up her paws as Helen opened her mouth. "We are talking legal things, I must use your full title. What about these holdings?"

"Sell them. Everything. Every last holding not in England proper, Canada or America. Get rid of them. Even if at a loss. My best reporter is talking about another war. So is Catherine and a few others who's opinions I have learned to respect." She thought of a certain French teacher, and her blatant opinion that France would fall in one week. "I'm not stupid Willy. I've looked hard at this evidence. That puppy in Germany is as mad as Marcus. Anything on the continent will be either lost, destroyed or nationalized. Africa and South America may be just as dangerous but I will allow you decide on that issue. Diamond mines are nice, but not if the country takes them away from you."

"You are assuming Lady Whitehall, that England will not be invaded?"

"Willy. England hasn't been successfully invaded since William the Conquer. Unlike France the English will fight to the last fur for their homeland. Take that money and invest heavily into Canada. It is not to the United States better interest to have her only friendly neighbor invaded by anyone. In the least our border with Canada is simply impossible to defend."

"Lady Whitehall."

"Yes Philip?"

"You order in your papers that we invest heavily into anything dealing with aircraft. Why?"

"That's simple Philip. Aircraft are the future, as any idiot can see that by now. In our lifetime they have already changed the world. You might also get into military manufacturing. Electronics and such. Oil production where possible. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck it's a duck. The same goes for war. Get into the ground floor of anything that looks like it might have civilian applications after a war is over. No matter how crazy it seems. I think it better that we get a little of every pie and lose a few bites, than either grab the wrong pie or none at all. Philip. Since Marcus was never legally Lord how badly are we hurt?"

"Lady Whitehall, any agreements he made as acting Lord are now invalid unless you accept them. Any money he spent is lost, probably most property that he sold. I am afraid that unless it is worth a great legal battle you should consider them lost."

"Fine. Charge Marcus with whatever crimes you can. Demand he repay all losses. I'll sign the papers. You and Willy represent me in all legal situations regarding the Whitehall name or estate. I thought to leave him his name, his little home. After what I learned last night I'd almost like to hang an anchor on him and tell him to swim home. As it is, since I will not publically honor his bills Spontoon has cashed his return tickets to pay them. As soon as the doctors clear him for travel they are deporting him the cheapest way they can. I'll repay Spontoon's costs, but I will not do so while he is here or debtless he simply won't leave. I am already well off, but in an emergency how do I tap into the Whitehall funds if I need them?"

"Simply have your bank wire the Bank of England Lady Whitehall" the greyhound answered. "Any amount you need, including the entire account will be transferred to you within a day."

"All of it?"

"Yes Lady Whitehall."

Helen finished her drink. "I do not like that. Set up a separate account when you get home. One that I can send money too or take money from. But all other accounts require me to appear in person with identification and one of you beside me in order to withdraw from them. It would be much too simple for a crook with brains to drain the entire Whitehall account by pretending to be me. How much is available right now?"

Philip checked his notes, giving an answer that shocked Helen.

"Two percent of that, maximum. If the account rises above that two percent it must be transferred to the normal accounts immediately. If it drops below one percent check with me, I may have it refilled. My God man, that is a lot of money."

"Lady Whitehall. It is only half of what was there just three years ago" Willy explained.

Helen shook her head in disbelief. "Marcus spent that much money in three years? I thought I spent money like water. Did he expect the money to always be there?"

"I believe that he did Lady Whitehall" Willy admitted. "Anyone who tried to warn him was fired, or beaten then fired."

"Willy, what are your plans when you get back. With the estates and all."

Willy thought a few minutes, knowing Helen would want a truthful answer. "Though I truly would like to put on a bulldog hunt I shant Lady Whitehall. I shall sack every employee who was loyal to Marcus. I will attempt to rehire those he sacked that I believe are worth having back. By the time he returns, I think about a month after leaving Spontoon since he is being shipped by the Southern route, I shall have cleansed everything of his touch. Your orders that I join the House of Lords shall prove interesting. I do believe that they will object."

Helen laughed at those words. "If they object too much let me know. I'll send Illie to visit with specific orders to clear your way. Now when are you two getting married?"

"WHAT! Lady Whitehall. To even suggest..."

"Oh shut up Philip. I already know how you feel. Willy."

"You know my rule Lady Whitehall."

"Fine. Since Philip isn't going to ever fight you then as Lady Whitehall I name Illie as his champion. Battle to commence in um" she checked the clock on her wall. "Two hours and thirty three minutes, when she arrives."

Willy choked on her coffee. "Lady Whitehall. That assassin of yours? I can't possibly defeat her."

"Don't think anyone can Willy" Helen admitted. "Not on these islands or Britain. You did agree to abide by my rules dear Willy. I need you married. I need you having sons and daughters. There is a better than even chance my son will die before he is old enough to take his place. Same goes for me. That would devolve everything right back into Marcus's paws even though he is officially disowned. I can't afford that to happen. Disowned, if you have children he can't raise his voice because my will is going to name them inheritors. Without children we both know it will be a matter of seconds before he raises a legal challenge and you are both the younger and female. I can't leave everything to you, can I."

"No Lady Whitehall. Without issue I am simply the younger sister. It would be a long draining legal battle, still one I already know from historical precedence that I will lose."

"Then its settled. You'll be married before you leave Spontoon. At the Consulate would be best, to stop any possible challenge of legality by that filth. Its certain that he will father no pups."

"And I am to have children immediately Lady Whitehall?" Willy's voice had changed, becoming somewhat harder. It was obvious that she was not happy.

"Within two years Willy. Not one minute longer. Preferable eariler."

Willy shook herself, sat down her coffee then shook herself again. "You speak like my mother and father Lady Whitehall. I find myself captured by my own rule. As I never thought about a Champion being used against me. Will you collar me as well?"

"If I have to Willy. Yes. Yes I will collar you then lead you about on a leash to prove my ownership. If I have no other choice."

Willy blinked in surprise, she hadn't expected that answer. "Why so severe Lady Whitehall. I thought us as friends."

"We are friends Willy. I am being so severe because I truly believe that your brother is evil. If I was certain of other things he would be dead already. I'm not quite certain. Willy, if he isn't its only because he hasn't found them yet. I can't let anyone like that to have the power Whitehall represents. I can't let them have the money, even if I have to play mean old witch with someone I am starting to love like a sister. I want you to search every place he had access to. If you find proof, even the least proof. You'll know what to do. That's an order."

Philip stood. "Lady Whitehall. I understand your losses but to charge anyone with that is unacceptable in any civilized company. Certainly Marcus is a cad, a fool and vicious. But that? What proof do you supply."

Carefully Helen stood, walking to the briefcase she had carried since the court case had begun. "Sit back down Philip, you look foolish. I had planned, as you are both aware to drag this case out for months. To bleed Marcus dry. I know that you both are wondering why I abruptly shot him in the back like that. This is why." She withdrew a folder from her case, looked through it a moment until she found what she wanted. Taking out several photographic prints Helen gave them to Willy. It took the hound only a few moments to understand what she held in her paws.

"He.. He sold me. To Prince Abul Karr AryAmanesh. Had I not followed him secretly here I would be in a Persian hell hole right now. I'll kill him. Slowly. With my own paws. How long have you had this Lady Whitehall?"

"Long enough to understand its terms completely. Willy read carefully. You will note that he sold 'A virginal maiden.' I am correct in assuming you have never been with a man?"

"Or woman Lady Whitehall. I have no interest in the latter. I've been waiting on the former."

"Married that would change overnight. As a mother no doubt could be offered that you are secretly still virginal. That gold has already changed paws. It is only time before certain agents catch up with you Willy. Only if I sent Illie with you could I be certain of your safety if you remained unmarried. I need Illie here for my son. Once you and I are out of the picture Marcus would have no threat to his claims. He would be what he has always desired to be. Lord and Master of his domain. Philip."

"Yes Lady Whitehall" the greyhound asked.

"Willy was sold for a great deal of gold. Find it. Something tells me that he didn't spend all that missing money either and I really don't believe he'd put it into a bank or trust someone else to hold it. There's craft here Philip. Rustler craft. Search everything, his favorite haunts, his get away places, especially that house and lands he was supposed to keep, but I'm betting you'll find it somewhere around where the property Willie was supposed to inherit. It's be like a rustler to do that. I'll hold him here as long as I can. I'll try to keep him from sending any messages. You might manage a few weeks in London before he is back in action sending messages. You will marry my sister in law?"

"I would be delighted Lady Whitehall. If she would have me."

"Oh Philip. Better you than this AryAmanesh. You are attractive and smart. I've just never looked at you as a potential mate I am afraid to say."

Philip shrugged. "Then we had best get it over with. It is for your own safety. When you find another I will bow out quite silently. My word on this."

Willy stood, towering over the seated greyhound. "You bow out after bedding and breeding me and I'll break both your legs." She turned to Helen. "Lady Whitehall. With your leave?"

"My leave is given. And Willy."

"Yes Lady Whitehall?"

"I would be your sister, your friend. Not your owner or enemy but that is your choice. Still if you ever call me Lady Whitehall again I shall most certainly spank you."

"Yes Lady Whitehall." Giggling Willy dragged the confused Philip with her towards the door even as Helen's right paw impacted the bulldogs rump hard. "Ow, hey. She wasn't kidding" Willy yelled as the door swung shut behind her.

Helen watched the two hurry away, knowing what their destination now had to be. Would it work? She didn't know. She did know that copies of that contract and several others involving missing young high society women were in the paws of the English law right now. Marcus disowned was going to have a lot of explaining ahead of him when he finally dragged himself home. And Willy really did need Philip. There couldn't be that many males as good as the greyhound around, considering the bulldogs social standing. Turning back into her house she was surprised to see Dia-Kura sitting in a chair, reading that same contract.

"True brothers do not do such" the calico announced as she started reading another page.

"I'm not asking how you got in" Helen admitted.

"Good. I not tell you. You let evil man live. That mistake."

"My choice" Helen answered. "Tea or coca."

"Coca please." Setting the photographs down Dia-Kura studied the woman who's home she was in. "You too tense. What wrong."

"Other than this mess with the Whitehall name?" Helen asked as she started heating milk. "Let me see. There are people who very much wish to make a rug out of me. I'm still getting used to this strange school schedule your country has. I am trying to learn what a rocket is and how it works, before one of my students gets killed and I'm having bad dreams. So I'm not getting a lot of sleep. I honestly think that madness is nibbling away at the edges of my sanity. Nothing major I guess."

"Then we talk" the young priestess decided.

"I would like that. You are aware that Illie is coming?"

"I am" the calico admitted, though she did not expand further upon her words.

August 22nd, 1936

Helen Whitehall stood on Moon island and watched with some awe as three of members SITHS Goddard Club carefully raised a fat length of pipe into place. It was, as they explained it, a two stage solid propellant rocket. To Helen it appeared nothing more than a split length of pipe with two sets of four fins and a bullet-like cap on its end.

"Doesn't look like anything does it" a well known voice asked from behind her.

Forcing her shoulders to unclench the afghan turned to find a female bobcat standing behind her, a rather large camera held casually in her paws. Her coat Helen noticed, had dulled. A certain sign of a fur who was ill, or spent no time in the sun. "Unless your sick, you better stay out of the sun" she warned.

"I'm not sick" Elizabeth Brighton-Saphano admitted. "I've been really busy these last months." She did though step into the shade cast by a large concrete bunker. "Is this the Ming III" she asked.

"No. Ming III is still being prepped. This one is called the MESKO, though why I don't know. Paul designed it, that's him over there. The pudgy brown bear wearing a cheap tourist shirt. If I had ever been told that I would be spending my Saturdays away from my son herding over a bunch of kids with stardust in their eyes I would have laughed. So tell me lust of my life, why are you here."

"Lust.. Whoa wait a second. I'm..." Elizabeth caught the twinkle in Helen's eyes and laughed. "You have been around a certain priestess too much" she laughed.

"No. A certain Songmark instructor" Helen admitted. "If I can't have fun with people why know them. Now tell me, considering what little I do know about you this..." She turned to indicated the dozen or more young students busy at work behind her, "...isn't part of your business."

"No it isn't Mrs Whitehall, or should I say Lady Whitehall? Or Matchmaker? No, I was bitten by the bug in Hawaii while visiting. I'll tell you the truth Lady Whitehall. I want to go to the moon."

Helen laughed, causing a few of her students to look up for a moment. "On one of these? It's going to be an interesting ride."

Elizabeth blushed, something she hadn't done in a very long time. "No silly" she gasped after a few long seconds of washing that image out of her mind. Taking Helens arm she pulled the larger woman a bit further away from her busy students. "A real rocket. I'm pushing through a budget item. Supposable military use of these things. But my real goal is to ride one into space. To walk on the moon."

"Military use? Of these toys? Surely you jest."

"I'm not joking Lady Whitehall and don't call me Shirley. Seriously. The Germans are already playing with them. Something about ballistic trajectories and warheads. They already reached two kilometers with their A2 two years ago. These things are toys, but these kids are our best bet for home grown rocket designers."

Helen looked back at her students who were busy cranking up the rail launcher holding MESKO I. "I don't think they would like their dream corrupted like that" she admitted. "I won't support your efforts. I don't build weapons."

"Then you and I will have to talk, tonight. Now lets just watch and see what amazing things these kids can do. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Walking with Elizabeth Helen returned to the activity, accepting a clipboard with a checklist as she joined team MESKO in their pre-launch inspection. Though she knew almost nothing of rockets yet she was learning. Even though in reality she wasn't that interested.

Annette Riverstone looked in disgust at the creature that Professor Flumbulger had brought back with him from Krupmark Island to Casino Island. "Parts are missing" she noted, pointing to where a section of the disagreeable animal had been cut away.

"Yes, egg sack too. They burned the eggs" Professor Flumbulger answered. "A loss, perhaps not a wrong loss. Part of deal they get section of creature for own research. Ugly yes?"

"Very ugly." She walked around the tank of formaldehyde containing a creature from her worst mad nightmares. "What will you do with it?"

"Take back Rain Island. Study. Discover what is, how lived. What is that made such. Will come assist?"

Annette shivered in disgust as a tentacle rose from the bottom, its spiked end somehow pointing directly at her stomach. Apparently moving slowly towards her as more of its mass rose from the bottom until the spike hit its tanks side with a sharp clink and stopped. She was definitely going to have nightmares over this. "No thank you Professor" she answered as she stepped aside from that deadly needle. "I prefer to do real medical work. Good luck."

"And luck to you. Offer always open, you already prove smart woman. Will make excellent researcher."

Abruptly a bubble of the creatures stench burst in the tank, quickly reaching her sensitive nose. Grabbing her nose with both paws the otter ran quickly out of the customs shed, then hurried to a nearby restroom where she soon left her lunch and breakfast. Nor she discovered, did supper set well with her that night.

They were in Helen's parlor on Meeting island, cooled coffee at their paws as they talked. "You had these photographs developed rather quickly" Helen Whitehall observed as she picked up another 8x10 print.

Elizabeth Brighton-Saphano simply turned her print in another direction as she studied its image. "Helps to be important" she eventually admitted. "Just exactly what did go wrong with MESKO I."

"Delayed ignition of the second stage is what Paul explained to me. "At least it struck in the cleared waters, not some poor water taxi."

"Had it" the bobcat observed. "That taxi would have sunk in seconds. Helen I am no fool. Neither do I think are you. You like these students?"

"Quite a bit."

"I thought so." Laying aside her print the bobcat sipped her cooled coffee. "Defiantly an acquired taste, and its so thick."

Helen laughed softly. "Arabic coffee, it should be hot though. Not cool like this. You've laid out your bait Mrs. Brighton-Saphano. Now what is the hook."

"We can close down these tests. That, what did they call it? A power-prang? Was dangerous enough to declare the entire club a public menace. They would never fly anything again."

Helen leaned back, fanning herself with the photograph she held. "Then do close them down. It will be one less thing to take me away from my son. Besides. I am not the one who wants to walk on the moon. Am I."

"I could threaten you" the bobcat suggested softly.

"But not my son. Send me home, I'll have '*Property of Mrs. Elizabeth Brighton-Saphano, Spontoon, Meeting Island*' tattooed on my back. So when they turn me into a coat it will eventually be delivered to you. My son though is a Spontoon citizen and under age. Him you can't threaten."

Elizabeth laughed softly, setting her barely tasted cup aside. "I was warned you'd seen too much to frighten. Very well, if we are going to play cards I am going to lay mine on the table. First card. Yes, I am a full blown space nut. I've even started reading Science Fiction in what spare time I have. I do want to go to the moon. Second card. As your aware I have some pull on these islands. Right now I can't let you

know exactly what, but your Miss Devinski is fully aware of that. One day I'll have to tell you, but not right now. I can close you down or set you up. Third card. You saw what that accident could have done. It buried itself ten feet into the harbor bottom fully forty five feet below the surface. Germany is already building rockets twenty times that size. Fourth card. Any invasion of Spontoon has to be ship born. A couple thousand of those MESKO accidents scaled up could turn the tide. Literally. Especially if they were carrying armor perching shells on their noses. Fifth and final card. No, I have no intention of threatening you. First it would be useless. Second you do not deserve to be threatened Lady Whitehall. But think of this. There will be war. You know it, I know it, everyone with half a brain knows it. I also know exactly what was said between you and Willy that last night before they left, after a rather sudden marriage. This kind of project might just be the difference between Spontoon as a nation being hurt, or being overwhelmed. And no Lady Whitehall, this is not my only project in the works."

"Strong cards" Helen agreed. "I knew that there was no secrecy here, I simply wasn't aware how much I am being watched. So why myself? Anyone can do the job I'm doing."

"Wildcard?" Elizabeth asked with a smile. "Your rich. No one, and I mean not even the smartest spy is going to think twice about a space bug bitten rich woman funding her own private rocketry club. I'll funnel money into your private account, the English one. Through your sister-in law. You draw from that. You are working for Spontoon as a citizen, not as a visitor. That is another thing Lady Whitehall. Right now your son's position is rock solid. You though are a visitor with a working visa and a native born child. That means that you are subject to deportation at the whim of maybe thirty different clerks. I will guarantee you full citizenship if you agree. You won't be able to be deported even if you killed Dia-Kura."

"Or you" Helen asked. She was interested yes. It was a big piece of cake set before her. But a cake with a very dangerous hook hidden in it.

"Or me" Elizabeth answered. "I'll even insure that crazed bulldog has a relapse and remains incommunicado until at least Christmass."

"What do the children get out of this."

"What do you want."

Helen thought that question over. "A permanent launch site on Main Island. Access to the best tools, equipment and materials. Supplies at cost, below cost where possible. There must be a few things in that custom shed of yours that they can use. They get a workshop on Moon Island too, with agreeably second hand tools but in the best of shape. Remember, I am supposed to be funding this. I will not stand for shoddy materials. Local college level courses in space and everything involved with their work. Along with credit for that."

"I have to check with Rain Island on the last" Elizabeth admitted.

"Do that. I'm going to have to ask that you remain away other than public launches. Obviously you are important in some way that would endanger my students."

"If I refuse" the bobcat asked.

"Then you better come up with a foolproof reason. Maybe we are lovers?"

"Please no" Elizabeth gasped. There wasn't any humor in her voice. "First I'm married, second I am in no way interested and third Catherine would gut me seven ways from Sunday if I took you away from her."

Helen sighed, badly acting as though she were disappointed. "Too bad. I am so lonely since Catherine hasn't visited lately and I've all this honey going to waste. Well, since you can not find a reason to be there then I must ask you to remain away. That doesn't mean that you can't send agents with cameras

though.”

“Granted, but you’ll see me in the background at your Moon Island tests, and at the public Main Island launch site. As another show of goodwill I will have a talk with Catherine tonight.”

“Do not threaten her” Helen warned.

“Threaten? Threaten Catherine Devinski? Lady Whitehall, I am a difficult person to get along with and I do what I have to for my country. But threatening Catherine Devinski in this case would be a serious mistake. You may trust me in this. It would not work at all.”

Helen relaxed. “As long as you do not threaten her” she agreed.

“You have my word on that. Now,” she picked up a photograph. “This MING III. You say it had a four pound lead payload? What was the altitude your theodites gave.”

Helen reached for her notebook, passing through several pages before finding the answer. “Five percent closing, three thousand nine hundred and seven meters. That means there is a oh, at worst a one hundred and ninety five meter error.”

“I have a challenge. As soon as I can get funding pushed through. The first ship to break ten thousand meters with a five pound lead payload wins a cash prize. Five percent closing ratio. That’s oh, five hundred meters either way?”

“Sounds right. How much” Helen asked as she picked up her pen.

“I might be able to manage five hundred shells” the bobcat admitted.

“A thousand and I will match it. Second place five hundred. Third place two fifty. A gold, silver and bronze medal as well. Real metal. Or nothing.”

“Seventeen hundred and fifty shells and medals? Lady Whitehall this is not the Olympics.”

“Maybe it should be. Call it the National Rocket Olympics. And if you ever call me Lady Whitehall one more time I will most certainly double the prize demands.”

Elizabeth bit her upper lip hard before answering. “Agreed. If I can manage the money. We have that air ambulance to fund too.”

“I think I can find a thousand shells a year for that work. Seeing as one day they may save my life, or the life of someone I love.”

“You are not a very good bargainer Helen.”

“Really? Do you happen to remember how I obtained my title? What I did to my so called brother in law and his sister?”

“Then why.”

Helen picked up another photograph, this one showing the awe stricken faces of her students as MING III clawed its way into the sky. Turning it around she let Elizabeth study it for a moment. “Them” she answered softly.

August 23rd, 1936

On Krupmark Island an aged female panda walked up to a dark red curtain in her families bar. Reaching out she touched its thick soft, alluring fabric. Its color was that of fresh spilled blood. She smiled to herself at the image of what lay hidden on its other side. Waiting for some drunk to give up a silver American dollar to watch the dance.

"They cost you your males" a hard voice stated from behind her. "Do not be a fool and turn around."

She stopped her motion, returning to facing the curtain. "Yes. They pay now."

"Your husband was a fool. He knew who she was. He would not believe you did not send that letter. That kind of fool cannot be allowed to live. You understand my words?"

"Word be sent to family. Photograph. Her last words. She say she buy other too. Same price."

"True. But a living daughter has greater value than a dead one. You will gain only that to remove the shame to her family. Much less than what would have crossed your paws before."

"Mistake. Yes. Grandson will live?"

"Until some woman begins telling him what he can and cannot do, yes. It was you who burned her letters, wasn't it."

"Was. Yes. I never read. Not believe."

"Show me."

With a shaking paw the elderly panda placed a coin in a waiting brass slot. Almost instantly she heard pumps start, even as the curtains began to open. Less than two feet from her eyes two female figures in only their fur began a maccabe swim, each impaled upon massive tentacles that lead back to a false cave. Just within that cave a single large blue eye could be seen, watching.

"Feed" the dark voice ordered. In moments the panda was bleeding upon her own floor, dying without a sound as above her the two young women's lifeless eyes watched. Blood splattered, striking an engraved brass plate. Her eyes last sight was of those words she'd chosen, now carefully engraved in six languages. *Katrina Elizabeth Faberge and her wife Yuralria Faberge.*

Walking closer to the bloody mess a very well known figure watched in amusement as her pets fed. "I will have no jealous fools living on my part of Krupmark costing me gold" she told the dead panda. Looking up at the two figures she swore. That was no way to treat your profit margin she thought. That final insult, accusing the two forever of having been married, was though a rather nice touch. She would allow it to be left, even though it was a black lie. She though would send the letter, false marriage record and the photograph.

Chapter Forty-Two

August 25th, 1936

“...so fades the moon from her eyes...” crooned the American singer known as Wildwood Weed, thus ending his Casino Island act for the night. Bowing to his audience the wildcat offered his microphone to the delightful vixen who’s act came after him. Bowing again to his very appreciative audience he made his way behind the resorts stage then to the dressing room he’d used for his entire tour. Spontoon he thought as he loosened his tie. When his agent had given him the assignment he’d almost revolted. Leave New Amsterdam for a back woods little island filled with uneducated natives? Those thoughts though had changed quickly after his arrival.

Yes Spontoon was hotter than New Amsterdam. Yes it was filled by apparently uneducated natives, until you looked closely. Why there probably wasn’t one native out of one hundred with less than a good High School education he’d discovered. And they liked his singing. Not just accepted that someone was on the stage making noise, they liked him. He even had a real live fan club though small and received a few letters every week. Having watched over a dozen so called hot acts bomb horribly on the stage during his tour he’d learned one thing. Harsh East Coast humor had turned out to have no place in this nation. Nor did ethnic or sexist humor. It seemed that the quality of tourist that came here wasn’t interested in crass cheap humor. Certainly the average native did not. Acts adjusted or found their contracts cut very short indeed.

Settling down in the second paw woven chair he used Wildwood stretched, feeling muscles he hadn’t known he had before coming here moving under his now loose shirt. And the beaches, oh those soft sand beaches with beautiful girls who, once you learned the codes were often approachable. If her fur was combed thusly and to the right she was available, a flower behind the left ear proclaimed this also should she be from a different village. If that swirl was to the left she was available as well, but only to another woman. But if she wore a flower behind her right ear or a ring of intertwined fur it was better not to approach. Oh she might be available for that night, but she had already given her heart to another. If the swirl was duplicated and intertwined it meant that she had given her heart to another and was unapproachable by any.

Oh yes, learning those codes was the best thing he’d ever done. It had made dating so much easier than hunting fingers for signs of recently removed engagement or wedding rings in a dark bar, or banding words over a glass of alcohol, often wasting an entire night for naught. Propping his feet on the makeup table Wildwood reflected on other things he’d learned. As long as he respected the local laws and traditions he was welcome darn near anywhere. His first weeks on Spontoon had led to many heartfelt apologies later on, by himself, but now he was welcome in many homes. Especially if he decided to sing a song or two before or after dinner.

This place was nothing like New Amsterdam or any other American city that he had preformed in. Absolutely nothing like any other place he’d been. Picking up a letter from his agent he thought over its contents. “Cleveland, in the Winter” he told his feet. “Not bloody likely.” A letter was already on its way back explaining that he had already accepted an extended engagement over the Winter at the Twin Palms resort, though at reduced pay rate because the tourist season would be over. He’d mentioned that an extended stay through next season, or a tour in Hawaii would be accepted with open arms.

Heaven, Spontoon was absolute heaven for the wildcat who hated snow bound winters, even if there were odd differences. Glancing at the clock on his dressing table he noticed that it was almost midnight. Since he normally slept most of the morning and was off the next two days a certain plan had come to him. He needed new songs, locally inspired songs. Romance, history and ballads were in short supply now,

having sung and resung his best until they sounded dusty, boring. At least to his ears. Though his audience was still appreciative the wildcat knew that his work was getting stale. There was but one thing to do, he would have to find a guide right now and visit Main Island again. Over the years he had found that night was always best for his muse. She apparently hated the daylight as he had never written anything worth the reading while sunlight splashed through his windows. Standing up he started to change clothing.

August 26th, 1936

On Meeting Island, in a certain weathered building a phones insistent ringing woke two young minks from their sleep. Being closer the younger lifted the receiver, barely awake. "SPQR, Tina speaking" she managed before a massive yawn hit her. "Repeat please? My apology, I had a most dreadful yawn. Yes, have the aircraft warmed and ready. Doctor Kiwi and Doctor Riverstone are on their way. Yes, everything will be ready. Time Zero One One Five hours." She hung up, looking over to find her older sister already writing in their log. "It is but ten minutes or less from the hospital" she reminded her sister as she pulled on her work clothing. "They will already have left."

"It will take but five to be ready. You open the door for our employers. I shall start the engine. Together we will open the large doors." Alexia herself was already half dressed by the time she finished her words. Neither bothered with more than leather soled slippers as they exited the Black Rose.

Both doctors arrived to find their aircraft idling gently, its nose already pointed out to the open bay. Both girls were going over the craft with a checklist, Alexia calling off items as Tina checked her pre-flight list. Privately both were impressed. It had been obvious that both had been sound asleep when the call came in, and that neither had taken time for more than the absolute minimal clothing.

"Our pilot will arrive very soon by water taxi" Doctor Kiwi announced. "We will be ready?"

"Working" Tina called from the open cargo bay where she was currently checking attachments. "We much hope so."

Turning to the otter beside him the Kangaroo smiled. "You were very lucky to find these two" he admitted.

"Or somethin else" Annette Riverstone agreed. On Spontoon she'd discovered, often luck had nothing to do with being pointed towards the correct path. Though one always had to make the trip themselves.

They waited in silence as the girls completed their checks, Alexia running over to the Black Rose to return with a five gallon jug of fresh water which Tina carefully stowed away. "Aircraft passes pre-flight" Alexia announced while Tina signed her list, offering it to her sister who first checked her watch, then signed as well.

"Very efficient. Why the water jug" Doctor Kiwi asked.

"Sir" Alexia answered. "Water ages within a container, its taste will flatten at best. Thus we keep none in the aircraft until it is needed. Our ships water tank is changed no less than weekly, cleaned with bleach then flushed monthly unless we are on the open sea. Thus we draw upon its tanks for what is needed."

"I see, ah. Here is our pilot." He noted that after glancing out into the darkness Alexia again checked her watch, writing on the papers in her paws. He was secretly delighted in the professional way these two young minks dealt with their responsibilities, though telling them such would most likely prove detrimental to their work.

Meeting the bear who climbed out of a still drifting water taxi Alexia saluted the man. "Full fuel tanks Sir. She has been idling since zero one two one hours. Five Imperial gallons of fresh water aboard, all

systems check ready. You will of course make your own pre-flight inspection?"

"Ah will" the bear agreed. Still he accepted the offered checklist, reading all three pages while his plane idled with a deep thrum, its engine by now quite warmed. "Ver'y detailed. 'Kay lets go through tah flight surfaces firss."

Again both doctors waited as their pilot checked the same things their employees had already gone over, then wrote his own name on those same papers before returning to the cockpit. "Bess gee aboard" he warned. Quickly Doctor Kiwi, being senior joined the bear while Annette climbed into the converted cargo bay.

As her girls loaded their small cargo she smiled to them. "I am suitably impressed. We will be gone until at least sunset. A fishing boat accident. An engine explosion followed by a fire. You are both free to wander until four PM, but let the hospital know how to find you." Smiling still she let herself be closed into the aircrafts fuselage.

Alexia and Tina Humber watched as their aircraft taxied out into the darkness, turned right into the light winds and soon took off. "You do realize what this means dear sister" Alexia said as they worked to close the hanger door.

"But of course. Scavenging time" her younger sister answered, her eyes bright.

"You are certain that I will be welcome" Wildwood asked his guide. They were now on Main Island and it was near sunup. He had asked if it were possible to watch a priestess sing the morning song. Of course he'd heard it, and its counter every day since arriving on Casino Island. But he'd never had a chance to actually listen. Morning song had such a haunting melody to it. Sunset song sounded more like someone singing goodnight to a dear friend than taps did, it was friendlier as well.

"Honored Mother serve all" his rodent guide answered. It was still too dark for Wildwood to determine which family of Rodentia, but scent tended to indicate chinchilla, or at least part chinchilla. "As long do not interfere is all fine. We go special shrine. Please not touch things?"

"Not to worry Karl. I may be a tourist but I'm not that stupid. I won't touch anything." Following his guide Wildwood Weed soon found himself entering a small open gateway, then moving carefully down mist dampened stone steps. His guides burning torch gave a pool of light for them but it only reached a few yards, from what he could tell they seemed to be entering a fairly large space from the way sounds returned to them. To his right he could see another small pool of light, a single lantern set against a large stone. Beside it was a typical priestess, or Honored Mother to grant her the local label of respect. Following his guides soft commands he found a place to sit, then waited.

They had arrived just before Sunrise Song began. He'd barely had time to become comfortable (if one could be so, sitting on a morning damp stone) when a rough voice began to sing. No he realized, not rough. There was training in that voice, long training but something caused it to sound like dry sands crossing each other. Yet the song still carried him away. Closing his eyes he rode with its sound, though not understanding its words the tune still told him all he needed to know. When finally the Priestess ceased her words he slowly opened his eyes, to find a mouse walking towards him still settling her blouse back into place. Of course, she would have been topless he realized. Him being European meant she would cover herself, lest he think her what the locals called a Huntress.

"How may I serve you" that strange voice asked.

"I only came to listen" he explained. "My guide said it was acceptable. Was I wrong to believe him?"

"No" that voice answered. "Not in this."

Then she was close enough for him to see in the dim light and his heart beat faster. She was a Goddess in the fur. All he had ever searched for and more. But then his hopes crashed, for there was that swirl on her neck. It was to the left and doubled. With a cry of anguish his heart shattered like a cheap glass on stone. Still other than a long breath he was able to hide his feelings. Or so he believed.

"All who have open hearts, open minds welcome here. This is shrine, very old. I am caretaker this time. Years to come another takes my place. You are welcome."

"You are" he asked softly, unaware that those eyes now held just a little amusement. "An Honored Mother?"

"I Oharu" the mouse answered. "Many say Honored Mother. I like Oharu. You are?"

"Wildwood Weed..." He giggled. "Sorry, that's mah stage name. I've been usin it too long. Mah real name is Fletcher. Billy Tom Fletcher. From Tennessee."

"That is in what country" Oharu asked.

"America. The United States." As the light grew he was able to see this woman better and all he saw made him desire her the more. Still he'd been on Spontoon more than long enough to know it was hopeless. She had already given her heart to another, openly declared that she was true to that one. She was also Sapphic, and a Priestess at that. To even think of accosting an Honored Mother would have him nailed to a sinking water taxi, a very slowly sinking water taxi. In very hot water.

"I am sorry. Never have been to your America. Is it nice place?"

"Very nice. Lots of trees, rivers, hills. Laid back place. Course we have ticks, chiggers and skeeters to worry about. Things that don't live here."

"Perhaps one day I see your Ten-ah-sea" Oharu agreed. "Now have work yet to do. You may stay, but please listen to guide. Some things here dangerous. Others just odd. Would not be desirable have to fit you for Lavalava when return."

He watched as she walked away, to be joined by three others in the gathering light. She was lovely, she was beautiful, she walked as though she had no bones and she'd just made a joke without thought. But her heart already belonged to someone else. With a sigh of regret he stood. "May I look around" he asked.

"I wait here" his guide agreed as he extinguished his torch with an old rag. "Is nice place. Stay on paths please. Best for one to find soul places like this. Sometimes. Always though alone." Karl, Wildwood's native guide watched in amusement as his companion looked around like a child discovering some forgotten magical place. Walking carefully through the morning mist Wildwood Weed began his exploration, moving slowly down the path deeper into Great Stone Glen as the day woke about him. Behind him his guide relaxed, watching the American's explorations. Like Oharu he had not missed that instant interest, and the just as quick acceptance of what was. There would be no troubles from this Euro. As he had said himself. He wasn't that stupid.

Lunch had proved less than filling for the two minks considering the limited funds both girls had carried with them. Had they wished it was only a bit more than a mile, as the snake slithered back to the Black Rose and waiting food. Or the hospital should they desire to eat in that cafeteria for free. Of course they would have to drag their cart with them, and with it the nearly two hundred pounds of materials they had scrounged or begged. "I believe sister that this was a terrible mistake" Tina announced as she finished her juice drink. "We have but the least of our needs now. With little time yet left to gather the rest. Should that even be possible."

"Watcha lookin for" a male voice asked from behind the girls.

Turning slowly Alexia studied the young wombat standing a few feet away, his paws held behind his back. Native obviously, enchanted by her sister Tina obviously from the way his eyes were locked upon the younger mink. "Cast off materials" the older girl explained. "We are employee's of the hospital. Our task is to care for their air ambulance. It is our misfortune that the building we are in is quite in need of repairs."

"So... yer lookin fer stuff what tah fix it up?"

"Yes, actually. That is the idea. Unfortunately we have been searching since sunrise, finding only what you see outside on our cart."

"Uh huh... Uh... Iffin ah could manage tah get what yah need. Um, would yer sister maybe go tah a movie with me?"

"But we do not even know your name" Tina cried. "It would be impossible. Why, we haven't been properly introduced, or anything."

"Ah, well. Yah see I'm called tha Mole. Cause ah get intah small places yah see. But mah real name is Alexander. Alexander Cartwheel. No mid name. Sorry."

"I see Mr. Cartwheel" Alexia said, fighting not to laugh. The poor boy was trying so hard and her sister was doing nothing to help. "I am Alexia Humber. Of England. My sister is Tina, whom I dote upon greatly. Please, tell me how you would expect to find all upon this list before four this afternoon. By instruction we both must be back by then. For at sunset our employers will be returning. They have given us the strictest of orders regarding how long we may be absent." She laid her pad of paper on the table in the wombats sight. It was a rather thick pad of course, for they had been making notes since arriving at their new base of operations.

"Mah I?" Alexander asked, pointing to the list.

"Please. If you wish" Alexia answered. "Any help will be greatly appreciated." If nothing else the boy had manners. That in itself was potential. She caught her sisters eye, signaling her to behave herself.

Carefully reading through the list Alexander occasionally whispered a name, whistled or clucked. Eventually he laid the list back down. "Gonna take day, mahbe two tah fin all ah that" he admitted. "Iffin ah do, would yer sister submit tah bein mah date to ah movie? My siste Carthagen will chaparoon course. She's sixteen."

"Tina?"

Looking first to the plump, overly furred wombat then back to her sister Tina smiled. "Alexia. If this kind gentleman is able to supply us with our needed materials, legally, then I will most assuredly join him and his sister to view a movie. My word as a Humber upon this. But you must know Alexander that we have been instructed to have no males at the building, or upon the grounds. It would mean our instant dismissal."

Turning to Alexander Alexia gave the boy a wide smile. "Should you be successful. And please, no insult is meant but these things must be located legally. I do not wish us to be fired over a misunderstanding, then I will be delighted to greet your sister when you come to take Tina to this movie. Is this acceptable?"

"Lik Songmark then. Nah any problem. Issa deal. Can use yer cart?"

"But of course. Shall we pull it to where you need it?"

"Thank, buh ah got some friens. Whell getr er taken care of. Miss Humber." This last was said to Tina with a clumsy bow added, then gathering the list again Alexander waved to some waiting boys and hurried out to the cart.

"I have just sold myself into bondage" Tina remarked as four muscular young males easily hauled their cart away. "He did not even ask where to deliver such things. Only when. Oh have I opened the door to walk into bondage all the days of my life. I will find myself within a Harem, with chains. I am but a ruined woman."

"Several things dear sister" Alexia corrected. "He is a gentleman, in all but speech. He supplies a chaperone, he makes an honest contract. He asks nothing more than your companionship while viewing a moving picture show. Not even a kiss or held paw. Perhaps you will enjoy the night, perhaps not. Yet you will grant the young man one small pleasure for what will be, too him, a great deal of effort. You will grant him the pleasure of your company in your best behavior. Second, I will speak with our employers about this young man to be certain. Now we had best leave, for I believe that this shopkeeper is beginning to wonder if we are painted ladies." Standing she left the last of her coin on the table, waiting for her sister to join her before they returned early to their home.

Alexander though was no foolish young boy. He had spotted Tina some time before she and her sister had taken employment with the hospital. Her eventual invasion of his dreams the following nights making him place his own inquires first. His sister had suggested the chaperone bit, as these were proper if adventurous young English girls. When he saw their list it was all he could do not to sigh in relief, for his uncle ran a salvage yard. Other than two or three items absolutely everything could be found there. Plus the girls were right, he and his friends had played in the building they now inhabited. In his young opinion it was almost a death trap. Though Alexia was nice, her younger sister was in his young eyes the most attractive one. She being closer to his own age. Eventually arriving at his uncles business he went in with his list, explaining his needs and the why. All of them.

Long after sunset, somewhere far South of Spontoon Island a purple and blood red amphibian floated next to a still smoking fishing boat. Onboard that boat two Spontoon doctors fought to save a male minks life. "I think I have the fragment" Doctor Kiwi announced. Lifting his forceps from the minks opened chest he dropped a tiny metallic slug that had once been part of the ships engine into a metal bowl with a clank. "Surgery, in the middle of the ocean on a small boat by flashlamp. Impossible" he grumbled as he began closing that ugly wound.

"If we waited until land he would be dead like his brother" Annette reminded her superior. She glanced at a porthole where nothing but inky blackness answered her gaze. "He will live I think."

"If we can get him to the hospital in time, but do we dare leave these other two alone?" He waved at two furs lying on bunks, their faces already wrapped in sterile dressings. "I mean, there is only the First Mate uninjured."

A head, wrapped in blood stained bandage, salt crusted fur sticking out in spikes around that bandage looked in on the two. "Gat der raddidio workin. Is a Rain Island warship only hour way lik yer pilot said. Ah keep transmittin, they keep comin. You get ol Fishkutter der home safe. We settle counts whe ah get bac."

"You are certain" Doctor Kiwi asked.

"Fiskutter ahn es brudder ben crew since afore ah made kapteen. Yeah, Ihm sure."

"Very well. Annette. Lets stabilize him for transfer to the aircraft." He started working again. Much less than an hour later the purple and red aircraft lifted off the water, turned to starboard and followed Radio LONO's signal home. It seemed that Whitemoon Fishcutter would live to fish again, though his canvas

wrapped brother back on the ships deck would never see another sunrise.

August 27th, 1936

"Returned very late" Alexia noted in her log the morning after. "One survivor, critical but stable condition. Zero three fifty two hours." It was nearer sunrise than sundown when the call had come in. Already Meeting Islands single ambulance was waiting, parked as close to the doorway as it could get. That Tina had noted would have to be corrected, she was even now cutting away bushes that would make moving a stretcher difficult. Already both huge hanger doors were locked open. It let the bugs in, but those could be dealt with later. If they didn't commit suicide in some lubricant stained container beforehand. Two brand new kerosene soaked torches were mounted at each side of the opening their aircraft would have to slip through, waiting nothing more than to be lit by a third longer but much smaller torch already waiting.

When the phone rang again Alexia picked it up instantly. "SPQR, Alexia. Zero four zero two hours." She listened, thanked the person speaking, then hung up. This too was noted in her log. "'Five minutes to touchdown Tina. I will need you in here" she yelled.

"On my way" her sister called from the darkness. A moment later the younger mink re-entered the building, brushing dirt off her clothing. "I have cleared the left side, then part of the right side" she announced. "I will much need a bath I fear."

"It is a damp sponge bath for you, just as always" her sister reminded her. "I will need assistance with this door after they return."

A short time later Doctor Kiwi watched in delight as his two employees helped guide the aircraft into its nest. Words like hanger were still somewhat alien to him, as were many other aviation definitions. Twisting around he looked back at his companion, the American Doctor Riverstone who had so proved herself on this mission. To his mind she was as much a Doctor now as he was. She simply needed years and years of experience to smooth her out. Their patient was still breathing, with a saline drip helping his body replace fluids lost battling his injuries. With luck he would live to a ripe old age. Scarred yes, with some limited mobility but the point was this red and purple madness had saved a life. A life that would have been lost before yesterdays sunset had they not been able to respond. Yes, he would have a great deal to say at the Allthings annual budget meeting. A great deal to say.

When he again turned his eyes forward the smaller mink was already tying off ropes while the larger was sending paw signals to the pilot. He couldn't understand what she was saying, until her flattened paw made a slicing motion across her own throat. That signal was universal, so that when the pilot shut off their engines it was no surprise. As he began unbuckling his safety harness Doctor Kiwi heard thumps and bumps from outside. Abruptly rich warm air heavy with scents of technology rolled up from the passenger section. Opening his side of the cockpit the roo was amazed to see that the girls had sometime ago built a ramp on wheels, complete with railings. It had been pushed up to the aircrafts cargo door then locked down somehow so that it would not shift, what looked like rolled carpet kept the ramp from damaging the aircrafts surface. This ramp allowed two interns to easily remove their patient.

"Amazing. Your ingenuity continues to amaze me" he stated as his feet touched the concrete that formed their hangers foundation. As he watched the two girls immediately began inspecting the aircraft, both holding electric lamps and clipboards. "That will wait until morning. You two must be exhausted. Get some sleep" he ordered.

Alexia looked up while her sister continued to search for problems. "Sir" she answered softly. "Then should you be required to fly out again in half an hour, with perhaps a leak in the float? Yes sir, you have the authority to order us to bed and we will follow those orders to the letter. But we both must protest. You have employed us to maintain this aircraft, this building. That you may fly out at any time secure in the knowledge that it has been serviced to the best of our abilities. Please sir, may we do our job?"

Setting his medical bag down Kiwi rubbed his eyes. "Yes, yes you are right. I'm just tired is all. How long will it take you to complete your inspection?"

"Complete turnaround sir? Refueling, inspect for leaks, loose fittings or other damage. Resupplying everything you have used such as blankets, water and food? Most of a day sir, but in an emergency thirty minutes. That would of course be a quick examination by Tina while I refuel and the pilot searches for obvious damage. Resupply would then be your responsibility."

"Goo as mah ohn gronh crew Doctor" their pilot announced as he stretched. "Bes listin tah them, tha may noh be tha best yah can get, but thas professional. Got promise. Can see tha. Gonna be somthin after Songmark. Where ah sign give yah back yer little toy?"

Alexia hurried over to a table, reading her ever-present watch again as she returned with her green cloth covered log book, filling in the page before offering it to the pilot. Signing quickly he yawned. "Nah tah get ah taxi" he started to say when one eased in next to the Black Rose, its pilot a rather pretty mature vixen. "Ah, tah ar goot Doctor. Ver Goot." Grabbing his flight bag and goggles the bear wandered off to his transportation home.

"And that" Annette asked as she crawled out of the aircraft, her tail looking as though it had been attacked by fifty rabid youngsters.

"I believe Miss Riverstone" Tina answered from under the port wing. "That it is rather difficult to land an aircraft at Meeting island at night without being noticed. In truth we had nothing to do with the water taxi's arrival. However I believe that we will attempt to become involved in such from now on."

"Uh huh. Doctor Kiwi. I need a stiff drink. If you will join me I am buying. And girls, I mean this. Fast turnaround then sleep. Extensive inspections after you are both well rested. That dear girls is ah order."

"You are paying?" the roo asked with a smile on his face.

"This time. Next time you are." She yawned, rubbing her face. "I have duty at eight pm. Shall we go?"

Alexia closed and locked the door behind her employers, stifling a yawn as she did so. She and Tina had napped that afternoon, but in truth were still very tired. Setting aside her log book she went to hook the ground cable to the Duck in order to begin refueling. Only after that dangerous operation was complete could they close the hanger doors.

Back on Casino Island breakfast had proven rather tasteless today for Wildwood Weed, for in his mind fully a dozen or more songs rang giggling down the paths within. He had worked all night, carefully outlining each song before going to the next but they kept coming. And all the time he could not get the image of that priestess from his memory. She haunted him, though she had made no attempt to attract his attention and he was well aware of her choices, she still haunted him. He would have to learn more about her though before he could begin writing a ballad about her. One he was aware could never be sung on Spontoan. One did not make stories of any specific Priestess his guide had quietly warned him. It was simply not done. He had the day off but needed sleep, so pushing away from his food he wandered over to his bed, hoping against hope that sleep would come. In time it did.

Alexia was pouring a cup of hot tea for lunch while Tina brushed her fur when their visitors arrived. Looking up from her brushing Tina groaned. "Such a long day yesterday, who could possible wish to come here today?"

"Perhaps it is your young male admirer" Alexia answered. She took a sip of her tea, then started up the small ladder to Black Rose's deck. "A moment please" she yelled, turning to her naked sister still holding

her brush. "Should I send him in to see you as you are, or do you desire first to dress?"

"Oh yes, certainly Alexia. Please do send the young man in to me. One whom we have known only a few minutes. Why, he will ravish my body, dragging me away to his native hut to serve him and his family the rest of my tragic life. Of certainty I desire to dress first, now go on with it."

Alexia laughed, leaving her over imaginative sister to tend to her needs while she determined who had pounded upon the door. Tina she had decided long ago, was very much the romantic.

It was a wombat waiting at the door, but a female one. In fact Alexia noted there were at least ten native females in the yard while outside at the gate were fully a dozen young males and one rugged older one. "I am much sorry to admit this" Alexia quipped. "However we have no beds to let."

"Neato. I be Alexanders younger sister Carthagen" the wombat announced. "Dah has this ting bout Grease. Since tha docs won let yah have men here, we cam tah help unload ahn stack."

Drinking deeply of her tea Alexia looked past the girls. There in the road was parked three large trucks. Almost she spit out her tea in surprise, catching herself only barely in time. "I... I must admit I do not understand. But please, come in from the sun." She stepped aside, allowing the women (most she realized, were not near that young after all) to enter the buildings relative coolness.

"Yep. Lik ah member it. Ah dump. Nah, as I unnerstan it. Alexander he makes good is promise, yer sister she goes tah tha movies wid him right?"

"As I recall those were the terms agreed upon. What are they doing?" She watched as five of the older women started looking around, two measuring, one taking notes while the other two moved things around.

"Tha fur yah helped tah save lass night? 'E issa close fren oh my uncles. So tah make sure this plane ere elps more we cided tah do good here. Um, yer sister?"

"In the Black Rose getting dressed. Come, I will introduce you."

"Ah, this be good" the wombat laughed. "She been inna mah brudders dreams fer weeks. Noh ah gets tah see her. Lead on."

Walking to her boat Alexia decided to be a bit forward. "Carthagen. Is that horrid accent real or something for the tourists?"

"My accent? Why no, it is very real. Maybe" she answered in near perfect English.

"I see. Interesting. Tina, you have a female visitor" she called as they stepped upon the deck.

Tina looked up, still fiddling with her coveralls. "They simply will not fit" she complained.

"Nor should they" her sister observed. "However, if you were to turn them right side out I do believe that they will fit. This is Carthagen. Alexanders little sister."

Blushing Tina slipped out of the purple overalls they always wore while working, blushing even more at the wolf whistle Carthagen gave her. "Iffin ah was interst, buh ah aint, wow girl your sweet" the wombat observed. "Nah wonner Alexander likes yah so much."

"Thank you" the young English girl whispered as she quickly dressed. In the near darkness her full body blush wasn't quite visible through the thinner patches of her fur.

Hoping to defuse what had quickly become a major embarrassment for her sister Alexia changed the subject. "There is a rather large contingent of women who will assist in unloading the materials" she announced. "If you would be so kind as to log in the material I will speak with the men outside. We must know what the bill for all this will be, that we may discuss this with our employers."

"I shall be happy too" her sister agreed as she buttoned her overalls. "If you two will excuse me? I abruptly find that I need to use the loo."

Lunch had long passed unnoticed other than a glass of iced sweet tea while Wildwood Weed worked to finish his first ballad. It was his plan to sing it tonight, then continue on with the other songs depending upon his audiences reaction. Though there would be mainly Europeans in his audience, there would also be a fair collection of natives. It was their opinions he wanted tonight. Songs could be tweaked to the taste of Europeans later.

He paused in his writing. When had he started labeling his own people Europeans, not Americans. A shudder went through his frame. Was he going native? No, no he decided he wasn't. It was just labels. When he returned home he would be labeling Americans as Americans and those from across the pond Europeans just as before. It was simply a mental adjustment to his current audience. Nothing unusual. He'd done it before while in Canada. Returning to his work he ran through the song again, carefully insuring that the words matched the metier of his chosen music. It simply would not do to have a word end too soon, or hanging after the music changed.

But why couldn't he get those eyes out of his mind? It was as if she were watching everything he did, gently pushing his words in directions he would never have thought of. Was it true? Were the native priestess's really witches? From what he had already seen of the local religious leaders, most were awfully attractive though.

Turning back to his work he scratched out a word, replacing it with another that seemed to fit just a little better.

Oharu returned from her visit to a local village only to discover that she had a visitor waiting. Thanking her students for caring to the women's needs she walked to her sitting place, bowing slightly as she arrived. "How may I serve you" she asked calmly.

"With orange sauce and a dash of lemon" the afghan answered.

Her words caught the mouse off guard, causing her to pause for a moment. "Would that be before or after dinner" she asked in Spontoonie.

"After, certainly after" Helen Whitehall laughed. "But please, English. My Spontoon is so very poor."

"Better than many" Oharu corrected, though in English. "You have need?"

"Oh yes" Helen laughed again. "Many needs. A love potion would be delightful but I'm informed no true priestess deals in such."

"We do not."

Helen nodded in agreement, patting the tree trunk she was sitting on. "I have some questions" she admitted. "Ones Dia informed me that you would be able to answer."

"Dia-Kura knows much. What little she not know that I might?"

"So your English is as bad as my Spontoon" Helen sighed. "Well, we will just have to muddle along. You don't happen to speak Arabic do you?"

"French some better than English, best in Cipangu" Oharu admitted.

"Where I speak no French or Cipangu" Helen sighed, accepting defeat. "Then it is my poor Spontoon and your poor English. Very well, what must be must be. I need to know about ghosts."

"Ghosts" Oharu repeated. "In this land there no ghosts. What you see is imagination. Spirits yes, no ghost."

"But I've seen them. Flittering here and there. Watching, waiting for me to make a mistake so that they can grab my son."

Oharu leaned forward, lightly taking Helen's paws into her own. "Dia-Kura protects son. Never fear. He is safe, spirit or dream. Illie protects son, no mortal harm come to him. He safe."

"Illie protects his mortal life" the American sighed again. A lot of tension abruptly left her body at those words. "Why wouldn't Dia tell me?"

"Because Dia-Kura sworn not to. By Great Mother. I not so sworn." Oharu increased the pressure of her paws upon her visitors a moment before releasing Helen completely. "Great Mother make such choice."

"Then Spontoon really is safe for my son" Helen whispered. It was as though a great weight had been taken from her shoulders. "He will be a Lord, wither he wants such or not. He will be rich. Illie will train him. Maybe Dia too. Not for him to see the body of someone he loves torn asunder."

"This still pains you."

"Honored Mother it tears me apart sometimes. My things from school arrived last week, the how is quite a mystery. I look at an old letter from Ruth, our notes from school or some memory strikes me and all I want to do is cry my heart out. But I've done that over and over. It never gets any better."

"This then what Dia-Kura send you to me for" Oharu whispered. Helen looked up, wonder in her face. "Come, we say good bye to Ruth. Together." Taking the Americans paws again Oharu led her down to the waterfall. Down to where peace welled up from the stones themselves.

It would be a long day for the mouse. Perhaps even a long night. But what was trapped within Helen Whitehall's heart had to be released or she would kill herself with grief. It was why Dia-Kuru had sent the woman to Oharu. This was where the mouse excelled, having had to deal with her own heart. It was not a path the Meeting Island calico was comfortable with, for she had never allowed herself to know love. It was quite possible the Great Mother had once informed Oharu, that Dia-Kura would never allow herself to know love. It wasn't something that interested her driven soul. There were others of course who could do as well as the Cipangu born mouse, but Oharu had already been within Helen's dreams. Thus for her the task would be easier.

Alexia studied her little sister. "There you are sister. Prim and proper. I do wish we had tried this dress on you earlier though. You have filled out somewhat since we departed dear England."

Tina took a deep breath, stopping before her lungs were fully inflated. "It is rather tight in places sister. I shall appear the poor daughter in such an ill fitting frock wandering the streets of Meeting island."

"Perhaps. Though I do not believe that Alexander would notice. What are your thoughts Carthagen?"

Sitting on a bunk, Alexia's the mink noted, wearing a demure printed lavalava the wombat grinned. She patted the mattress beside her. "Wanna maybe sit aside me" she asked with laughter in her voice. "Hon yer gonna have mah dear brother fergitten tah breath. Now we gotta hurry, cause tha show starts in lessin two hours and yah havin dinner firs righ?"

"Not too much dinner I am afraid" Tina admitted as she tried another deep breath. An ominous creaking sound warned her of over stretched buttons. "I would not like to find myself abruptly standing before your brother with my dress at my ankles."

"Not yet at least" her older sister giggled.

"ALEXIA" Tina gasped, seeming to blush everywhere her dress allowed to be seen.

Alexia giggled again, then moved aside. "Now off with you both. Have a good time Tina. Remember that you are repaying Alexander for a great favor. Remember also that you represent the Humber family."

"What will you be doing dear sister, while I am away spending my virtue?"

Alexia grinned. "Dreaming about what you are doing of course and wishing it was me." She giggled yet again at the shocked look upon her sisters face. "Own up to it sister, it is what we both spoke of on our voyage here. Yet to be truthful I must finish our report of what was done today, for what price we have paid and what yet remains to be done. Now off with you, and do try to watch enough of the movie to tell me its plot. Please?"

She watched as Tina made her way up the short ladder to Black Rose's deck, surprised by the words Carthagen whispered into her ear before the wombat followed. Tina would have been amused to know those words, and that they were spoken in perfect English. For some time Alexia shivered at those words, for they were not ones she was certain interested her. "Kalanie finds you desirable young lady" Carthagen had whispered.

"...still through the bamboo walls whispers a mornings breeze." Wildwood Weed finished. It was his first ballad after visiting Main Island and he'd hoped for applause. What he received was a polite patter of paws from the European members of his audience, but only silence from the natives. '*Tanked*' he told himself. '*Dead in the water, lead balloon. Torpedoed amidships.*' Bowing respectfully to his audience he left the stage, almost forgetting to pass the microphone off to the vixen as she passed him with a concerned look in her eyes.

It was much later that a knock came to his open door. Looking up from his notes, many now crumpled paper in the waste basket the wildcat found himself looking at a native fox couple. "Yes, I wrote a very poor song" he admitted. "It's in tha trash with the rest now. No worry, I'll be sticking to what I know from now on."

"You are mistaken" the male fox corrected. "We have come to ask if you wish to publish your song."

"Publish? But... No one liked it."

"Again you are mistaken Mr. Weed. You see, I believe that you mistook tears in ones eyes for dislike. No one applauded for the simple reason we were all too moved emotionally to react until long after you had left the stage. You wrote about one of our Priestess's, if my wife is correct."

"Not exactly" Wildwood corrected. "I will admit that several of your priestess's influenced that song, but it was about no certain one of them."

"Yet it was about all of them. Mr. Weed, may we impose upon you for your time tomorrow? Perhaps the day. We would like to introduce you to some local people."

"I am sorry. Perhaps the afternoon. My last day off was yesterday you see."

"Then after lunch? My card." The fox held out a card that Wildwood accepted, nodded his head goodbye then left with his wife.

Reading the card Wildwood was no more educated than before. It was simply a name and an address on Meeting Island. Carefully placing the card in a slot between his mirror and frame the wildcat began recovering his material from the waste basket. Maybe there was something worthwhile after all. '*Or maybe*' he thought. '*I should grab the next flight out.*' It was a gamble, still it had been an invitation not an order. He would see what came of it.

August 28th, 1936

"I had no idea" Helen told Oharu. They were still in the dream plane, though it had taken Oharu several exhausting attempts to bring Helen here. Looking around her the American watched in delight as images from her thoughts became real. Or as real as any dream could be. "Ruth is now free of my heart" she asked.

"Your heart will never be free of your Ruth" Oharu answered. "Any more than it will be free of your Killian. Now though you may sleep without such pain. Ruth has passed on to her next life. She will be reborn, to again grow up. To find love. Perhaps even a friend such as yourself."

"I just won't be there will I" Helen asked. There was heavy sorrow in her dream voice, but not the crushing emotion of hours ago.

"Not in this life, or the next. Perhaps one soon after. You are fated to be more than friends one day. That is obvious." Oharu reached out, her paw finding an invisible place within the dream plane. Opening it she allowed Helen a glimpse of what lay beyond. A dull rust colored landscape, creatures in balloon like clothing moving slowly around, behind them odd domed structures in some sort of metal. Then she closed that window, for the opening of it even for such a short time had taxed the mouse heavily.

"That was Mars. I'm certain of it" Helen whispered.

"I do not know. Was only a possibility." Oharu admitted. "I know almost nothing of Science. Now we must awaken, for my own energy is now exhausted."

"Thank you. For that. Will I remember" Helen asked.

"You will in your dreams only" the mouse admitted. Then Oharu allowed herself to slip away from the dream plain, to wake slowly into the world of mortals. Such travels cost her always but opening a true future was folly. For the doing so could make that possible future too real to the viewer, not simply a possibility. It also drained her almost completely. She managed to turn her head enough to watch as Helen woke.

Unlike the mouse the Afghan woke full of energy. There was a lightness about her that had not been there when she had first spoken to the priestess. As she struggled to stand Helen noticed Oharu. "You are exhausted" she said.

"Very tired" Oharu agreed. "Is very late."

"Then I will carry you to your bed before I leave. It is the very least I can do, after you lanced that pain for me." Bending her knees Helen slipped her arms under the mouse's body, lifting with her legs she almost staggered. "My, you are the hefty one" she whispered into the mouse's ear.

"Hefty?" Oharu asked. It was a word she had never heard before.

"It means heavy, in a polite manner" the American explained.

"Oh" was all Oharu could manage before she fell asleep in Helen's arms.

Chapter Forty-Three

Tuesday, September 1st, 1936

On Cranium Island Professor Jural Jenkins watched from a secured observation room as his daughter Sarah opened the first of five small wooden boxes. They had arrived only this afternoon via courier, an old native man who's mind was less than fully there. That fact alone made him one of the few fully trusted natives of Cranium Island. Having been shipped from Weliweli Kamalli, a place far South of the equator they were his daughters newest idea. An idea he found oddly frightening. For Sarah Jenkins had officially withdrawn from the islands main competition, and that could be very bad news.

No more would she attempt to destroy the world. No, her investigations had gone into what, or who had destroyed Biff Armstrong's entity. Through that creatures destruction three years of her own lifes efforts had been lost. For the physic feedback had somehow wiped out her colony of creatures and had driven her to an even colder madness. One that even he found disturbing. Her target now was to remove all life from the Island group known as Spontoon. This he was absolutely certain his daughter could do, and in the doing so would bring the wrath of every nation on Earth down upon them long before they were ready to fully defend themselves.

Turning to the exotic female meerkat standing next to him he pointed down. Down to where his daughter was carefully examining strange blue-green cocoons. "You eat madness. Can you not stop her" he demanded. His temporary companion, Sarah's servant Titto simply stood watching, her golden eyes devoid of any emotion. "Titto" Jural continued. "I have no idea how much you understand of what you hear, so I will be brief. If my daughter succeeds at her plan, and I will personally make no attempt to stop her, every living thing on those islands with blood will be dead within a year. That will awaken this world to what a danger we really are too them. They will destroy us before we are ready to defend ourselves. Titto, I am begging you. Stop my daughter. Any way you are able I will allow though I beg you, do not kill her. But please, stop her. Stop her before the Council destroys her in self defense. Please. She is all that I have left."

Titto though made no sound. Other than breathing she made no move. Disgusted the mink left her alone as he returned to his own laboratory. Destroying the entire planet was one thing. There would be no chance to retaliate should one of them manage such. But to completely take out a single nation of tens of thousands with one single attack would be an alarm none could ignore. His only other hope was to find a way to win the competition before his daughters breeding plans came to fruition. That meant his Orcerlator, yet there were no specimens to test his latest adjustment upon.

Alone now Titto watched as the younger mink worked. Watched in silence as Sarah carefully set each cocoon into its own glass cage. There were thirty glass cages against the wall. Each one would hold a single cocoon. With luck half had survived the trip and would become what Americans called butterflies. Butterflies, completely innocent. Completely harmless. But these insects, like their lesser cousins the mosquito required blood for their eggs to develop. Sarah had explained it completely this morning. A single Weliweli Kamalli butterfly required no more blood than that released by a small finger cut. Many times more than a mosquito of course, but nothing dangerous to even a just born child. It was the way they fed though that was deadly. Like the mosquito swarms of Northern Canada's tundra, these beautiful shimmering blue green creatures swarmed in the hundreds of thousands. Feeding only at night a few hundred could kill a sleeping full grown fur by draining every drop of blood from their bodies within minutes. Hundreds of thousands would wipe out a small island in weeks. Perhaps days depending upon weather conditions. Spontoon would take perhaps a month. Six weeks at the most. Still silently she watched, within her mind weighing the fathers words against the daughters desires, against her own desires. How that balance would turn was anyones guess.

Anything he had said.

A few hours later and many miles away a half dozen longboats slid onto Cranium Islands Eastern shoreline. Moving quickly a dozen heavily armed Imperial Cipangu Marines fanned out, marking a beachhead for the unloading of supplies and setting up of a base camp. At least in Cipangu this little islands reputation was not only known, but taken seriously. For among those who followed were two Mikos, their red over white clothing standing out against the muted colors of the party. Immediately upon stepping foot on the land both began to chant. Soon even the hardened marines felt a weight lift from them. Their alert eased slightly as a constant sense of dread that had come upon them when setting foot on these shores lifted. Still even the bravest would not step past a line marked out by those two. Looking up towards the tallest craters they all noted the oddly melted edge and silently agreed. If any of them survived, it would only be due to these Miko's efforts.

Meanwhile a camp was being built halfway up the shore. Midway from the high tide mark and first green leaf of jungle it rose in a carefully designed plan. Professor Yajyo Iko had spent many hours aboard the freighter waiting just off shore working with both his military advisor and the two Mikos. This camp was being built at the best location they could find on the Eastern shoreline. No fool, Professor Yajyo had already investigated many ancient sites in his long lifetime. When that tiny package had arrived with its craved gems he had known instantly what they had to be. Knowing that, he also knew that he would use any means to obtain all he could find. His greed for a lost youth would be the end of many of his expeditions lives. This, even had he know in advance, even had he known in advance who would not return to that waiting ship and why would not have mattered to him one iota.

Wednesday, September 2nd, 1936

Annette Riverstone had just returned from her lunch to be informed that her patient in room two was 'special.' She was quite surprised by who waited in her examination room. Ancient, the native female panther was a completely unexpected visitor. "Your Hakuvie right" the otter asked.

"Huakava" the other corrected with that calm tone of one often used to such errors. "High Priestess of these islands. To all who walk my path. I have come to speak with you for two reasons." She leaned against the ornately carved and painted staff she held. "None medical I think."

"I see." Annette indicated the waiting bed, which her visitor ignored. "I have not many days left upon this land" Huakava explained. "Do not ask, for my illness is one of age. Your medicine cannot help me." She grinned slightly. "Unless you could give me my youth back. For which I would be greatly indebted to you for the doing of."

"No can do" Annette admitted. She laid her clipboard on the waiting table. "You wished to see me. Why?"

"It is about my daughter, she who is well known to you. Knowing her desire to have children I have questions. Is it true that Oharu cannot conceive, and why."

"It is true" Annette admitted. "I examined her in Hawaii. She is badly scarred, probably by that cargo hook she spoke about. Her uterine opening has been closed completely by scar tissue. Being as there is no access for sperm to reach her womb it is impossible for her eggs to be fertilized."

Huakava cringed at the image those words gave her, and the injury that had to have occurred to create it. "I understand. Then why is it her moons have not killed her, having no escape."

"You do not know?" Annette asked.

"I am High Priestess yes" the grey furred woman admitted. "I must know all about my daughters. Yet Oharu is too new. I have had so little time. No, I know little about her body, not enough about her soul."

"Then I better explain. I'll try to be simple, as you would be explaining your religion to me. Oharu is Eizawa clan. That means nothing to you and honestly little to me other than this. The Eizawa clan are a line from ancient times. I think that they reach back unbroken to the time before we gained intelligence. A straight line Huakava, not the branching you and I have in our lines. This means at least biologically they have retained many traits. One of these is that Oharu does not have moons. She has seasons. Spring and Fall to be exact."

"Seasons" Huakava repeated. "It does explain much about my daughter that was puzzling. Explain please, how this saves her from death."

"Basically Huakava" she explained. "Each month our bodies create a nursery hoping for a child. If that child does not come we expel that unused material. This is our period, what you call moon. In Oharu's case her body reabsorbs that material. Since she expels nothing, the fact that her entrance is sealed by scar tissue hasn't any danger to her. Unless she contracts an infection of course. Still her lifestyle and the fact that she is sealed make that possibility so remote that I would not even consider it."

"Is it possible to open her way again?"

"Clear the scar tissue, make it possible for her to conceive? Yes, but she could never bear a child normally. Her damage is simply too great. She would die in childbirth, her pup with her" Annette explained. "Your next question. No, there is no Doctor on Spontoon skilled enough for such surgery, and even if there was the chance of infection in this kind of climate is so great no one would even consider it. Until we discover ways to kill infections the like that would instantly attack such a place I advise you, and her not to think about it."

"You still love her" Huakava decided. It was not a question the Otter noticed.

"Of course I do. I always will. Huakava, she is the first person other than my family to show me herself. Her true self. She was the second non-darkfur to actually accept me absolutely fully for what I am. She is also the first person to push me away because it was best for me, not her. Yes I still love her. I will always love her, but I am moving on now. I'm looking for someone new."

"As you should" the ancient High Priestess agreed. "I have watched the fires. There is one for you, another for her. She cannot see this, her kind cannot truly see their own true future. Or themselves at all." Huakava pulled herself more erect. "By her kind I mean her bloodline, not her race. Perhaps this is a curse of her line, or her training. I know not. Now she is Spontoon, she is what Spontoon begged for. There is then no medical hope for her without this operation."

"None. Even then she would have to have a Cesarean to deliver her child. Such deliveries are always extremely dangerous for the mother, what with infection so prevalent and our inability to destroy such once it has taken hold. I know her feelings Huakava. I know that she will accept a male so she would mother a child, or several. I lay and listened as she spoke of the family she had wanted, had dreamed many years of and now cannot have. Don't you think I would have given her that had I been able? I'm truly sorry, but our medicines are just not up to the job yet. There are new drugs, sulfas and such, but we don't have them and even if we did they are so expensive. Maybe three or four years, ten at the worst." She sighed in defeat, looking at her paws a moment. Unsurprised to find herself holding her own tail. It was a habit she had picked up from the mouse. "More importantly the nearest doctor I would agree to even let try on myself, much less Oharu is currently practicing in New Amsterdam. It would take a true miracle."

"So then she will wait" Huakava decided. "I will ask the Gods to help, if they will. She is yet young enough. You have answered more questions than I knew I had. My thanks. Now I must take leave for I still have much to do before my last breath." Walking to the door Huakava left quietly. It was several

minutes before Annette realized that the door had opened with no aid from anyone.

As Huakava made for her waiting boat she studied the words given her. A straight line. Oharu could reach directly back to the purest forms. Then it was no wonder her abilities were so great. As she stepped aboard her water taxi she looked towards Main Island, towards the place her newest daughter hid. Hid from the doe she loved more than life. *'Had you been Spontoon born'* the High Priestess thought, *'You would be High Priestess now, for I would have stepped aside freely.'* That though she knew could never be. For the mouse had already refused her offer. Not once, but three times. Another would take the staff from her, though in truth the only other Huakava thought fully worthy was still much too young to even begin training. She had chosen, thus it would be.

Several miles away on Main Island Oharu went about her duties as normal. Unaware of the conversation on Casino Island for her it was just another day. She had returned just before noon with her students from refreshing the shrines that were hers. Her students had preformed without error, delighting her heart. For she well remembered how they had been when she first met them. With Oharu her weight was now balanced. Barely, but it was balanced. It would not remain so for much longer.

Friday, September 4th, 1936

In New York Atsuko brought Lady Tsukiyama a small fan, standing behind and to one side as her employer opened the device, fanning herself lightly. "It is only the Humidity dear Atsuko" the mouse explained. "'Nothing more. I am well over my illness. You have nothing to fear."

"Yes My Lady" the rabbit agreed, though she herself had doubts. For nine long days she had cared for Lady Tsukiyama as she lay in the bunk given her. Her fur painted against her flesh as fire burned within her body. It had taken all the ships Doctor and Atsuko could do to save the older mouse. Tests had proven it was Yellow Fever that had struck the Emperors servant low. Probably a single mosquito bite, one hardly noticed at the time. Atsuko had studied all the information available to her. Though her mistress's illness was a sever case, it had not been quite so sever as to kill her. Even now though Atsuko made certain to always be near, in case her employers body failed her. She had been warned that it might take many months for her Lady to fully recover. Perhaps years. But she would recover though her health would always remain somewhat frail. This information the rabbit kept from her employer. For now.

"We will disembark within the hour Atsuko. Everything is ready?"

"Yes Lady Tsukiyama. All you have brought with you has already been sent ashore. Our travel cases will be waiting us at the hotel, all else will be shipped directly to Wash-ton to await our arrival."

"Wash-ing-ton" the mouse corrected gently. "A strange idea, to name a capital after ones first ruler. Yet the Americans are a strange breed. They have yet to accept that they are of one nation for example. Very well, lead me as the crippled child to my transportation." She laughed at her servants expression. "Though I do not like being so treated, I know that I must accept it. Now we begin to earn the yen we are paid."

Turning back into the ship Lady Tsukiyama prepared herself for the rituals of departure. As she had informed her servant, it was the humidity that was giving her problems. She had certainly not yet recovered fully from her ordeal, while ahead of her were years of difficult duties. Many that would for now be laid upon the rabbits shoulders to bear. Destroying oneself to appear what one was no longer simply was not permissible. That was the style of fools. Not of those in her position.

It was late evening on Casino Island when Maria finished her latest article for the Daily Ellie. Just two pages long it would be reduced to a single column in the political pages. Lately the bovine had noted that her articles were not being edited, but published in their entirety. That told her a lot of things, most

importantly that she had become a professional reporter. Oh not a paid one, that would take even more effort. She leaned back in her chair, ignoring the warning creaks as her bulk placed stress upon the locally made furniture. It hadn't failed yet, so why worry?

"Done?" the American doe Molly asked from her bed. She was again reading one of those alluring True Crimes magazines, a well used pencil held in her teeth. They had shared the small resort cabin, knowing that their money would go the further by doing so. Having a roommate who knew, and calmly shared her knowledge of real crime had opened the bovines eyes. Many things she had taken for granted at home now shown for what they really were. Graft, extortion, kidnaping and other much less savory things. It was something she would attend too when she returned home. Exposing those who preyed upon others like vultures upon dying sheep.

"Done" she answered, taking the pages from her typewriter. An original for the Ellie, a carbon for her exulted Uncle and one for her own records. Originally there had been a fourth, a copy for her instructors. Then at the end of their second year Maria had been quietly informed that a copy was no longer needed to be turned in. She didn't bother to waste time wondering why, her instructors did nothing without reason.

Storing her tiny portable typewriter she placed her papers in the drawer set aside for them, stood, grabbed her robe and headed for the resorts shared shower. Later in the dark of night after her leaving the lit shower as always Maria had difficulty seeing her way, until a glow of light came from their cabins open doorway. Walking in she found Molly reading by the light of a cigarette lighter. Noticing Maria enter the doe set aside her magazine, closing the lighter. Far be it for Molly to ever admit she was helping anyone without being paid Maria thought. Sleep came easily for both Songmark soon to be third years.

September 5th, 1936

Oharu woke to a by now well known feeling. '*Not already*' she thought, pushing away the thin blanket that was all she owned for her bed. '*It is too early, I have yet three weeks.*' Standing she took a deep breath. Though it helped that the mouse knew her biological clock was now running, she was also well aware that her clock was early. It must be the stress she decided. That could be the only reason. She was fully aware that by sunset her body would have awakened to its season. There would be no choice for her. She would have to withdraw earlier than she had planned, to bear out her hungers alone. Still there was time. She picked up her single towel and brush, making her way to the waterfall at the Glens deepest point.

"Yes" she told the stone after bowing to it. "My season comes this time early." She listened, not glancing towards the small longhouse now above her. "No. To take ones student. Even if willingly. Is to shatter all trust forever. I shall withdraw for a time is all."

She listened again to that voice within her head. "Molly" she admitted. "Would be my choice. It cannot happen. Nor will I oppress a Huntress, for I cannot pay her and she needs money to survive. It will be a difficult time, not a dangerous one. In years to come I will cool, my seasons will not be as strong. Even should I find a mate."

Bowing again the mouse continued downwards, to where icy water tumbled from stone blocks. In one place forming a pool perhaps four of her size could lay within the waters, to eventually vanish into cracks the ending of she had no idea. A cold bath would be helpful, it would shock her body, delaying that which now grew within her. Not for the first time Oharu wondered which was more trouble. Monthly flows or a twice yearly hunger she could no longer ignore now that her body fully understood what they were.

After sunrise song Oharu turned to her students. "It is my time" she explained. "I must withdraw. I place within your paws all that must be done. You are my students. You are well trained. My trust is with you all."

"Which of us is to lead" the boy Tehepoa asked softly.

"I will be gone no more than two weeks. I trust by then you will have decided" the mouse answered. "Now I must go, for it is a long journey to where I must be by sunset song." She stood, walking to her hut where a small bag of supplies waited her. As her students watched in silence Oharu Wei made her way out of Great Stone Glen.

"Which is harder" Tehepoa asked his partners after their teacher was lost to sight. "Moons or seasons."

"Being male your would have to ask my love" Ote'he answered. "Moons may be bothersome, but to near lose ones mind for a week twice a year, two without a partner is worse. To only be able to conceive a child twice a year is madness. She will protect herself, but will be nearly mad with need for a time. Tehepoa my love. Seasons are the curse I am happy my friend and I do not share."

Nuimba stood, looking another way. "There is one who may help her" she reminded her companions. "She has shown interest when Oharu was not looking towards her. I have seen this, when our teacher would be drawing them. Two weeks is too great a strain to force upon our teacher. Not when we know of an option. It would be below all of us to allow her such pain when we have within our grasp a cure."

"Take all my coin" Tehepoa decided, reaching for the small bag at his side. "Ote'he and I will attend the shrines until your return." Abruptly he looked towards the great stone, a frown upon his lips. "True, we go against the spirit of our teachers desires" he answered. "But never her direct orders." So quickly had the question come and been answered that Tehepoa was already walking away before he realized that the stone's spirit had spoken to him.

Nuimba nearly ran up the stone stairs while her brother and Ote'he began collecting what they needed. There was only one place her teacher had expressed as much love for as she did Great Stone Glen, and that place only recently. It was a two hour walk from the Glen, the final twenty minutes along a usually dry creek bed. She knew that Oharu had found it because she needed it. It was not a place even most guides were aware existed and she knew the way though her teacher was unaware that she did. Still as she ran it was not after her teacher, but down to the coast and a certain already awaiting water taxi.

Several hours later Oharu was putting the last touches on her shelter when a stone tumbled behind her. Turning she watched as a rabbit well known to her approached. "This place is not safe for you" she announced. "Not while I here, at this time."

Belle Lapinssen didn't even pause as she made her way to the half cavern Oharu stood within. "I know" Belle agreed, shifting off the heavy backpack she had carried three quarters of the way to Main Islands third highest point. "You have a need. Songmark can help you. We owe you debts we can never fully pay. I volunteered, even though none of our instructors are aware yet. Mouse, we know what you've done just for us. Certainly we paid good shells for the work, but you really put everything into it." She sat the backpack in a shaded area, covered from any possible rain. "Nice place you found. Is it sacred" she asked, easily changing the subject.

"Is not sacred" Oharu whispered, backing up several steps. There was she knew, no other way out except past Belle. Unless one was an expert climber, which Oharu was not. "Is from that time, cavern that collapse. Belle. Do you understand danger be with me now. Truly?"

"Nuimba made your need fully clear. Nikki backed her up with enough detail that even Prudence blushed, and that takes a ton. At least the last movie was finished, our part that is. There's another starting this afternoon but they only want Prudence. Its some kind of after civil war piece. Not even a full movie, but they grabbed Prudence not me. Would you believe it?"

Oharu turned away from the Songmark student. "Go back" she ordered. "Tend to friends. I will not be cause you waste vacation."

"I thought we were friends" Belle countered.

Turning back to face the rabbit Oharu gritted her teeth for a moment. "We are friends. I wish we to remain friends. I wish we remain friends long long time. If you stay then friends no more. You will no longer like me. You will come to hate me. I do not wish a dead friendship."

Stepping forward the larger rabbit enfolded Oharu into her arms, pulling her against her body. "How's about you let me decided that sweetheart?" Her answer was an uncontrolled sob from the mouse, followed by Oharu's arms encircling her.

Tuesday, September 8th, 1936

"Such a nasty cut Major" Annette Riverstone observed as she carefully clipped fur from around the bulldogs wound. "Slipped shaving again?"

"Sharpening my pencil" Major Thomas Hawkins corrected. "It is all those carbon copies you understand. You have to bear down hard. It demands a sharp pencil."

"I see" the otter agreed. "Which explains that Chinese wolf Doctor Kiwi is sewing back up. A disagreement in format style?"

Hawkins snorted in amusement. "You could say that."

"Then I shall finish here so you may return to your typewriter."

"Your use of language has improved" the bulldog noted. "Studying?"

"Nah. Ah dinna nah wanaah see tah stuped when ah sewd yew up" Annette answered. She picked up a probe. "Sure you don't want a painkiller? This will hurt, and ah mean seriously toe curling eyeball twisting hurt."

"Go ahead." Hawkins took a deep breath, holding it.

"Men" Doctor Riverstone sighed. "Too much testosterone, not enough estrogen. For the record. I'm having to learn how to speak correctly because I'm tired of the radio operators asking me to repeat myself. Now lets look at what's in here." She opened the wound with two fingers, sliding her probe inside the torn flesh as gently as she could. For almost a minute there was silence, then Hawkins whimpered.

"Pain medication" Annette asked again.

Releasing his breath Hawkins took four fast breaths, then a deeper one. This he held, indicating with his good paw that she continue.

"Huh, you'd think he'd given birth" she muttered as she continued her search. Suddenly she grinned as her probe struck something that shouldn't be there. Setting her probe aside she picked up a set of forceps. "Tip of the blades still in the bone Major. Or is that silver pencil lead? Now this WILL hurt" she warned. Reaching into the wound she clamped down on a ragged bit of metal, prying ever so gently. Finally the bit of blade came out of the bone. "Good, now to..."

A thump as Hawkins unconscious body hit the examination table told her the full story. Looking down at the handsome Englishman Annette smiled. "Warned you'd it'd hurt" she whispered. A bright ring of metal hitting metal followed as she placed forceps and broken knife tip into a metal bowl. Setting aside her tool she turned to a tray holding what appeared to be a tortures toolkit. "And now we clean you up then put you back together my handsome Major."

Hawkins woke from his faint to find Doctor Richardson sewing his arm up. "Nice nap?" she asked, tugging at a stitch.

"Delightful" the bulldog answered. "Quite refreshing."

"Liar" Annette shot back. "I would'ah been screaming to die long before you passed out. So what is it, afraid of pain medication making you vulnerable, or showing off to the beautiful doctor."

"Former" Hawkins admitted. "Though I wish I could claim the latter. How bad is the damage?"

"For a bone deep wound not nearly as bad as it could be. You'll lose a little feeling around the wound, but little muscle was actually cut and no really important nerves. No my dear Major, your not going to have to give up sneaking around for your country."

"So how is she?"

Annette finished the last stitch, setting aside her needle before answering. "If you mean Oharu. We're history dear Major. No its nothin you did. She just went a different way. And you?"

"Alone again."

"Such a pair. I thought you were married."

"I was. She died."

Annette bit her upper lip. "Sorry" she apologized in a little voice. "Must hurt."

"Did, does, did the first time." He watched carefully as Annette spread a cream over his wound. "Antiseptic?"

"Cyanide, really good for killing ugly bugs."

"So I'm ugly" he asked. "How disappointing. Mother seemed to think I was handsome."

"Mothers believe all their children are beautiful" the otter retorted. She started wrapping the wound with sterile gauze. "So we won't drown them at birth."

"Ah, then you are a mother?" Hawkins asked.

"No, but I hope to be. There" she patted the bandage lightly. "Not as good as new and don't get it wet. Have it checked daily, stitches can come out in fourteen days. No heavy lifting and no more paperwork for at least a week. I'd prefer two. If you notice any redness, puffiness or deep pain get to a doctor. If you see puss, get to one yesterday. You'll have a scar but I think your fur will cover it pretty well. "

"Not like Oharu's back" the bulldog admitted.

"No." Annette hesitated. "No" she repeated softer. "You can arrange payment at the front, let me finish this form with your treatment. Good luck Major."

Hawkins stood, flexed his arm careful and nodded to himself as if agreeing to something. "May I ask you out to dinner Doctor?"

"Dinner? Why" she asked. "You have another spent cartridge?"

Hawkins grinned sheepishly. "Point taken Doctor. No, I'd just like to ask you out to dinner. If I may. I would very much like to talk about that red and purple aircraft you now own, most importantly its new profession. I would like your opinion on how the idea is working out. And if you think it would be worth implementing elsewhere."

Annette put her tools into a waiting tray to be autoclaved before answering. "I get off at six. Where would you like to meet?"

"There is a very good restaurant about three blocks from this hospital. The Silver Tear I believe it is called. Around eight? Will that be acceptable?"

"Silver Tears and yes. I will see you there at eight. But stand me up Major and I will be sorely unhappy with you."

"I have never stood up a Lady" he retorted.

"I" Annette reminded him. "Am not a Lady Major Hawkins. I am a Doctor." She offered a sheet of paper to Hawkins which he accepted. "Oharu can explain the difference."

"Then I shall add Doctor to that list. At eight then, and thank you."

Annette watched the British bulldog walk down the hall. "He does have a nice ass" she whispered to herself.

"And uh nice... um, room four, a taxi pilot caught his paw in a line" one of the older nurses whispered back from behind her. Blushing heavily Annette went back to work.

Later that night Annette Riverstone walked up to the Silver Tears front door. There waiting for her was an impeccably dressed British bulldog. "Well Major, your ah tad early" she said in greeting.

"I have found that it is never a good idea to upset ones doctor" he replied, offering her his good arm. "They seem to have difficulty locating ones records afterwards. You look quite beautiful Miss Riverstone."

"Thank you. This is the first date I have been on since Hawaii. I can't quite imaging running for my life with Sandy as a date."

"Doecan" the Major whispered. "Bad business that. She deserved a great deal better. Let us drink to her memory tonight."

"You hold no anger to her?"

Hawkins shook his head no. "She was doing a job for her country, whichever country that was. No one really knows but her and her people. The same as Oharu was for hers, as I do for mine. Doctor, she was one of the best. I will only admit that I had wished it was I who captured her. The Americans are barbarians."

"Jane of the Swords?"

"Point to you Doctor. Yes we all have our bad sides. But I did not ask you out to air evil deeds, but to learn about your air ambulance. Shall we allow ourselves to be seated?"

Dinner Annette discovered had been nice, as had been the wine. They were talking over coffee now, the conversation somehow having turning to their own private lives. "She died in an automobile accident" Hawkins explained. "Oh I tell everyone different stories, but the truth is a delivery lorry ran a traffic lamp and pulled in front of her motorcycle. She was always so adventurous. I was told she never felt anything,

but having been hurt myself I know that as a lie.”

“Was it quick” Annette asked.

“Not at all. She lived long enough to tell her rescues her name.”

“Then she did feel pain” the otter admitted. “Probably a lot of it. Doctors, myself included. We kinda feel like those that survive need tah think that their loved ones never felt anything. As like it was turning off a switch. At least Sandy went quickly enough to feel almost nothing.”

Hawkins sipped his coffee, closing the journal he had brought with him. One he had written his notes about the Air Ambulance in. “My second wife. She gave up. Just stopped wanting to live. She lost our first child and just gave up until a simple cold turned into pneumonia and killed her.” He slipped his journal into his jacket. “People like me, we just shouldn’t get married I guess.”

“I’m not one to ask that” Annette admitted. “You should talk to your priest. Now I hate to eat and run but it is near enough to eleven as not tah matter. I have to start for work at eight am.”

“Odd shift” Hawkins observed as he signaled for the waiter. “Ten hours on?”

“Southern Island. Doctor Kiwi wants me to help with an operation at ten. I’m told it’s a full hour trip at that time of morning.”

“Tides against you then. Yes, seventy-three minutes, on average. Unless you are granted the luck of a tiki taxi. Then two thirds that time at worst.”

“Tiki Taxi” Annette repeated. “I’ve never heard of such.”

“They have a brass or bronze tiki on the bow” Hawkins explained. He stood, walking around to pull Annette’s chair out. “Serve the local priestess’s mainly. But if your lucky you can catch one now and then. Something to remember if time is ever important. Even with normal passengers they have ultimate priority.”

“Thank you for the information” Annette said as she stood. “Now I have had a wonderful night, thank you.”

“May I walk with you to your home?”

Annette smiled, reaching up to press one finger against the bulldogs nose. “Not on the second date” she whispered. “And I think that I am quite safe on Meeting Island. I do thank you for the offer though.”

Hawkins blushed, but only very slightly. “I am no cad doctor. I would not expect...”

“ssssshhh” Annette answered, smiling at her date. “Don’t spoil things. I would though like to see you again, if you so desire.”

“I think I would, but I truly would feel better if I at least walked you to within sight of your front door.”

“A gentleman. All right, to the corner. No closer.”

When Annette fell asleep a little later it was not with thoughts of the bulldog in her mind, but of the operation to come.

September 10th, 1936

Lady Tsukiyama lay in her bed looking out the huge windows at the city of New Amsterdam spread out before her. Beside her was a cup of hot green tea that she did not feel like drinking. Her illness had left her weaker than she had expected and now she found herself resting in this old Dutch city just outside of New York. Washington she had been warned, had been built over a swamp. It would be better for her if she recovered completely before trusting her health to such a place. Taking a deep breath of the cold Fall air the mouse closed her eyes, thinking of home. There was snow outside, but the alien voices belied even her dreams. Regrettably surrendering to the truth she opened her eyes again, just in time to see a large military battle dirigible drift into her view.

Battle Dirigible's she thought. A unique idea, they would cause havoc to any attempt of landing upon enemy shores. At least until fixed wing aircraft could be brought to bear. Even then these American craft had no hydrogen in them, instead being filled with non-flammable helium. Thus their armor could be concentrated, not spread out. It would be a nightmare to take one down. Since the Americans released them in squadrons of six it would be an expensive nightmare. No, assaulting American shores would be too costly with what resources her country could field. She would have to send Atsuko to discover exactly how such armor was placed. She hoped she would not have to spend Atsuko's life. Not for such a simple thing at least. Atsuko had become much too important since the mouse had contracted Yellow Fever.

A sound at her doorway turned her thoughts from war to other things. Atsuko stood there in nothing but her nightrobe. "The Doctor" the rabbit explained. "He said you need warmth. I have come to offer my warmth."

Smiling the mouse nodded her acceptance. Other than twice a year when her need was beyond ignoring neither she nor Atsuko followed the path of her sister, and denying herself the offered warmth would be endangering her health. Even her life. As her life belonged to her Emperor such an action was dishonorable. She watched in silence as her servant removed her robe, folding it carefully before sitting it on a table. Making room she allowed the now naked rabbit to join her. Almost instantly warmth entered her body, soon after her muscles began to relax. Yes Atsuko had been correct. This was exactly what she needed. If only the rabbit had been a certain... Pushing that thought away Lady Tsukiyama allowed her servant to press up tightly against her. "What of today's schedule" she asked.

"I have informed all that you are too ill for any visitors. I have instructed the secretary our Embassy sent to take all messages. That as soon as you are healthy enough you will send me out to gather them. That you may attend to each one in the fullness of its need. The Doctor knows what I am doing and agrees that it is the best choice to help you heal quickly."

Feeling her lungs open a little further as Atsuko's body warmth struck them the mouse relaxed. "And you are not afraid of being labeled Yuri" she asked.

"If the lily I must taste in order to serve you my Lady, then the lily I shall enjoy in its fullness as I have before. As I will again. In your seasons I have proven this. You are two weeks not yet to your season. You are no lily, you are simply very ill. It would be dishonorable of myself, your servant, to refuse you the warmth you need. That my body can supply."

"I agree. Atsuko, I do feel better. Perhaps after a nap I will be well enough to eat."

"I do so hope My Lady" the rabbit agreed. "For I have ordered a light supper to be ready for you when I call. Now please my Lady, sleep. Should you die I must follow, and I feel that there is much you need yet of my services before you will spend my life."

"That is true" the mouse whispered. Closing her eyes she inhaled the cinnamon scent her servant had used with her morning brush. A tiny smile came to her lips as she fell asleep, for the scent was one of her

favorites. It would be very late before she awoke. Awoke feeling much better, but knowing she would need many days of her servants warmth before her health returned. It would though give her time to compose her thoughts, time she would use to the best of her abilities.

September 12th, 1936

Nine long days and nights had exhausted both mouse and rabbit, still Oharu's hunger went on. Now though she was asleep, while the American rabbit Belle sat on a nearby stone quietly watching the mouse do nothing more than breath. She had read about those with seasons, had even heard rumors. That they went mindless at the time, were believed to be unable to hold any secrets and were entirely helpless to their own bodies need to mate. Some of this was true she had learned. Though Oharu wasn't mindless, her needs tended to overwhelm her at times. During the day though she seemed capable of functioning, but they had given that up the first day. It was obvious to both that doing so was a heavy strain on the mouse. That she could not hold a secret though, that had been proven a lie.

Belle stretched, feeling bones pop all through her body as she did so. Oharu was not an inventive lover but she was a hungry one. *'This' the rabbit thought, 'Twice a year, and she still has a normal mating drive?'* It left her wondering. She could understand why such a seasonal drive would be eased out of the bloodlines. Such strain was obvious. One was simply unable to defend oneself against an equal foe not crippled by such a drive. But other than that there really wasn't much difference. Oh the mouse certainly couldn't reproduce except seasonally, but other than that there really wasn't any difference between them. Even this one weakness had proven to Mother Nature which path was best. Oharu and her kind were dying out. Slowly yes, but just as certainly as a forest without rain they were vanishing from the planets surface. Within a couple of hundred years Oharu's kind might be gone forever.

But she was cute. Though she was an Honored Mother and Belle knew Oharu's heart belonged to Molly the rabbit could find no fault with her companion. Walking on her paws and knees, not bothering to stand, Belle rejoined her companion. There was still a day, maybe two or three before this need ran its course. She intended to enjoy every second of it.

Outside the small hideaway Ote'He watched Belle's actions only for a few minutes. Unlike her friend such things held no real interest for her. Setting the fruits and water bottle where the Songmark girl would again easily find them she turned back down the rough trail. There were many more duties she had yet today. Soon her teacher would return, then their studies could continue. She was so interested in the wedding ritual, for she and Tehepoa had decided to become one. This meant he would never become a Wild priest, but there were still many other paths open to him. Just as there were to those called who did not become full time Priestess's. Knowing what was ahead would be helpful. It was her friend that bothered Ote'He, for though she joined them each night Ote'He was not certain that it was Tehepoa that truly called to her. A talk with Oharu would be most helpful.

September 13th, 1936

"She needs you not?" a voice asked.

"It is Sunday. She prays" the golden eyed meerkat answered.

"And she is used to you visiting me. I can not return her brother. I have already digested him."

Titto looked over towards where many rotted bones were hidden by a long hallway. A room that had once been a luxurious bedroom she had discovered. Millennia or more ago. It was a hallway only she and the Guardian could traverse, for the Guardian was truly mad, yet would not harm her. Very little could harm her she thought. Almost all of that little was the Guardian himself. "You mean that you will not. I have not come for such. I have come to settle our debt."

"Our debt? Ah, then you have chosen."

"Should I not act Sarah dies. If I act, I play my paw. Yet I must not let her die."

Movement in the shadows indicated the Guardian's presence. "I thought you happy she had gone mad. After what her family and kind have done to your people."

Titto settled on a pile of golden coins, a tiny clatter arising as several slid further down the pile. Before her was a strange board. One who's rules and movements she was by now well educated in. "I will place all your debts upon one last game" she announced.

"Should I win you will be the poorer."

"Should I win you will allow me sufficient of your deep treasures to escape with Sarah and survive well. The knowledge of how to use them, how to cure my Sarah. How to make her mine."

Darkness flowed forward. "For such a wager I need more upon this board" the Guardian demanded.

"That being?"

"You. I would know your taste. I would feed upon you. I would take your soul."

Titto's eyes brightened just a little. "My soul, my body, my life, my existence. We will play by the same rules?"

"You are not afraid of a full war?"

Titto shrugged. "Yes. Yet I am now near deathless thanks to you. If I cannot save my Sarah I would rather not exist. You have always kept your word. You do not cheat. Skill against skill."

"Aye, to cheat would ruin the game, flatten any victory. In all this time you are the best to play me since my own childrens fall. You too keep your word, play honestly. Then it is settled. For the chance to add you to myself I will place upon the table my deepest secrets, the knowledge you will need. The gift of your Sarah's heart. But know this little mortal. I was eating your kind before you gained intelligence. Though I do like you as a friend Titto, I do hunger for you."

"I understand. Does the mad God choose Green or Gold?"

"Gold. You place all upon the board, to you I grant first move."

Standing carefully Titto removed her clothing, tossing it aside. If she lost it would be useless and the Guardian hated having to remove clothing from its food. If she won then better clothing would be awaiting her. Reaching for her first star she moved it carefully upon the battlefield.

Many many hours later a squeak filled the chamber. A squeak from the ancient Guardian as it watched Titto's remaining comet crash into his Royals position. Quickly the boards spells calculated damage, applying its results to his forces in total. Horrified the Guardian watched as his heavy raptors turned away from their attack as the last Sorcerer controlling them died. It had been certain that it had already won the game. Most of Titto's forces were separated, broken into groups that could be easily mopped up later. It could taste her flesh in its jaws, her blood on its tongue, her sweet soul dissolving into its own darkness. Where had that last comet come from. Where?

"It is your set Dark God" Titto announced. She was watching the results, carefully checking them against her own board and the notes she had placed there.

"Set" the Guardian gasped, its jaws closing slowly. "Set. I will have luck reforming before you. How?"

"Should I win I will tell you. Should I lose it will not matter. For you will absorb all my knowledge, as I have duplicated Sarah's education."

Setting its form into what might be called a huff, were one foolish enough to look that closely, the Guardian activated his board. His Heavy raptors were now ripping into his own armored knights, who were beginning to break. Without his heavies to press the attack he could not hope to hold Titto from regrouping. He had no choice but to expend his last reserves eliminating the raging raptors. Looking over to where he had placed his royals he almost gasped in shock. All but his princess were dead. Even the Princess bodyguard had succumbed, protecting her charge from the comets impact. Had he lost his Princess the game would be over now. How much military training, if any had he assigned his Princess he wondered. Ancient slips of paper moved as notes were checked.

"You are going to lose" Titto observed. "Your Princess has no battle training."

"How. No. I yet have time" the Guardian argued.

"Play."

"How long have you know I am a God" the Guardian asked as it shuffled notes.

"My village wise woman once warned me that only a God could make one person love another against their nature. By turning that nature the one affected would never suspect that they were changed. Their love would be true, not false. You have agreed to give Sarah's heart to me. That is against her nature. You have never lied, thus you must be a God."

Looking across the board at his opponent the Guardian chuckled. "You are the first since your species first looked into the night sky and wondered to make that connection. Your soul will be the sweetest I have tasted in many millions of years."

"Your set."

Later that evening, or was it morning, Sarah looked up from her workbench when Titto returned. "Your clothing" she observed, turning back to her ledger. "I like it." She ignored her servant as the meerkat walked up to her.

"I have news" Titto announced.

"News?" Sarah turned to ask more when she felt the meerkats lips upon her own. Immediately it was as if the universe itself had twisted. For bare moments she tried to fight the feelings, then her entire world crumbled about her. Slowly she fell into the arms of her servant, who then carefully laid her upon the floor. Stepping away from the unconscious mink Titto opened her left paw. From a finger she removed one of a pair of rings, a pair exactly like those worn by two Songmark students.

"I am sorry my love. To save you there is no other way. I had hoped. Hoped to earn your love. That would never happen so I played a God for you. I played, and won." Slipping the ring onto Sarah's finger Titto gently touched her mistress's face. "When you wake we must be gone to Hawaii. We must be gone long before the sun sets. For my curse will vanish forever with the suns first touch as will your madness. I will no longer be able to protect you from this land my dearest love. Now I go to pack what you must have."

Sarah would have been surprised at her servants command of English, for Titto had always spoken like the stereotypical island girl. That she had copied some of Sarah's education into herself each time she had taken her madness away would have both delighted, and frightened the American scientist. Now all

such things she would take in stride, for by the time she woke the mink would be in complete love with her servant. For though it is true that only a God may make one love another against their nature, it is not true that all Gods are sane.

It would be four days before her father realized that his daughter and her servant had vanished. That in doing so Titto had released the strange butterflies into his arboreum. Only when plants began to suffer from a strange caterpillar invasion would he realize the damage. By then though it would be too late. For Sarah had finally her vengeance on those plants who had eaten her mother. Dying plants that within weeks were festooned by thousands of cocoons. Though he would eventually destroy the last of them, his great flesh eating monsters would be by then nothing but a memory. Still they had been but a dead end, kept only because he occasionally needed them.

Of his daughter and her once deadly servant he would never again find a trace.

September 14th, 1936

"I owe great debt" Oharu told Belle as the two finished cleaning up their site. It could not be called a camping site, as very little camping had occurred, not much more sleeping. Belle herself, for all her Songmark training looked like she had been run through a wringer, yet her face held a smile of one greatly pleased with oneself.

"Is was my pleasure" the rabbit answered. "More than expected Honored Mother. But next time I rent a room with a real bed. Stones are painful, even through the matting you made. I will need a weeks sleep to recover my strength." She leaned over, kissing Oharu. "There is but one word for your heart Oharu. Lieben" she whispered. "And should you ever give up on Molly, try to remember to give me a chance. Who knows, we might even make a pair." Shouldering her knapsack she reached out to run two fingers along the mouses jawline. "Were you not already besotted with Molly I would ask to be that part of your life. You owe me nothing, you have given me these days a great gift. One you may be certain I shall never forget."

She looked at the bracelet of head fur that Oharu had braided and placed upon her wrist. Not a tailfast, simply a symbol of friendship. If only it had her own fur within it the rabbit thought, but as long as Molly held that heart it was impossible. She had heard the story of that Doctor Riverstone's failure, it was a warning she would remember. At least until Molly fouled up and gave away this mouse. Then she would swoop in. Oh yes, she would not give this mouse a chance to find another. Such prizes as Oharu were rare, and came only once in each life. Coming to her senses Belle gave Oharu one last soul searing kiss. "Remember me" she whispered to the still confused mouse. Adjusting her backpack the rabbit walked away, leaving Oharu to understand the meaning of her words without comment.

September 17th, 1936

For her entire first break from Songmark Tatiana Bryzov had quietly endured the snobbish tabby Miss Millicent. It had unfortunately gotten much worse in the last three days though. Especially when her sponsor, Major Thomas William Hawkins, had left on emergency transportation to England. His wife's health, always fragile since touched as a child by the 1918 pandemic, had finally turned for the worse. Privately Tatiana had wished both her sponsor and his wife good fortune, though it was not to be she would eventually discover. When making reports to her controller she had been careful to show nothing but disdain for both. Had the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs not trained her so well she might have had troubles keeping her several faces separate. By now though she had formed a plan to deal with the snobbish, self centered tabby. A complex plan yes, one that required subverting the stuck up Miss Millicent. Yet a carefully crafted plan. One that would either get her into Amelia's good graces forever, or earn her hatred forever. It was truly a dangerous plan. Though she had studied the feline carefully there were always unknown quantities that affected any plan. Millicent for example could be a Master Spy, her

act only that, an excellent act. In that case one of them would be very dead. Very soon.

She needed a friend the sable knew. Amelia was her choice, and to gain that friendship she needed to prove herself worthy. Doing so would be difficult, but with Millicent she just might have the key to her problem. Maybe. Miss Millicent though was another matter. The tabby, her long dark hair always set just so was nothing more than a minor aide. Yet she had obviously been placed as a buffer between Tatiana and any other embassy personal. Tatiana looked at the difficulty as a minor challenge, as Millicent had only once, and quite by accident managed to deflect her secret investigation. It was the constant badgering that was on Tatiana's nerves. Finally she had reached her limit. It was time to act or give up. And as all knew, Songmark girls never gave up. It was near leaving time on a Friday when Millicent, carrying her ever-present secrets bag stuck her muzzle into the cubbyhole that had been given to Tatiana.

"We are now preparing to invade Moscow" the Tabby announced, that sickly sweet smile on her face. "You should warn your people, so that they may gather white flag material."

With a speed that the tabby could never of expected Tatiana stood, leaned over her tiny desk, reached out with one paw to grab the tabby's blouse while patting the thin door closed with her other paw. It was after all almost a closet the Russian had been given to do her translation work in. Yanking the surprised and unresisting tabby in Tatiana was pleased to hear her door snick shut behind Millicent. Still stunned, and now more than a touch frightened Millicent started to scream, only to see Tatiana raise one finger to her lips even as she released the tabby's clothing. "We will talk" the Russian announced. "Now." Her voice, though low, had absolutely no question in it as to wither Millicent had a choice in the matter or not.

"I will have you shot. Hawkins or no Hawkins" Millicent threatened.

In answer Tatiana opened her blouse, pointing to a white patch of fur on her left side just below her breast. "Already been shot English toy girl. Burns" she answered. "Millicent" she began as she closed her blouse again. "Pravda. There are many things you do not know. Dah, is Pravda I work here only because of Major Hawkins. Dah, is Pravda he is gone for some time. Dah is Pravda I much wish his wife a full, complete recovery. Dah is Pravda I seriously want to rip your throat open with my teeth. These things are Pravda. Millicent, we must work together. I would speak to you in public place after work. Discuss difficulties."

"Why should I desire to spend a moment with such a low born creature as yourself" the tabby responded.

Tatiana studied the English snob before her. Had there been a slight difference in her voice? Why? "Because Millicent. We do not speak I sell you to Kuo Han. Tonight. Now we will have a little meeting at Parrys. We will share a bottle of vodka. We will in most polite fashion come to agreement, even if it take several bottles of vodka. Because little Millicent, for all airs you put on in truth you are less than nothing here. You are a clerk. A child. A girl who is endured only because her father is Ambassador to Piccupacac."

"That.. That isn't the truth" Millicent denied. "I am much liked. I have a party to attend tonight. At the Swedish Consulate. I am expected."

"Expected?" Tatiana smirked. "Yes. You are expected, is Pravda. Invited? When was last time any invitation comes to your paws? Pravda girl. When?"

Millicent glared, not wilting one bit. "Two months after my arrival. When they knew I would come anyway they stopped sending invitations. A saving of paper."

"Parrys. Seven PM, on the deck. Or Kuo Han by morning. Good-bye." Having said that Tatiana returned to her translation, a report by a White Russian fishing captain of some strange creature he had pulled from the sea. She ignored the slam of her door as Millicent left.

Parrys was not the best restaurant on Casino Island, nor was it the worst. That distinction though was not its claim to fame. Its claim to fame was a very bribable Head Waiter. An ancient Russian aristocrat who's neck was very much wanted by both white and red Russians. One simply did not play double agent as badly as he had and not make more than a few enemies. Yet he was trustworthy, for once bribed he stayed bribed and he had the worst memory of anyone Tatiana had ever met. It had been his failing of course. Parry's itself was a small eating establishment that catered to madmen flyers and adventurous tourists. Its decor was broken aircraft parts, signed photographs of pilots (many now dead) and the occasional visiting Huntress. Her profession though was plied in a quite subdued way here. Millicent arrived promptly at seven as ordered. She had, the Russian noticed, at least investigated where she would be spending several hours. Her dress was fashionable yet subdued.

Sitting without a word Millicent placed her purse on the table, a clear sign she did not expect to remain long. "You have eaten?" Tatiana asked sociably.

"I will eat at the Swedish party later" Millicent answered, her voice strained. She was clearly upset about this meeting, yet she had kept it. "Speak your piece then let me leave. I must have time to change before the party."

"Very well." Gesturing with her right paw Tatiana ordered a bottle of Vodka from the Head Waiter, with two glasses. Millicent was a social woman. Her understanding of things Tatiana took for granted was either shaded by social disdain, or completely absent. "We will share one bottle" the Russian explained. "We will talk. We will come to an agreement. Pravda you do so irritate me Millicent." *'You are also an idiot to drink on an empty stomach'* the ermine thought, knowing full well she herself had eaten a heavy meal less than an hour ago.

"Thank you. It is such an easy task." Millicent waited in silence as the waiter carefully placed a small tray holding two clean glasses and an unopened bottle of vodka between them. She retained her silence after he left, watching with little interest while Tatiana opened that same bottle. "You Songmark girls are all the same. Soiled laundry" she continued while her companion carefully filled both glasses to the half-way mark, then placed one in front of her.

"Drink, then talk" Tatiana ordered as she picked up her glass, swallowing half its contents a moment later. She was taking a calculated risk. Her People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs training had exposed her to the active ingredients of Nootnops Blue until she understood fully its effects upon her body. This bottle held an amount equal to ten bottles of Nootnops Blue. Not dangerous, but it would have an effect even through that training. She was ready to adjust her actions for that.

Picking up her own glass Millicent sipped, made a face (though in truth it was an expensive brand) then swallowed half her own glass. "So talk. I notice we are away from everyone else. The better to threaten me?"

"Nyet. No threats Millicent. Kuo Han was threat. Threat Pravda never happen. Oharu burn my soul I sell anyone to them. Krupmark, maybe she will only singe me some."

"Oharu. That chip little pagan..." Millicent's voice faded at the look Tatiana gave her.

"Oharu is my adopted mother. Watch what you say, or I treat you like you treat someone who bad talks your mother. Only worse."

"She's... But she isn't old enough."

"Adopted" Tatiana reminded her companion. "To me, an orphan thank to Iosif Starling, that is very important to me. Millicent. You think I am enemy agent dah?"

"I know that you are. I've read all the reports on you and those other Songmark girls."

"Ah, I did not know you have Very Secret clearance" Tatiana observed. "Thought only Secret."

"If your going to leave a folder out, someone is going to read it" the tabby admitted. "You are an agent of Iosif Starling."

"Was. When came here" Tatiana admitted, lifting her glass again. "Met Amelia. Met Helen. Met Oharu. Now I am agent of Amelia Bourne-Phipps. English spy."

"Amelia.. English?" Millicent laughed, absently following her hostess's lead and finishing off her own glass. "She works for Spontoon. Dear Lady Amelia is a cheap criminal traitor."

Tatiana kept her mouth shut, pouring more vodka. She had made a study of this self centered girls actions, listened carefully when she talked. As a diplomatic aide Millicent was a fountain of information, along with being a social gadfly. Someone had seriously dropped the ball with her training the Russian had decided. Leaning back she studied her guest. Ears beginning to redden on their inner edges, eyes dilating. Both alcohol and THC were beginning to have an effect, though as to what those effects would be the Russian wasn't certain. Everyone was affected differently by the same drug, though this combination would lose its effects long before morning. "Amelia's father is?"

"Sir Archibald Bourne-Phipps" Millicent supplied. "Who is most upset about his daughters turncoat ways."

"You would think?" Tatiana gestured with her glass, sipping while Millicent drank. "Amelia was sent to create own spy web. I was first convert. Is amazing how one changes when one understands ruler is gangster. Is madman. Molly, Helen, even niece of Italian Dictator Maria her agents. You are fool Millicent. Big open mouth fool. What government admit anyone their spy? Make problems for that person. Make them seem unwanted. Else make them target."

Abruptly frightened Millicent finished her glass. She now believed that she was being given information that she was really not cleared for. Information that she should not know. Secretly reading a folder left out during lunch was one thing. Being briefed with Most Secret information was quite another. Gratefully she accepted the refilling of her glass, finishing half of it in one gulp. "I am not a fool" she argued, though her conviction, like her glass, was less than full. She was sitting here alone with a known spy. Hearing about a network being built by her government that she should know nothing about. There was only one reason for such a thing to occur. She was expendable. They were going to expend her. This woman was going to kill her. If not Tatiana then another English agent. "I can keep my mouth shut" she continued. There was almost a begging tone in her voice now. Millicent hated it, but couldn't take it back now. She was truly captured by this woman's web.

Abruptly Tatiana stood, tossing several bills on the table. "We will go to someplace private, to continue talk" the Russian instructed her guest. Picking up the bottle and glasses Tatiana walked towards the road a few yards away.

'*Ten shells*' the tabby noted as she struggled to her own feet. '*So much money.*' In her confused state she didn't notice that Tatiana appeared completely unaffected by the drink, nor that she had never finished a third of her second glass, while Millicent herself had now swallowed three glasses. The last being full. '*Running is useless. I am so very much dead. I will miss England*' she realized as she picked up her purse and meekly followed the Russian. Maybe, if she followed instructions to the letter it would be quick. All she had ever in her life wanted to do was become a Diplomat. Then later marry a Lord hopefully so as to live the pleasant life of those with breeding. And money of course.

Tatiana's rickshaw delivered them not to some back ally or darkened corner of Casino Island but to the brightly lit front entrance of the McGee Resort. It was a place Millicent was aware of but had never entered. On the ride she had finished that bottle purchased by her hostess. Now barely able to stand she allowed the much stronger Russian to aid her to bungalow number five, ignoring the looks of those still about at the time. Somewhere along the way she remembered a toilet, and emptying her stomach into it.

Now she was sitting in the bungalow, sitting on a chair with her hostess facing her.

"Never drink on empty stomach. Dah?"

"Dah" Millicent managed in agreement. She felt so very, very odd. As though her body wasn't connected to her soul anymore. "You will murder me now?"

"Later" Tatiana answered. "Always time later. I have much use for you yet. Major Hawkins have much use for you. Later. Later I cut your heart out and eat. While you watch."

Millicent knew she should be frightened, but those words. They sent a shiver of excitement through her. Could this woman know her secret fantasy? No, it was one thing she had never told anyone. It would have regulated her to a sanatorium for life. *'But I would have lived such a long life'* she thought. "What use" she asked.

"I need contact in Consulate" Tatiana admitted. "You have almost right access. Amelia needs new passport. I need English passport. Many other things." She settled onto her bed, sniffing. Was Millicent becoming excited? It could be expected under such a load of alcohol and unaccustomed drugs. Though women were not her choice in life it was an opening she could use, had been well trained to use in order to blackmail this primed up snob into helping her. So why not. "These things you will do."

"I can't do that" Millicent admitted. "Charles doesn't leave his materials out. Not ever."

"Charles?"

Millicent nodded yes, an act that cause the world to waver in multicolored streamers. "He makes all new passports. I only deliver the papers to him and pick up the completed passports. I can lose paperwork, or mess it up if I want and am careful. But I can't make passports."

"You can add paperwork to what give this Charles?"

The idea was surprisingly new to Millicent. "Well, yes" she admitted. "I guess so. As long as it isn't too many things at one time."

Millicent, Tatiana noted, was calming. Her scent easing. So what had been the trigger. While she thought about this she continued her conversation. Soon the tabby would be getting tired. When that happened she would sleep. Period. "You called Amelia Lady. Why? She is unmarried, her father still alive. Cannot be truth she is Lady."

"Oh yes it is" Millicent answered, a big smile coming to her face. "Though she does not know this as yet. I saw the report only this morning. Both her husband and sister in law were most publically executed by Our Majesties Government just a little while ago. So she is the only living heir to certain dark estates, title, privileges. A most darkened name she has now. Allworthy."

This was news to Tatiana as she barely knew the name. Amelia married? Since when. And Millicent had returned to her normal self while gloating over that news. Tatiana hated to admit it, but she knew nothing about whomever Amelia might have married or why they had been executed. More investigations. If she could get passports, oh what a slap in the face to Molly that would be. A fitting response to her last humiliation. And the tabby had started to become excited again. Only a little but... Prey Syndrom? Could a feline have Prey Syndrom Tatiana asked herself. It was unknown in carnivores, but a mind was a mind, if exposed at the right age. To the right circumstances. Or so the NKVD believed. But a feline? She decided to test her theory. "If you want to live my little pet, you will do as I want. If not then you will be my meal tonight. Do you understand?"

"I left a letter" Millicent warned, trying to stand. Her legs though wouldn't hold her anymore and with a heavy thump she hit the hardwood floor. "I feel so strange" she moaned. Her scent though, built.

'Prey Syndrom' Tatiana decided as a well known scent filled her rooms. *'In a feline. Impossible. But usable if kept under control.'* Kneeling beside the semi-conscious woman she whispered. "You are well aware that I must return to Songmark on Monday. After I leave this will happen. You Millicent, will arrange several passports over the next month. Lady Amelia requires a passport to return home. She must attend to her new estates. She will be taking four servants. Helen Ducros, Maria Inconnutia, Molly Procyk and Katrina Wei. You will bring me papers here tomorrow. We will fill them out together. We will make new names for those three then. You will slip them into your pouch. You will give them to your Charles. You will bring those passports to me. This is understood my little meal?"

"Won't" Millicent argued. "Left a letter. Kill me. Eat me. Don't care. Your going to die."

Pulling Millicent into a more upright sitting position Tatiana reached into her own blouse, removing a pink envelope. Ripping it open she held up a single sheet of paper before the tabbies eyes. "This letter" she asked, triumph in her voice.

"How..."

"I am a spy Millicent. I work for your country. Through Amelia. Through Major Hawkins but I am a spy. A well trained spy. Now, you will do what I need?"

Millicent blinked, tried to nod her head and thought better of it. "I see that I belong to you now. Why?"

"Because you failed to align yourself with another before I had need of you. Because you made enemies of potential friends. Because you angered all who might have helped you. Because, my little supper, in all the ways you could have protected yourself. You failed to even make any attempt."

"When will you eat me" Millicent asked, her voice soft, abruptly that of a child maybe four or five years of age.

"When I have no further use of you. When your existence is no longer to my pleasure." Tatiana leaned forward, bringing her eyes almost against the tabbies. "When your very existence has no further importance, in any way to me. Then I will carve a stake from your living body for my meal. You will cook it yourself. You will serve it to me. You will watch silently as I eat."

Millicent, her mind confused worked though those words. Finally she thought that she understood. "It will be a long time. Wont it?"

"Yes, but will happen. Won't it."

Millicent only whimpered her answer, throwing her head back, exposing her throat. "You have such beautiful fangs" she whispered in her total surrender.

Prey Syndrom Tatiana thought with disgust. If anyone could help this woman it would be mother Oharu. Until then... Opening her mouth as wide as she could Tatiana enveloped that offered throat, taking as her property that which was freely offered.

At the feel of her teeth pressing upon her throat Millicent sighed as though in great pleasure. She had found the one she had searched for, though it was not some powerful African Tiger native as in her dreams. A tongue tasted her throat, her bared throat, her defenseless throat. She would do whatever Tatiana wanted. As long as it was for England, whatever she wanted. Quietly the civilized mind of Millicent drifted away for a time.

September 18th, 1936

Morning sunlight burned through Millicent's eyelids. Where was she, this certainly wasn't her bed. Opening her eyes she found herself in a typical little tourist bed, nothing like her embassy supplied bed. And horrors of horrors she wasn't alone. "Nothing happened" a well detested Russian voice announced from behind her. "I dislike sleeping on floor when good bed is available. We go see someone now."

"We do nothing of the kind" Millicent argued, rolling from the bed. She was in her chemise the tabby noticed, though when Tatiana sat up there was nothing hiding her form. "You perfectly dreadful woman. You got me drunk, then dragged me to your room. Hawkins or no Hawkins I shall see you thrown out this very day."

"And never be eaten" Tatiana asked softly.

Millicent gasped, covering her mouth with both paws. "How... No one knows. I am certain. Your guessing."

"You and I see mother. Today. Prey Syndrom not thing to play with my Millicent. You need help dah. I will see you get such help. Today."

"Prey Syndrom? I don't know what it is you think you are talking about Russian. I assure you that I have nothing like that. Whatever it may be."

"Millicent look in mirror at neck, then say different" the Russian ordered as she too stood, gathering her brush. "LOOK!"

Shaken Millicent backed up, away from this obviously unhinged woman until she came level with the rooms full length mirror. Studying her reflected image she groaned in dismay. Her neck fur was matted, matted in the way that could only happen by one way. On each side of her throat were a series of groves in her fur. Groves that had been made by teeth. Russian teeth. "No" she gasped. "No."

"Dah" Tatiana corrected, brushing her own fur. "How long you hide this? Is dangerous for anyone untreated. More so if work in secret areas."

Millicent collapsed onto the floor. "Tell them. Get your revenge. I will be shipped home, sent to a Sanatorium. I shall die there an old untouched woman. My family would never let me out. I am a disgrace."

"How long" Tatiana repeated.

Millicent looked over to the closed door, then back to Tatiana. "I was four. We were inspecting a village in Dower Defladio. Ten years of no rains had devastated that nation. In that village there were only children left. Well fed children. Their parents had given themselves, to save their children." She sobbed. "I thought how Nobel a sacrifice. To freely give ones body, ones life to one whom you loved most deeply. That they may live. What is Prey Syndrom?"

Tatiana sat her brush aside, picking up her clothing from where she had left it the night before. "It's a hazard of pure herbivores" she explained. "Rare, constant dream of being chased down by predators, taken down, eaten. It becomes everything. It can be used against the suffer, when done right. I never read of a predator species being so affected my new pet. I will take you to be helped. I will do that one favor only. Only because I need you. Pravda."

Spinning around, her paws to her own throat Millicent almost managed a sneer. "So you will hold this over me forever. No thank you Russian. I managed my life with it this far." Abruptly she grabbed her chemise, ripping it.. "Take what you want Russian, but my loyalty to Crown and King never."

"Ah my poor flower. Crown. King. Country." She walked closer to the English girl. "I will demand much from you. Very much. On my Honor I will never ask you endanger your country, your King. Yours at least is free country Millicent for all the snobbishness you hold. Our revolution. Our Glorious Revolution. Stolen from us by band of criminals. I am Russian Comrade, just as you are English. Never forget that. I am no longer Communist. I am RUSSIAN!" At her last words Tatiana grabbed the hanging chemise, her greater strength tearing it away as though it were tissue. "If I want I take. I not want. For now. Later yes. Not though now. So dress. Main Island is a long trip, we must hurry. She will be finishing Shrine duty soon."

Millicent looked down at the ruined chemise laying at her feet, then to the Russian's back as she dressed. Last night's conversations flooded back through her alcohol and drug muddled mind. "You... You don't want me then? I remember what you said about Amelia and the rest." *'I remember your beautiful teeth'* she told herself.

Buttoning her dress Tatiana turned to face her companion. "Want? I am not Oharu pet. I do not want a woman above all others. Need? Dah. Pravda is I need you. Desire? That I will not allow comrade, until Oharu has helped you calm demon. At this moment no proof exists. You are not dangerous. I warn you English girl. You hold to me, I will help you. I will endanger you dah. I will protect, as best I can. Choose wisely. Now dress, or walk with me as you are."

Even so they had to wait more than an hour while Oharu instructed her students. Though Tatiana could understand much of the Spontoon being spoken, Millicent had never degraded herself more than to learn only the most basic words. Eventually the mouse walked over to them, greeting them warmly. "How may I serve you" she asked in that shattered voice of hers.

"I must speak with you mother. Privately" Tatiana answered. "She should listen to the water. While we talk."

Her adopted mother's look told Tatiana all she needed to know. "Then take her there, instruct her. I will await you."

Quietly Tatiana did as instructed. Settling Millicent down next to the tiny fall she managed a smile. "Close your eyes my new pet. Listen to water. Trust me if in this only, here you are safer than behind castle walls. It will only be little while. My word."

With nothing better to do (though any Romance Novel would have been a nice addition) Millicent did as instructed, barely hearing the sables departure. It was soothing though she thought, a soft hissing of running water. A sweet babbling as it tumbled from stone to stone. Comforting.

"Daughter" Oharu asked as Tatiana returned to the gathering place.

Instead of sitting Tatiana fell to her knees. "Mother" she answered, and in her voice was truth, not simply repeating a title. "I have done evil. For no reason."

Settling herself on a stone Oharu studied her adopted daughter. So far had the angry Communist traveled since her arrival upon Spontoon's shores. She was a natural. She could, as the Buddha spoke of it, become truly enlightened. "You are my daughter. As much as if I bore you from my own body. I will never deny you. Tell me of this evil that I may help my daughter make amends."

Still kneeling Tatiana explained her actions, her intents, her plans. All that and how what she had stumbled across that had so made a disaster of her attempts. Of her plans. "I do not wish to kill her mother" the Russian admitted. "Yet she is so foolish. I could never depend upon her not to speak about this, to attempt to strike back. She is so... so Emotional."

"We are all emotional my dear Tatiana" Oharu admitted. "In this nothing is unexpected. This Prey Syndrom you speak of, explain please." Listening Oharu learned what Tatiana suspected, discovering that

it was simply a different name for something she had been trained to deal with long ago. "What you believe, what this is. I think may be different" she decided. "Please sit, you are not a servant to me. Nor ever again a slave. You are my daughter. This illness is a desire, a need to die for no reason. What you explain appears different. Leave her with me today. I will see what I may do. I warn you daughter, I may be able to do nothing at all. Speak with her now, explain. I will not force her."

Tatiana looked into the older mouse's eyes. "You will do all you may. This is all I may hope. I truly have use for her, but as she was. Not the confused, frightened child she is now. I shall return at midnight then Mother. Thank you. I truly do not wish her blood on my paws." She stood then, walking down to the waiting Millicent.

"I am leaving you with mother for few hours" she explained to the now calmed feline. "She will try to help you, if you let her."

"If I do not" Millicent asked. "What then oh great spy. You will then notify Amelia? She will arrange my most unexpected death? We despise each other Russian, she and I. She will laugh at my lifeless body."

Tatiana sighed in exasperation. "Millicent. Why do you hate her? Pravda she is daft some times yes. Sometimes she does not see what is in front of her, but she is a nice woman."

Millicent laughed. "Why? Why shouldn't I? Her airs, her position. She is daughter to a Lord. She is now a Lady. My father is nothing but a career Diplomat. We are of no special breeding. My only hope is to marry into breeding or I will end up some clerks wife stuck in a row house somewhere in some forgotten city. I spend my every waking hour in that Consulate. Not even a proper Embassy. Father has warned me that he may even ship me off to Nunui Hale. I do know what goes on, I see it flow about me. Intrigue, advancement, people being noticed. Myself? I wander about carrying my little Secrets case, as I have since the day I arrived here several years ago. No one even asks me on a date anymore. Its been over a year Russian since I had a drink with someone who wanted to be around me. A year, and who is that? Amelia's pet assassin. When you kill me, and Russian I already know too much, you will have too. When you kill me they will not even suspect her. Because no one suspects you are part of her team."

"You can be too Millicent" Tatiana offered. "Oh not as an agent. Not out in field. You have all wrong training for that. But you see things. You attend parties. You hear things, see people. That is helpful. All you have to do is be polite. People will open up to you."

"You wish me to be a spy? I am a Lady Russian. A LADY! Ladies do not spy. Ever."

"Pfalzgräfin Schwarzkopf?"

"They shot her" Millicent reminded Tatiana.

"Pravda. Even mounted her head on wall. Did they not? Prussia give her body state funeral. A State Funeral Millicent. That means even though she was spy, they respected her. What would you get today, if I rip your throat out right now? A tiny plot on Casino Island. Short note to father. Millicent, as an agent, a spy you meet people. You make contacts. If you are very good you marry well. I will not be spy all my life. Family is something I want. Oharu has given me part that. You let her help you. You think what I offer. Millicent. If you refuse help. If you refuse everything. I tell you Pravda this. You will die. Tonight. At my paws." She stood up, looking down at the confused but still very proud feline. "I do not wish this. So you think."

"I will never turn on my country like Amelia has" Millicent countered, though her counter was not quite as forceful as before.

"Has she? Is not Spontoon of interest to your country? Would not network here be use to your country? Millicent, you presuppose. Think. Why would England abruptly list Amelia as Person of Interest right after

best spy discovered. After best spy, student Songmark with her, runs for life? Wake up. I will return at midnight. In morning I will wake in my bed. You will be there or floating in Sacred Lake, never eaten. This I let you decide." She turned away from the Consulate aide, walking silently back up the path.

Pausing only to pay her respects to the great stone Tatiana hurried away from Great Stone Glen. Mother, daughter. Words she had never expected to use or be used with her again. So long ago, she would make Sterling pay heavily for that loss. Killing Millicent would be easy. Perhaps she should have already done that. But doing so without real reason would have upset Oharu. Oharu, the woman who had saved her from Nikki. Who had saved her from Kuo Hon. Who had saved her from herself, and Sterling. Oharu, who had not only shown her the beautiful face of true love, but had taken her as her daughter. Had given her a family again. "I will not disappoint her" she growled at a pair of tiny eyes in the bushes.

Some time passed before Millicent saw the kimono dressed mouse walking down the path. She watched in silence as Oharu paid homage to that strange splinter of stone, as she walked the final yards down to where Millicent waited. Still in silence Oharu sat near the feline, looking not to her but to the waterfall. "And now" the English girl asked.

"I do not force" Oharu answered. "If help you truly wish. Help I will give. Or we may talk. We may sit in silence, you may sit alone or run away. I will not hinder you in any way."

"You are a spy. Just like that Russian" Millicent snapped. "Why should I trust you?"

"Incorrect child. I was a spy" Oharu corrected. "Very bad one. I am now Priestess in Training. Soon I hope to be full Priestess. If Gods accept me."

"If they don't" Millicent asked, truly interested.

"My skills are very few child. Religion has been my path since I was nine. At eleven I became Miko. Now I may be Priestess. If Gods do not accept me." She leaned her back against one of the many stones here. "You are familiar with Spontoon term Hunter?"

"You would become a whore? Why?"

"My stomach needs food, my body clothing. Child, nothing in this mortal world free. Not even air we breath. I would become pansuke yes. Or die. I would find choices very hard for I have daughter to care for now. You too have choices today."

"I do not wish to die" Millicent announced. "Still I will not be disloyal to my country. What choices have I?"

"Did my daughter ask you to be disloyal to your country?"

"No. But she is Russian."

"That is true. She has renounced her government. Not her people. She works now free her people from slavery those who stole their revolution. Would you not do same. Should that happen to your England?"

"Yes but... I mean... Oh I don't know what I mean. Yesterday my life was ordered. I knew what I wanted. Where I was going. Now I find I am meat for someone's table."

"That excites you" Oharu observed, noting the scent that occurred almost upon Millicent's uttering of those words. "Why?"

Millicent blushed so deeply Oharu expected to see her paws redden. "I do not know exactly why" she admitted. "It bothers me. Your daughter, I told her."

"She explained what happened when you were four. This does not explain why such thought should cause you react so. Will you trust me help you discover why?"

"If not you will kill me, correct" the feline asked.

"No child. I cannot kill. For any reason. It is not a vow that stops me. It is what I am. To eat yes, a creature that has no intelligence. But you? Millicent I cannot kill. I offer to help you because my daughter asked. You must want this. I will not force you even to move one hair aside."

"I was exorcized, twice" Millicent admitted. "Both times they told my parents the dreams would stop. That they had chased away whatever servant of the devil had entered me. For a while my dreams faded, but they came back again. Priestess, will you exorcize me as well? Will that save my life?"

"I do not believe any demon is within you, other than one you have created yourself Millicent. I will try to guide you to place it cannot follow. Only you may control it. No other may do more than bind for time. Without help soon it will destroy you. Millicent. My daughter not kill you unless she had reason. Please. Do not give her reason. Do not hurt my daughter. Let me take one those reasons from her."

"Just one?"

"Millicent. One is all I am able to help you with. The other. That you must decide yourself."

Millicent bit her upper lip, weighing her options. On the one paw she could just run. Once she was back in the Consulate she would be safe. They would send her back to her father yes and he would send her to Nunui Hale but she would be safe. On the other paw, leaving would mean being unable to enjoy the life she had found here. Had begun to build here. Granted it was as Tatiana said. Only because she made her own way. But she did make her own way. Then there was another paw. What if this woman. This pagan priestess was lying? Well, on that paw she was dead anyway wasn't she. Certainly she was stubborn, but snobbish? Selfish? Not as she saw it. Then there was the paw holding this delightfully clueless newcomer Songmark girl Nancy Rote. Such an entertaining American, what with her little detective work. Another paw held adventure. She so much wanted adventure, most girls her age did. To really work with spies. Not just carrying papers from room to room. But gathering information. Information to help the Crown. And yet, on this paw was Tatiana. She already knew Millicent's weakness. Even if this slant eyed spy could help it was only for her daughter. Adopted or not, her loyalty was as plain as Millicent's own. Oharu was right about one thing though. If her government was overthrown by a bunch of backwater crooks like Russia's had been, she would do anything to right that wrong. So perhaps Tatiana was right. But she would have to work with Amelia, and her right paw was certain that could never be successful. They each hated the other already.

It was a lot of paws Millicent abruptly realized. An awful lot of paws. If she accepted Tatiana's offer she would be working for Amelia. Through Tatiana yes, but still. Well, perhaps she could arrange with Tatiana that Amelia never discovered this. It was adventure. She would be hob-nobbing again with other Diplomats. She already knew a few small things. Such as England certainly desired Spontoan back under Crown rule. Had plans to base a large task force here as they did Singapore. It had the perfect harbor for such things, unlike the American Pearl Harbor with its single entrance and shallow draft. Tatiana would be returning to Songmark very soon, so she would be on her own. And... Her entire body shivered in reaction. Tatiana had the most beautiful teeth. Such sharp night black claws as well.

"If I allow this. This thing you want to do" she whispered. "You will not make me subservient to your daughter. You will not make me love her."

Oharu leaned forward, gently placing one paw upon one of Millicent's. "I will not" she agreed. "It would be a Great Change to make you want her or not want her. You would always know you were made to need her. Only a God can turn heart fully around and hearts owner never suspect. By a law I follow I can no more make you want her than I could make you want me. I would be cast down, thrown out of Spontoan.

Not even allowed the life of a Hunter. It can be done yes, but I am not permitted such. No Millicent, if you have now or ever have feelings for my daughter. They will have come from your heart. Never mine."

"Then what do I have to do?"

"That is simple. Place your body in a comfortable position" Oharu instructed. "Listen again to the water. Sleep. I will come to your dreams. Together we will see what has so twisted your soul as feel death is love."

"You won't read my mind. Promise me that. I know Crown secrets I can not permit..." Pressure upon her paw quieted the feline.

"Millicent. Reading minds not possible. We will be upon the dream plane. Have you never controlled one of your own dreams?"

"Yes. Many times."

"That is where we will be. I will no more be capable of reading your thoughts than you mine. You are welcome try. For if you are able, you will be the first in this worlds known history able do so. I would be honored to meet the first true mind reader, though I would be frightened as well. You are as safe as any dream. Now rest. I must now instruct my students upon herbal lore."

Millicent waited until Oharu was out of sight before deciding. She could run, but she bet her entire lifes savings that Tatiana would catch her before she reached the coast. This slant.. No. She rearranged her thoughts about Oharu. This Priestess wished only to help. Nothing more. "Very well then" she said to the stones about her. "I am tired, so I shall sleep."

Saturday, September 19^h, 1936

Tatiana returned at midnight as she had been instructed. Her adopted mother met her as she slowly came down those ancient stone steps. "Mother?" the Russian asked.

"She sleeps in my hut. Come, we truly must speak." Turning her back on Tatiana Oharu made her way to her gathering place, waiting until Tatiana was settled before speaking.

"Millicent. In her youth. Saw mother cut her own throat. Take own life that her children might have food" the mouse explained. "Her father refused give lunches his group had brought, claiming such uneducated creatures deserved starvation. Millicent took own two sandwiches to give away, stumbling upon the mother too late save her. Daughter. She has come believe that giving ones life another for food is greatest act of love. It has twisted inside her."

"Mother. We all demons have" Tatiana reminded Oharu. "You have your Molly."

"As you have Russia. A mistake was made by first priest. He or she. I cannot tell, turned a wrong path. Believing Demon wrong ritual was used. Its use covered her darkness. Strengthened it. I have with some effort released that mistake. I cannot in one sitting heal lifetime of twisted paths. You must return her here, until she is as free of this darkness as she can be."

"It isn't Prey Syndrom then?"

"No daughter. It not what you feared. Had it been. At this age she would have been incurable. In time I may release her from this madness. I fear though never fully."

"I still must know mother. Will she serve me, or must I kill her now."

Oharu's eyes closed but a little, still enough to warn Tatiana. "You will not kill her. I have invested too much myself. I call her life upon my own until she fully yours. Yes, she will serve you. Not to save life, for even now her greatest pleasure would be for you rip her apart, devouring her still living body as she watches. No my daughter. Her reason much different."

Tatiana was a spy. A good spy. She was also a very good Songmark student. "She is then in love with me" the Russian stated. Her words were not a question, for the evidence was inescapable.

"She in love with you. You have, in her words, such beautiful fangs."

"Mother. I am not that way. I will have sons and daughters. I cannot be as you are."

"You are Tatiana Bryzov-Wei. You are my daughter. You are perhaps Mother Russia's last loyal daughter. You will be what must be to save your homeland. No matter cost to yourself. This I am certain you can do. There is more. She is your punishment. I explain another day. Do not waste this woman my daughter. She has promise. She needs you."

Tatiana swallowed. Of all the things she had avoided. Yes Nikki had taken her pleasure from Tatiana's body, as had Oharu. Once. In a much softer way. Many others had too. But she was not like her adoptive mother, who's only thoughts of love were the soft curves of Molly Procyk. Molly. Who towered over Oharu by a full foot. Tatiana's though was of those like Amelia's choice. Hard muscled, intelligent. Able to grant her the children she secretly hungered for. Yet yes, she could do this. Women were her second choice, but in honesty a freely made choice.

"Mother. I lied to her."

"You do not work with the Priestess in Training Amelia" Oharu agreed. "You must do this. One day she may be greater than myself. She may be second to High Priestess. Daughter, never close your path simply because is undesirable. It may one day be only path open to save you. It is time now. Go to her. Take her to your home. To your bed. Touch her as you would the flutterby. Let her heart blossom for you. Do not strangle this bud before you taste nectar. Use her yes, as you must for your Mother Russia. I think you may be long time finding another such chance. Do not abuse her, for she is fragile. And Daughter."

"Mother?"

"You will bring her to me as often as you may. This darkness can be defeated, but it will take much time."

"Yes mother. I will send her to you as often as I can. My word. As your daughter."

Millicent woke the that morning with wonderful memories. Opening her eyes she found herself looking into the already open eyes of Tatiana Bryzov. Bryzov-Wei she now knew, though that name was Most Very Secret for now. "She promised she wouldn't make me love you" Millicent whispered into those eyes. "We were both surprised to discover I was already in love with you. She offered to release me from this. I said no."

"Why, because I have such beautiful fangs?"

"And you will bring me adventure. You will help me serve the Crown better. You will... Tatiana, there are many many reasons. I can not at this moment count them all. Since first meeting you that day you were assigned to my section. This has grown. Perhaps it is why I treated you so badly, for I have always desired children. Your mother though. She warned me that I could never hope to hold your heart only to myself. That you too wished to marry, to have a family. This I much understand. Tatiana. You are my first true love. Perhaps you will be my only true love. Perhaps we will both find others. Yet for now. In this time. In this place. Let me be yours."

"It is good that you will work with me" the Russian admitted. "Mother was much right. Clipping your bud before I tasted your nectar would have been terrible mistake."

"Then what must I do for you. How can I help your Amelia build her spy network. How can I help England's safety."

"First I must have the passports I spoke of before" Tatiana decided. "You need lessons in social behavior. This I know of a place that can teach. It is not best of reputations Millicent, for some its clientele is less than the best. Yet it will teach you as it has Amelia and Molly. You will go?"

"I will go any where you ask me to go. I trust you now. For I know that I love you."

Tatiana snuggled closer. She well knew how to use seduction to gain her goals, and Millicent seemed completely unprepared for Tatiana's abilities. Like a farmers daughter thrown into a barracks of veteran soldiers fresh from the fields she was well out of her depth. "You must treat Amelia, myself as you already do. In public. On Main Island you are safe to show your true feelings my pet. To hold me, to touch me. We will train you to be gatherer of information. Report what you learn to me, let slip some information I will give you to those in your consulate who should know. I report to Amelia. Now to first task. What names should we give these passports?"

"Lady Amelia's married name of course" Millicent answered. "For you my love, as you want Katrina Wei will do, but I would put the Wei as a middle name. Perhaps Katrine Wei Ivanovicha. It is a common Russian name after all, Ivanovicha. You could never pass for anything but a Russian I am afraid. I would list you as her personal pilot and driver. Your Helen, she is America from the state of Texas.. Perhaps a personal guard or driver as well. For a name something like Susan Harkens would fit. Molly. Oh Molly who has been so evil. Personal maid I should think, to punish her for how she has treated you and your dear mother. Marzena fits her. Marzena Krygowski was a friend of mine. Maria would be her secretary, she is so much a writer. Italian names are very easy. They are so simple. DiLucca. Bianca DiLucca. It shall require two months to manage so many passports. Still I shall have them for you. I will though have to study carefully what each person's career should be."

"Do not forget yourself my pet" Tatiana whispered. "As one day you too must vanish back to your England, least those eyes we do not wish to touch you come hunting. Now enough of talking, I am hungry. You my pet, taste delicious. This afternoon I take you to Madam Maxines for first training class."

Butterfly McGee, walking past a certain bungalow later that morning was pleased at the sounds she heard coming from it. Love after all was always desired over all the other choices available.

Two days later Millicent was walking by Tatiana's office. Opening the door she looked in, watching as the Russian worked. "Crossword puzzles are not permitted while working. Or is that just a love letter to your controller?" She stepped back sharply when the door slammed shut, adjusting her blouse she walked on. Behind her several clerks simply shook there heads in dismay. Would that Ambassadors spoiled little brat never learn how to treat people?

Some months later Tatiana would approach Amelia. Carrying with her an offer and certain fully legal passports.

It was still well before Sunset Song when Maria found herself standing outside the door of a rather large though still common looking cottage. She had been given a letter of introduction by Miss Devinski and an address on Meeting Island. "You may go, or not. She is expecting you. In truth dear student she asked for you to come. This meeting, unlike others you have attended, I believe that you will be very delighted to keep. Marie, she is important to me. Remember this."

Always on the lookout for a story Maria had accepted both letter, her weekend pass and warning. It was a pass she knew would not come often anymore. Third years rarely had that much free time and those frozen islands still loomed in her future. On her trip over she had let her thoughts turn to home. Of her friends. What they had done for fun. From letters and newspapers she had learned of many deaths. Fast cars on mountain roads, aircraft crashes and even two murders. Of her circle of friends, those she had considered close less than half still breathed. Two of those only because of extensive medical care. That she would have been one of those that were now, as Molly put it, pushing up daisies was obvious. She had always driven the hardest, flown the fastest. Songmark had saved her life. It had also opened her eyes to a career she would never have seriously considered before.

Knocking on the door she waited. A child's cry came from within and a woman's voice. "Hold him Dia, I think she's here." It was an American voice the bovine noted, with a taste of the same accent Helen had though somehow different. When the door opened she found herself face to face with an Afghan. Well, from the bone structure at least half so Maria noted. "Your Maria?" the woman asked.

"Maria Inconnutia" Maria answered. "I have a letter of introduction."

She offered the letter which the American accepted. "Cath said you were big, I just never. Oh, I'm Helen. Helen Whitehall. Pleased to meet you." She held out a paw which Maria took, surprised at the strong grip her hostess offered. "El Duce's niece. Well, we only have two full days and I've so much I think you might like to see. Please come in."

Stepping into the rather plain home Maria immediately noted the native priestess holding a child. "Not interested" she announced.

"Not? Oh, this is my friend. Maria Inconnutia meet Dia-Kura. Dia-Kura, Maria Inconnutia. Maria, Dia is only visiting. She has to my understanding nothing to do with your visit. It is my son I fear she is after."

"No" the calico responded. "Not want your son. Maria, I have heard much about you. Am proud to meet one of those who tried recover Cranium Island Fragment. Helen? I be in nursery."

Maria watched as Dia-Kura left, still carrying the baby in her arms. "Interesting friends" she noted.

"Catherine has told me of your friends" Helen answered. "Like as not, I could say the same about yours. That though is not why you were invited here. Your wish is to be a reporter, correct?"

"Yes. Not a simple reporter. I wish to wander the world. To report on everything I find."

Helen stepped towards the hallway Dia-Kura had vanished down. "You are certain of that."

"Absolutely" the Italian answered.

"And you still have not made the connection? Regarding my name. Then follow me my child, for I have a new universe to open for you."

Maria followed, though at her guard. This hallway would lead to bedrooms and though she was open minded, she had never... A bomb went off in her head. "Whitehall" she gasped. "Killian Whitehall?"

"The same" Helen admitted as she opened a bedroom door. "I am his wife, Lady Whitehall. Though I do not like that title I find myself forced to carry it. For now. You will call me Helen, never Lady or so help me I will have Cath severely punish you with sweet pickles. You have just met Killian's son, upon whom I will dump the title of Lord upon when he reaches twenty-one. Wither or not he desires it. Please come in."

Stepping into the room, one that had apparently been meant as a bedroom Maria found herself faced with wall to wall shelves. Books and artifacts had been carefully placed everywhere, leaving almost no space

for more. A wide desk was placed against the room's single window, Northern light splashing upon its flat surface. "My husband's legacy" Helen announced. "Perhaps you may find it worth your time to look through a few things."

"All this" Maria gasped as she looked around her.

"A new crate, envelope or package of some kind arrives almost monthly. Not as often or as much anymore, but it still arrives. My husband left many friends behind, many who admired him. I have spent simply hours just answering letters as best I can. Dia helped me arrange all this, it is to the best of our ability in chronological order. My dear sister in law shipped me a large crate of his writings her parents had saved. I honestly think that you should meet my sister in law. I think you two could be friends. Remind me to write you a letter of introduction to Willie."

She pointed to a shelf at the floor next to Maria. "Killian's writings while attending what I would call Junior High School. I am afraid that his last work is not available. It was never published, apparently vanishing into the Spontoon Governments most secret archives I think. Or burned. I am much afraid that I am sworn not to speak of them to those who do not already know."

"Boneless?" Maria asked.

"So you know. Yes, Brotherhood of the Boneless" Helen agreed. "When you are ready to live in nightmares for the rest of your life perhaps I will tell you about it. What they did to my sweet Ruth, what they were going to do to me. Not this weekend though. All I will say for now is that they had me, he saved me, then married me and gave me our son. Now. Have you any interest in this chamber or should I escort you to the front door?"

"Oh please no" Maria whispered, reaching out to take a ragged traveler's journal from a shelf. "Ignore this? I might as well cut my own throat. I have so much to learn from these."

Helen smiled, Catherine had been right. "Then I will call you for supper." She edged around the larger bovine, leaving Maria in a heaven of her own. "There is a spare bed in the visitors room" she whispered as she passed the enthralled journalist. "And the door locks with an iron bolt from the inside."

Two full days later Maria pushed back from the room's desk, gently rubbing her eyes. It was raining outside so she'd had to rely upon the desk lamp. Now that had failed as power had been cut. Looking around her the room had an odd feeling. Memories she realized. It was a chamber of memories and she had been granted the golden key. Checking her watch she noted that there were still three hours before she would have to leave. Three hours to spend in the mind of one of the greatest traveling reporters to yet live. Pushing her chair back the Italian bovine stretched, amused when her crossed paws did not strike the room's ceiling. Mrs. Whitehall had chosen her home to accept almost the largest of creatures who might visit. There were limits, but this home had been designed for a rhino couple. A couple who had returned to Africa in order to enjoy their retirement. It explained the building's size and simplicity. Maria's bulk was easily accommodated by the room.

Walking over to a brand new display case she picked up a weapon laying there. Unloaded, the oversized .45 caliber luger was one of a very small run originally designed for the American military trials. Those trials she had just discovered had been covered by a Killian just out of university. Somehow he had obtained this weapon. It was obvious that the tool had seen a great deal of use. Now it lay in her paw. Hefting it she enjoyed the feel. Having been made for a bulldog's grip it fit her own paw well. Setting it back down she looked at the rest of Killian Whitehall's Great Wars collection.

"You may have it, if you wish" a now well known voice announced from behind Maria. "Inspector Toews returned it three weeks ago. He told me that he was uncomfortable having it. That it was meant somehow for another. Truthfully having that gun in my home bothers me. I think, looking at you, that you are that other Antonius referred to."

"Your from Montana though" Maria reminded her hostess before she turned to face the Afghan. "I would think you would be comfortable with such."

"There is a difference Maria. That gun was used in the Great War for nothing but killing people. It has its use, but not here. Anyway if you would like to have it I would like to make a gift of it to you. Your following my husbands footsteps. I think that he would be happy if you carried his gun to protect yourself, and others."

"I could lose it" Maria warned Helen. "Ruin it, sell it. Any of a thousand things."

"All things have a lifespan Marie. There is also this, you could save your life, or one of your friends lives. Or never use it at all other than to shoot at tin cans floating down a stream. Please Maria, if you would like to have it then take it. It will simply gather dust and rust in this room. That isn't a good ending for the weapon my husband used to fend off the Hun and other creatures of darkness."

"You are certain" Maria asked, turning back to the luger.

"Absolutely. I think that the belt and holster might fit you as well, you and Killian are of a size. He was a big man still when we met, even through his illness. Now dinner is ready. I am sorry it is not poe and breadfruit. There were peaches in the market today. Of course I could call and have poe delivered. If you would prefer."

"Peaches? Fresh peaches?"

"Over a dozen" Helen answered, a smile touching her eyes. "Are you interested?"

"Only if I may take one each to my dorm mates."

"Done. Now gather up your weapon, we just have time for a long supper and wine before you have to leave."

That night when she shared her fresh peaches with her friends Maria still could not believe that her luck. Sitting in the Songmark Armory was a weapon that now belonged to her. She would have her own name engraved upon its barrel, right below the name of Killian Whitehall. A thought came to her then. She had just been given a pair of boots to wear by the only person alive who had the right to give them, and they were such very large boots.

Chapter Forty-Four

September 23rd, 1936

Oharu Wei reached deep within a grove of white flowers, carefully selecting several stems whose buds had yet to fully open. Again she had not slept the night before and it was showing. Having three days before returned from a night of island wide celebration after the last tourist boat of the season had departed her dreams still kept her from sleep. Creating the sacred fire that then was used to burn a huge sculpture of a tourist had been but the beginning of that night. She had spoken with many of her new people through the night of their problems, their needs. Answering questions, helping find new paths around old problems. For her it had been a wonderful night, for she was helping. She was serving. It was all she ever in her life had wished to do. Her secret pleasure had continued until near morning when the last had made their way to a place to sleep, or find a water taxi still able to take them to where they needed to be. She had even spoken with two priestesses that she had not met before. It had been a wonderful night, one that had lifted some small part of that great weight attempting to crush her into the ground. She had even been able to watch her love Molly Procyk for several hours. From afar of course. Approaching the soul scared doe would have endangered Molly's recovery. Thus she had remained within the shadows.

Molly Procyk. At that name her paws stopped their work. Molly. She for whom the mouse had fallen, knowing in her mind that there was no possibility of even a simple kiss from the hard bitten Chicago mobsters daughter. Her heart though refused to believe that, so Oharu had moved to Main Island. To the remote near forgotten ancient temple site now known as Great Stone Glenn. Oharu had done everything she could to insure that their paths never crossed. Yet cross they had. Again and again. That fact bothered her more than she would allow even herself to admit. Was she unconsciously hunting the doe? Was there some darkness still within her that would not allow her to leave the American alone? Or was love simply that powerful. This she did not know.

Wednesday, September 30th, 1936

On Main Island branches rustled as an unseen figure stumbled down a forgotten jungle trail. For several long moments nothing could be seen other than those rustling branches, then the form of an attractive auburn furred female mouse burst into the open, stopping next to a small cliffs edge. One eye was covered by an ornate black patch, its surface embroidered with a silver star. Turning around as she cleared the jungle she kneeled, pulled out a fat looking weapon from its holster and pointed it up the trail. A burst of flame, much like a charge of flash powder answered her pulling of that trigger. Replacing her weapon into its silver holster she stood, turned and ran four steps before a vine caught her booted foot. Without a sound she went over the small cliffs edge, striking a pool of quicksand headfirst. In less time than it took to say it she was trapped.

Up the path a tall, handsome pinto stopped at the edge of a ravine. As he watched the rope bridge before him vanished in another flash of white smoke, itself reminiscent of too much flash powder. When the smoke cleared the entire bridge was burning. As he watched the fire a dainty, delicate looking vixen stumbled out from behind him. Only his instant action kept her from falling over the edge. "She has burned her bridge behind her" the stallion cursed. "There is no where else for her to go, for that way is the swamp of living death."

"We must follow her Carl" the vixen replied. "You have proven to me that she killed my brother. I want to watch her boil alive in a native pot for that."

"Petunia, do not say such things. You are a lady. As such you should not think such things. Still. Very well then, I will find another way across." He looked down, it was only thirty or so feet to the bottom but

there were alligators down there. Dozens of them. Looking around he seemed to gain some kind of inspiration.

Ahead of them a filthy head broke the surface, mouth gaping open to gasp for air. Laying on her back the mouse carefully stripped off her blouse, proving she wore nothing under it. Slowly twisting it as one would twist a wet towel she began throwing one end at a limb just out of her reach. Each throw caused her to sink deeper until finally she let go her useless blouse. Looking around herself she took one last deep breath of air, then sank from sight. The last that was seen was her long black hair being pulled under.

Sometime later the other two were standing at the ravines edge. "Oh Carl" the vixen gushed. "I would never have thought of using a vine to swing across. Thank you for holding me so tightly." Apparently unnoticed by the vixen her blouse had opened, showing more than an acceptable amount of delicate soft fur. Carl though had obviously noticed, yet said nothing.

"To the trail. She cannot be that far ahead of us."

Again time passed, now the two were standing at the edge of that quicksand trap. "You are certain she is dead" Petunia asked.

"Her tracks lead to here" Carl explained. "Her foot was caught in this vine. That is her blouse floating in the center. I think she took it off, trying to catch a limb or root. Yes Petunia, Silver Star has finally met her end. Your brother is avenged."

"I wish we could dredge her out of that" the vixen complained. "I so wanted to watch her boil. Alive or dead."

"I know my dear. Still that pit could be bottomless. You are avenged. Now there is nothing more here to do. Let us retire to my camp. It is several weeks journey back to the nearest civilization." His arm went around the vixen, his paw resting just under her breasts as he turned Petunia back towards the trail.

"Oh Carl. What shall we do until we return home?"

What Carl answered was lost as the two vanished into the jungle.

"And CUT. Print That" a voice called. "Break it down for the day boys, we set up for the American version tomorrow and the sequel's opening scene for both markets." Dozens of figures started moving around, cloth light reflectors were moved to safety while two cameras were dismounted and packed for travel. That same mouse who had taken a dive into the pool walked out from behind a canvas screen, a towel around her neck the only thing covering her ample breasts. She went directly to the otter writer who was busy making notes.

"George, just how are you going to get me out of this one" she asked. "Or is this Silver Stars final swan song."

"Keel Siver Stah? Crazy Jean. You best draw studio haff" the writer answered. "Think maybe tube, mount back belt? Let breef undervater."

"Have to be rubber, metal would be useless. George, just how many more tricks are you going to shove in my belt? It weighs almost fifteen pounds already."

"As maen need till dah keel you goot" the otter admitted. "Rub-er? Whad kin?"

"I'll look around when we get into town" the mouse promised. "How long will you need?"

"Ve doubl ober, maybe four feetz?"

"Make it six, with a camouflaged float. Say a dull flower? Our fans will believe that more than just four feet of material. I'll have something for you after the morning before we shoot the American version. I look forward to seeing what you write for the next story." She bent down to kiss the otter on his balding head, uncaring that by doing so she gave her friend a perfect view of her chest. After all, it was on film already and George was as Fey as they came. So was their current hero she remembered as she walked away to the tent she shared with her co-star. And the two before him. But George was smarter than she was when it came to movies and she needed him to keep the evil Silver Star believable. Besides, she really liked him. Unlike most Hollywood actors she had many friends in the crew.

Charleen Van Puggug was arguing with the director as Jean walked past. The mouse paused a moment, listening to the argument.

"And if you can't get me a co-star that likes my body next time, I am going to quit this gig" Charleen threatened.

"So its burlesque again" their director, a rather skinny porcine asked. It was almost a threat.

"If.. I... Have... Too" Charleen answered, stressing each word, thus calling her directors implied threat for the first time.

"All right. Let me talk to Jean. She spent three years on these islands. Maybe she knows someone. But Charleen, Petunia is going to have to 'marry' one of these heroes one day or make some kind of implied commitment to Silver Star. Your fans are demanding some sort of continuation."

"I know Robert. I know" the vixen admitted. "And as many want Jean.. I mean Silver Star and I to become an item. They keep claiming that there are clues. How Star captures me, and it is always days before my hero of the day saves me. They wonder what happens between capture and release. Some even quote dialog between us, certain looks or expressions. Those people are driving us nuts."

"Yeah. Megs been keeping a running tally. More want your characters together than don't. Look, talk to Jean and George. When you three brainstorm you come up with great ideas. Hell, the last three scripts were probably completely rewritten by you guys anyway. You know your characters better than anyone. The nosey, apparently vapid brain dead reporter who's really a sharp cookie willing to pay any price for her story against a mad scientist who's plots continually endanger the world. Only to be foiled by that selfsame nosey reporter. Just talk with her okay?"

Jean took that moment to step into the tent. Tossing her towel aside she posed as erotically as she knew how. "Petunia my love. I fear that I can no longer hide my feelings" she announced in her sexiest voice. "I am yours. Do with me as you will, but know that I love you. I have always loved you."

Charleen giggled, ignoring their directors stunned look she took up the ad-lib. Ripping her own blouse off she ran the four steps to Jean, throwing her arms about the smaller mouse. "Oh my dearest love. You cannot understand how much this delights me. There is a village just two days away, come. We will marry quickly. Before George returns with the amphibian."

Both women held the pose a few seconds, then began giggling. As Robert watched in amazement the two broke down into gales of laughter.

"Crazy" he said, shaking his head no. "Crazy as loons." Reaching across his table he picked up a mug of coffee and began to sip, waiting for his stars to regain their composure. "When you two are done I shall treat you both to dinner at Parrys." He propped his feet up on his table, listening as the two first caught their breath, then started plotting. *'Why do I bother to hire writers'* he wondered as he listened. *'Together, those three are pure genius. Absolutely pure genius.'*

"Yah kno she's jus over bah tha old movie site on Main Isle" the black furred mare Nikki Benevedo told her business partner.

Katherine McMaster threw down her leather flying jacket. "Really" the dalmatian laughed. "She does owe me thirty shells I recall. And just where are they filming today?"

Nikki flicked a wad of paper towards her trashcan. "Murder Cliff" she answered. "Shou' be bak afore sundon."

"That fake quicksand pool" Katherine asked. "What are they filming, another Jumble Jimbo movie?"

"Petunias Perils" Nikki answered. "Tha Great Radiosonic Warhead." She opened a drawer in her desk, taking out a bound sheaf of pages. Dropping it on her desk she gently laid one hoof on it. "Script."

Licking her lips the dalmatian stared at the script. "How much" she almost whispered.

"Yah tak 'morrow off."

"I can't do that" Katherine admitted. "There are reports to write. I need to get over to Superior. We have customers..."

Pulling a lighter from one of her outfits many pockets the mare flipped it open with practiced ease. A single scratch of steel roller over flint sent a long lick of flame into the air.

"Half a day" Katherine offered.

"Sunrise tah nex sunrise" Nikki countered. "Ah yah visit yer famly."

"But Nikki..."

"But Katey..." the mare countered. "When's tha last time yah had ah day off?"

"My brothers wedding."

"Tah weeks after openin shop. How long go was that?"

Her shoulders drooping the dalmatian walked over to her partners desk. "Sunrise to next sunrise" she agreed, grabbing the pages as soon as the mares hoof lifted. "You'll pay for this."

"Probably. But yah 'serve it" the mare answered, closing her lighter as she reached behind herself to pluck a clipboard off her wall. "Ah got ah cargo run tahday, yah got tha missionary fly-rond in tah hours. Tahmorrow yah rest, mah girl ahn ah work."

"And just when my dear partner, will you take a day off" Katherine asked.

"Hon. Malou... ah couln survive ah day off. Serious."

Later that night George, Jean and Charleen were dining at Parrys when a bottle was placed on their table. "Didn't order that" Jean informed the waiter.

"No my dear lady, this you did not" the Russian waiter answered. He stepped aside, giving the mouse view of a waiting dalmatian. "That lady though did." He bowed slightly before turning back to his other duties.

"Hello Katy, come for those shells I owe yah" the mouse asked.

Katherine pulled out the forth chair, settling into it carefully. It wasn't quite designed for her species, still she managed to fit with some comfort. "That would be a good start" she admitted.

Unsnapping a pocket of her clothing Jean withdrew a small coin purse. "American or Spontoon" she asked as she opened it. "Honestly I did lose your address. I also lost all my luggage in that crash."

"Spontoon. Who was flying?"

"I was" Jean admitted. "My co-pilot was dead drunk, thirty hours in the air, fog. I screwed up." She offered the thirty shells, waiting calmly as Katherine first counted then slipped them into her own purse.

"I should charge you interest. So who was stuck with the blame?"

"Karl" the mouse admitted. "We were both unconscious when they found the wreckage but Karl was still drunk with a bottle near him. Somehow I'd floated to the back. They thought I'd been sleeping in the bunk I guess. He's back in Germany and I'm not flying anymore so it evened out."

"And this lovely lady is" Charleen asked, batting her eyes.

Jean stood. "Charleen, this is my old dorm mate Katherine. Katherine, the international renowned star of stage 'n screen, Charleen Van Pugnug. Originally known as Susan Yarrow. And this sweet gentleman is George Jacob Spring, our favorite special effects creator. George, Katherine. If you offer her your paw George count your fingers when yah get it back."

"That's Nikki" the dalmatian corrected.

"And who taught her that" Jean asked as she sat again.

"Louise" the hound answered.

"Oh, folks. We don't go there. Bad subject. Katy. How is Nikki doing."

Reaching over the table to grab a bottle of beer Katherine smiled. "Believe it or not a local priestess dug her out of it. She's happy now. Has a sweet little Macau siamese. You'll like her."

"Really? That's wonderful news. I was afraid Nikki would commit suicide or worse."

"No, Nikki won't be flying over Cranium Island" the hound agreed. "Not that I didn't find a flight plan for that the week after Louise died. Now what are you up to?"

"After that good news, drinkin ah toast" Jean answered, lifting her arm to signal with one paw. "An trying to figure out this new plot." Ordering from the waiter Jean tapped George on his wrist. "Let the little lady see what we ave."

"Buh she..."

"Is an old friend George" the mouse explained. "I lived with her for three years, she's all business. Now please? We are stuck."

Shoving his notepad over to the waiting dalmatian George waited for her to read. There really wasn't that much worked out yet as they had only been brainstorming seriously a little while.

"No hero in this story" Katherine asked.

"Comes in way later. Maybe 'nother captive who escapes" Jean explained. "Say. Is Biff Armstrong still around? Its tha perfect part for that camera ham and Charleen is dead sick of leading men who are more interested in George than her."

"Biff died" Katherine answered. "Took some cute reporter to Cranium Island. Its not like he was never warned. Haven't seen her around since either."

"Cranium?" George asked.

"You seriously do not wanna know" Jean admitted. "Had ah couple girls get lost at night righ after graduatin, first job wid passengers even. Buncha missionaries. Bad storm blew up, compass crashed. They refueled NorthWest o' Cranium Island. Nav flew her crew near tha island. Two, three miles away. Thought they were safe enough that far out. Something sucked tha brain right outta tha Navs best friens skull while they watched. Through 'er ears. Happened tah be tha co-pilot so they lived. She quit life right then. Curled up in a ball in ah Sanatorium back in England. Visited once, was like talking to a ball of fur for all I got out of her. Probably be there the rest of her life. Missionaries, they sorta.. Well no one really know wha happend tah them. Jus vanished after landin."

"Fairy tales" Charleen laughed. "To frighten overly curious outsiders."

For the first time since she had met the mouse Charleen saw a part of Jean that frightened her. "Cranium Island, yah die ugly. Krupmark, lucky is they just slave yah a few years. Kau Hon? No one ever see's yah again. Charleen, it happened. Live with it."

"Your serious."

"You go tah Cranium Island I'll remember yah in my prayers for a year. I won't look for yah to return. If you do I'll kill whatever stands in front of me cause it won't be my best friend Charleen. It'll be some kind of monster in her skin. Kapish?"

"Kah.. Peesh" Charleen agreed abruptly serious herself. "Cranium Island, no go. Gotcha."

"Now that's over what is your basic plot" Katherine asked.

George answered her, the otter becoming animated as he spoke. "Petunia. She kapures tha Star. Onna way hom is accident. Bad. Land stran place. Kretures ferm space kapture both. Goin take home. Hero he saves, but Star she is killed."

"For real this time?"

Both women shrugged. "Depends on how our audience reacts" Charleen admitted. "Seven Petunia movies, four with Silver Star. All four the most popular. We just wrapped up number eight, so that's five with Silver Star. You see Katherine we have a problem with our fans. A lot want me, well Petunia, to get married. Most though believe that Star and Petunia are secretly lovers. Or at least in love. Most of those are the ones who view our European cuts. They seriously want the two of us to link up somehow. Express our love. But that would kill both our careers and probably our director Robert as well. If we do go for the European audience, who are over seventy percent of our audience now anyway it has to be subtle. Subtle but something that the average viewer will catch. Something we can cover from the American censors."

"That's all we get here" Katharine admitted. "European cuts. Given a choice between America's curdled milk censorship and what is available. I always thought you two were lovers. Your characters I mean, I know Jean too well to think she'd kiss a woman without being paid to do it. Or for a joke."

"Same here" Charleen admitted. "Jean and I, we chase the boys. See who can get the hunkiest fellow."

"Who wins" the dalmatian asked.

"Usually Charleen" Jean admitted. "She has the better looks, more famous. Outside my eyepatch I'm one of jillions of mice."

Katherine looked at the page again. "George. Are you trying to make these two an item? For real I mean."

"Goot idea" George agreed. "Hard do wit how Movtown s nah. Ah do und specl fects, noh so gott writer."

"Jean. There's a first year in town. Writes professionally. Weird Tales. Let me call Nikki. If anyone can get her out of Songmark for a day its that mare. Creatures from space is probably right up her alley." She stood, picking up her purse before walking towards the public phone booths.

"She 'kay" George asked.

"We can trust her" Jean answered. "She may be a mad Petunia fan but I never knew her to break a secret."

October 2nd, 1936

It was a soft Friday morning as came often in this time of year. There was a gentle breeze that whispered though the Great Stone Glen, causing a mist that each morning drifted in from the nearby waterfall to shift like a thin smoke. A soft breeze gently moving its mist partner in transparent curtains through the depression Oharu delightedly now called home. In one raised side, where natural rubble was coated with a fine green moss a certain mouse kneeled on one wide stone. She was currently deep within her own thoughts, waiting for the suns first rays before preforming her morning ritual. It had been only months before that she had been accepted by those in power on Spontoan. Accepted, but given only this one chance. Only then, and by a test that had stretched her courage and deepest training to the ragged edge had she been allowed to live. To live upon Spontoan and train as a priestess. Now she was deep into her training. As she once explained to Huakava and Saimmi, the difference in basic ritual between Shinto and Spontoan beliefs was very little. It was the more complex rituals that showed that difference between their paths, yet it was still less than the differences between Buddhist and Shinto. Even so she was constantly going over each Spontoan ritual, laying its foundation into her mind in such a way that she would never confuse it with a like, or near like Shinto ritual.

Her three students though were away. Learning from another Priestess things Oharu herself as yet did not know. It was by the sending away of ones student to another that rituals could be better saved. For the more they knew, the less chance a single lost life would cause another disaster.

It was the dancing that was giving her the most trouble though. To dance she had to wear the native costume, not her familiar and comforting kimono. Four days a week she traveled to Casino Island in order to study Hula. For three hours a day she worked at learning moves that had no corresponding value in her first life. Each move, each stance, each paw gesture had a certain meaning just as it did in her own dance. To those tourists who spent a week or two studying the native dance the mouse seemed to be working awfully hard at getting each move exactly as her teacher showed her. To them Hula was simply a dance to take home, to entertain their friends with. Usually at parties after a bit too much alcohol had been absorbed. That anything about it might have a serious meaning never occurred to them.

At the moment Oharu kneeled before the small Shinto style shrine that she had built with her own paws, this morning there was only a simple grass skirt upon her body. For this was how the ritual should be done. For a few certain others she would discard even the grass skirt. It embarrassed her, even more so because without her kimono her ruined back was visible to all. A whisper of energy, almost of sound caught her attention. Opening her dark eyes she saw the very first pale ray of sunlight caress those thin

high clouds above her. Opening her mouth she began singing her welcome to the life giving sun, her whiskey sour voice giving a strange trimmer to ancient, long sacred words. As she sang she began to rise, to move in those steps required of this dance.

Certainly welcoming the morning wasn't an extremely important ritual, yet in order to fix within her mind each ritual Oharu had decided to preform it. Preform it each day until she could do so not only without flaw, but with all the power her heart and soul could give. One of her nanori would test her on each ritual. Nanori, teacher. A fleeting thought wondered at her flickering between Cipangu, English and Spontoon words. Occasionally even French. Only a fleeting thought though, as her entire being smoothly flowed into the ritual.

Unknown to the mouse another figure had entered the clearing behind her. Called by the rough voice a young female prairie dog had quietly entered the glen. She stopped at the opening, her soiled and torn Songmark uniform hanging limply while she watched Oharu move smoothly through her morning ritual. When the mouse ceased her song, ceased her dance the young woman stepped further into the open area. One foot slid over a stone, causing it to roll.

At the sound Oharu turned, her emotions still so buffered by the ritual that she forgot she was naked from the waist up. "Good morning" she said in greeting. "You are?"

"Pa.. Patricia" the tan furred girl answered. "What happened to yer back?"

"It is the past. I have moved on. Now it is unimportant. How may I serve you?" She had quickly noted the Songmark uniform, a single note sewn upon its sleeve. This was a first year, but from what little she had learned about Songmark first years were not allowed to explore on their own. Certainly never Main Island. She would have to discuss this with Titania when the Russian again visited.

"Is this a sacred place?" Patricia asked, ignoring the mouse's question.

"Yes. One of the most sacred places. Is this why you have come here?"

Patricia grimaced, only then did Oharu notice she was favoring her right foot. "Father Joseph says that all Gods are false cept' ours" she said in answer.

"Each person must find that path which calls to them" Oharu countered. "None may say which is truth, which is lie until after one has been called. What is true and correct for one person may not be true and correct for another. For yet a third it may be entirely incorrect. I have always believed that, as long as one walks within the sunlight that their path is true."

Hobbling forward the young Songmark student made her way to where Oharu stood, stopping a few feet away. "How com yer.." She indicated her own chest.

Oharu laughed. More to cover her own embarrassment than from amusement, for only Saimmi had yet seen her this way. She reached over to a stone where her blouse, such as it was, lay. Slipping it on she used a free paw to indicate the shine she had rebuilt. Was in fact still working on. "Certain rituals require certain forms of dress" she explained. "This is optional. As I did not expect a European visitor I preferred the more natural version."

"Ah. Say, do yah have any water? Please? I've been walkin a long time."

Since Patricia hadn't mentioned her injury or asked for help Oharu simply walked to the cavern where her fresh water source cascaded from a shattered section of stone. Picking up a waiting wooden bowl she held it under the cascade, then walked back up the path to offer it to the girl. Patricia drank greedily, then asked for more. Instead of getting it Oharu simply stood aside, thus making the girl walk down the path to obtain her own drink. It also gave the mouse time to study her visitor.

"You have run away from school" she remarked.

"Run for mah life" Patricia corrected between gulps of water. "They were gonna kill me."

"Who" Oharu asked, "was going to kill you?"

"Red Dorm. All I did was say Communism was just a way tah steal everyone's property." She opened her blazer, lifting her stained and torn blouse. Under the soft tan fur a dark green bruise shown. Dark black blood also matted the short fur, making a nasty mass. "Barely outran 'em" she admitted. "Wanted tah attend Songmark because its tha best. Got in, then second years tried tah kill me. Education or not, I prefer breathing. Can yah protect me? Please?"

"I prefer breathing as well, and yes. Since you ask I will do what I am able to protect you. Yet I know much of Songmark. Their tutors would frown heavily upon one student killing another. In the least they would deduct a great deal of points from her dorm. If nothing more than to clean up the mess."

"Funny. Very funny. You a student?"

"Not of Songmark" Oharu admitted. "I am learning to be a priestess. I have been learning since my childhood. I will be learning until I take my last breath. You understand that they have already released the second years to search for you, that if they release the third years your life will not be worth the living. Even if you are not expelled for your actions. Certainly if Maria or Molly is the one to find you. "

Patricia sat the bowl down where Oharu had kept it, turning to face the mouse. "Yah seem tah know a lot about Songmark."

"One of Red dorm is my adopted daughter. I count her also as a friend and student" the mouse admitted. "Another student has stolen my heart. Miss Devinski I consider a friend. Yes Patricia, I know a little about Songmark."

Sitting on a large stone the prairie dog suddenly collapsed in exhaustion. "Ran outta tha frying pan right intah tha fire. Now what?"

"You are American?" Oharu asked, avoiding that question for the moment.

"Nah Zealand. Grandfather emigrated when he was nineteen."

"He traveled a great deal for his future, for your future. It is early, they will not release the third years until noon. Perhaps we should walk now. It is a distance to the nearest water taxi, further still to Songmark." Though she very much wished to change into her kimono Oharu was well aware of the anger third years would show to a first year, should they be pulled from their studies to chase her down. Best to get this mess, and mess it was, cleared up before that happened.

"Why? They just gonna throw me out anyway."

"Perhaps" Oharu agreed. "Most likely. However all you needed to do was go to one of the tutors and quit. Then there would be no problem. They would have you on transportation home today. By this evening another girl would be offered your place. I am aware of two young English girls who would sell themselves, their honor, their souls perhaps, to anyone. Without question or reserve, simply for the place you so easily throw away. Why you are throwing yours away I do not understand."

"Cause I'm stupid" Patricia admitted. "Mom said I was stupid, that I'd never make it. She's always right."

"And your father?"

"Dad? He supported me, but their divorced. I don't see him much cause mom hates him."

"Can you walk on that foot or should I carry you" Oharu asked abruptly.

"Can walk. Hurts, but not that bad. As long as I keep my boot on."

"Then we have wasted enough time. Come first year, unless you wish to join a certain young lady as my servant."

Standing carefully Patricia eased her weight onto the injured foot. Her gasp of pain was all the warning Oharu had, or needed. Stepping under the younger girl she caught the falling weight on her back, then lifted herself, taking the girl's full weight onto her back. Patricia it turned out was heavier than she looked. "Much muscle on your body" the mouse admitted as she helped Patricia into a comfortable carrying position.

"I can walk" Patricia argued.

"Not today" Oharu warned. Staggering a bit under the weight for a moment she carefully made her way up the only path into or out of her glen.

As they cleared the first jungle intersection a native guide stepped up. "Care for assistance?" He asked in Spontoonie

Oharu nodded. "She is very heavy, damaged ankle."

"Not a problem. Where too" he asked as, with a short instruction in English from Oharu Patricia allowed herself to be carried by the more muscular male. Oharu noted she seemed awfully pleased to be so close to so much native male... fur.

Adjusting her own clothing Oharu pointed towards Eastern Island. "Nearest water taxi, then I take her home." She fell into step with the man, absently noting Patricia's paws wandering just a bit as she 'held on for dear life.' "How did she?" she asked.

"Swam over, all the way from Casino" her helper reported. "Moro followed her with his taxi, in case she couldn't make it. I sort of herded her your way. Thought it best."

"I think she likes you" the mouse giggled.

"You noticed?"

"Hey" Patricia yelled. "English please? I don't understand native."

"It's not important" Oharu explained. "He was simply asking how much I wanted for you. He needs a second wife."

"He's MARRIED?" A deep sigh of disappointment came from the tan body. "You husband right?"

"Learn to read the fur marks little one" Oharu laughed. "And to listen to what is said to you. For your second question..." She stepped close for a second, the guide pausing, already knowing what was coming. Kissing the prairie dog hard on her lips before stepping away Oharu smiled, letting a paw wander soft private curves for a moment. "I prefer a different taste in my life. Perhaps I will keep you if Songmark discards you."

While Patricia remained silent in embarrassment Oharu and her helpful Guide laughed.

With the Guide's assistance it was a quick walk to a second waiting taxi, who's wolf pilot 'happened to have pulled in for a relief break.' Giving him a knowing nod Oharu took her normal place amidstships, while ordering the girl to sit on one side. "Eastern Island" she told the pilot, though it was certain he didn't need the information. As they pulled away Oharu drew her utility knife, deftly slicing through the laces of Patricia's boot. A cry of pain as the boot released its pressure came from the young girl. Other than that she kept her silence.

"Put your foot in the cool water" Oharu ordered after removing boot and the thick cotton sock under it. "It will reduce the swelling."

Following instructions Patricia looked at her damaged boot. "Wouldn't need too if you hadn't cut tha laces."

"By the time Mrs.Oelabe could get to that foot there would have been too much damage. It would never have healed correctly. You may even have lost it."

"You a doctor too?"

"No. Annette is."

"Oh..." was all the prairie dog could say. She didn't even bother to ask who 'Annette' was. Memory of that passionate, hot, unexpected, undesired kiss and the wandering paw in private places was all the answer she needed.

With a rising morning wind against them the powerful little water taxi slowly fought its way across the bay. Other craft went by now and then, while the occasional flying boat landed or took off. Patricia watched the aircraft avidly. Oharu though kept her mind elsewhere. A little over halfway across the bay another water taxi suddenly veered off its course, turning to intercept Oharu's. A sound from their pilot caught the mouse's attention. Looking around she finally spotted the craft, two Songmark students at its bow pointing and yelling. "They could use a bath" the mouse remarked in Spontoonie.

A warbling whistle came from the wolf followed moments later by other craft hitting a wave wrong, its bow snapping up high before crashing back into the water. Both second years went flying, ending up in near perfect dives as they hit the water.

"Wow, did-yah see that?" Patricia asked.

"And what did you see" Oharu asked softly.

"Those girls got knocked into the water."

Oharu didn't look up from contemplating her missing claw. "How did they enter the water" she asked.

"In dives. That's wild. They didn't know what was happening. No warnin at all. But they hit the water in perfect dives anyway."

"Could you do that?"

"Not on my best day" Patricia admitted.

"You will, in your second year. If you have a second year. It is part of what Songmark teaches. Whatever happens you must be prepared to survive."

"Why aren't you ah Songmark student?"

"I am unable to pilot any aircraft" the mouse admitted. "Taking position at such wonderful school would be waste. I will not steal from another place they deserve. I am happy with my life. I prefer to serve others. Not rule them."

"Their back in the taxi, headed after us" Patricia reported a little later.

"They have lost valuable time. All they can hope to do is follow. Keep that foot in the water."

"But tha drag..."

"Does not matter. It is a very powerful engine. Nor are we moving that fast."

When they arrived at the dock there were two more second year students waiting, along with dozens of natives. Oharu noted both of the waiting students were Red Dorm, though neither was Tatiana Bryzov. Patricia flinched at the looks they gave her. "Pay the man" Oharu told Patricia. "Two fares." Then she stood, picked up the discarded boot and stepped in front of the two girls. "Please move" she asked softly.

"That's our student" the larger girl answered. "We're taking her in." Neither seemed to recognize the mouse in her native costume. This was to be expected, as neither had seen Oharu that much in the first place and no one but Saimmi had yet seen her in full native costume. Her fur markings, taught to Oharu by Saimmi told the natives all they needed to know the mouse noted. A respectful clearing was made behind the two Songmark girls, as they would for Saimmi or Huakava. *'I do not need this respect'* she thought. *'I do not deserve it.'* But she kept her voice silent on the matter.

"I need room" Oharu continued. "My guest is injured. If you touch her I shall be most unhappy." Looking behind them she spotted a cart. "I need this girl carried in cart" she called as she stepped onto the pier. "These two will pay" she looked back at the two students. "Twice the normal rate." A movement by the larger Red Dorm girl as she started to pass Oharu was followed by counter movement by the mouse. With a cry of surprise Liberty Morgenstern tumbled into the water, not quite having time to turn the tumble into a true dive, but managing a shallow entry none the less. Turning to the other girl Oharu simply waited. Waited until recognition eventually came to the girl as she took in the events around her.

"Priestess" she whispered, taking a step back. "Okay, I'll play your game for now. Priestess."

Within minutes Patricia was on a cart while Liberty was pressing water out of her fur. "Why all the hubbub" Liberty asked. "Your not part of Songmark."

Reaching down to the now prone prairie dog Oharu grabbed Patricia's stained blouse, ripping it off with a wet sound of tearing cloth. Fresh blood was again seeping from the girls wound. Automatically the young girl covered herself with both arms but the wound remained in view. "This makes it my business" she growled, throwing the bloody ruined blouse at Liberties feet.

"But... But we didn't hit her that hard" Liberty gasped. "Brigit. Go get Mrs. Oelabe. This had to have happened when she fell down the stairs."

"With help?" Oharu asked.

"Maybe" Liberty admitted. "But this was never intended. Never."

"Let us hope that your tutors are so understanding. I am not."

Liberty looked up the road towards Songmark. "Murdie" was her only answer.

Miss Oelabe met them a little outside Songmark's gates, quickly dropping to her knees to inspect the damage. Within minutes she gave her report. "Broken rib, torn flesh. She'll live. No infection yet. Nice little

scar though to make lies for her grandchildren.” Looking up at Oharu, anger in her face she paused, then asked what had happened.

“That is for Red Dorm to say” Oharu answered. “Until Miss Devinski comes, this one is under my protection.”

Standing quickly Mrs. Oelabe gave Liberty an armor plate melting look. “What is it with you and Songmark students” she asked the mouse, while still trying to turn her student into a wilted mass of protoplasm using only her eyes.

“They taste good” Oharu answered. “I enjoy the spice you give them.”

“Ah, well I guess that’s as good a reason as any. For this time your welcome inside the gates, but only as long as Miss Devinski lets you stay.”

“I understand” the mouse agreed, waiting as Liberty and her partner dragged the heavy cart inside Songmarks gate. As its owner was male he could not enter Songmark, so he waited outside, quite happy to chat with the very cute current student guard. They would have to drag the cart back as well and pay the double hire. A fact Oharu know meant that their punishment had just started. Even an accident must be dealt with, least accidents gave way to hazing, then hazing to maiming injury. Or death. As long as it had truly been an accident all Red Dorm was looking at were a few lost points, a lost pass. Two at the worst. It was Patricia’s future that the mouse was worried about.

It wasn’t Miss Devinski who arrived at the office, the hound being at Casino Island today for some reason. Instead Miss Nordlingen came to take statements, the feline glancing at Oharu in her native dress as if she were seeing a green skinned Martian Invader for the very first time. Turning her attention to the two Red Dorm girls she studied them as if viewing something distasteful. “Liberty, wash and change clothing” she ordered. “Then both of you find your partners in crime and return here. Without delay.” As the two left she turned her attention to the waiting mouse. “And you’re here why?”

“I was asked for protection” Oharu explained. “I have given it. I shall now leave.”

“Not.. Quite.. yet. Please” the feline asked. “I need to get to the bottom of this, so I need your part of the story as well. If you would please. I’ll be back as soon as I question Patricia.”

“I will wait” Oharu agreed. When Miss Nordlingen had left Oharu settled onto the floor. Unlike certain American movies (many filmed in Spontoon itself) a grass skirt did not lend itself well to sitting in a chair. Simply folding ones legs under oneself, while letting the skirt fan away from her body was the most comfortable way Oharu had discovered to sit while wearing one. But there was a disadvantage to being new to grass skirts. Miss Nordlingen’s office had a stone floor. It was very cold.

For over half an hour Oharu waited, spending her time going over what additions were needed to the shrine she was building and just how expensive wood working tools were going to be. Carvings needed to be made, as an artist herself it would be a simple matter to teach herself carving. Tools for carving the native woods were expensive, and though Mrs McGee continued to sell Oharu’s works at her resort, most of those profits had to be held back for after the tourist season. Perhaps the Hoele’toemi family could rent, or find someone to rent such tools to her. Perhaps for further work in gardens, or helping around the longhouse. She was still going through her options when Miss Nordlingen returned.

Hardly noting Oharu’s position the feline simply walked to her desk. “Red dorm will be here in a minute or two. Would you please wait, so that you might hear what they have to say? I still need your side of this story.”

“Patricia?” Oharu asked as she struggled to her feet. Her left foot had gone to sleep, it made balancing a difficult act at the moment.

"Undecided" the feline admitted. "One tutor cannot throw out, or retain a student. That takes a decision by all four of us. I warn you though. Unless there's a really good reason for her actions she is gone. I wouldn't hold my breath hoping for a reprieve. Main Island is forbidden without a Guide. We make certain to tell all our first years that on the first day. Of course its to make them wonder, and then find ways to get around that rule. Other than a pawful, such as deliberate injury to another student or faculty member or equipment, all our rules are meant to be broken. Our best students break every one they can, then find unwritten rules to void. But this, school is only a week old and already she's.. well." Shaking her head the feline instructor gave a sigh of disappointment. "Not to forget her injuries. Both physical and emotional. Patricia truly believes that Red Dorm wanted her dead."

A knock on the office door interrupted their conversation. Oharu quietly stepped back into a corner, becoming almost invisible as she blended into the native items already on display there. As the four students entered each barely glanced at the priestess in training, giving lie to that apparent invisibility (then Red Dorm were all second year students, they had learned to notice their surroundings) before lining up in front of Miss Nordlingen. "Red Dorm Reports" Liberty announced, her fur still damp from her freshwater shower.

Miss Nordlingen settled herself behind her desk, ignoring the four nervous students. Finally, after taking a delicate sip of her coffee (the act in itself telling anyone with the right education that her own background was much more than it appeared) she looked up. "Since when is attempted murder of a fellow student part of Songmark's curriculum" she asked.

"If we wanted tha lass dead" Brigit answered. "She would be dead."

"I am quite certain that she would be Brigit" the feline agreed, turning her gaze onto the girl. There was no anger in that gaze, no emotion at all. It was as if something dead was looking at her Brigit realized, and that more than anything in the world frightened her. "Since you spoke, why don't you tell me what happened."

"But Miss Nordlingen, Liberty..."

"Was smart enough to keep her mouth shut" the feline finished, giving the coyote barely a glance. "Now, your story is?"

Brigit inhaled slowly. What was running through her mind at the moment no one could know. Only that her opinion of authority was, at best, limited. "Tha lass came tah us" Brigit explained. "While we were ah walking back from supper. She wanted tah know about our political views." She hesitated only an instant before continuing. Yet in that hesitation the Irish girl balanced her future against that of her dorm mates, and any none to subtle threats made by several of them over the last year. "We talked long intah tha night. Well past bed check buh Miss Cardroy must ah missed her."

"She did not" the feline corrected. "Patricia was well hidden by you, even her scent. I will not tell you how Miss Cardroy knew she was there. Your efforts were enough to allow the transgression and Patricia's dorm mates proved most adept at making a bedcrow for her. Continue."

"Ah. So. Well, come late Patricia decided tha she had had nough of us all. She told Liberty ahn Tatiana tha Communism was not but medieval serfdom innah new suit. Then she tol toh'other she was nothin but ah cheap thief."

"And yourself?"

Brigit seemed to shiver, which was strange as it was in no way cool even for the lightly dressed mouse standing behind her. "Terrorist. Nothin but ah cheap terrorist. So we jumped 'er. Honest, we din-nah mean any real harm. We were jus angry."

Miss Nordlingen leaned back in her chair, appraising the four. "Comments?" she asked. None of the three remaining girls opened their mouths. "I can see where Patricia's lack of tact put her in a bad situation. To so bluntly inform not one, but four mad wolves that their lives were based on lies is bad enough. But to do so within their own den. That shows an extreme lack of self preservation. Still she may have been basing her decision to do so on the mistaken belief that you four were civilized. Something I am afraid that you have apparently failed to manage. No matter, there will be extra course work for all of you. How to act civilized within a civilized context for you four, basic self preservation for Patricia. If she remains a student."

A knock on her door silenced the feline, a second later Mrs. Oelabe walked in. Stopping next to the seated feline she leaned down, whispering in Miss Nordlingen's ear. When she was done the nurse left as quickly as she had come.

"Well girls. While we chatted Mrs. Oelabe and several third years have investigated the scene. I think you will be happy to know they have all given the incident a label of almost tragic accident. You will, I am afraid be unhappy to know that your stash of special equipment, the one you kept under the eighth stair? Has come to a tragic end. Ladies, and I do use that term here in its loosest context, the next time you hide something under a stair tread, insure that it cannot come loose in a life or death situation. It appears that when Patricia trusted her life to that step holding, it slipped. One of your crampon's lifted just enough to catch her as she fell. It was that which caused her injury. Still I have one last thing to ask. Oharu?"

Stepping forward the mouse bowed respectfully to Miss Nordlingen. "I have nothing useful to add" she informed the feline.

"Perhaps you do. How did Patricia get from Casino island to Main Island, considering by law no first year may step on those shores unescorted. We all know that no water taxi would have accepted her. Not a first year."

"She swam."

"At ebb tide?"

"I would not know. I am not sailor. Perhaps asking water taxi that followed her, Moro was pilot. He would give you information you need."

"I'll do that. Oharu. Miss Devinski told me that, for reasons we all know but will not speak of you have taken up residence in a very difficult to locate place. One the average tourist could never find. Even a second year would have difficulty locating your home without some clue. How then did a student of only one week come to you?"

"She was herded. As to the how I not certain, most likely by noises, closed paths and such. I am certain Red Dorm aware of way one frightened young girl, away from home for first time in life might be herded to destination. Without her knowing."

Shaking her head in amazement the feline gave a soft laugh. "Second years make a swim like that, but for a first year. In the dark, across unknown waters. She could have been an exceptional student. Oharu. Would you tell me something about these four young ladies?"

Confused, for she knew nothing of three of the girls, Oharu cocked her head slightly. "If I am able."

"Look at them, are any of them worth trying to civilize?"

Oharu turned, studying the four girls. It was an odd question, one she didn't have any idea how to answer. Still, she could at least try. Walking to the first, Tatiana, Oharu smiled warmly to the Russian woman. "Tatiana spends time at my shrine. She is helpful. Her soul has begun calming but a little. Yet I hold much

hope for her. She is my chosen daughter. These others I must guess." Then it was Brigit's turn. Again the priestess in training gave an affirmative answer. But it was Liberty where things went oddly. When Oharu's eyes met the coyotes something occurred. Through her bare feet the mouse felt a tingling. A feeling she knew well from her Miko heritage. Within her mind she stepped aside, letting that which wished to borrow her body access.

"There is greatness within your heart" she heard her voice say in a much softer, much gentler tone than it should have been able to achieve. "Yet you let your mind rule. Step aside, let your heart rule. Until you do so you will never achieve that greatness which has been chosen for you." Just as quickly the feeling passed and Oharu was again in control of her body. Stepping back to regain her balance she blinked, but did not look away from the New Haven woman. "You have powerful friend here" she said softly. "Heed well its advice." Looking to the fourth Oharu gave a soft laugh. "Very much yes" she answered.

Turning away from the girls she locked gaze with Miss Norgenstern. "You have asked of me favor. I ask of you one in return. Give girl Patricia one more chance. Nothing more, simply one more chance. Now I must go. I have shrines to attend and I am already well late in the doing so." Bowing again she stepped away, leaving the office and its occupants to dwell upon what had happened.

It was late in the evening and Oharu had just finished her sunset ritual when a electric torch flashed from the glen's path. Walking over to greet her visitor, whomever they were, she was pleasantly surprised to discover Tatiana walking towards her. "I thought your dorm be restricted" she said in greeting.

"We are. I'm here 'for training'" the Russian answered as she turned off her torch. "Two weekends, no passes. I also have a message for you. Patricia will get one more chance. But she will need tutoring to keep up with her classes until Mrs. Oelabe releases her to full activities." Sitting on her favorite stone Tatiana grinned. "Guess which dorm gets to do the tutoring."

"Perhaps it the best" Oharu admitted. "She will learn even wolves may curb their appetites. You will learn what is like to teach."

"So you will teach me?"

"That Tatiana depends. What do you wish learn? Religion? Shinto or Spontoon yes. No other. Meditation? To point yes. I will not teach you Misogi. Not.. Not yet. How to dance? Cipangu dance yes, I still learning how to Hula. My style self defense has already been taught you, I am simply faster. I will always simply be faster. The why that I leave for you to discover, as one day you will."

Standing the ermine wiped her face, her black tipped tail twitching. "I want to learn how to look at something the way you do. To weigh its value, to find its truth."

Laughing the mouse stood as well. "That anyone may do simply opening their eyes. When must you return?"

"Miss Cardroy said no later than sundown Sunday, or don't bother coming back. Ever."

Oharu thought that over. "This the weekend. Either you have test, or this itself is test. I have roast chicken to warm, with breadfruit and pineapple. Though all have to drink is cold water I delighted share it with you. Then we may talk seeing that which is obvious, yet ignored. But first I must get out this skirt and into kimono. Grass itches."

October 5th, 1936

"Good afternoon Millicent. You look very well today. Please place your secrets case on my desk."

Millicent followed the terse instructions of her superior, stepping back after she was through. "Sir. Is there a problem?" She was in a part of the English Consulate that she rarely visited.

"There are always problems Millicent. At the moment my problem is you. Ah, your key please?" He waited as Millicent removed the chain holding her key from about her neck, accepting the still warm shaped brass metal piece from her while ignoring the delicate scent attached to it. "Thank you."

Millicent watched as her superior opened her case, carefully taking out every last paper before inspecting its interior. After that he checked each paper carefully, even the red covered ones. "I see. Everything as it should be." Abruptly he opened a drawer, withdrawing a revolver that he placed in front of him. "Would you please explain your sudden interest in the Russian Spy Tatiana Bryzov."

Fear washed over the young woman at the sight of that weapon. Tatiana had warned her. Warned her to tell nothing but the truth when this occurred. For she was certain that it would occur. "Certainly sir. She offered me information, for a price. I felt that the price was well within my budget to pay. I have given that information to Mr. Green."

"Very useful information at that. Millicent. Why didn't you contact your superior first? You are not trained as an agent. In fact you are a snobbish little know it all stuck up Diplomats daughter whom I would love to see shipped home in disgrace. Or rub my bare feet through her pelt as a rug."

"Sir. I... I..." Millicent stopped. "Yes sir. That is the truth."

"And the reason you failed to contact Mrs. Henderson?"

"Mrs. Henderson was on South Island sir. I am not aware of her superiors name or office. Without sufficient time to find that person I decided to act upon my own initiative. After all sir, only my life was at risk. Certainly I know nothing of importance worth kidnapping me for."

"Really? Well that may be true here. Have you thought of your fathers position?"

"Sir. I will die before I endanger Crown or Country. My father may be of some small importance, still he has much more than one daughter. He also has several sons. I am aware of my lack of real worth to him. That he brought me out here only at mothers insistence."

"I see. Then you have decided to try and make a name for yourself."

"I.. Yes sir. But not right now. I saw an opportunity with little risk of failure. No large risk to this station or anyone within it. I was told in training sir that very rarely will a chance like this will come to one of my low status. That when it does, no matter what do not waste it. It is very true sir that I wish some excitement. But field work? No sir. Tatiana had been working here several months. Her own controllers, both Russian and British are well known. Her affiliation with the Russian Government is well known. I have checked her British sponsor, he has never once been accused of being a fool. She has been adopted by a native Priestess, who herself was once an agent for the Japanese government. I took a chance yes sir. I was probably wrong. I would do it again given the same choice."

"You would do it often, by my order. Millicent, I have noticed two changes in your normal behavior. Well three. First, you no longer attend any parties. Why?"

"Oharu, the native Priestess opened my eyes to the social mistake of attending uninvited any function. I realized that I have been a fool. My father has often called me a fool. This is the first time I have totally agreed with him."

"I see. Madam Maxines? You are aware what that place is."

"She teaches Hunters. Yes sir. She also teaches social etiquette, and how to listen without seeming to listen. Many many things Tatiana believes I need to know to please her. Things that I believe I need to know to be effective in the future to Crown and Country. And her.."

"As I feel that you may yet be. Are you in love with this Russian?"

"Yes sir. I still will never turn my tail on Crown and Country. She knows this. She has accepted this."

"Amazing. Though you are not aware of this we have lines of communication within all government offices here. You have released no information, no information that could even be suspected of coming from you has surfaced. Therefore you retain your Secrets position."

"Had I violated your trust sir. You would have shot me in the back of my head long ago."

"Quite correct. I may still do so. Then personally throw your naked body into this Embassy's septic system. You would simply disappear. Is Tatiana in love with you?"

"I believe so, yes sir."

"You are not certain though."

"No sir."

"Very good. Remember that. She may be acting of course. Now, as you have so abruptly placed yourself onto the active list I have a new mission statement for you. You will retain your current position. You will retain your current attitude in public within these walls only. You will also continue studying at Madam Maxines. Who is paying that cost?"

"Tatiana sir. As she is now Oharu's daughter and I am her lover she is paying somewhat lower than even native rates."

"Interesting. Very well then. Your orders are to turn this Russian to England's side. I do not care how you do so, or what you must do in order to manage this as long as you do not give up secrets. Certain information will on occasion be given you to pass on to this woman. You will do so should she ask for information. Turn against England my little want to be spy and you will never be seen again. Your death will be neither quick, nor pleasant. You understand this?"

"Yes sir. Sir, I never wanted to be a field agent."

"Nor will you be one Millicent. Madam Maxines is not Songmark. She is teaching you what your father failed to allow you to learn. You will use this with good effect. There is a birthday party for the Swedish Ambassadors daughter in eleven days. You will attend."

"Sir. I have not been invited."

"An open invitation has been sent to us for one young lady. I was going to send Rose until I discovered your new life. You will attend, you will act as you now know that you are supposed to act. Not as you have acted before. This will probably be the last chance to redeem yourself in the eyes of this community. Do not fail. Any questions?"

"One sir. Is Amelia Bourne-Phipps an English spy? Or is she a traitor."

"Millicent, never again ask who is or is not an English Agent. When you need to know you will be told. Otherwise it is not your concern who is what. Certainly she is no traitor. Anything else?"

"Nothing sir."

"Gather your things." He watched in silence as Millicent gathered her secrets papers, checking them against the list she carried.

"One is missing sir."

Quietly he returned the single slip of paper. "Very good. You pass. Today. You may leave. For now."

"Thank you sir." Locking her case she slipped the key chain around her neck, the little key vanishing from sight between her ample breasts. "Is there anything else sir?"

"Very good. One little thing. At least you have one advantage in your mission Millicent. You will not suddenly become a mother. Dismissed." He watched as the young woman departed, remembering a certain mouse and her gift of an agent long thought lost. Most likely poor Millicent would be found floating face down in the bay one morning, her throat a mangled mess from a garrote. Still he was no fool to worry about her fate. She had freely placed herself within the Russian's jaws. When the day came that Russia was hungry, well there are many sons and daughters of Ambassadors. Losing another one would be nothing. Especially one as foolish as Millicent. She would provide information for a while. That was all that was important to him. At the moment.

Millicent though was barely able to walk after she left that office. Her entire body wanted to collapse. He had intended to kill her. Only speaking the full truth had saved her life. Tatiana had warned her this day would come. Warned her to never lie to her people. Now she was certain the Russian loved her. Why else give her the one warning she needed to live. Without that warning she would have lied, she would have been dead by now. Her left paw raised as though to cover her heart, instead it rested upon her left breast. The breast Tatiana had bitten last weekend. Bitten until her fangs had met. Her love had such beautiful fangs.

Pushing away from the wall Millicent returned to her duties, now certain that Amelia was an English spy. Tatiana had told her the truth about that. Millicent knew she was finally useful, and had just been given orders to do almost anything. Those passports she had worried about, the ones hidden could now be released without worry. *'I will work for Amelia, though she may never know this. And one day. One day my beautiful Russian Sable will feast upon my living body. I am so happy'* she thought as she returned to work.

In the office behind her a hidden door opened. From it stepped a bulldog she would have recognized instantly. "An interesting case" Major Hawkins noted as he sat. "I would have thought she would lie."

"As did I" Jacob Dassher agreed. Reaching out to retrieve his weapon the border collie examined it. "But she never lied, not one word. I would so have been upset to use this on her. She is quite attractive and I do like that rug." Replacing his weapon he turned to face his companion. "My most sincere regrets regarding the loss of your wife."

"I will miss her" Hawkins admitted. "As much as I miss my first wife, though for much different reasons." He shook himself, an action that for a moment frightened his host. "I am quite surprised that Tatiana selected this one to subvert. I had expected her to go for young Willcock. He is rather handsome, for a woodchuck."

"Too obvious a target I think" Dassher admitted. "Too little real usefulness at the moment. Should have made the boy harder for her to connect with. I do much agree. Young Millicent is the least popular member of our organization here. She has made herself unwelcome in too many places. It will be a dicey bit of work for your girl to repair that damage."

"I wager you twenty pounds she is successful."

"Really? Twenty pounds" the collie answered. "How long. Two years?"

"Oh please Jacob. Tatiana has but one full year of school after this. A year where she must have young Millicent up and running on her own, as she will be much out of pocket for the majority of her time. Before the ending of Tatiana's third year."

"Forty pounds. Sterling."

"Forty Quid? Are you mad?"

"Forty or nothing."

Hawkins walked over to the room's single window, looking out over gardens accessible only from certain offices. "You will not interfere?"

"She must pass our one last interrogation. Should she pass, which I think she shall after today I will agree. As long as you do not interfere I shall not."

"Forty it is then." He turned around, offering his right paw. "My paw upon it."

"DONE!" Dassher cried, standing and slapping his paw into the others. "Oh I am so going to enjoy taking your money from you."

"We shall see my friend. We shall see. Now about your security officer."

"You loved him much" the calico known as Dia Kura observed as she entered Helen Whitehall's library. It wasn't that late yet, only near eight in the evening still other than the two all was silent in the house.

Looking up from the diary in her paws Helen took a moment to wipe a tear from her face. "More than I ever knew. As always, welcome again to my home."

Looking about her the calico noticed books and photos strewn about. Holding a finger to her lips she stepped out. A rustling was heard, when she returned the native priestess was in the fur she had been born in, her grass skirt set aside. This time there was no dark red under skirt to be seen. In this room there was no space for a grass skirt to spread out. It would have been a hindrance best done without. Settling down across from her hostess Dia Kura picked up a stack of damaged photographs.

Helen watch her visitor for some time as she puzzled over what she was looking at. "Passchendaele Dia" she finally explained. "A battleground in France. What we did to each other. The Earth of France."

"I have seen such" the priestess admitted. "In the words of those who survived the Gunboat Wars. Their dreams. Why do people kill each other such."

"You ask the wrong person" Helen admitted. "I have no training, no experience. I am in no way qualified to even try to answer that question."

"Spoken as teacher" Dia laughed, setting aside the disturbing photographs. She indicated the strewn material. "You called to me. I come."

"I called?" Helen pressed a paw against the diary's cover, its rough worn surface cool under her skin. "Maybe. I am so lonely. All this, I learn so much about my husband I never suspected. Dia, everything I learn simply makes me love him the more and he is gone."

"From world yes. From heart. Never. Songmark then was mistake?"

Helen lifted the diary, holding it tightly against her heart before she answered. Finally taking a deep breath she laid the book aside. "No. Catherine is not a mistake" she answered. "I know this now. There are things about Catherine I will probably never know Dia. She holds so many secrets, some I think will pass with her. But she isn't a mistake. Oh God Dia I miss her so much. I miss Killian and Ruth too. I don't know if I could survive if Catherine runs away from me."

Dia changed her position, pushing away those dark photographs as she did so. "Have deep heart Helen. I not one you need talk with. Need priest own God. I only can be friend."

"More than a friend. You trust me Dia." She noted the quizzical look of her guests face. "You sit there in my house with no escape, with nothing but your fur between us while knowing fully my new desires yet you show no discomfort. That is more than a friend. Dia, I haven't any priest or priestess. Ruth was probably as close as anyone could be to that for me. I'm neither Christian or Jewish. That I am certain of. I know I am somewhere in between, but there is no church for my kind. At least none that I know of."

"Then must speak with Ruth. I stay. Watch young Lord Antonius."

Helen smiled to the smaller woman. "Dia. I can talk to Ruth anytime I want. I don't have to go to her grave. You see she isn't there, only what remains of her body. It's the same with Killian. She's inside me, so is Killian. Not their souls or spirits but what they were to me. My dearest memories. Thank you for that offer anyway."

Dia-Kura nodded in agreement. "You learn. Intelligent. Loved ones pass on. Leave behind what were to each of us. Not ghost wander world bother living. So do what?"

"I don't know Dia. You're my friend" Helen answered. "I trust you with my sons life, I trust you enough so I don't ask how you can enter my home even though every door and window in it is triple locked. I trust you to guide me. So I ask you. Where do I go from here?"

"Is phone still in kitchen?" the calico asked.

"Of course there is a phone in the kitchen, and yes it works and no it isn't a party line. Use it anytime you need."

"Not need" Dia explained. "You need. Need call." She recited a number, smiling at Helen's puzzled look. "Songmark even teacher need elsewhere during school year. Is number yellow hound at now."

"On Eastern Island?"

"Meeting Island. Had important meeting today. Go back tomorrow maybe. Maybe meeting not over. Maybe need meet again tomorrow. I honest not know truth there. Very important meeting. You not ask please. That important."

"And you?"

"I clean up mess. You make call."

Standing Helen made her way out of the room, stepping carefully around the smaller feline as she did so while watching for the priestess's always moving tail. Going not to the kitchen but her bedroom she rummaged around a bit, then returned. Gently she laid a necklace into Dia's paw. "A present from Ruth and I. She had several made in New York by a family friend. They arrived with my birth certificate and many other things from our shared apartment. Dia, I'm smart enough to know not to ask how. My family believes me dead, these are things they might keep, or might not. Yet I have them. This one I give to you as my dearest trusted friend."

While Dia-Kura studied the gold device Helen walked on to her kitchen, and her phone. It was a Jewish Star of David, with a Christian cross worked into it creating a pleasing new pattern. In the center was a single blood red ruby. Carefully the calico placed it around her neck. Helen could not know, but this was the first gift of jewelry anyone had ever given the priestess for her own use.

October 6th, 1936

Spontoons year around school schedule was driving Helen nuts. Not actually crazy, but she would much rather have stayed in bed with Catherine than return to teaching her students. Of course she now well understood the reason for such an odd schedule. With tourist season, helping during harvest or fishing and never forget the storms that roared up without warning. There were three one month long breaks, but the next was for Yule-New Years. At least she was certain that Songmark shared that same break, as she intended to spend every moment of it with Catharine. Dia-Kura had been right to have her call the hound and now all things were right with her world again. She was no longer alone.

"Mrs Whitehall?"

Opening her eyes Helen saw that her students were watching her. She retained her smile. "Yes Bobby?"

"Are you ill" the young stallion asked. This question brought giggles from some of the other students. Those with enough experience to have already pieced together this jigsaw.

"I am quite well Bobby. I must admit to daydreaming." Standing she turned to the blackboard, picking up her chalk. "Tell me Bobby, which name should I use?" Carefully she wrote three names on the board. Sneed, Whitehall and Devinski. "I think I will let you choose."

"Who is Sneed" the young stallion asked.

"That is my maiden name" the hound answered. "Whitehall is my married name." She leaned over her desk, bending at the waist. "Devinski is the name of the woman that I love."

"Songmark" a dozen or more voices whispered. Their tone was both respect, awe and in at least two cases absolute fear.

Looking out at her class Helen laughed softly. "I do believe that calling myself Mrs Songmark would be a bit of foolishness."

"Whitehall" Bobby abruptly decided. "I once heard it is bad luck to have three last names. It confuses the Gods."

"All right Bobby. Whitehall it will remain." Straightening she turned back to the board, erasing it. Then she began writing again. Without comment she wrote the names of Spontoon's six main islands. Then turning to her class she picked up their math book. "Open notes, open books, study pairs. Steady Northwest wind of six knots. Standard twenty passenger tourist water taxi. Leaving at noon at beginning of slack tide, determine the fastest route from the Northern tip of Main Island to each of the other islands closest points without landing on Sacred Island. All currents are as we spoke of yesterday. Your last variable is that High tide begins in two hours. You have until end of class, I will grade your answers for tomorrow. Questions?"

A single paw was raised. "Yes Canteena?"

"Whitehall was the wrong answer?" the poodle asked.

"There was no wrong answer Canteena. I determined today's test three weeks ago. It was checked by those who know better than I the correct answer. I will tell you this, I was not absolutely correct my first try. You may pair off into study groups if you so desire, simply keep the talking down to a dull roar please."

"Oh. Yes Mam."

Setting back down Helen was fully aware that her native students would have little problem with this work. It was her non-native students whose foundations she intended to rock. Opening her carry case she withdrew yesterday's homework. It was graded already, but she still needed to transfer those grades into her teacher's filebook. *'Not absolutely correct'* she thought. Hell, she'd been almost three hours off having gone exactly backwards.

October 7th, 1936

It is a place somewhere within our dreams. A place we find when asleep, to find oneself not upon the dream plane but upon the spirit plane. "Who" Oharu asked, knowing that this journey had not been of her own making. A form came from the mists, neither male nor female yet pleasing to the eye. "Wei Oharu."

Oharu bowed as deeply as she could without falling. "How may I serve you" she asked, discovering that here her voice was again that sweet pure song of before her mutilation. A gift, but why?

"You serve us well Oharu Wei. You serve as well as any can." That spirit or God, for here it could be either while appearing the other, settled upon a stone that appeared beside it. "Your intelligence is more than we hoped. Your heart stronger than we believed. For when we approached your Gods we had hoped only for one that would help weave this land's rituals into a whole again. You have proven to be many times more than our greatest hope."

"You turn my head. It is unseemly" Oharu warned.

"You currently have no Honor Oharu Wei. Thus you have no pride. Nothing we say to you would endanger your usefulness to us. Yet we feel that you must regain your Honor in order to be fully useful to the one whom you will next serve. This we are aware. So we will make such possible. In the fullness of time."

"May this one ask a question?"

Amusement struck her. No laughter, yet it was certain that the emotion was amusement. "You have asked many questions already. Still. We see this is one that you feel important. Ask your question. Priestess, who is no longer to refer to herself as Priestess in Training. Else a certain mortal mouse will feel our displeasure."

"Why?"

"This you must ask your own Gods. They chose you, not we."

"I shall. Still I have yet to spend my night upon Sacred Island" the mouse reminded that which was before her.

"For all that truly matters, this is your night on Sacred Island Priestess. We will see you again, in the coming of time. As we see all, judge all who wish to serve us. We fear that there is not time enough for your ritual meeting with us. Events unfold too quickly for such luxuries at this time."

Abruptly the figure became serious. "We have great need for you Oharu Wei. We have great tasks for you. Each could be your ending. Each is important. You may live a month, or a full life. Yes. We are aware of the how and when of your passing from your present body. We are aware you will not rest, but return to

serve again and again. As you have too many times for mortals to count. We are aware of your life tread. Its full length, its ending. This we will not tell you."

"I serve. Thus I am happy" Oharu admitted.

"Yes. That one finds simply being a servant such a pleasure in all her lives. We think that we shall give you your doe..."

"NO!" Oharu screamed without thinking. Almost instantly she was thrown to the misty ground by a power she could no more defeat than an ant could defeat a battle cruiser.

"YOU WILL NOT...." Silence followed, long and cold silence while Oharu fought for breath under the crushing pressure. "We see. You love her that much?" That voice was again soft, though Oharu still could not move.

"You are aware..."

"Answer Priestess." That force increased, causing the ribs in her chest to creak.

Oharu gasped a bit of air into crushed lungs. "Yes" she admitted. "I love her this much."

Abruptly the pressure vanished, as did that figure. Struggling to her feet Oharu found a stone still waiting. Carefully she settled upon it, feeling pain lance through her chest as she breathed. '*Fool*' she thought. '*To argue with the Gods.*' Her thoughts though changed nothing. To protect Molly even from her own love Oharu was well aware that she would die before forcing a whisper of thought upon the doe.

"What will be will be" that voice announced from around her. "We have looked upon the future between you two. You still refuse to accept her love in payment for your service to us?"

"I so refuse any payment" the mouse answered, feeling her body begin shivering in fear of her actions.

"Then you are truly a Priestess. We accept what will be, though you could be surprised when that future unfolds. Or not. This secret also we withhold from you. We welcome you fully within our fold as a beloved and needed servant. No rules of restraint now hold you other than those you place upon yourself. Go Priestess. But know this Oharu Wei. Should you anger us again your futures will not be comfortable ones. For a very, very long time."

Two days after her first interview Millicent had found herself abruptly surrounded by two rather large British Marines as she stepped out of an office. "You will come with us" the ancient Scottish Sergeant announced. There would be no argument with that one. This she was certain. Meekly following his command the young feline eventually found herself in the basement of one of the lessor buildings. There awaited a certain bulldog, standing beside him was a very well dressed greyhound. Captain Heller, the new station Security Chief who had arrived but yesterday. As she stepped through the rooms door it was closed behind her with the heavy sound of a very well built, very strong door. Her two guards remained outside.

"You may sit Millicent. For now" Captain Heller explained, looking over to his companion. "You are certain that simply cutting her throat right now wouldn't be easier? After all the guard dogs are a bit hungry."

"There is potential. There is time" Hawkins answered. "We shall see."

Millicent sat on a waiting stool, though in truth she simply could not have stood after that blatant admission that she probably would not leave this room alive. Hadn't Mr. Dassher cleared her already? What was this then.

Hawkins remained standing though Heller sat, picking up a rather large stack of papers. "Six passports Millicent. Please inform us what you need with six passports, and what names that they might be under?" He held up a paw, stopping her from speaking. "You see Millicent, passports are controlled by a rather strictly regulated number system. Now, I admit that Charles is not the brightest boy on the block. He simply follows those orders given him. Which is why he is in the position he is in. What you could not know is that, though you control the presentation of forms that create passports, another report comes to me. This one is a rather short report. How many passports were created. How many forms authorizing those passports are on file. Their numbers. We seem to be short six. Don't we."

"Yes sir" Millicent admitted. "Six is the correct number."

Heller's widened his eyes in surprise. "No lies? No begging? No attempt to wiggle out of this. I am much surprised. You do realize that this is an offense that is punishable by death in certain cases. Correct?"

"Yes sir. Where do you wish me to stand, so that my blood makes as little mess as possible."

"Over the drain will do. If you please."

Millicent stood, first placing her Secrets pouch on the desk, then her key. Shattered she walked to where a rather large oddly stained metal grate lay in the floor and stood. Waiting. A sound came from behind her and she shivered again in fear. *'Tatiana will never taste me'* she cried within her mind. *'I will not be eaten by her after all.'*

"Names please" death's voice asked from close behind her. Millicent couldn't help it, she lost control of her water. Then, embarrassed by her weakness she calmly gave each name, though in a voice devoid of much life. When she had finished there was another sound. She felt more than sensed that Major Hawkins had moved away from her.

"This is Tatiana's doing" the bulldog asked from some distance away.

"It was by her request sir. It was completely by my doing sir."

"Millicent. Do not lie. There is a star nosed mole listening. He will know if you lie."

"Ask him then. I am not lying" she answered.

She could hear the sound of pencil on paper behind her as the two conversed. Finally Major Hawkins spoke again. "Please explain exactly how this was done."

Haltingly Millicent explained. Explained how she had slipped the forms out of the building under her skirt. How she had carefully filled out each form under Tatiana's careful guidance. How, from examples that Tatiana had supplied her she had signed each name in the style of its owners paw. How she had then returned those forms to her tiny office hidden within the daily paper. From there how it had been easy to slip one form every few days into her pouch, making a simple modification to the official forms, then remodifying them before returning them. How she had slipped each passport out. Again held carefully under her skirt.

"Tatiana never touched those forms" Hawkins asked.

"No sir. She felt that if her scent was upon them that Charles would notice. He is a bloodhound after all."

"It was my understanding that you hated Amelia" Hawkins continued. "What changed your mind?"

"I believed Amelia was a traitor sir. When I discovered she is really an Imperial Agent, of course my opinion had to change. Privately, not publically."

"Where did you discover this information" Heller asked.

"Tatiana first sir. Then from Mr. Dassher."

"Dassher told you that Amelia was an English agent" Heller asked. There was disbelief in his voice, but Millicent hadn't the courage to turn and see it in his face.

"Yes sir. I asked him if Amelia was an agent or a traitor. He told me never to ask, that I would be informed if someone was an agent, had I the need. Then he mentioned that Amelia was not a traitor. Sir, if one is not a traitor and one places ones life within the jaws of ones enemies to defend ones country, one must then be an agent. Officially or not."

"Amazing" the greyhound admitted. "Now as I understand this, you freely work for Tatiana. In fact you admit being in love with her."

"Yes sir."

"And you do not consider yourself a traitor to England? Tatiana Bryzov is a Russian spy. You well know this. It was briefed to you when you were assigned to disrupt her plans while here."

"Sir. Tatiana was a Russian spy. Her time with her adopted mother has opened her eyes. Sir, she is a Russian patriot. As much as I would now be an English patriot should Germany have invaded and conquered England in the Great War. She understands that her government is corrupt, that they are in truth criminals. Tatiana now works to free her country from Starling. She works for Amelia because through such work she is able to disrupt Starlings plans. Yes sir, she is a Russian Agent. She is not a Soviet agent. Not for a long time now."

A rustle of paper came to the frightened girl. "Oharu Wei, Priestess of Spontoon Island. Ex-Japanese agent. Tatiana Bryzov, Soviet agent who claims to have turned against her own government. Millicent. These are not good references."

"I understand fully sir."

"Major Hawkins. Should we have the prisoner disrobe herself, or simply throw her living body to the dogs as it is?"

"Does it honestly matter" the bulldog asked. "Millicent. You do realize that once you entered that door you would never leave as you were."

"I do now sir." With tears falling she began unbuttoning her blouse. Her mother had embroidered it herself. Letting it be ripped to shreds by feeding animals would break her mothers heart. As she slipped her blouse off both men first noticed what she was doing.

"Do you think you get out of here alive by offering your body" Captain Heller asked.

"My mother embroidered this blouse herself sir. Its making took weeks. If you would be so kind as to send it back to her in one piece. And no sir, I am not offering myself. My body belongs to Tatiana. It will always belong to her."

"I see. Please keep your back to us if you will. Millicent. What are your plans for this passport you had made for yuorself."

"For myself sir? Tatiana explained that no matter how careful I was, that eventually I would be discovered. Having a way to slip back to England alive for reassignment was important."

"Not to escape say, to Russia?"

"SIR!" Forgetting herself she turned to face both men. "I am not a traitor. You fully intend to dispose of me. Good, do so in any way you please. Feed me alive to your dogs, I will walk into their mouths without argument. But do you not ever dare to accuse me of turning against Crown and Country. DO YOU NOT DARE!" With those last words she stamped her foot hard against the grate, the action causing her rather large breasts to move in interesting ways.

"Feisty" Heller observed.

"Hot tempered" Hawkins agreed.

"We must dispose of her then. There is just no choice. You agree?"

"I certainly do Captain" Hawkins agreed. "Our young secrets courier must vanish. Unfortunately, she was so good at her job."

"Very well." Selecting a folder from his desk Captain Heller stood and walked to Millicent. "Take this to assignments. Turn over your secrets case, your key. You will spend the next two weeks under Sergeant Proud's gentle care. He is waiting outside for you. Each morning at zero-seven-hundred you will report to him. At zero seven oh one he will throw you out of bed. Dressed or naked. He will then take you to the marines compound. Dressed or naked. There you will receive extensive training in the pawgun of his choice. You will also be given a basic paw to paw defense training. On weekends you will attend to your duties with Miss Bryzov. Whatever they may be. After two weeks training you will be assigned to carry Most Secret materials. This position requires you to carry a weapon at all times while on duty inside this compound. You will do so. You will remain proficient with its use. When again you need certain documents made you will come to me. They will be supplied without comment."

Millicent accepted the offered folder. "I am not going to die?" she asked.

"If you were going to die young lady, you would have died the moment you stood on that grate. It is after all easily electrified from that desk. Millicent, as Mr. Dassher said you are useful to us now. Before Tatiana. Before you became important to her you were nothing to us. In truth you were a bothersome self centered useless..." He paused. "I will not insult you with that word Millicent. Not now. As of now you are an official agent of Her Majesties Intelligence Service. Amelia is able to get into places we cannot. Your Tatiana is able to get into places we cannot get our agents. You will continue your training under Tatiana, because even after Pfalzgräfin Schwarzkopf. Even after Sandy Doecan men simply cannot seem to keep their muzzles shut around pretty women. I, or the Major here will give you certain assignments. You will preform your duties as best you can. You're a beginner Millicent. Do not expect to be sent into dangerous territory for many many years. If ever. You may be sent to test the strength of someone within this building. To test the loyalty of someone in another Consulate. Or simply to observe events."

He paused, stepping back to study Millicent's form. "You do not have the body pure seduction requires, but there are more ways to seduce someone than simply with a body like Molly Procyk, who has apparently taken a Priestess's heart with no effort of her own. Military secrets are not the only thing important to us. Social information, rituals, who in the Swedish Embassy is sleeping with whom for example. What diplomatic aircraft is going where with whom aboard it. No, no field work for you dear Millicent. We need you alive for a very, very long time. Not rotting at the bottom of the harbor weighted down in a fishing net bound with stones. You will though maintain your abusive personality within these walls until further instructed."

He returned to his desk, but did not sit. "Dress, then report to Sergeant Proud. Secrets Courier Millicent no longer exists. Agent Millicent now exists. Pray you do not let this get to your head girl, or I may one morning find a package delivered to my office with that pretty head packed in salt within it. I will be honest with you young lady. I would not like that at all. Not at all. Now leave this room and do not ever again give

me reason to bring you here. Because if I do." He shrugged. "Maybe you will be lucky and able to convince me to simply sell you to Kau Hon, with your voice and eyes removed. Now there is the door. Take your key, case and use it."

Still shaking Millicent struggled to get her blouse back on. Again she was going to live. Again Tatiana's instructions had saved her life. Now though it was fully official. She was a agent of her government. She had attained a goal never within her imagination. And it was all because of Tatiana. Truly she was in love.

"Wake UP!" a harsh voice snapped as Millicent left the room.

Staggered by the verbal assault Millicent actually stepped back, but the door had somehow sealed behind her causing her to bounce forward again. Looking up she found herself staring into the no-nonsense face of that Scottish Terrier who had marched her here.

"You are my meat for two weeks girl" the man snapped. "You will be instructed. You will learn. Or so help me by the Crown I will rip you a new one. Is this fully understood?"

"Yes Sir" the feline answered.

"Sergeant. It is SARGENT. I am no fat bellied rum sucking desk sitting brain dead OFFICER! I am a SARGENT! UNDERSTAND? SERGENT'S RUN THE ARMY!"

"Yes Sargent."

"Very good. Now march yourself to the ladies room. Get rid of those stinking unders and wash yourself. THEN we will turn in that case and key you carry. After that I think we will begin teaching you basic self defense this bright morning. Now MARCH!"

It wasn't until late that night when she staggered into her own bathroom that Millicent realized that she had spent an entire day of training with no unders on. Giggling she drew a bath. Why, just a few months ago the thought of being without such clothing would have shocked her to no end. Now. She glanced at the unmarked utility uniform that she had been issued. Her only clothing for the next two weeks. Now it was completely unimportant. Slipping into her hot bath she flexed her right paw. Remembering how it felt to fire a real automatic for the first time. Of course, she had never come close to the target but that too was unimportant. Tatiana would protect her. Tatiana had already protected her. With a smile she ran her paws down her flanks. As long as she pleased the Russian without complaint, Tatiana would always protect her.

In a very closed office two men stood looking at a strange chart mounted on the office wall. Normally hidden behind a map of the world, it showed hundreds of coded names with links to each. Were an enemy agent to discover this he would believe that he had found a gold mine, until he realized that this gold mine was written in a code created by these three alone. That the key to this code was an ancient Sanscrit text known to perhaps a pawfull. Breaking an alien language might prove easier.

"As you can see Hawkins. I have placed your Tatiana in this grouping" Mr. Dassher explained. "This is of course keyed outside of your normal lines of communication. I will not have a Doecan or Schwarzkopf on my watch. Young Millicent is the only connection to her."

"You will eventually connect my sweet little Tatiana to your Amelia and her group?"

"Once they have accepted that they are also English agents. Not simply Spontoon ones of certainty" Dassher agreed. "I must admit that having this young girl on our suspect list has forced her paw. You dealt with the young lady who created this problem?"

"Oh yes" the bulldog admitted. "I am most certain that she is finding Nefta rather interesting. We simply must keep track of German and Italian actions in that area."

"Remind me never to anger you" Captain Heller admitted as he tasted his tea. "You have such interesting posts for those who do so."

"Anger?" Hawkins laughed. "No. She did not anger me. Certainly she went out of channels. Her actions did cause the two of you serious problems. Recruiting this Amelia will prove even the more difficult because of her actions. Yet it does give you a bit of a leverage against her. These passports. They are not to be destroyed?"

"No" the greyhound admitted. "Millicent proved exceptionally talented. I have gone over the papers she surrendered. After instructing her that should she ever have to do something like this again, destroying the evidence is her best choice. I have examined those signatures. She is a natural Major. I cannot tell the difference between her false signature and Miss Bourne-Phipps actual signature. Should we need certain materials created I will see what she can do. It is possible that she is better than Margaret. I truthfully believe that this girl is a natural. Losing her might be a very bad idea after all."

I have come to ask" Oharu said softly, staring directly into the yellow furred hounds eyes. It was something no student could manage yet the Priestess found what was there, interesting. She had walked into Songmark without asking permission, both girls guarding the gate knowing better than to interfere with a native Priestess. Now they were gone, sent off by Miss Devinski. She had been oddly waiting when the mouse arrived.

"Ask what" the hound said, looking at the gate. "How."

"It was never locked" Oharu answered.

"It was locked. I checked."

"You saw what you wished to see."

"And the squeak?"

"Squeak?" the mouse asked. "Are you being speciest now my little pet?"

"No. That gate is designed to squeak when it opens. It always has."

Oharu looked at the gate. "Then you must not have heard my sister."

Frustrated Miss Devinski walked to the gate, to find it locked. Taking out her key she unlocked it, then opened it. A squeak that could be heard across the compound answered her actions. Stepping away from the gate she walked over to her visitor. "Suitably impressed" she admitted. "I let my guard down again I see. Such a failing around you."

"Should I get collar and leash now" Oharu asked, though there was humor in her voice.

"Only for Molly" the hound answered. "She's digging herself deeper Oharu. I'm afraid that one day and soon she is going to need the Seventh Calvary to come to her rescue. Will you?"

"Her needs are my needs" the mouse admitted. "At this moment."

"Then I will endeavor to keep you informed of her life. As best I can. Oharu. I have a question."

Oharu cocked her own head for a moment. "We will never be a couple" she answered. "Mrs. Whitehall now holds your heart. I have lost my opportunity I much fear. For myself, this is truth a great loss. Your path is not my path. We are sisters, but not of the same belief."

"Oh my..." Throwing her paws into the air the hound looked past Oharu for a moment. "That isn't the question you.. You... Oh hell. What do you get out of all this. Helping my girls. Bringing Henrika back to us. All you have done. What do you get out of all this?"

Reaching out Oharu gently laid her right paw over one of the hounds. "Truth. Truth Catherine. My life is to serve. To serve is my greatest pleasure. I have always served. I have always wanted to serve. Doing so is my reward. Nothing else. I want nothing else. I truly need nothing else."

"Lies" the hound snapped. "You want Molly. You need Molly. It'll destroy you one day if you don't get her. Still you break your back helping people. I'll accept the serve thing, but Oharu. Never. Never lie to me about what you need. What you desire. Not when it comes to that doe. Not ever. I won't stand for lies. Especially not from someone who lies so badly."

"She is?"

"She will pass my sister. Barring something unforeseen all third years pass. We have only had one third year fail, and her failure even you and I could not have kept from occurring. She is well, she's still in love with Lars. But understand me my sister. This I swear. If I discover that Lars had anything to do with Henrika's destruction I will skin him alive myself. Even if it does get me the short end of a rope, or a swim in certain waters."

"Do not do so on Songmark grounds. She would be angered beyond calming" Oharu warned. "She is my question. Who is she?"

"I don't know" the hound admitted. "Such a long voyage for such a simple answer?"

"I had a need to know. Now I know. Thank you. I must go now, I am needed elsewhere." She removed her paw, looking past the hound to a certain dorm for a moment.

"You didn't correct me when I called you Honored Mother" the hound noted abruptly.

"You made no error" the mouse admitted.

"Congratulations. Welcome to the club. And Oharu. Don't stop flirting with me. Nothing will ever happen of it, your right. Helen has finally captured my heart. But I do enjoy it. Honestly."

"Then when you are upon the slave block I shall bid for you" Oharu decided. "An old broken down hound, who's body is no longer young should be a bargain. Good night Catherine. We will speak again."

Miss Devinski watched the mouse walk away. "Oh, we will speak again" she whispered. "I just don't think I'm going to be any more happy about it than last time." When the mouse was no longer in sight she too returned to her bed. With luck she'd get a few hours sleep before that first year dorm tried to return from their little adventure. Fifty demerits and a ten mile march on Main Island in full pack should teach them to damage school property in their escape attempts. And how long had the mouse known the truth about her the hound asked herself.

October 10th, 1936

George laid the last page of Lucy Ullrich's proposal down. "Kan't ford tha effects" he informed the young wildcat. "Gret storie tho. Maybe cut back sum fects? Arplans expensive tah blow up."

"Yep, right expensive" Lucy agreed. "Models arn't. Bit of reed, some cloth, aluminum paint the thing could look real from ah distance."

"Same wid tha spaship" George asked.

"Right. Look, iffing ah remember right, yah can mask part of an image right?"

"Do alltime. Big paintin fer bakgrnd but difcult. Cost tha thin. We do tha chep."

"I know" Lucy admitted. "Petunia's The Red Meteor is playin downtown. Watched it tah get an idea how yah work. What was it, toilet paper ahn gas?"

"Styrofoam" a voice answered her from behind. Turning Lucy found herself facing a rather skinny porcine. "Robert Windsong, Director" the balding man explained. "Your our local writer?"

"Hope so, pull up ah chair. Take ah lode offin yer feet" Lucy answered. "George here says the scripts tah expensive. Mind if we hack ah workaround here ahn there?"

"What have you in mind young lady" Robert asked.

"One scene needs an ancient plane wreck. Heard tell there's one on South Island. Yah film those scenes here, mess with tha negatives in tha lab. Supposed tah be a ripple in reality there. We gotta burn Silver Stars plane, then ah need tah crash Petunia's inna mountain. Can do with models. Couple oh girls say they seen some good models around Casino. Nothin expensive."

"Miss Ulrich..."

"Lucy. Please"

"Very well. Lucy it is then. Such models are time consuming and expensive. We have to leave here Monday, there simply isn't time for such things. Then there is your pay to consider. Three hundred fifty dollars for an accepted script which George, Jean and Charlene may rip apart then rewrite anyway. That is the union minimum. We just haven't the budget."

"Don need money" Lucy admitted, catching both males by surprise. "Not inna union ether. Texas issa right tah work state. Uppity Unions aint welcome there. Yah put mah name up below George's as co-writer. Good enough for me. Models, yah using standard thirty-five?"

"Of course, why."

"Cause yah can get the local boys ahn girls tah film yer special effects here. Develop 'em an send negatives tah where yer goin. Save yah time at least."

Robert thought a bit. "George, how many special effects could we manage if we did this?"

"Leven, mahbe twelve" the otter answered. "Gotta shoot ah lest tha old aircraft scene twice, fer Europe ahn America."

"Could set up and film that in a day if we can get a guide to the wreck and permission." Robert looked at Lucy. "You'd put your pay into this film, why."

"Songmark girls tend tah stick together ah guess" Lucy admitted. "Ah like Jean, she's honest. Sides, this gets me into tha film industry. Never know. Might like bein a writer."

"Let me check with our legal department Lucy. If you put your pay into this you're a backer. That means you have to have an investment contract. You'd be a very small investor, but a few dollars in royalty payments if the movie goes over well might be nice to have. Plus it puts you into a different level of movie making, if nothing more than for bragging rights. Your name gets spread around the studio. Even small

investors are worth having. Especially for this level of movie making.”

“Fine bah me. You draw up tha contract, if ah like it ah’ll sign it. But tha European version. George, it ain’t too racy is it?”

“Som parts gonna hafta be heavy neutral density, mahbe adjusted. Buh probably will git by. Robby, we goh us ah good scripiter here.”

“Good. Lucy. You and George hash this out. I’ll read the rough draft tonight. You’ll have your answer waiting when you get out of church tomorrow. By the way, which church are you attending?”

“Donno” the wildcat admitted. “Gatta see which slip oh paper ah pull from tha bowl. I’m tryin everything here” she explained. “Buddhism ain’t my milk though.”

“I’m sure Jean can find you. Until tomorrow.” He stood, taking his leave. Yet even before he made his way to the door he could hear George explaining Silver Stars ray gun to Lucy. Maybe they had found a good writer. Maybe not. But she was the first one in years to actually sit with George, work through his accent and ask about the characters backgrounds. That was a plus.

Late that night Jean and Charleen sat reading the proposed script. “She is insane” the vixen gasped after finishing reading a page. “Do that, to you?”

Jean leaned back, obviously thinking. “Char. This girl can write. She’s obviously played that side of the field a few times but yeah. This is a bit over the top. I don’t think even Europe would allow it.”

“Maybe if we toned it down a bit” Charleen thought. She pulled out her green ink pen, writing in a margin before showing it to her friend. “Silhouettes and cuts mayhap.”

“Could work. Its close to the original and we’ve gotten bout the same past those censors before. Lets read some more. “

As the two read they made notes. Mainly character notes. There were sight changes in dialog, a few scene suggestions but even they had to admit that by the time they were done there was less green ink on the entire script than some previous ones had on a single page.

“She’s good” Charleen admitted. “Talent shows and she obviously spent a lot of time with George. Nothing new in Star’s belt. She’s using a lot of the older stuff. I absolutely love the scene where we covertly profess our love for each other in the American version. Switching rings is something the kiddies won’t notice, but parents will. She’s put an awful lot of effort into this.”

“Agreed” the mouse said. “Even an implied marriage at the end for our European audience. I vote we tell Robert to double her pay. This is the best script we’ve ever had. And I mean ever.”

“You Songmark girls” Charleen laughed. “Sticking together to the bitter end.”

“We film this, you may find out if my end is bitter” the mouse laughed. “Lets go. This just might launch both our careers.”

Standing to follow her co-star Charleen picked up the script. *‘Or sink them forever’* she thought. Still it was the best script she’d read since taking this job.

October 11th, 1936

Late afternoon found Petunia's film crew setting up on South Island for their last shoot of the day. Filming had started just after sunrise, as the natives had proven extremely helpful and competent in setting the site, even in torch lit darkness. Because of this they were well ahead of schedule. Robert would film the European version after sunset, as it would be in full silhouette. At the moment he was standing with his stars while the set dressers tried to make the scene look as though the two had been there for months. With native help the porcine had to admit it was looking awfully good. "Sorry we couldn't find a new hero" he explained to Charleen. "There just wasn't time but Tommy, I mean Carl's scene's are all here on Spontoon. We can cut and paste scenes to make it look like he's with you later. Okay, is everyone ready?"

"You will get me a good co-star next episode" the vixen asked.

"My word on it" Robert agreed. "And I'll even put it in your next contract." He picked up a stray sheet of paper before leaving. *'If there is another chapter after this one'* he thought. Getting to his place he checked the scene. "All right people. Lets get this done. We're burning daylight." A few minutes later there was a clap of wood against wood.

Walking in from stage right the male hero, one Carl by name stopped next to a partially dressed vixen. "Is she dead my love" he asked, his rifle pointing at an apparently unconscious mouse.

"No. Just unconscious" Petunia answered. "I slipped her a Micky when I heard your signal. She'll sleep until morning." She stood, swaying slightly as if exhausted. "We must be long gone by then."

"But Petunia" the pinto countered. "You wanted her dead." He pulled a nasty looking blade from his belt scabbard. "This is the perfect chance. Here, use this."

Accepting the blade Petunia looked down at the sleeping Silver Star. "No Carl. She didn't kill my brother. I know that now. I can't kill a woman who has done no harm to me."

"She didn't" Carl asked, confusion in his voice. He had backed a step away at Petunia's declarations. "But I swear that she was the one. Though it was at a distance, I swear to you that I was certain. If not her, then who?"

"She's far away" the vixen answered. "I need to leave now so she wont escape my justice." She turned around, moving as if to follow the pinto. Suddenly her right paw slashed out, driving the blade deep into the pinto's chest. "Why Carl. I trusted you. I thought I loved you. Why did you kill my brother."

Dropping his rifle Carl grasped the blades hilt, looking up into Petunia's eyes as he fell to his knees. "Murdered. By you of all people." He gasped, trying and failing to remove the blade. "Dead, might as well let you in on my dirty little secret. He found out" the pinto gasped. "... I sold your older sister. To Count Karspin's Harem. That is why." Falling on his face the pinto died.

"CUT" Robert yelled. "No time for a second take, start setting up for the European shot. Tommy, how are you."

Standing the Pinto brushed leaves off his outfit. Though it was no longer sparkling clean, in the darker next shot it wouldn't matter. "Best death any Petunia hero has ever had" he answered. Pressing the blades point against one paw he pushed, watching as the dulled blade slipped into the oversized hilt. "And I'm the first hero to be in two movies. This is quite the feather in my cap. I very much thank you."

"Don't thank me" Robert laughed. "You've two weeks hard filming here under a native crew. Make sure that they get your best side. At least you'll be back in California months ahead of us. I already sent word, my Boss's are seeing if they can get you into the next Shirley Shrine epic. You do dance right?"

"Wonderfully. Thank you Robert. You've been the best director I've ever worked under and I truly have learned a great deal acting school passed over. Now I had best get wardrobe to unmess this outfit a bit. Be ready quickest."

Charleen watched the pinto walk away. "Shirley Shrine" she repeated. "I'd rather pick up garbage with my teeth for a living than work with that brat."

"I'd cut my throat before being near the same sound stage again" Robert agreed. "But Tommy is infatuated with her. He actually thinks I'm doing him a favor. Well he can learn like the rest of us. Go get wardrobe to fix your costume. Hey" he had just looked down to see that Jean hadn't stood up. "Jean? Is anything wrong?" A gentle snore answered him causing him to laugh. "Wake her up Charleen. Last time I did she decked me." Walking away he pulled a roll of papers from his back pocket. If they could get this scene past the Paris censors Petunia was going to become the talk of every town.

October 15th, 1936

Saimmi Hoele'toemi sat across from a small fire on Main island, a plain wooden goblet of water was held lightly within her paws. On her fires other side quietly sat the oldest living priestess of Spontoon. She sat in silence as she had done since before Saimmi's own arrival a short time ago. It was a pleasant October night, cool and crisp, with a hint of rain from early morning still in the air. A pleasant night for most, but not either feline.

"I give to you my cave and all within it" Huakava abruptly informed the younger woman. "I have spoken to all other priestess, they are for once in agreement. For once all of one mind. Of all of them, of the four I found most acceptable you are the only choice for this. You will take my place as I had hoped Leokau would. But I have discovered that my most treasured student is faulted. She is thus unable, for she hasn't the fire within her that she needs. This is no fault of her own, it was a choice of the Gods. You then are the only true candidate for my replacement."

Saimmi slowly sipped her water, looking hard into the fire before her. "There is Oharu" she reminded the ancient panteress. "She is better grounded. Her future is stronger than my own. In truth it will come eventually to the fate that I am the child to her adulthood. Such is her knowledge, her ability greater than my own. She will surpass me within the year."

"There is Oharu" Huakava admitted. "Who is as you say, the more powerful. There is the truth that she now knows as much, if not more about the foundation of our religion than you do. It is true that she draws upon not one but two paths. She is unlike any who have served upon these islands in living memory. She is what we begged the Gods for, and more. I believe that in this choice they sent us there best. Their very best. Still I already know that she will refuse should I ask a forth time, which has never been done. Natasha has told me this. Namoeta has confirmed it. I have confirmed this. She has no desire to lead, only to serve. In truth she would be our best choice were all things of equal value. Most importantly from her own lips comes this. No outsider, not even one who has arrived and is as dedicated as herself may be chosen. Remember this, she has already looked at this problem. She, I and you know that such a choice would cause dissension. Dissension we all know that these islands cannot afford at this time. Another time yes, she would be my choice and I would make her accept. Now, no. I cannot force one whose desires are to serve only. Not with the darkness that is coming"

Saimmi closed her eyes, feeling the gift offered to her. She carefully examined it from many directions before answering. "Should I refuse?" she asked, returning her gaze to the fire. "What does the fire tell you" Huakava asked.

Saimmi remained silent, opening her eyes to stare into that fire burning before her. For within that fire were images she did not wish to speak of. Not even to Huakava. "There is still Krupmark" the feline reminded her elder.

Huakava smiled. A smile meant more for herself than to the younger woman across from her. "You stall as badly as I did when Selvana passed this burden to me not that many years ago. She was your teacher, she was my best friend. She warned me that when this time came I would be of two minds as to whom I must pass my burden too. She was right in that, as she was in all important things." Laughing softly Huakava gestured with her cup. "Though she was very wrong about that chili on Eastern Island." For a moment there was silence until the aged woman continued seriously. "Now I must pass this burden on to her brightest student. Yes there is Krupmark. There is also one, as you once said to me, to do your dirty work for you."

Saimmi herself laughed now. "I never meant that. I knew that there were things you were no longer strong enough to preform. I will deal with Krupmark."

"No daughter, you will not. One Cranium Island, one Krupmark. It is all any single priestess may stand in one turning. Perhaps two. You are not recovered yet and Krupmark must be dealt with before those that took the first fragment discover its failing. Before they search out the second and bring the two together."

"Which they will" the younger feline admitted. "Europeans are so foolish in their ways. Bringing the two together will negate my ritual. It will recharge the first fragment."

"And bring the third to the surface of Sacred Lake, to the woe of any who approach it without protection. There are not enough priestess's in all of Spontoon, within five days boat travel to match that power again."

"So I will take your staff. I will take your burden." Saimmi agreed. She drank her water, pausing to refill her cup. "When?"

Huakava sighed in relief, for convincing Saimmi had been harder than she had expected. "Now. My time is over. You are no longer my daughter, but my sister. It is time that I joined all those who came before. In truth I welcome my rest."

"I am not ready."

"Nor was I Saimmi" the panther admitted. "Nor was Selvana, or any of those who came before or will come after. I had you to lean upon. You will have Oharu, who has been accepted and is now fully one of us. You will select those to go with her. You will send her to Krupmark. She is to deal with that fragment. Of all who remain and are now trained she is closest to you in ability there. Perhaps..." The elder woman managed another soft laugh, "...one day she will admit to herself that she has always been your superior in such things. Yet I have no fear of her. I have seen in my fires that in all paths she will always obey you, no matter what you demand of her. Even if that demand is her life. Or her gift."

Saimmi looked up into her superiors eyes. "I would send the same who came with me to Cranium Island. They are the only assistants I would trust in this, they have the experience and ability. They will be our warriors if they accept. But there is the problem."

"Then you must inform your three students of this truth. They will know how to handle this and I have already seen that they know how to keep their muzzles shut as well. Until the time is needed that they speak out" Standing Huakava walked to the still seated Saimmi, moving through the fire without harm to herself or her clothing. Reaching down she took the younger felines right paw, carefully placing her carved staff within it. "You are now High Priestess of Spontoon and of all those islands that accept her my sister. May the weight of your burdens never press you into the ground." Leaning down she kissed the weeping woman, then vanished as though she had never been.

Some time later Saimmi took a deep breath, steadying herself. Standing carefully she slowly poured her remaining water into the small fire, then all that remained from her bucket. Steam and smoke billowed up

towards the stars. A pillar in the night to guide one upwards perhaps, or simply smoke and ash. Huakava's body would be found in the morning wherever she had decided to die. There would be a great ceremony on Sacred Island, tourists or no tourists. Saimmi would preside over it, and from this day on all would look to her for answer to questions they didn't know. Answers she herself would spend a lifetime discovering. Turning to the path she was surprised to see a single small figure standing in the darkness, waiting.

Dressed in her best kimono, the one she had once wished to be married in Oharu bowed so deeply that her hair brushed the ground. "Huakava informed me to be here at this time Great One" she explained, still bent over in her bow. "How may this unworthy priestess serve you."

Chapter Forty-Five

October 17th, 1936

Three tired figures worked their way through a semi-overgrown pathway, the island's high humidity having plastered their fur against their skins. "You are absolutely certain this island is quite perfectly safe" a very well dressed female tourist asked her guide yet again. They were on Main island following one of the lessor used tourist trails. One that had overgrown a bit more than normal, thus had cost the two a bit more to travel, though neither realized this. She was looking about her as she and her husband followed their native guide. "You are quite certain that there are no savage tribes here." It was like a broken record their native guide thought, though he kept that thought to himself.

"Certain is Missy Lady" the brightly dressed wolf answered for the umpteenth time.. "When follow guide directions yes yes. This not Albert Island. We not have cannibal on Spontoon. No no. No tourist end up village pot. Be boiled with vegetable."

"Albert Island" the vixen's husband repeated, for the first time in over an hour ceasing his near constant stare through his camera's viewfinder. "Albert Island has cannibals my dear. It could be just what you've been searching for all your life" he commented, a look of true humor on his face. "Why, how jolly of them to accommodate us. I simply must garner a photograph or two of course. Certainly two or three as your naked bound body slowly slides into their pot. A perfect photograph to show the relatives at dinnertime, with your bleached skull as the table centerpiece. Why, you will be the hit of all parties for generations."

"Quiet Philip" his wife ordered, though her voice wasn't sharp by any means. "I am afraid that we are not going off to yet another rustic island this week. We cannot afford any more side trips. Not simply for you to photograph local natives boiling some poor person for dinner. Especially if that person is myself. A pirate ship would be one thing, being enslaved for a time perhaps even another. However you must understand that having my leg bones gnawed upon at some natives evening meal is simply not within the bounds of acceptability. Or even my darkest fantasies."

Philip, who was currently walking behind his wife gave her a look that caused their ever observant guide to smile for a moment. It was obvious that Mr. Harkens loved his wife, was soldiering on through the oppressive heat only for her pleasure. Mrs. Lynette Harkens was rather attractive after all. In truth, when she took the time to prepare herself she was a stunning beauty. It was her oft-times spoiled brat attitude that ruined that illusion. Such as when her husband wished to go the easy route, and she the hard one.

Gilbert Two-Tall had been a guide for several years and this was one of the few times that he actually liked a Euro tourist. Philip took every moment he could to ask about Spontoon's culture, carefully noting Gilbert's answers in a large travel book he carried. Such as what he should and should not photograph. Even to being careful to cover his camera lens when native girls were around in nothing but their grass skirts. Gilbert knew those girls expected to be photographed. Quite a few, all unmarried of course, had been selected for these 'villages' because they enjoyed being photographed this way. Philip though was completely different than his wife, who entered the shrines brazenly, only to be pulled back by her husband before she could do something wrong as she poked about. It seemed as though the vixen truly desired for something bad to happen to her. Perhaps she was cursed the wolf thought. It had been known in his lifetime.

Pushing yet another banana leaf aside to allow Mrs. Harkens to pass, the plant having been carefully placed there just two years before, Gilbert pushed a hidden button that would warn the waiting show village ahead. Silently he waited for the older wolf to reach him. "Want maybe Om Nom make reservation" he asked in a low voice as the vixen walked ahead of them, soon to ooh and ahh as she stepped into the next 'surprised native village.' "Likki Tikki makie makie many trip trip Cannibal Island. Maybe make special

trip for you wifie?"

Philip grinned as he shoved his inverted and unlit pipe into his mouth. Another thing Gilbert liked the wolf for. He'd noted his guides distaste for pipe smoke the first day, quietly never lighting up while with him again. "It would be an adventure for her my good man" he admitted, taking a moment to sit on a convenient fallen tree trunk. "But not the fantasy she has dreamed about since childhood. If I may say the truth, having dear sweet Linnie live out her true fantasy just once would be a jolly good scene. Linnie though has never had a desire to end up in someone's pot I dare say. Something else yes, but someones food? No, neither of us have any real interest in attending an Albert Island cookout. I have no desire to mount my beautiful Lynette's carefully cleaned skull above the mantle place."

Abruptly Philip paused, watching his wife walk away slowly. "Young man. Since I first met her as a child she has harbored a single dark fantasy. That of being captured by pirates and enslaved. I think that perhaps this is why she visits these islands. Hoping, deep down. Perhaps at least once. If only for a few hours. In all truth I have come to realize that becoming a slave is most likely her greatest dream, perhaps even for life. Each of us have our dark side sir, that I believe is Linnie's. Mine is different, though I shant bother you with it. I cannot grant her that dream of her's I am afraid. It is not within me to force Lynette. Or harm her. Still I do love her dearly, thus I must protect her. Losing herself to some slaver may be her dream. Not mine. So I give her these trips to places such as Spontoan, where she can imagine that a rope and chains are waiting her just around the next corner. Yet I shan't knowingly ever place her into real danger. Not my Linnie. Still I thank you so much for the offer."

Accepting his current employers decision Gilbert returned to his job. First helping the somewhat out of shape wolf stand, then carefully leading his current safari of two into yet another carefully staged 'native village.' Again Gilbert noted with pleasure as Philip returned his camera to its case at the sight of beautiful young native girls. Almost all wearing nothing more than grass skirts, while a few of the more adventurous ones wore even less. Philip completely missed the disappointed looks on many girls faces as his camera vanished. There was though a possibility regarding his wifes fantasy. With possibility oft-times came profit. He already knew that the Harkens, though well off were not of the very rich. Yet money was money. It was the end of this years tourist season. A chance to pad the villages accounts a little more couldn't be ignored.

Late that night Philip Harkens was as his habit sitting at the Marlyborne hotel's bar, quietly enjoying his evening tittle before joining his waiting wife for sleep. Just as he tasted his drink a rather large, and very impressive black furred mare pulled out the chair across from him. She quickly spun the chair around before sitting, leaning her weight, and quite expansive chest against her chairs back. "Word is yer lass has ah fantasy" the mare stated bluntly. Her voice was pitched just barely high enough to be heard by Philip and no one else. "One yer wishin yah could make true."

"You are" he asked politely.

"Nikki Ibarra Lily Benevedo. Sometims cald tha Red Lily. Ah sometimes help arrange certain tourists special fantasies. Long as tha aint dangerios tah them inna long run."

"I see. Believe it or not your fame precedes you. I have heard of Red Lily within my business circles. A business partners secretary once visited Spontoan. His opinion is that she changed a great deal, so much so that she has become quite indispensable to him, as he is unmarried at the moment. As I recall, he stated that Red Lily both trains women who desire such, and grants them their greatest fantasy in full safety. You are considered extremely reliable by both him and his secretary. Now you wish to arrange something for me. Still, no thank you. I have no desire to see my wife boiled alive or roasted over a spit. Nor does she herself desire to experience such. Yes, she has an odd fantasy that has grown as long as I have known her, but dying is not that fantasy by any means. You see, I very much love my Linnie. Have loved her for as long as I remember. We have our disagreements yes, yet I find that all couples do so. Nor do either of us have any secrets from the other."

"Ah dislik killin ahn ah never murder" Nikki responded. "Ahn all of mah students returned home live ahn well. Buh yer Lady has ah fantasy. One yah canno honorable arrange fer her at home. Though yah wannna. Son, this here is Spontoon Island. Fantasy's are orh berad ahn butter. Harmin tourists is somthin only ah fool does. Ahn only ever once cause then tha tourists. Tha stop comin. Tha villag tha hired me has no fools."

Philip was intrigued, still. "Who sent you."

"Yer guide." She pulled a trinket from her blouse, setting it in Philips paw. He well remembered it, a ring of two colored coral stones interlocked in a strange occult symbol that Om Nom wore. One that he had made a point of checking for the few times that they had to drag his wife from some dangerous quicksand, or out of an occasional ravine. "Most importan thin he has next tah his family. Es waitin outside tha talk wid yah, iffih yah need further proof."

Returning the object to Nikki Philip sipped a bit of his drink. "Unrequired. I am well aware of the importance this object has to our guide. You are of course aware of my wifes greatest fantasy? To be captured by wild natives. Trained, then sold as a slave?"

"Common. Get it here two, three times ah season ah least. Few years more often" the mare admitted. "Thos tha don take mah personal instruction. Don understan it, but some. Well some are lik that. This nah Kuo Han son. Yer lovs saffer my paws than yer home police station. Gotta warn yah first. No woman's spent time with Red Lily ahn been tha same. Nah one. Yah might noh like tha change. She mah not even com back tah yah. Does happen sometimes."

"Should I accept your offer young woman, be assured that I will deal with any change. She is my wife. I love her. She loves me. I am certain that she will return to me. If I must make adjustments for a few small emotional changes I will. Yes. I do understand what she needs is rather a strange desire. If, and I very much must stress the if here. I should hire you for this fantasy. What guarantee have I that my wife will be unharmed. That she will be freed within the time agreed. A time which I must admit is when our ship departs which is in eleven days."

Nikki reached into her expansive blouse again, withdrawing a business card. "Kart-Tombs. Ah own ahmost half, all ah can bah law sein as ahm no ah native. That's eighty thousand dollars plus value. Ah put tha up as guarantee yer wife be returned alive ahn healthy. Nah unchanged, buh alive ahn healthy. Nah as good as any life, buh all ah own. Thers ah writtn contart tah sign bah all involved, cept tha victum course. Read it carefully. Good enough?"

"And this would cost me?"

"Five hunner shells. Ah get twenty fer mah part. Some few other actors geh ten. Most rest gose tah tha village tha puts this plah on. Times are hard fer most durin off tourist season ahn as yer ship is tha next tah last one this year..."

Philip closed his eyes as he crunched numbers, making a decision. "Five hundred would mean that I would have to cancel our visit to Hawaii this year, unless the local banker will allow me to wire money from home. For that amount Nikki, exactly what fantasy will my wife be given?"

"Tha allow yah tah wire money, is azh branch oh Lloyds ere." Carefully Nikki laid out the play that had been decided upon, noting quickly by his questions that this wolf truly loved his wife. It was a situation Nikki had discovered was rarer than her parents had lead her to believe when she was a child. Only one change was requested by her new client. One easily agreed upon by Nikki. No males were to more than touch his wife during her selling. None to touch her otherwise.

October 18th, 1936

It was only a little more than two hours later as Oharu finished her instruction of star reading to her three students, that she acknowledge her late visitor. A male wolf, brightly dressed in feathers, trade beads and a leather kilt-like device so outlandish that she could not quite restrain a giggle. "How may I serve you" she asked, forcing her mirth to one side. It was very late, yet she would not refuse any visitor her time.

"Honored Mother" the wolf answered, only to silence himself as Oharu held up a paw.

"Oharu. Please. Unless needed Honored Mother is a title I prefer not to use. Thus Oharu will do. Now, please?"

"Oharu then" Gilbert continued. "I am Gilbert Too-Tall of the Amerindian village Green Feathers. A Guide. We have need of you for a play."

"Need of me? Gilbert Too-Tall I am not actress. I am simply Priestess."

"No Honored... Oharu. I have come to ask your help. You are oriental, obviously not born of Spontoon. You speak Cipangan. You have dealt with a military force of your own people. We, my tribe, have a play requiring one of your abilities. She who normally does such is already involved in the Volcano Sacrifice play. Her stand-in has injured herself and cannot walk at this time. There are no others available at this time for such. We ask that you accept her place in such this one time. Please."

"And this play is?"

Sitting on a stone Gilbert carefully outlined what his tribes story writer had come up with. Though he spoke for almost half an hour Oharu remained silent, completely still. What she couldn't know was that her absolute concentration on his words impressed her visitor more than had she asked questions. No one had ever given his words their absolute full attention before.

"So" she decided when Gilbert had finished. "You are certain Nikki and Malou will join? That they take this woman where she wishes, no other place."

"They are already at my village preparing. Our own Priestess will monitor her."

Oharu finally nodded her own agreement. "You will have tourist at the site just noon. This shrine. It is not holy place."

"No Oharu. It was built for a movie many years ago. It has been used, built upon for a pawful of other such endeavors since. We have allowed it to age of course, have added too it, but it has never been a holy site."

"You are absolutely certain that there will be one insure your victim not abused beyond her own acceptance. At all times?"

Gilbert nodded yes. "Beyond Nikki herself my own villages Priestess will observe all. She will have final say. If the woman is forced even little this play will end instantly. A back-up hero waits in case needed."

"Then I see no problem. May I bring students? I am certain they would enjoy bit of change from studies."

Gilbert grinned again. "I am certain that we can find parts for those who join you. This though will cause you no problems?"

"Religiously? Not at this time. I am serving your village. That my function. More than, I would have speak with Great Mother first. Your plot though, you are certain no lasting physical harm will come to the fox?"

"She will have bruises yes" Gilbert admitted. "Her husband has stipulated only one change to the original play. A change that shows his great love for his wife. Bruises cannot be helped. She will not be used by any male as was previously planned. Our own Honored Mother has reviewed all things, will review each evening. This will be four hundred shells to our village. Money needed for the lean time for our children. We have never harmed a play victim, nor will we. For, as with Nikki's own special teachings word of mouth is a very important advertising gimmick. Harming her would ruin our business. No others would ever trust us. She will have no long lasting physical harm. I give my word."

"Physical. You avoid most dangerous harm Gilbert Too-Tall. What of her mind? I have already found myself holding too many shattered minds in paws this year."

"I understand Oharu. Our Priestess has looked within the fires. There is a fair chance that this tourist will fall forever within her fantasy world. It is not too great a danger she believes, still it is one all plays must deal with. It has happened before though."

"I accept that word then Gilbert Too-Tall. I will hold you too it, be certain of that. Since I do not know the way to this site, would you have someone here to guide by moonset tonight?"

"It will be done Honored Mother, and my thanks." Standing Gilbert again bowed to the mouse, then hurried off. There was much to prepare before morning.

October 19th, 1936

That morning three figures stepped off a hired water taxi just North of the shortwave antennas on Main Island. With the Abyssal Sea to their backs they were soon following a well worn track into the jungle. All with full expectation of returning to Casino Island in time for a late afternoon lunch.

"You are of course absolutely certain that these ruins are safe" Lynette asked. There was a pensive sound to her voice, a sound of one knowing the answer to come yet greatly wishing to hear differently. If only a little danger. Please? Her voice seemed to beg.

"Very safe safe" their guide responded. "Bring many many tourist here. Take many many pictures."

"I see." Was there a deep note of sadness in the foxes voice Gilbert asked himself. Yes, defiantly a note of sadness. Hawaii was well known to be safe. Why, they didn't even preform virgin sacrifices to their volcano goddess. They never had of course, Hollywood movies or not. Pele had never accepted anything more than a lock of hair, or a certain plant within her liquid rock as sacrifices. "Well Philip" the Vixen sighed. "We will view these ruins so that you may photograph them. I will explore the jungle, just a bit. Then we shall return to Casino Island to laze about in civilized luxury until we take to our cabin and travel on-ward to Hawaii."

"Thank you my dear" Philip replied. "You do so know how I much enjoy my archeology hobby." He opened his ever present camera, following behind his wife. Philip knew what was going to happen within the hour, if his wife was true to form. A photograph or three for her to hide away for her private memories would be just the ticket. There was something else he'd discovered last night. These constant disappointments had pushed his wife to the edge. She had mentioned divorce for the very first time last night. Divorce because she felt that she could no longer be a loving wife, such had her dreams changed her.

Certainly those small ruins their guide led them to were safe enough, and real. They bore odd carvings true, ones Philip had never seen before and he was fairly conversant with known old world carvings. These were... He looked closer. A reptilian face was hidden within the strange symbols. Quickly he pulled out his rubbing paper and a charcoal stick, beginning making what would by sunset become an extensive series of rubbings.

"What is that" his wife asked their guide, pointing to a tall stone tower just within sight. She was unaware, but it was the currently unused movie set.

Om Nom shivered as if in fear. "That place taboo taboo. Bad ju-ju" he warned her. "Not go there. No native go there. No one go there ever come back."

Philip stood from his rubbing, silently grabbing his camera. '*Follow Linnie carefully*' he reminded himself as his wife almost instantly vanished into the jungle. He knew her ways too well. Give her any reason, any suspicion of danger to herself and off she would go. Hunting that danger she had always hungered for. Facing it, daring it to touch her. To take her within its arms. Secretly wanting it to take her. With his guide helping he kept just within sight of his wife until they came to a small open space. Lynette stopped as she reached the little meadows center, looking around for the way towards that tower now out of sight. Behind her, as Philip watched with admiration at the acts simplicity as Om Nom pulled a small brush across the paths opening. By the time Mrs. Harkens turned around her path out was invisible. Before she could frame another thought, other than curiosity several brightly painted figures stormed out of the brush behind her. Calling native words neither American could understand the five females of various species, none wearing more than masks over their eyes, quickly overpowered the solitary very civilized female. Lynette never even managed a scream as her muzzle was wrapped shut by some kind of sticky vine almost instantly. One figure ran back into the brush, returning with a long thick pole. In moments the pretty fox was hanging between two husky females by her bound ankles and wrists as she was hauled away into even deeper jungle. Behind her lay her clothing, apparently torn and abandoned.

Om Nom gently released the brush. "Need see all?" he asked, noting that Philip was already winding his camera.

"Only enough to know that she is in no real danger" the wolf admitted. "Then I must appear upon Casino Island very late this afternoon. Bedraggled, frightened as I reach our embassy to beg for help. This is awfully exciting though but I truly hope that she is not badly frightened."

"True true. If badly frightened special hero waits to save immediately. Follow. Foxy woman not hurt. Om Nom give word. We treat almost like slave. Then hero save day. Bring wifey home loving arms. Leave for safety safe Hawaii. Wifey have sweet memory last lifetime yes yes. Maybe frighten grandchildren with. Many have done this." He carefully failed to mention that one such experience had left the victim deep within her own fantasies long after she had returned home.

Following his guide and walking carefully past the ruined clothing '*excellent knife work*' the wolf realized upon spotting the cut, but unbloodied cloth. Philip soon found himself standing at the edge of a natural bowl. Below him were 'ruins.' But ruins even his amateur trained eyes told him were a movie set. For only a few pieces were whole, all the others simply hollow shells that appeared solid from the center and certain other angles. A full dozen natives, all female, were busy tying his wife to a tall stone column. No, not stone. Painted cast concrete pole. She was, he noted, not fighting all that energetically. There was a shine in her eyes that he had seen only rarely and not in a very long time. One known only when she was daydreaming. Knowing her so well he was now certain that she was enjoying herself completely. "There are no males here" he observed.

"You ask. Only help heavy work in background, two photographers and Doctor." Om Nom answered. "All but Doctor soon leave. Village have much much fishing must do. Have returned boats throw many nets. Not return unless Priestess call them."

"I see. What was filmed here anyway?"

"Jungle Queens White Bride last" his guide answered. "Built for Legend Lost Lizard. Nineteen twenty-eight. Seven movies now here."

"I remember the second. I take it the first will never see viewing in America. Sad. I simply will have to take Lynette to Europe. She does like such fare a great deal. Anything dealing with an enslaved woman has always caught her attention. Please, which one is the Priestess?"

Om Nom pointed to a feather covered figure currently hidden from Lynette's sight, but easily viewable from this angle. "That our priestess" he answered as she looked towards them, lifting a small feathered fan in greetings. Then he pointed at a Japanese Army figure walking towards the now well bound fox. "That Oharu. She Priestess too, from other place. Come as big big favor, because speak, look Japanese. One day be greatest Priestess maybe. Agree do play free. Normal actress. She busy busy other play."

"So this is all then. These plays. They are a national affair. And should I perhaps complain to say, your Allthing?"

"Play end. Wife return within hours. Many many apology. You not welcome Spontoon again. Mistake identify. Break contract. Not nice nice thing."

"I think then that I shall keep my part of this contract, as long as my wife is in no physical danger. Should it prove as fruitful for Lynette's fantasies as I hope then it will be well worth the cost. Should this prove as you promised, be aware that there are many friends with near such fantasies whom I shall refer to your lovely nation Om Nom." He watched silently as the oriental mouse pulled the ropes from his wifes muzzle. Instantly the fox assaulted everyone with language he had never expected her to know.

"And when my husband finds you..." Lynette was saying when Oharu slapped her hard enough to cause the world to spin for the fox.

"Husband go wrong way. Men lead merry chase with your scent" the Japanese officer snapped.

Lynette was stunned. Of course. That was why they had stripped her. They had taken her clothing for her scent. But why was a Japanese officer, and a female one at that hiding on Spontoon Island? She never knew that Japan even had female officers in their military. "He will get the police" she continued in a softer voice.

"Please yes will" the mouse before her admitted. "Find torn bloody clothing floating off cliff. Poor American spy. Fall off cliff. Eaten by many shark. Fill shark belly nice warm red meat yes?"

"I am no spy" Lynette argued, only to be slapped again. Not nearly as hard this time though some part of her mind noted.

"You come straight my camp" the mouse snapped. Her heavily accented English was hard to understand and the roughness of her voice made it even the more difficult. "Now you tell truth. Or I turn over to them."

Lynette looked behind the mouse at those brilliantly fur dyed native women. Every one seemed to be measuring her for something. "Oh God no. Not Cannibals" she gasped as she understood their motions. The mouse before her only laughed. "Maybe" she answered. "Maybe only want pelt for Winter blanket. You talk. I listen. You tell truth. Then maybe I only sell you slaver. If not keep for own pleasure. You make warm bed winter storms. You decide."

Lynette swallowed her fear. She wasn't a spy. She did know quite a number of military officers though. Her husband manufactured things called tanks after all. But... "General Williak Potterman sent me" she gasped, partially remembering a name. She knew she was incorrect, wasn't he in supply? But if it kept her alive who cared.

"Why" the mouse asked, her right paw laying dangerously upon the hilt of an ornate and rather nasty looking sword carried at her side.

"My husband builds tanks. He wanted us to see if Spontoon would buy any" the vixen continued, making up her story from an adventure book she'd read a few months ago. "I am supposed to look for places to build hidden bases. Honest. I didn't know you were here."

Oharu had to admit that for an obviously made up story the woman was doing her best. "Then General lose spy. Poor General. Bet spy keep him warm often. Now he have cold nights. Until find new spy yes?"

"I never" Lynette only to see that blade clear at least six inches of cold steel with a whisper of sound that sent waves of both fear and excitement through her body. "Please" she whimpered.

Oharu turned to one of the women waiting, one a ferret who was actually drooling. "Best tell Nikki to get ready" she told the girl in Spontoon, shaking her head gently in amazement as a look of apparent obvious disappointment came to the ferrets face. These people were very good actors.

"No get new blanket" she asked in broken English.

"Do not frighten her too much" Oharu continued in Spontoon. She turned back to Lynette, noting the fear returning to her face. Best to cool that now. "She go find slaver. You spend rest of life some others toy. Never see Amerika again." Turning her back on the now relieved (and from her scent, abruptly very excited) fox Oharu walked away.

Philip had seen and heard enough, along with taking several photographs for his wifes scrapbook. Turning away from the site he started back along the trail with his guide. '*I really must finish my rubbings first*' he decided. "Eleven days. You are certain three days would not be long enough? After all, Lynette does so love her soft bed."

"Eleven days" his wolf guide announced. "You pay eleven days. She well fed, only first night bad. She dream be enslaved. Even false auction set up. You be there, hidden good good. Watch make sure no harm done. Hero waiting meet you day after tomorrow. Him you give five hundred. If want want, next year we do again?"

"Next year she would not believe such. Oh how I wish we had a month, but Hawaii awaits. We both much hope to find the volcanoes still active when we arrive." Philip admitted. "Lynette is a very good artist. She will though remember this time forever. I have always wanted to safely give her such a fantasy. Thank you for arranging such. It has been her dream for as long as I have known her. Since childhood."

"Is business. Now we go rub rub carvings. Maybe one day you figure out meaning. Tell us. We not know. Want know."

Much later, long after Lynette had fallen asleep in her bonds she was woken at the feel of paws on her body. She opened her eyes just enough to discover two young women with brushes working on her fur. It was late, the sun had already fallen. Her arms ached, her wrists having been tied high above her over half the day. "Water" she begged, ignoring the fact that the two girls were brushing strange symbols into her fur. "Please. Water."

Both ignored her, talking together in that strange liquid sounding native language. Defeated the vixen slipped back into sleep. Somehow though she felt content. It was her childhood dream come true. Sort of. In her dreams though it had been rough pirates. Pirates who had first taken their pleasure upon her, eventually selling her to some black furred native Chief in Africa. Deep dark Africa where she lived the rest of her life in bondage, giving him many pups from her well used body. As yet though no male had come to throw her across some log or simply fall upon her, his filthy breath upon her face. Anyway that dream had changed as she matured. For a long time it was that her husband eventually saved her, arriving after several years to carry her away from life long enslavement. Lately though that had faded, and she had become enslaved for life again. Even now, believing herself in real danger Lynette couldn't shake the pleasure she felt. Was there something wrong with her she wondered. Then shook even that thought off.

If there was, she couldn't do anything about it now.

Oharu sat just out of the vixens range of sight, waiting as a special organic wash dried upon her fur, one her borrowed clothing had already been soaked in the day before. She was watching with the interest of a teacher as her two students carefully placed special symbols in the vixens fur. Unlike those given the average tourists, these did not say 'for sale, cheapest bid' or 'pull down woman.' No, these were protection symbols. For though this site, as she and her fellow Priestess had ascertained was neither holy nor cursed, there were always forces who could take advantage of an unprotected Euro female in her weakness. These symbols would protect Lynette a full moon, even when gently brushed over by Malou tonight. Back in one of the buildings Nikki and Malou were readying themselves. Their outfits, unlike Oharu's crisp starched Army Majors uniform were of dark, tight leathers and silk. Surprisingly Malou was having a wonderful time, even though her part would be no more than what she had already given Nikki. And where had the Amerindian tribe gotten a Cipangua uniform the mouse wondered. It could have been a few sizes larger though.

Nikki was ready, having brought one of her favorite outfits to wear. Looking down at her Persian feline companion she felt pride in how Malou appeared. She was wearing only the jewelry she had brought with them, it was all she would wear the next few days. Quickly Nikki changed her fee for this play. A photograph of her and Malou in full costume would be more than payment enough for this work. Or better, a drawing by Oharu. That mouse's skills with pen and ink were unbelievable. Nikki shivered, thinking of Oharu. If that uniform had been any tighter the mouse would have been popping buttons hours ago. A very tasty, and now untouchable dish the mare admitted. One she had dreamed of feasting upon before, had feasted upon once. After this day those dreams would come again she knew. Her own outfit left nothing to the imagination, though it covered her completely in black leather. Malou though. Malou advertised. Oh did she advertise. Making certain everything was ready the two walked out to make their appearances.

Loud voices, arguing voices woke Lynette. Her eyes were gummy, still with some effort she managed to open them. There was now a large fire between her and those who argued, its flickering light making visibility difficult. As she listened the American berated herself for learning French in school, not Chinese or Japanese or even Polynesian. Being bi-lingual in this case only meant that she was completely ignorant in two languages.

"You mother drank Saki and you're an expensive lotus eater" Oharu snapped at Malou, waiting for Nikki to translate. Malou's response was odd.

"Even as a lotus eater, I am more desired in this world than any unadorned woman."

Nikki groaned. "I ought to throw you both in a mud pond and let you fight it out."

"I would much enjoy that" Oharu admitted, licking her lips. "I think your woman would taste of honey." Her voice though sounded like she was cursing. This went on for some time, with the three discussing everything from next weeks dinner to Oharu's non-choice in artificial body scent to finally Malou threatening to seduce Molly, a statement that at first stunned the mouse (giving the feline extra points) then causing her to break out laughing (two more points for the Chinese woman.) Finally Oharu walked over to the hanging vixen. To Lynette's horror the mouse walked right through the fire, its tongues of flame completely enveloping her for a few seconds before she emerged. Yet there wasn't even a curled fur upon the mouse. Not even smoke drifted from her body after such heat. What she couldn't know was that the now dried coating had vaporized within the fire, keeping Oharu's most delicate fur cool enough to not react, for just long enough. Though its after effects would cause the mouse a great deal of itching.

"What are you" she gasped, feeling her heart race. Was this a demon? She had heard the Japanese described as little devils at some of the parties she had attended.

"You never want know" Oharu answered, ignoring her bodies abrupt screams to be scratched. "You have been sold. This one new owner. You please her, she maybe not use for shark bait like last two." Turning to the two waiting native girls Oharu instructed them, in Spontoon, to carefully cut the woman down.

Lynette collapsed into the arms of that huge black mare, a scent of sweat, oil and leather filling her senses. A bottle was thrust into her mouth, granting her no more than a single swallow of warm water before vanishing. She didn't even argue when Nikki tossed her over her shoulder like a sack of flour and walked into the dark jungle.

When Lynette had left Oharu quickly removed the uniform she wore, grateful to be able to breath again. Someone began pouring cool water over her, washing away those itch producing particles left behind by the fire protecting coating. Her part in this was now over. Tomorrow she and her students would again be caring for shrines, studying, helping others. Still it had been an interesting diversion, and an eye opening view into the Spontoon tourist scene. "Her wrists" she asked her students as they began to comb back those signs Oharu always wore in her fur.

"No blood" one answered. "Her wrists were wrapped in cloth first. Some swelling yes. Malou has herbs to care for such. A doctor will check her while she sleeps from the drugged water."

Looking over to what appeared to be a pile of firewood Oharu signaled with one paw. Two rather unkempt appearing furs smelling of chemicals appeared as though they had formed from air. Both carried very expensive cameras. "You have all you need" she asked.

"Everything" the older Fennic fox answered. "Harry will take these films to the village, then meet me at Nikki's campsite. It will be an interesting album for the Harken's to look over in their old age." With a bow to Oharu both foxes vanished. Each in a different direction.

Slipping on her lava-lava Oharu felt again the freedom such a style of dress gave her. She would always prefer the Kimono, yet no longer did she feel like a gaishou when in native dress. She was certain though that even as a grey furred old woman, wearing nothing but a grass skirt would always cause her some small embarrassment. Gathering her two students she headed back to her Glen.

October 20th, 1936

Lynette woke to a bucket of cold water being dumped upon her. Sputtering she tried to move, only to find her arms bound tightly behind her. When did that happen she wondered as she struggled to a sitting position in the now muddy ground, much to the dismay of her once well kept fluffy tail. Managing a sitting position she looked around her. That huge black mare was sitting comfortable by a small fire, apparently eating her breakfast. Walking away from Lynette was the most beautiful Persian cat she had ever seen. Most of that her logical mind warned her, was probably because of the massive amount of obviously expensive jewels, and nothing else that the woman wore.

"Water" she begged, only to have the mare curse her.

"You keep that muzzle shut slave. You hear. Or I'll beat you." Nikki ordered.

Lynette swallowed, her throat dry. It'd been what, almost a full day since her last real drink of anything, and that only a cup of tepid water from her husbands canteen. She couldn't count the barely mouthful of sour tasting water the night before. *'Oh Philip, I wish your were here'* she thought. Her fantasy had, in light of day lost some of its luster. Yet strangely only some. Time passed slowly while she waited, noting how the feline waited upon her companion. *'She is a slave'* Lynette realized. *'Oh God, I'm going to be just like her.'* Though the thought initially horrified her, it excited her more she discovered.

Finally the mare stood, grabbed a limp leather bag and walked over to the waiting vixen. Opening the bag, a water skin Lynette realized, she let the vixen drink. It was musty, hot and tasted better than anything she'd ever had. Once the bag was empty the mare tossed it at her companion who captured it with a grace Lynette once would have killed to learn. "First we start on the basics. Posture. Commands. If you do very well slave we might even get to the more pleasurable parts before the auction." She switched to Chinese, apparently instructing her companion.

As Lynette watched the feline settled down across from her. "Positions" the mare snapped. "One." With a fluid grace no living thing should have the feline moved into a position Lynette could only call totally available. "Basic position. Any time you resting in the presence of your owner, that is how." Pulling out a wicked looking knife the mare reached behind Lynette, cutting her bonds.

"Two warnings. One time each slave. One, my name is Mistress. Nothing else. Two, you try to run I leave your gutted still living body on this beach for crabs. Understood?"

"Yes Mistress" Lynette answered, fighting back that sudden urge to run.

"Very good. Now a gift for you, since you listen. That is Kitten. She is my private slave. You choose your new name. If I like you keep it. If I don't Kitten chooses. Kitten has a nasty turn of mind when it comes to Europeans. Understand?"

"Yes Mistress."

"Now, position one. No, open your knees wider Lots wider. That's better. A fair start. You'll need to do better. Chest out..."

By noon Lynette was exhausted, but she had memorized twelve of the fifteen positions Kitten had shown her. Though at her best she knew that she couldn't begin to match the Chinese felines suppleness. It would take years of practice to do that. Oh if she could but have those years flickered through her mind. She also knew the meaning for over a dozen one word commands in Chinese. For learning her lessons well Mistress had given her a present. She was allowed to eat lunch, though from a bowl on the ground while holding her wrists crossed behind her back as if bound.

It was very late at the Marlyborn on Casino island when a knock came to Philip's door. Not expecting anyone he was surprised when a middle aged Fennic fox female walked in, she carrying a large envelope in her paws he noted. "My wife" he asked, understanding who she must be.

"Is very well and oddly, so far has not shown any desire for rescue" his visitor answered. "I have brought photographs. That you may be assured as to your wifes safety." She laid the envelope down. "A small change in schedule. He is ill at the moment thus your Hero will meet you in a few days at lunch. Please have the money for him then."

"And if I don't" Philip asked, gently testing.

"Your wife will be released immediately to you. You will then be asked to leave Spontoon and never allowed to return."

"Be certain then Madam that I shall have the funds we have agreed upon at that time. I must ask though, your speech."

"I spent some time in England" the Fennic answered. "First attending Saint Winifreds. I am also what you call a lawyer. My village holds your wife for this play. Thus my current commission is to insure that no physical harm befalls your wife, that you are kept informed daily as to her condition and that our side of this contract is upheld. To the letter."

Philip felt his jaw drop, forcible closing his mouth he hefted the envelope. "I shall be blunt them Madam. Your country continues to surprise me."

"Then I too shall be blunt" his unnamed visitor decided. "You have not approached the local talent. You have been careful not to photograph our young women when in states of less than expected dress, even though they expect and many desire such. You have also done all that you can in the very short time you have to learn and respect our important customs. This is unusual for any Euro, thus is the reason such an involved play was offered you, rather than the normal few hours of captive manages to escape on their own plays."

"Thank you Madam. When this play reaches its conclusion I shall be delighted to have my Linnie back in my arms. I just hope that this fulfils forever her taste for such things."

"There is one matter Mr. Harkens" the fox warned. "I have been asked to inform you that, as far as both Nikki and our Priestess can ascertain your wife is perfectly happy in her current situation. This is unsettling. She should be crying, threatening even trying to escape. Instead she is apparently doing all she can to learn her new life, even though that will only be for a few more days. I was asked if you would like to terminate this play early, at no penalty to yourself or your wife. Her reactions do worry us. There have been very rare occasions where the victim has accepted fully this new life. When that happens. When it does there is no path back. She would be lost to you, useful only as a servant or true slave. No longer as a wife of equal stature."

Philip took some time to digest this information. He had all through his life known of Lynette's unhealthy love of slavery. That she wished to be one was not a great surprise. But that she accepted so easily. "Red Lotus" he whispered.

"Will force absolutely nothing upon her. Even the slightest resistance will be observed. As yet, other than a distaste for raw fish your wife has refused nothing. This does worry Nikki. As I am to understand it, she has seen this before. She sends this warning though. That you should seriously consider ending this play early. It is possible, should the play continue to its prescribed ending that you will not have your wife in your arms but a true slave at your feet."

"Are you certain that Red Lotus will know not to go that far?"

Shrugging, the fox was somewhat evasive with her answer. "Red Lotus has recently broken a strong woman, for cause. She did not like doing so. As I understand it, she either shattered that woman or her entire group would now be dead. Even today she is still sick at the thought of that doing. To purposely do so again I do not think is within her. I also do not believe she, or anyone else, can possibly know when your wife would slip over that edge from fantasy to reality. Understand sir that accidents will occur, no one can know exactly where a mind's edge is, though of all I know Red Lotus is the most careful in such matters. I think she is afraid that your wife may already have done so, already looked over the edge of that cliff and willfully stepped over. Consider this carefully. For it is not within our contract to return your wife emotionally or mentally unchanged. Only physically undamaged, unused by any male."

Philip walked to the room's bar, picking up a bottle of Scotch. For a long time he stared at the bottle, then slowly sat it down. "Miss. I love my wife more than my own life. This is something she has wanted since I can remember, and I can remember very far back. I will refuse her nothing. This has been her dream since at least her fourth birthday. Send a message to Red Lotus. Try not to send her over that edge, but if she steps over then treat her kindly. As I will the rest of her life. Wife or slave, she is and will be my only love. Now and forever."

"I will do so, immediately. Until tomorrow evening then Mr. Harkens." Turning her back on the wolf she left, still not giving her name. Though had she seen the look of appreciation Philip gave her tail things might have been quite different. Or might not have. After all, she did have a very important message to send. This time.

October 22nd, 1936

Several days had passed and by now Nikki had the certainty that this American was absolutely delighted in her situation. "You show promise American" Nikki laughed as Lynette hurried to the called out position. "Too bad you were married. I could get ten times as much for you if you were still maiden."

"Yes Mistress" Lynette answered, forcing herself to hold the degrading position. She had learned that saying sorry was never accepted. One did, or failed. That was all. She felt fingers on her thighs. Since Mistress was in front of her, this must be... A dragged claw tip both sent shivers through her, and stunned her. No woman... Not... A look at the mare warned her. She was property now. No longer a free woman. Not unless her husband could find her, could rescue her. One wrong move though and she'd lose her life right here. If not that, then the fire taste of that lash again. She so feared that burning taste. Abruptly a purr of pleasure escaped her. It was wrong, what the felines fingers were doing. But it felt so right. Her desire of rescue slipped further away.

Nikki watched the action before her in silence. She had expected the vixen to at least complain again. Instead she'd gritted her teeth then silently allowed Malou her exploration. How strong were the fantasies within this woman Lynette she wondered. Lynette listened. She watched, she practiced and she rarely showed complaint, though complaint was often evident in her face. It had taken only a half dozen or so very light lashes of her lightest whip to end the foxes minimal resistance. Lashes that Malou, in fact any beginning student would only have flinched at. This woman had absolutely no tolerance for pain. That lash was now packed away, never to be used on this vixen again. It was obvious to the mare what fear Lynette held for the little lash, yet her strength in accepting whatever else came amazed the mare. Now how to get her to believe in the strength that she so obviously showed. She had been forced to adjust her part of the play a bit. Tomorrow was her last full day in this play. Following that she would 'sell' the vixen to a waiting auctioneer (who was, at this moment probably helping his group repair said auction block.) After she and Malou left it would be sale, then Marks turn to rescue her. Otherwise known to one and all as The Hero.

Lynette came too, her senses filled with the mares scent. Automatically she forced herself into position one, though her body had a great deal of trouble managing it due to certain muscles still being unaccustomed to such activities, they screamed in pain. But she'd tasted that lash the mare had held enough to know that a few angry muscles were nothing. Of all things that fiery pain was one thing that she could not abide. Her body was sending conflicting signals now. For example her nipples first burned as though on fire, then seemed to be ice cold, followed by a warm pleasure she had never felt before. When she looked down it was to find silver rings where no rings had ever been before. A simple silver chain ran from one ring to the other. *'All this, in the little time I was unconscious?'*

In front of her were her captors. No, not captors, for they had purchased her from that evil Japanese mouse. They were her owners, never captors. That mouse had been her captor, all after was ownership. Nothing less. Lynette forced her mind to accept her new position, pushing away her old life like so much useless clutter in order to survive. Property, no more rights than an animal. To be bought, sold, traded or loaned at her owners pleasure. *'Understanding. That leads to life'* she reminded herself. *'With life comes the chance Philip will one day rescue me. Or not.'* Rescue her, as he had so many times in their childhood games. Always there, always at paw when her brothers would tie her to a tree or fence. Always her rescuer. *'No wonder I fell in love with him. Oh Philip, don't wait for me. Find another. For I have truly found my heaven'* she prayed. Yet deep down she still hoped her husband might just one last time prove her hero.

"She shows a great deal of promise" Malou remarked in Cantonese. She was now cuddled up in Nikki's lap, enjoying her loves warmth.

"A great deal" Nikki agreed. "She is enjoying her situation. Unbelievable Malou, but I honestly think she really wants to be a slave. Had I the standard three weeks she might even surpass Alexia." Both remembered the Librarian who had returned to her home only a short time ago. At the end of her three

weeks, when Nikki had informed her that their contract was complete she had begged the mare to keep her.

"I have a slave" Nikki had answered, pulling Malou to her.

"Then I will be her slave. Please Mistress. Don't make me return to that hell. My life is so boring. You have shown me so much I never knew that I needed."

"It wouldn't matter" Nikki had explained. "It's common for students to want to remain. A month, two at the most and you will understand. Besides I can't afford to support two slaves. Go home now Alexia. Go home and continue your life."

"No Mistress. I am Dust. Not Alexia. Alexia is dead. Only Dust lives. Dust loves you both."

Finally Nikki had lost her patience. "I am ordering you. Return home. If in a year you return only then will we will speak of this seriously. But you wont return. Your kind never does." And so Alexia had left. It happened at least once every two years. But Alexia had been something different. Nikki had never seen a woman release herself so quickly, so fully before. Until now this Lynette. *'Am I just getting that better at this, or am I attracting a different sort. Or worse, did my time in China change me'* she wondered.

"Two days to break fully" Malou said softly. "I offer you my soul if I am wrong. Two days."

"Malou, I already own your soul" Nikki countered. "And we have but tomorrow then sunrise the next. Not two days."

"There is tonight" the feline reminded her hearts love. "And tomorrow night. Between them are two days."

Nikki thought over that challenge, studied the exhausted vixen fighting to hold a position she had barely learned and felt a rumbling growl rise in her throat. "Yes Malou, there is tonight. There is tomorrow night. We shall see." She stood, walking to the waiting vixen.

October 23^d, 1936

Lunch had proved rather eventful for Philip. His 'hero' turned out to be another wolf. This one was wearing a German uniform, its patches removed and not too long ago. Philip was a fairly good weigher of men yet this one puzzled him. If that was a costume, it was one his contact had worn for a long time. Sweat stains matched where they should be and he was quite comfortable within his clothing.

"Herr?"

"Isinglass" Mark responded. "Karl Isinglass, once of der Fuhrer's Navy. Your wife was taken?"

"She was. I have been informed that you may be able to recover her for me."

"Dah. But Red Lotus has her. I must warn you Americano. Play or no play Red Lotus leaves her mark deeply upon those she touches. It may be you no longer have a wife, but only a friend. Or slave."

"So I have been warned" Philip admitted. "I will be honest with you Herr Isinglass. Almost no male alive has not at least once wanted a slave. Even as a child when we played I desired so. But she is my wife. I love her. I would prefer my wife rather than a slave. Yet I do not think that I would not refuse the other."

"Dah. All think such once, or more. Still. You left her there. On your soul is this thing. You did not say you were one of the few who do not still desire such."

Philip lowered his head in shame. "I could not refuse her that dream she has wanted for so long. To be truthful, the idea of her kneeling at my feet..." He shuddered. "I am an evil man."

"Not so much I think. Were you evil, say as der Fuhrer you would not care. You would have no such deep misgivings. I will return your Lynette Herr Harkens. That we both know. Whether as wife or slave. That we will learn. I suggest you be ready for both." Accepting the thick envelope Philip passed him Mark stood and left. In seconds he was lost in the crowd, surrounded by guards until the money was safely deposited.

Eastern Shore of Main Island

"She sleeps" the feather covered Priestess noted as she laid her paw upon the ragged vixens head. It was almost sunrise and she was almost out of breath. For she had come quickly at the mares call.

"Ah drugged er, soh we could talk" Nikki admitted. "Ahm worried."

"She fell too easily?"

"She has falln all tha way Priestess. All tha way. She refuss nothing. NOTHIN!"

"I feel this is of her own desire. This is something she has always wanted. She simply used Red Lotus as an excuse to walk through that door she opened as a child. Now she has closed that door behind her, locking it with her own paws. You are at no fault here."

"But..." Nikki stood, heedless of Malou's worried eyes as they followed her. "Its ah play. Noh tha real thin."

"To us. To her husband yes. To this one, it is a path she has longed for. Perhaps since before birth. Where are you going?"

"Tah ge Oharu. She can brin her bac."

"Nikki. You already owe her more than you can ever repay her. How many lifetimes of debt will you accept. Simply to hope she could help this one."

"Could you?"

In answer the older fox closed her eyes, slowing her breathing as she did what even now the mare had trouble believing. For over half an hour there was silence, until slowly the vixens eyes opened. "Oharu could force her back" she reported. "At great effort. For only a little time. Nikki. She is where she wants to be. Has always wanted to be, has been moving towards every faster this last half year." Turning to look up into the mares eyes the priestess finished her report. "She wants this with all her soul. She is now in, for what is her, heaven. Without you she would have fallen in Hawaii, though her fall would have been dirty. She would have become the toy of those who use women for their own income. Nikki, she would have been destroyed."

"It was ah bet. Ah stupid bet" the mare cried, sitting abruptly on the ground. "Ah broke two woman nah ahn one can't be saved. Ah'm evil."

"No Nikki. You are not evil. Rough around the edges yes. Evil? Oharu would have destroyed you long ago were you evil. She would never have opened her arms to evil that night. No matter the cost to herself. She is a full Spontoon Priestess. She is by the Miko Urako's own words a full Shinto Priestess. Evil is frightened of her, as it is wary of us. I hesitate to dream of what she will be able to do. So there is no worry. You are not evil."

"But..."

"In this time the Gods selected their best tool to give this woman what she truly needed. There is a reason Huakava turned you two's paths towards each other my little mare. She is your guardian. She will not allow you to become evil. Continue this ones training. Give her pride in what she is now so that when she returns to her husband. That then, at least in public, she will be able to function in her society normally."

"Ah need mor time."

"How much?"

"Ah day, aht least. Ah month tah be sure."

"You shall have your day. No more can I guarantee. I will send my messenger to those who need to know. Schedules will be adjusted. But if more than a day we will need to know. So that their ship may suffer a regrettable delay."

"Mah word" the mare agreed.

"Which has always been of better worth than others written blood signed contracts. She will waken soon. I must withdraw now."

"Honored Mother"

"Yes Nikki."

"Ah wanna marry Malou."

"Then do so. You deserve her love, she deserves your love. You are a pair not to be sundered." Standing silently the Priestess walked away, leaving Nikki to explain to Malou what had happened. What now had to happen.

Lynette opened her eyes quickly. It was morning and her owner and the slave Malou were talking. Slowly, attempting to match the felines grace she moved into position one, ignoring her bodies cries for a moment in the bushes. Red Lotus easily noticed her movement. "Stand" she ordered, the unfamiliar command catching Lynette off guard. It took a bit more effort to stand than to hold the first position. She hadn't stood since being captured. Hanging by ones wrists several inches above the ground did not constitute standing.

Walking over to the younger vixen Nikki studied her position. "You are a slave. Remember that. Be proud of that. Very few chose to be slaves, most having to be broken into it. You chose. Have pride in your choice. When you stand on that block look into the audience. It will be the only time you may ever again look into a free persons eyes. Show them your pride. Not arrogance. Pride. Pride you're a slave of your own choice. Proud to be sold, to be owned, to be used. To spend the rest of your life as property. With never any say in your future, your actions your fate. All by your own choice."

"Yes Mistress. I am proud to be trained by you" Lynette answered softly.

Nikki held out a thin silver ring, by its size its use was evident. That it had come from China, intended to be used upon an English spy wasn't important. What was important was what it was. Nothing else. "This is a slave collar. It has my mark. The mark of Red Lotus upon it. Since you truly wish to be a slave I grant you the privilege of collaring yourself. Once closed it must be cut to be removed. You understand this?"

"I do Mistress" Lynette admitted. She reached out, taking the collar in her trembling paws. It was a slight effort to get it around her neck as it had no hinge. Turning it so she could feel its ends Lynette forced the device together with a sharp snap. "Mistress. You have made my life worth the living now" she cried, falling to her knees in supplication.

Nikki gave her a few minutes, then ordered her to again stand. "We have a hard day and a half before us slave. You have a great deal yet to learn with little time to do that learning."

"Mistress" Lynette asked. "May I ask a question?"

"One."

"How did you know this was my greatest dream?"

Nikki smirked, trying to act haughty. "You talk in your sleep" she answered, lying. "Have you chosen a name? Be careful, you only get the one chance."

"Yes Mistress. I have chosen Clay."

"Clay. An odd name for a slave. A female slave at that." Nikki reached out, brushing a beetle off the vixen's arm. "Why?"

"Mistress. Clay may be molded from one form to another. Once formed as desired it may be fired, to hold that form forever. Or not fired. So as to be reformed again at another time."

"And I am your fire?"

"Mistress. I most fervently pray that you are."

Nikki was impressed. Her students usually came up with degrading names for themselves, when they could. Toy was the most common name. Clay though, this woman was intelligent. Very intelligent. "Who does a slave serve" she asked.

"Mistress. I serve only you. No other."

Never had Nikki seen a woman so proud to be a slave. Never. "I would keep you" she found herself saying. "But I need the money badly" she continued, covering herself. Such an intelligent woman. Malou had talents beyond talent with her jewelry. Was by no means unintelligent, but she hid behind philosophy. This woman. If only. Such a prize. Suddenly shaking herself from her thoughts she gestured to Malou, calling out a number. Instantly the feline moved into that position. "Please her Clay" she ordered, then knelt down to speak to Malou. "You lost the bet by a day. Enjoy. Please. Or I will give you to a certain mouse in part payment of my debt to her" she whispered in Cantonese.

Malou took a deep breath, looked to Clay, who was now kneeling. "I am yours to do with as you desire my love. Though I will take no pleasure from another woman."

In this, Clay proved Malou a liar.

October 24th, 1936

Finally the day came to sell Clay and Nikki found herself wishing it was all real, that she could keep the woman. Yet it was a play and all plays had endings. She had easily spotted Philip Harken's in the crowd, his fur temporarily dyed to hide who he was. There were over a dozen young girls held in the same cage as Clay, making real this part of the play. Their parents would buy them with bags of painted iron discs, disc used as prop money in dozens of movies. It would make a money like clatter as bags changed paws, as 'money' was counted out in Clay's sight. Normally the mare and her love would have returned home by now. Nikki though had decided that she wanted to see what happened next.

Clay waited in silence with the other slaves, ignoring their chattering. She only knew Chinese and Spontoon words for her commands, the numbers for her positions. Her new owner would teach her whatever language she would need other than that. Privately she hoped for a virile male, one who's body would punish her each night. She had already stopped hoping for any rescue, in fact was now hoping against such. Philip was still in her mind, still a laughing loving face in her memories. She hoped that he would not wait for her. If only he had understood. Understood that her pushing had been in hopes that he would finally turn on her. Would bind her, would truly make her his. But he loved her too much to see what she truly needed. Well Red Lotus and her slave had given Clay what she needed. Oh had they given her what she needed.

A drum sounded three times as guard came in, easily dragging a resisting girl out. Clay listened as the auctioneer spoke. Perhaps he was describing the girl, her talents, her training. Then numbers started being called. It surprised Clay that she understood the numbers, even when they went above those she had been taught. Soon a hammer struck, she could hear the girl screaming, then a sound like paw on flesh and silence. Foolish girl. Be proud. Show them your worth Clay thought.

Nikki leaned back with a beer in one paw. Malou was sitting between her legs, the back of her head resting in the mares stomach as though in a formed pillow. There would be six 'sales' before Clay, seven after. All for show. Malou had laughed as the ferret had strutted across the stage during her own sale, sticking her tongue out at the crowd.

"Behave Lulu" an older woman's voice had called. "Or I'll resale you. To a Euro. Cheap."

"Mother... You know I have to finish S.I.T.H.S. final tests next week."

"Maybe one of these boys will buy you then. Let them pay the water taxi fees."

"MOM!"

Laughter had followed, then a padded wooden paddle had struck a dead pigs carcass. That silenced the girl, but she sashayed off the stage like a true vamp. Each new girl had their own private acts. One kept making faces at the auctioneer until finally he lost it and started laughing silently. Another sat with her back to the crowd, her tail held as high as a squirrel. It would have been an insult, except none of the girls were wearing anything and she, like Clay, had shaved certain areas.

Finally it was Clays turn.

Philip stared in stunned shock as his wife walked onto the stage. No, she marched ahead of the supposed guard. She was wearing chains but they were loose. In fact she held them up for all to see then stood proudly before them. Proudly. *'My wife is proud she is now a slave'* he thought, the idea was confusing him. No cries for help, no begging. She looked directly into the crowd as if daring them to bid low. And where she no longer had fur... He found himself suddenly in what would have been an embarrassing situation, had he not been wearing the odd leather kilt Ohm Nom had supplied.

Carefully the auctioneer began listing Lyn.. No Clay's attributes in fair English. Her age, that she had been married "automatically annulled by the Euro Church now that she is a slave, as all know that slaves cannot be married." This was true in the olden days Philip knew, but had not been applied in a very long time. When the auctioneer announced who had trained her Clay threw out her chest, the silver chain hanging between her nipples flashing in the afternoon light, her silver collar matching her ornamental chain flash for flash.

"You can never have your wife back" Mark warned Philip softly. "She has become this. I am so sorry. It was unintended."

"You do not understand Herr Isinglass" Philip corrected. "All her life she has wanted this. All her life she has dreamed it. If I did not love her so much, need her so much I would leave her in this life forever. She would be in heaven every moment. No matter how she was treated."

"It cannot be. Slavery is almost completely forbidden on Spontoon. Krupmark would dirty such a soul. Kuo Han would burn it to ash. It must be you, for I can think of no one else."

Philip followed his wife's gaze, finally locating Nikki and Malou at the edge of the crowd. "Or her" he admitted. "I have lost my wife to the Red Lotus. Yet, I think that the Red Lotus would never deny me my wife."

"You are correct. Nor think I that Red Lotus herself yet understands that look. They will begin bidding now."

And they did. All the girls before had stopped at five hundred, but Clay's prize quickly rose to a thousand, then paused. An agreed upon ending to this play. Clay though had other ideas.

"A thousand" she called to the crowd, laughing. "You insult Red Lotus. She trained me. Someone call a number."

"Eight" an older woman's voice called. Fluidly, not as fluidly as Malou but better than when she first tried, Clay slid into position eight. "Come" she called, unable to see the crowd in that position, but the crowd able to see her treasures quite well. "I am trained. I will happily obey any command you give. I will learn whatever you want. Bid for a trained slave the price she is worth."

Again the bids were called slowly, eventually stopping at fifteen hundred. All through that Clay held her position. Then she called for another number. Thirteen was the number. A very difficult position, still Clay managed it. "I speak fluent French as well. I am intelligent. Not simply paws to clean house, legs to encircle you at night. Think what use you can find for me. I am no virgin to fight against your pleasure, I know how to please a man. Or woman."

Again the bids came, this time stopping near twenty-five hundred. It was only iron discs after all, the numbers meant nothing as the winner of this auction had been chosen days before. When the bidding finally stopped Clay stood, taking the mallet from her auctioneer she looked out at the crowd. "Twenty five hundred. I may be worth nothing more now, but had Red Lotus the month she wanted I would be worth ten times that. Who called twenty-five hundred?"

A tall cheetah stepped forward, her gown screaming money and taste. "I " she answered.

"I will serve you uncomplaining all the days of my life" Clay announced to the crowd. "I beg you to have Red Lotus complete my training so that I may be of full value to you." She slammed the gavel down. Instantly lowering her eyes. "This property surrenders itself to its new owner" she finished, her voice dripping with honest respect.

Walking over to the 'bankers' table the cheetah sat a wooden box down. "Twenty-five hundred" she announced, though what was in it in truth was about two pounds of scrap metal. "Her papers."

As freshly printed papers changed paws Clay stepped down, finding her place behind and to the cheetah's right. She waited in silence as the transaction was completed, words written in a ledger. *'I have sold myself'* she realized. *'And I loved every second of it.'* Behind her she could hear the auctioneer start describing a raven furred chipmunk's attributes. There were still other girls to sell. They waited in silence, the sun beating down upon them as each girl was sold. Her papers signed, many dragged away by a leash.

"I am Kat. You will call me Kat. Nothing else" the Cheetah announced after turning to face Clay. She snapped a leash to Clay's collar. "Come. My home is several islands away. I will take your advice slave. I will hire Red Lotus to complete your training, and that will be the last time you leave my home in your life. If you try to escape I will sell you to Albert Island. I am aware you well know what will happen to that beautiful body there."

"Yes Mistress. Thank you for buying me." Clay answered in a subdued voice. "Unless you sell me, I will never leave you Mistress. I will never deny you anything." She felt a light tug on her collar, quickly moving to follow her new owner. Ten days. In ten days she had gone from a free woman on holiday to a slave. Of the two, Clay knew now which she preferred.

It was a two plus hour walk to the beach where a large number of boats (mainly fishing boats) waited. Kat lead Clay towards one, a cabin cruiser from the early twenties. Kat had spoken quite a bit of her home and Clays future duties, most of them outside the bedroom. "Your French will be helpful in my business, as my main buyer is a French..."

Whatever Kats words would be Clay would never know as a shot rang out. Kat groaned, grabbed her stomach and collapsed. With a scream of horror Clay fell to the sand beside the Cheetah, turning her over.

Blood welled up between the felines fingers. A stomach wound. "At least a kiss" Kat begged. Clay responded instantly. Fighting away the paws that tried to rip her from Kats apparently dying body.

"Come on Fraulein. Yer husband awaits. We must hurry else all will be lost."

Crushed, Clay allowed herself to be lead away. After all she was nothing but a slave. With her owner dead she belonged to whomever wanted her. She was still crying when her husband called her name from another boat.

Behind her 'Kat' stood, throwing aside the pigs blood soaked sponge she had held. "That was a real kiss" she whispered before returning to the village. "Better than I have had in years."

Within hours the two were aboard their cruse ship, one which had slipped moorings only minutes after they arrived and were now headed for Hawaii. To his dismay Philip found that his wife would not leave their cabin. "If you will not use my training Master then I beg of you. Sell me to one who will" Clay had informed him bluntly when he had made the mistake of allowing her to speak freely. Clay, she refused to answer to her real name. She was Clay. She was heartbroken to have been saved. "Why didn't you find another" she had asked. "Instead you bring me back to my Hell. I am a slave not a wife. I beg you please. Treat me as a slave. Or sell me. To anyone."

This was so much more than he had expected, had prepared himself to handle. Philip didn't know what to do to change things, but he would by the time they reached Guam. After all, his wifes happiness was really all that was important to him.

October 26th, 1936

After checking out her new weapon from the armory Millicent carefully inspected the revolver, insuring that it was loaded and not with blanks. Then she wiped away a bit of dust that had collected overnight with a clean rag before slipping it back into its holster. Two weeks of the toughest physical training she had ever encountered had drilled this action into her. Tough for her, but she was absolutely certain that her love Tatiana would have considered it a vacation. Every day now that she worked the feline carried with her material that others would happily kill her to have. On duty her weapon must be ready, as Sergeant Proud had made crystal clear to her. Yesterday afternoon he had demanded a snap inspection of her weapon. After returning it without comment he had suggested that she report to the firing range weekly for practice.

Suggested. She had laughed to herself. One thing Millicent had learned was that Sergeant Proud never simply suggested anything. Thus her last action of the day was to report to the range for further instruction. Then to arrange a weekly appointment for more of the same. It had been when she was leaving that the ranges trainer, a rat terrier, had surprised her.

"Proud inspected yah tahday?" the old terrier asked.

"Yes sir" she had admitted, wondering why the question.

"Whad he say?"

"That I might find a weekly practice session with you useful to me sir."

Scratching his beard the terrier had seemed lost in thought. "Nothin bout yer gun?"

"My revolver" Millicent gently corrected gently. "Seemed of little real interest to him sir."

"Ah sweet, 'e werre interested. Had yah no kept 'er clean 'ed ave let yah know. Next week?"

"Please. I still am not certain that my ability is acceptable."

"Darlin. Jus pull ahn fire in fron oh yerself. Sergeant Proud's men'll be tha ones tah do any real killin."

She'd left then, stopping to clean her weapon before turning it in. Millicent secretly was aware that the idea of actually shooting anyone was a stomach twisting idea.

Now though it was time for another day. It had been over a month since the she and Tatiana had last met and for Millicent it was a month much too long. Perhaps this weekend. Now though she had to push that aside, it was time to work. After gathering her Most Secrets case from its place in one of the safes Millicent inspected its contents before signing for the device. Twice now she had discovered either something extra, or something missing. These were she suspected, tests. Tests that as long as she carried Most Secret material she would be forced to pass at random times. Still part of her mind was upon Tatiana and the one letter that sable had sent her in the last month. Tatiana had expressed pride that her student had advanced, then cautioned to ever be on her vigilance. For from now on her mail would be read, she would be watched. *'Do not ever stumble in your loyalty for your Crown and Country'* the sable had written. *'For to do so will mean your death. This is something I do not desire another to grant you.'*

Another to grant her. A promise. Millicent remembered those word. Tatiana's promise of a future yet to be. That the letter had been read by someone else Millicent was certain. All her mail would now be read by censors, to insure she did not ramble on about things others should not know. An Agent of the Crown. If only she could tell her father this but it was forbidden her. Carefully belting the cross strap of the case around waist Millicent stepped out to preform her daily duties. Most Secret or not, she was still basically nothing more than a courier carrying documents from place to place. But now to places she had been denied before, some she had never suspected had existed.

It was after lunch that she was called into a certain office. There the station security officer waited, but there was no oddly stained grate in this room. "My dear Millicent. I have a package that must be delivered to the American Consulate. Most important" he informed her. "As it is now part of your responsibilities to transfer these materials please secure your current case and return here. Most immediately."

"Yes sir" Millicent answered. She hurried out, so many questions in her mind yet knowing now that she would be told what she needed to know. Nothing else. With a pounding heart she returned to that office, to find a case designed much as her normal one waiting for her. This one though she discovered as she snapped the latches about her body, required a key to remove.

"You will leave your weapon with the guard as you depart dear Millicent. Though I would prefer that you carry it, I am afraid that we have certain.... agreements. Agreements with the local government. Were you to wear it, you would in the least be arrested. "

"How am I to protect my package sir, should I be attacked" she asked.

"The correct question dear Millicent. With your life of course. You will deliver this to a Major Dalmont at the American Consulate. Here is his photograph. He will sign for the contents. He has the other key. He may have material for you to return here. Have you any questions?"

Millicent took a minute to study the photograph before returning it. "None sir. May I have the package now?" She accepted a rather large and heavy package. One that barely would fit in the case now locked to her body. Inspecting its seals she conferred with the report that came with it. Locking her package away she signed the paper, now responsible for what was in it. Wither that was a collection of comic books or a plan of invasion didn't matter. It was her throat on the blades edge now. Oddly she felt no elation. It was simply another duty. One that she would manage.

It was a surprise to Millicent how easily she made her way from the English Consulate to the American one. True, there was only a matter of a hundred meters or so between their gates, but anything could have happened as she walked. Arriving at the main entrance she was stopped by a young and very bored guard.

"Reason for visiting" the ferret asked.

Taking out her identification papers Millicent allowed the guard to read them. "I have official business with your country. I request entrance" she informed the guard.

"Ah no toots. Nah, yer not onna list. And with ah chest like yours, your probably just some hunter comin tah see someone. So who is it hum?"

"I have a clandestine meeting with your sister" she answered. "We are lovers."

Blushing the guard fought his anger. "Listen toots. I gotta know why everyone wants tah go through them doors. Now you be jake with me or I'll frog march that plump rump of your right back to the street. Kapeesh." Reaching out he placed one paw boldly upon Millicent's left breast.

Very carefully Millicent studied the guard, then simply kneed him in the groin. Kneeling down she gathered up her papers. "You sir" she said in a rather loud voice to the curled up ferret. "Have no manners."

"He isn't supposed to Mam" a much deeper voice answered. "Thomas, are you okay?"

"Fine" the ferret answered, though his words were high pitched and obviously forced. "Never wanted kids anyway sir. She's awfully soft."

Standing Millicent stepped away from the two. "He has lost his accent" she observed.

"It will return to him, as soon as he can stand again. Thomas, when you can move please take the rest of today off. Tell Sergeant Campbell that it is a combat injury will you?"

"Yessir."

"You are" Millicent asked the rather large and impressive hound. She was almost certain as he matched the photograph she had been given, but decided to be certain. Failing Tatiana would be embarrassing. Failing her country was inexcusable.

"Major Dalmont. United States Army at your service. You have a package for me?"

"Shouldn't we go inside" Millicent asked, not quite pointedly looking around them.

"Yes. Yes we should. Thomas, I warned you about the English ones didn't I?"

"Yessir" the ferret agreed, having managed a sitting position. He grinned, staring pointedly at Millicent's chest. "I was sorta distracted sir."

"Yes. Yes you would be. Miss Millicent? If you would follow me please."

It was much cooler in the American Consulate Millicent noticed. As she signed in a chill breeze struck her. Looking around she spotted a strange metal duct work still being mounted on the wall. "That is a state secret?" she asked.

"Air Conditioning. Something new. We are testing it in the islands. It uses liquid Ammonium to cool brine which flows in radiator tubing. It then cools air flowing over it without transferring the chemical smell. That is then filtered and circulated around the building. Unfortunately only the public areas are cooled at present. My office still uses fans and cross ventilation. Still I have hopes. This way please."

Millicent followed the larger hound through a seemingly maze of corridors and ways until they arrived at an office much like the one she'd left. There Major Dalmont presented his credentials and gave her the code word she had been instructed to expect. "Then you also have the key sir" she replied.

"I do. If you will allow?" Dalmont opened a drawer in his desk, removing a key before approaching Millicent. With care he unlocked her case, then stepped back. "Your package please?"

"Certainly Major" Millicent agreed. Removing the bulky package she held it in her paws. "A receipt please sir?"

"But of course. To Miss Millicent?"

"Miss Holmes please. Millicent is my first name."

"Ah." Writing quickly the hound offered her a slip of paper, accepting the package in return. "Holmes, that is a very nice name. English?"

"Yes sir" Millicent answered. "Will there be anything else?"

"Yes. I have a like package for your sender. A moment please." Walking to a safe he opened it, removing a slightly larger package wrapped in much the same manner. Again Millicent found herself signing papers after carefully reading them. One she laughed at, sliding it away. "I will not agree to be an actress for any Shirley Shrine movie sir."

Major Dalmont recovered the offending page, barely glancing at it before slipping it into a folder. "You would be surprised Millicent, at how many have signed that paper or one like it. A week being bossed about by a spoiled brat tends to make them a bit more observant." He waited until she had locked his package into her pouch before pressing a stud on a waiting intercom. "Mr. Redstones, if you would be so kind. Our English visitor is ready to leave."

Millicent was struck by the very handsome, and very powerful cougar that entered. Mentally she forced herself not to purr though it was impossible to control her tails antics, much to her embarrassment. "Please escort her to the front door, and please insure she is not harassed by the guard this time" Major Dalmont ordered. "Good day Miss Holmes." As the door closed he tore off the covering paper, smiling as the packages contents became visible.

"Are you the new English Courier" Two Redstones asked as he led Millicent through the maze that was his workplace.

"For today sir. We are headed for the main entrance?"

"Yes." Stopping suddenly in an empty corridor the cougar studied his English companion. "You are quite attractive. Do you not feel uncomfortable. Alone in a strange place with a male you do not know?"

"Actually" Millicent replied, stepping back away from the other. "Yes. I do. In fact I am" she admitted.

"You needn't be Millicent. Or should I call you Miss Holmes? You see I'm chief cook and bottle washer for Major Dalmont. His secretary actually. It isn't often I have a chance to speak with an attractive non-native woman. Your previous courier was male you see. Talkative, but male. Look. This is awful abrupt, but would you mind having dinner with me tonight?"

Millicent smiled at the offer. "I'm sorry Mr. Redstones, but we have not yet been formally introduced. Nor do I know you well enough to consider accepting or rejecting such an offer."

"Ah yes. The proper English way. My apologies young lady. I'm just a country boy who made good. Listen, there is a state function on next Thursday. May I at least provide you with an invitation to that?"

"I may not be able to attend sir" Millicent warned.

"Of course. I mean, it will simply be an invitation after all. Should you come I will arrange a formal introduction. Would that be satisfactory?"

"Quite. Now please. I must return to my own work."

Turning back down the hallways Two Redstones led Millicent towards the main entry. "I do hope that I have not insulted you" he continued as they walked. "It's just that all the American women here are already in a relationship and though the local ladies are attractive. It is just that..." He let the words fade as they walked.

"They are not European" Millicent finished. "I most fully understand Mr. Redstones I will not promise anything. Still we will see what occurs, in the passing of time."

Sometime after Millicent departed Two Redstones sat quite comfortable in Major Dalmont's office. "She is very beautiful" the Major was saying. "If you like that type of woman."

"Millicent? Oh yes" the cougar agreed. "Quite a handful. So she is the one that Russian girl has under her thumb. I wonder what Tatiana Wei sees in her. Other than her obvious assets."

"Maybe it's her assets that interest the Russian" Dalmont said with a gentle laugh. "Different people need different things. I'll have the invitation delivered to her people this afternoon. Are you really going to court the girl?"

Looking up at the ceiling Two Redstones considered his options. "Too dangerous to try to get too involved" he decided. "She belongs to Tatiana, who belongs to the Priestess Oharu Wei. You might not believe in this nation's Priestess's but I've seen them do things. Things I do not want done to me. Besides, I stir up that nest and the local government gets involved. Major, I've been here quite a long time. I'm still alive. That's because I know when to stop pushing. Honestly, yes I'd like to make friends with her. It would be nice to have a companion at dinner who wasn't trying to get me to marry her."

"If companionship is all you want" the Major probed.

"I've spent time in London sir. We will have something in common to talk about. Then there is this. Tatiana is Songmark. That doe they want is Songmark. Maybe I can arrange a way to snatch that doe through this housecat. It is a stretch, but a chance is a chance. Of course if I'm successful I've got to be out of here, with my prize in a matter of hours. We both know who's lovesick over that doe. And I am quite certain as to what she would do to me if I were successful, then foolish enough to stick around."

Turning a page in the 'most secret' volume before him Dalmont grunted before speaking again. "Is it just me, or does this little nation have an awful lot of Sapphic women on it."

"Its you sir. Your predecessor had a study done. Spontoon is simply very open about it. There no more here on average than in Chicago. Male or female. Around twenty percent on average. About the same average of tourists that arrive from America that are Sapphic or Fey. Its during tourist season that its most obvious. Spontoon can at time average nearly thirty percent then. When three out of ten women are kissing each other on the street, well its just that more noticeable. Its like that Songmark School. Their girls have a reputation for availability. In truth it is less than five out of ten who are or become so over the three year course. That includes the ones who marry and settle down here. The other half return home to waiting family. Its just what we perceive because it is different than home, not what is really here."

"Wonder the missionaries haven't swarmed these islands, converting everyone to Christianity, Judaism or Islam. Making the women wear covering clothing, shutting down places like the Double Lotus. Ought too."

"They tried sir. They still do. Is there anything else?"

"No. Nothing at all. See you at dinner?"

"Not tonight Major, I'm taking another shot at tracking down that doe. Washington sent another where the Hades is she message. Maybe next week."

"Next week it is then."

Millicent arrived back to her own Consulate without further problems. There she met the waiting greyhound who took her back to her office. "Any problems" he asked.

Carefully Millicent reported upon everything that had occurred. "Sir, was I wrong to assault that soldier when he touched my breast?"

"Not at all Millicent. In truth I would have been disappointed in you had you not at least tried. Now, would you like to see what you carried?"

"My clearance sir is to carry Most Secret, not to view it sir" she answered.

"Though we are both aware that you have already read material you are not cleared for. You would be of no interest to us if you hadn't managed that trick already. Well in this one case I'll make an exception." Placing the paper wrapped bundle on his desk he simply ripped off its outer cover. Before him lay the latest Sears and Roebucks catalog.

"A catalog sir?"

"Yes Millicent. A Catalog. You carried Harrod's latest to the Major. It was both a test for you and something we do to simply mess with our enemies minds. Have done so since we became friends several years ago. Now, since you have nothing more important to do the rest of today shall we peruse the latest enemy intelligence? Who knows, you might find a new disguise costume to wear."

Thus Millicent spent the next three hours with her superior, him showing her the advantages of fishing tackle, her embarrassing him with her interest in the latest fashions. It was an interesting order form that

left Spontoon the next day by Diplomatic Pouch.

At Kart-Tombs Charter Service on Casino island It was Nikki who was poleaxed when a PanAm employee arrived at her door. PanAm had just managed to build a temporary terminal on the leased land next to Kart Tombs. There was barely any service as yet, the majority of that was from Hawaii to Spontoon and back right now. Even so it was not unusual for PanAm employees to wander over and chat.

"Well, need more towels?" she had asked the pretty blond otter. She had already noticed that for some reason Pan Am Orient ran towards otters, blonds most of the time.

"Not today" the otter laughed. "I am just escorting someone to you" the air hostess, Kandy by her name tag answered. She had then reached out the door, bringing in a well known face.

"Mistress" Clay cried with joy, throwing herself into the first position.

Kandy looked at the vixen, then to the mare and a giggling oriental feline working at another desk. "Mistress?" she asked softly.

"Don ask" Nikki growled. "Thanks, bye." She hustled the Air Hostess out of her office then turned to Clay. "Stand up ahn explain" she ordered.

Obedying Nikki as quickly as she could Clay held out an envelope, keeping her eyes downcast. "My husband has divorced me Mistress" she announced. "He has determined that he could not treat me as I must be treated, so he has given me to you Mistress. To train fully then keep or sell as you desire."

Opening the offered envelope without comment Nikki found those ownership papers from the play auction. At the bottom, fully notarized, was Philip Harkens signature and a thumbprint that must have been Clays, transferring ownership to one Nikki Ibarra Lily Benevedo. A cheque drawn on an American bank account and note were also in the envelope. She read the note first.

Red Lily.

I should have listened to your first warning. Yet in all truth I was, am too much in love. I never truly understood Lynette's need. I find that I cannot treat her as she needs to be treated. Nikki, I trust you to care for her. I will send money each quarter for her upkeep. If it is not enough notify me at the below address. I shall always love Lynnie but I cannot accept what she is now. I cannot accept Clay. Care for her. Please. I beg you, should you sell her find one who would treat her with kindness, yet a firm paw as Kat would have, had she been real. If you cannot I will buy her back and try yet again. I will visit Spontoon next year to see her. To see how she is. I will also fulfill my promise. Be certain that soon others will come to you. Finally. Should my Lynnie ever return, though I informed Clay I had divorced her this is a lie. I have not truly divorced her. I will never love another, in the hopes that one day my Lynnie will return to me.

Philip Harkens

"Malou" Nikki sighed in Cantonese as she laid the papers on her desk. "We are in deep, deep trouble with the Allthing."

"She is a gift? Allthing law allow gift. As long as freely given."

"Oh, she's freely given. But somehow I suspect that this doesn't quite qualify under those limited rules. And I, well I have you. What do I need her for?"

"She speaks French. You and I do not, nor does Elizabeth. That is a use. She is intelligent. She is a fairly good artist. My great love. Clay has but one weakness. One not of her own making. Do not discard a valuable employee for a weakness given her by the Gods."

Nikki sat on her desk, studying the American vixen with a critical eye. "Employee? Perfect. Malou?"

"Yes my love."

"Will you marry me?"

"Certainly. When."

Nikki looked again at the woman standing before her. "How about this afternoon. I know a little calico Priestess on Meeting Island that would do it, if your willing."

Malou dropped the tiny hammer in her paw. "You are serious."

"Close shop girl. 'Is time I took my life back fully. I'm marrying you today." She shifted to English. "Clean this place Clay. Lose that ugly clothing and find a brush. Your fur is unacceptable. We will be back in a few hours. I'll find something fitting for you to wear while you work here, tomorrow."

"Yes Mistress" Clay agreed, unbuttoning the blouse her ex-husband had forced her to wear for the trip. "Immediately Mistress. Mistress?"

"Yes."

"Thank you for keeping me Mistress."

Nikki groaned in dismay, taking Malou's paw as they left. "What am I going to do with her" she asked the feline.

Malou thought seriously on the subject. Eventually a smile came to her eyes as her paws fell to her now obviously bulging belly. "I will need a baby sitter" she reminded her love. "All I beg is that you not press her upon me again. I love you Nikki. As with Clay I will refuse nothing you desire, not even that. Yet I desire no other woman. Still a reliable baby sitter while I build up inventory, and someone to help with your needs would be more than welcome."

"My needs? I have you. What else could I ever need?"

"You, my wife to be" Malou laughed. "Make a Satyr appear the beginning student. You exhaust me every night. Then there is the day. Your paws are always upon my body, quickening my heart."

Nikki blushed, though one would have to be close to her to notice under her black fur. "Okay. You win. Oh look, there's that Songmark couple. The SS girls."

"SS?"

"Squirrel and Shrew. Aren't they just perfect? I'd love to get my paws on that squirrel. She looks delicious, and the shrews not as bad looking as most either."

Malou laughed. "Changing the subject will not change the facts. You now own two slaves. Clay and myself. I look forward to hearing her new name, after you have exposed her to the true fires within your heart and baked her form forever. You make your Oharu in her season, whom you still so much desire, a civilized woman. In truth my love you now truly deserve that name some at the Lotus call you." She giggled, "How many more will throw themselves at your hooves my love? Alexia will return. This I saw in

her eyes. She you should think to sell to Krupmark though, for she is flawed. Yet how many more? Changing the subject cannot make this truth pass."

"Doesn't hurt to try" Nikki laughed. "They are cute though." As to Malou's other words she pushed them away. Dealing with them could wait, but the mare was no fool. She would have to deal with them, and soon. Perhaps Oharu could help her. She would have to discover this later.

Chapter Forty-Six

October 30th, 1936

It was very late at Great Stone Glen and long after sundown. Although her students were already asleep Oharu herself could not as yet find such rest. So many things had happened in her life since this time last year and now for some unknown reason her mind was going over each incident. This day last year she had just begun readying for an archery competition. After winning that competition her life had seemed complete, for it had proven to her that she had truly found her center. She had finally decided that it was time for her to move on. To leave the red over white silks of Miko behind and dawn those white silks of a full Priestess. Then had come that fateful call to the Naval office. Since then her life had taken a downward spiral that had stopped only when her body had died, for by now the mouse knew that she had truly died. Died, only to be reborn as a tool for these islands.

Then Molly had also come into her heart, though Oharu was by now absolutely certain that she and the doe had no future together, still her heart kept aching. Kept hoping, dreaming. Nothing she had been able to do had more than slightly muted that ache within her breast. Even when just recently Belle had entered her life for those seasonal near two mad weeks, still that doe eclipsed everything. It would, she now realized, take an act by the doe herself to release her heart. Or a God. Yet even now Oharu could not tell Molly of her full love. She now found herself in a painful place with no visible path out. So much did she now wish for a path out. Any way out, that now even death was an option that the mouse had begun to explore.

"You are not paying attention" a well known voice whispered into the mouse's ear.

Jumping at the sound Oharu turned, to find the new High Priestess Saimmi standing behind her. "I was reflecting Great Mother" she admitted to the feline. "Much too deeply I see. I will get water."

"Yes, please. It was a long walk from my new home to this place. Longer than I had thought." Saimmi settled down upon a large stone, watching silently as a visible flustered mouse hurried away to gather fresh water. *'No one has ever so surprised her'* she thought. *'Not since her arrival here. What is preying upon her mind. I must know.'*

Yet nothing was said about this when Oharu returned, not until Saimmi drank deeply of her first cup of water, waiting until her priestess refilled it before speaking. *'My priestess'* the feline repeated in her mind. *'I am now High Priestess. I am not ready. Oh Gods I pray please do not allow my mistakes to be deadly ones.'* She would have to send this one to Krupmark, but that would wait until later. Though not very much later. "You were reflecting upon what" she asked the mouse.

"Of how much my life has changed since this date last year" Oharu admitted. "I was beginning to ready for an archery competition on this day. I had just that morning decided to become Nisou. A Priestess. To step away from Miko forever, partly so that I could pursue love. I could never hope to become Saishu, as you are. For I am not of the Imperial family. Now though all that is behind me, forever." She continued on, listing her life from that day forward. "Spontoon saved my soul" she finished. "I was nothing. Less than nothing. Spontoon gave me a path, a life. I have a reason to live now, that I may serve. This makes all things almost bearable."

Saimmi sipped her water. She had been unaware of all the things her priestess had spoken of. Most yes, but certainly not all. "You have a love of archery" she asked.

"Great Mother, all Miko's must learn archery. It is a requirement of our duties. For demons have a fear of the bows sound. Of the Black Arrow, what is carries. Still yes. I found that I much enjoyed it. It was my

pleasure, my escape from the world. All was the arrow, nothing else. I would practice every day as long as my duties permitted. As I do now."

"Even in the rain?"

"Great Mother. Rain, fog, snow. They are nothing. It is the target, the bow, the arrow. All other things are immaterial."

"I would see this please. Would you show me" Saimmi asked.

"I would be honored" the mouse admitted. Setting her own cup aside Oharu stood, the grass skirt she wore rustling softly as she moved. Walking to her hut she removed her skirt before entering, hanging it on a waiting peg. When she returned she was wearing the better of her two blue kimono's. "My apology Great Mother for my delay. I am more comfortable with the bow in this clothing. If you will chose a target?"

"Oharu, it is dark. Yes the moon is above the horizon, but there is little to see as yet. And do not apologize, I would rather you be comfortable than make an error."

"It is a full moon Great Mother, though it does not matter. I know this Glen well now. Please. Any target that you can see." She strung her long black bow, selecting a single red arrow from the quiver she had brought with her.

'How good is she' Saimmi asked herself. *'To say select any target, even on a not yet fully risen full moon.'* By the fires tiny light she studied the arrow Oharu now held. It was finely made by an expert craftsman. Both knew how the mouse had known it was red, not black though both colors in this light appeared the same. Yet to have even this practice arrow shattered against a stone would be a shame. Instead the feline used her far superior predator based night sight to locate a gnarled, twisted root of a tree hanging over what had once been the main waterfall. A root she remembered because of its odd placement. It was a full two hundred or more feet away, almost the Glens full length and at least sixty feet above them. Explaining her target Saimmi expected Oharu to admit that she could not see it, as she herself could only see a shadow of a shadow in this light. Instead the mouse quietly nocked her arrow, pulling the bowstring back well past her ear. She held the arrow oddly Saimmi thought, and the index finger of the paw holding her bow was pointed straight forward.

"I know the root you have chosen" Oharu explained as she steadied herself. "It is an easy target." Releasing her arrow she stepped aside, her bow swinging in her paw until the string was opposite her body. For long seconds there was no sound, then a soft thump came back to them. "Was that your chosen target Great Mother" the mouse asked.

Saimmi looked to the target she had chosen. Though the moon was not quite high enough to illuminate the site, her eyes told her the truth. A bit off center yes, but in that root now was the red arrow Oharu had released. For Oharu though, even with the special sight of all full Priestess's could not have seen her target at all. For she had prey based eyes, not Saimmi's superior predator eyesight. "You won the competition" she asked. Her eyes still on that quivering arrow.

"I did."

"And the prize went where."

Oharu carefully unstrung her bow before answering. "Almost all to the temple certainly. We ate rice instead of year old millet for the first time in four months. Many repairs were made that were badly needed. Some went to my father yes, for I was his sole income then."

Taking her eyes from that place Saimmi turned her attention fully on the strange mouse before her. "What did you yourself gain?"

"Pride of having helped my temple" Oharu answered. She was now wrapping her bow in tightly woven black silk to protect it from the damp. "And my last opponents bow. Lord Haga was much impressed by my small skill. He had made a wager, I had agreed."

"That isn't his bow, is it."

Oharu held her covered bow in both paws. "No Great Mother. That remained in Cipangu. Perhaps it has been returned to the Lord. He much loved that bow. This one was given to me by Miko Urako. I understand that her Priest is in failing health. He is ancient. I think that she will take his place. She too wishes to become Nisou. For there is no other upon these lands capable of replacing her priest but herself. I cannot be both Shinto and Spontoon priestess. Though she has begged me to do so."

Saimmi stood, taking her cup with her. Now the moon had risen enough to fully illuminate that arrow. "What is your normal practice distance" she asked softly.

Setting her bow aside with its arrows Oharu picked up her cup of water. "A little over one hundred and ten meters."

"Your bet with this lord?" the feline asked.

"That I could not loose a second arrow before my first struck its target, and hit the second as well."

"I see, he would have won what?"

"Only my bow Great Mother."

"I see. There is a national archery event each year. Main Island has never won. Would you like to represent Main Island next year?"

"This will be when" Oharu asked.

Saimmi smiled, though her back was to her priestess. "During the height of Tourist season of course. Tourists often enter, though even the best have never won. It is not a rigged contest daughter, that would be unacceptable to any who entered. In June. Usually the second weekend depending upon weather. Your main opponent will of course be Urako. She has defeated all comers for the last six years."

Oharu smiled, perhaps thinking of older days. Better times. "I would be honored"

November 13th, 1936

A full moon held high above the nation of Spontoon this night. Under it many eyes looked up, studying its ancient, scarred face for clues as to the future, or remembering a past. Among these eyes were those of the Russian sable Tatiana Bryzov-Wei and her adopted mother the Cipangu mouse Oharu Wei.

Many long months had passed since the purchase of Tatiana's I.O.U. Months in which the Russian had changed. The sable looked out of her dorm room window, reflecting upon these things. She had of course paid off her debt, had in that time accepted the strange oriental priestess Oharu as her adopted mother, had even found new ways to express herself. Why, she had even found a love, though that had not been a love Tatiana had expected or in any way truly wanted.

Unknown to the Russian in that time many things had changed with the mouse herself. She had encountered many challenges. Herself changing. At the moment though Oharu sat alone by her small hut, weaving a mat to place offerings upon while she herself remembered her adopted daughters change, and the things that had occurred today. Neither could know that the other was reflecting upon the same things at this moment.

Oharu remembered well how Tatiana had followed her to her home that first night, fully expecting the same brutal treatment her previous 'owner', one Nikki Ibarra Lily Benevedo had given her. Had decided to endure it without complaint as she had with Nikki. Instead Oharu had given her the small huts only bed (more a rough prison pallet than a bed the sable had thought, though it was weeks before Oharu learned of this) while sleeping on gifted old cushions herself.

Tatiana remembered that first night at her adopted mothers hut. That first night had been strange to the Russian. She had expected, had prepared herself for the dominate actions Nikki treated her too. Or at least for Oharu to force herself upon her. Had expected in the least some kind of advance by the mouse. She had prepared herself to accept them willingly. Yet Oharu had spent over an hour attending a small shrine far from the hut, then returned to simply curl up in the battered second paw cushions to fall almost instantly asleep.

Morning had been a greater shock to the Songmark sable. Used to waking up before dawn she had opened her eyes to an empty hut. Her time spent searching the small glen had turned up no evidence of the mouse, in fact it wasn't until near noon that Oharu had returned from her daily duty of cleaning and repairing shrines.

"I will prepare a lunch" she had said in greeting, not bothering to explain where she had been or why she was wearing a native grass skirt. With no show of modesty the mouse had carefully removed the woven grass skirt, pulled off her native style blouse and started dressing in a kimono. It was her scarred back that had most stunned Tatiana.

Remembering those horrid scars upon such a delicate back Tatiana shuddered in revulsion even now. She had seen such before of course, her Russian trainers had even taught her on living furs how to create such a pattern of scarring. Such often ruined the muscles here and there, forever crippling the bearer. Yet other than a favoring to her right side Oharu had shown no discomfort. *'She is stronger than I believed'* the sable told herself, remembering. *'She will never break. I can trust her, if I need.'* This too she had admitted to Oharu before accepting her as mother. There had been her delight of the one night that they had spent together before their new bonding had been finalized, the sable learning that being dominated had nothing to do with force. That though Tatiana needed being dominated on occasion, she did not need to be beaten or bound. It was during this time that Oharu had discovered the mark Nikki had branded into her once slave. A mark that Tatiana would carry for her life. It had angered the mouse. A very great deal. For she knew what that mark meant, though her sable partner hadn't. At the time.

That one time event though had been months ago. Tatiana knew that now Oharu would not think of touching her now adopted daughter in such a manner ever again. One did not do such with ones daughter, not even if she were only adopted. Now Tatiana would sit quietly when she visited. Watching what Oharu did nearly every morning of every day she was on the islands. Listening to her words, even joining her in ritual dance now and then. She had even begun helping her adopted mother with her shrine duties.

Now she turned for bed. There was another engine to rebuild. This one most likely tossed out as scrap metal long ago. It was a challenge, one Tatiana understood now. *'There will come a day'* the sable told herself as she slid under her thin blanket. *'When I must rebuild such an engine to save my life. Perhaps the lives of others with me.'* Soon she was asleep, as were her classmates.

Oharu was still awake, for though her days were long they were almost never as physically challenging as those of any first year Songmark student. She too remembered of that special night, and the following

morning, the morning that she had stepped away from being the sables owner and lover. Had happily stepped into that place she so desired. That of mother. Tatiana had followed her on her morning journey of refreshing shrines. Basic work any apprentice already knew by their sixth month of study. Oharu though still had to learn, having been trained in a greatly different ritual. Having carefully placed her offerings onto a shrines altar Oharu was saying the same prayer she had given at the last two shrines when a noise came from the path behind them. Tatiana had turned instantly towards the sound, spotting a native guide leading two rather large brown bears towards the shrine she automatically moved herself between this possible threat and her newly adopted mother. That act alone had warmed the mouse's heart, for it told her more about the Russian's soul than a days words could.

Unusually the two were not dressed in the ornate brilliant colored clothing most tourists seemed to love. Still the male carried a camera from his thick neck, while the female carried a rather plain parasol. They both stopped several yards from Titania's position, waiting oddly quietly while Oharu finished her duties. Though it was true that the guide might be able to match Tatiana had he wanted too, no Guide was fool enough to face a second year Songmark girl alone. Certainly not one guarding someone she now loved as a mother. Only when the mouse was walking towards Tatiana did the guide walk forward, Tatiana moving aside while his two tourists waited behind him.

"Kahuna Wei" the middle aged hound said in greeting as he approached.

'Odd' Tatiana had admitted thinking. *'Why is he speaking Spontoon in front of tourists?'*

"You have a need?" Oharu asked, herself using the local language. One Tatiana had secretly started learning but was still very limited in.

"These two have a need" the canine explained. "They wish to speak with a priestess. About our religion."

Oharu cocked an ear at that statement. "Better Great Mother than I" she had answered. "She is more versed, is High Priestess."

"Great Mother sent me to you. She said that you would be less likely to send them to Sacred Lake for a swim than she, should they anger. Besides, she does not understand their language well."

"I see. Dumped upon again as is my position. What language do they speak."

"French Kahuna Wei. I was the first guide they could find that would attempt their quest, who also understood their language."

"Please take my apprentice for a swim, I will speak with them." She walked up to the waiting sable, speaking in a low voice that barely carried to her, certainly not to the waiting bears. "I told him to take you for a swim. Try not to kill him. He is very likable. Perhaps you may like him, or not. I must speak with these two."

"I understand" Tatiana had answered in near flawless Spontoon, obviously delighted to see the surprise on Oharu's face. Though she would rather have remained to watch, ignoring her adopted mothers request would have been a public insult after all. A swim, should she decide to was a swim and it would beat hiking through jungle carrying flowers.

When they were alone Oharu waved to the stones Tatiana had occupied. "My apprentice and your guide will return when we are done" she informed the two, speaking fairly good French. "Please to be comfortable. You have questions?" From their expressions Oharu knew that her use of their language, even heavily accented as it was had obviously caught both by surprise.

"You do speak French" the man almost gasped as he guided his companion to a waiting stone.

"I speak four languages well enough converse with" Oharu answered. "Though not as well as I would like. You have a need?" Unlike the two, she declined to sit. It was easier to vanish in the jungle from a standing start than from a sitting one was her opinion.

"I am Monseigneur La Roux. This is my wife Jolie. I am a simple parish priest who has an odd hobby. I try to capture on film and in my writings all I may of those native religions that I am exposed too."

Oharu forced down an expression of distaste. As a Miko she had dealt with 'religious scholars' before. Never had such dealings been pleasant ones. Still each new meeting held hope. "I am Oharu Wei" she explained. "Is this hobby of yours because you desire to learn from those older. Wiser than yourself. Or is it because you desire to show your followers how foolish others are not to follow your limited ways" she asked.

These words had caused the expected reaction from both. The woman grimaced, La Roux simply took a deep breath before answering. "I see my less courteous brothers have been before me here as well. I have come to learn, not to ridicule."

Oharu touched the fingers of her paws together. "We shall see. What are your needs?"

"As you were blunt, so shall I be. I have noted that other than one church upon South Island, one I understand is moving to Casino island along with one upon Meeting island that will close soon. That all non-native churches are limited to Casino island. Why is this?"

"They defile our lands, our lives, our beliefs. Our Sacred places. We have no need nor desire for them. They give us nothing in return for what they take. Europeans though have a need and desire for such empty structures. Therefore it has been allowed that they may build their temples upon Casino Island. No where else."

La Roux took out a travelers journal, opening it carefully to an empty page he wrote down her answer. "Are you afraid of our beliefs" he asked gently.

"No more than you are afraid of a viper" she answered. "Your ways are to crush any local beliefs, to build upon sacred sites soulless temples. To treat all not of your own loins as children with no rights, no worth upon their own lands. Those not fully of your blood, yet half so, are still treated as children even in their elder years. We do not ask that Europeans believe as we do, while from the first hoofprint of a European upon these shores every effort has been made to repress our beliefs. In the childish trust that yours is the only way. It is not."

"It has been the history of our ways, throughout the world" the bear admitted. "You must see us as a force of evil."

"Many do" Oharu admitted, for it had been her experience that most of the natives who followed the old ways had no love for these Europeans or their one God path. "More do as each holy place is defiled. As each tradition is held to ridicule. As each day passes your ways are less and less welcome upon all nations of these waters. Our ways are older than yours. Our ways have proven to fill all our needs. We do not look down upon others because they do not believe what we do, or have fur a different shade, are a different species. Before she became High Priestess I spent half a day repairing a shrine with the one who sent you. Rededicating a shrine four young tourists had defiled. Defiled simply because they saw it as nothing, for they had been raised to believe that their way is the only true way. They are no longer able to visit these islands, no matter how old they may live to be, how rich or powerful they may become. They or their first descendants. Such are our laws. We have never defiled your sites, we have never laughed at your beliefs. We would not think to do so. Thus does the elder look upon the child. As one who needs maturity, needs guidance. Yet is too stubborn to listen."

"I see. You show great restraint in your anger."

"I do" Oharu admitted, surprising the bear by that admission.

"May I ask what you were doing when we arrived, it was dedicating a shrine?"

"This shine is hundreds of years old. I simply cleaned it of the previous offerings, freshening its flowers for a new day. Preparing it for today's worshipers that may come, if any. I do this daily to many shrines as do all priestess's. It is part of our duty to serve the people. That place I am responsible for, where I live and serve is thousands of years older than your beliefs."

La Roux wrote carefully before asking his next question. "You do not teach, or guide your people?"

"Teaching, guiding. Those responsibilities are for family. We Priestess's are servants of all the peoples of Spontoan. We are no better than anyone else. We are less for we live upon the kindness of those who give us extra food for our stomachs, cloth for our clothing. Nor do we stand between those we serve and our Gods. Unlike your way, one needs only to speak directly to those one wishes to. It is not needed to ask another to do such for you. Nor may we refuse anyone the right to worship or to attend any shrine. We do not make or uphold any mortal law."

"Yet you do so with religious laws."

Oharu had expected that shot. It was after all the most common attack she had experienced. "As with all beliefs, there are certain guidelines that must be followed. These guidelines are for the safety of our people. We hold within us those guidelines, rituals, songs and dance to share freely with all who ask. We are trained carefully with each ritual to insure that no failure occurs. Unlike your gelded European belief, ours have visible reactions to what we do. We are held responsible for our actions not by our sisters, but by every Spontoan citizen. Thus we may find ourselves ignored, unsupported should we error. For should we make a mistake, it could become a disaster."

La Roux smiled suddenly, as though she had fallen into his trap. "Such as the great experiment making these islands uninhabitable?"

Oharu closed her eyes in response to those words as if in pain. "I see that you have been reading the pulps" she answered, opening her eyes again. "That is one of many stories created to amuse tourists. Obviously these islands are habitable, else we would not be having this discussion. Anyone who thought that story through would realize the same thing."

"I had wondered" La Roux admitted. "I will admit we came here expecting to speak through our guide. We had, as Europeans often do, underestimated our hosts intelligence. I doubt that half my colleges know two languages, and that second is almost always Latin. Yet you know four? Incredible."

"Have you other questions?"

"I have some" La Roux's wife answered. "You wear a Kimono. That clothing is from Japan. Are you then a Japanese citizen?"

"My birth country was Cipangu" the mouse corrected. "Japan is a way of finishing with laquer. My Gods brought me here to assist these people in only one of their needs. Thus I have a great project I must complete, though I will remain here to serve when it is done. I am Shinto, yet if you know my birth country then you already know that it is unimportant if one bows to more than one path. Thus I am Shinto, I am Spontoan. I am a Spontoan citizen now, as much as though I had been born here."

"I see" Jolie La Roux said. "The young lady with you. She wears a uniform I have seen on Casino Island. Is she military? Your guard perhaps?"

"Tatiana is my adopted daughter" Oharu explained. "Her uniform is that of Songmark, a school for young ladies. It is designed to guide them to understanding how to survive and prosper alone in this male ruled world. She is not my guard, she is simply assisting me today as any good daughter would."

"Oh" Jolie gasped, taking several minutes to fully digest what she had been told. "Then" she continued. "What is your opinion of marriage. I have seen many woman alone with cubs of several species, a few men together and women as well. I have studied the laws regarding this and am appalled. As a Priestess, doesn't this immorality bother you?"

"My opinion? As a Priestess or as a woman."

"Both" Jolie answered.

"As a Priestess I will happily bind together any two hearts who have proven their love. For marriage is the binding of two hearts in love. None may control to whom their heart blossoms, nor am I a Goddess to demand what is or is not true. As a woman." She shifted her weight, "I am Sapphic."

"Sapphic. That is... oh my word Paul..."

Oharu forced herself to show no amusement at the bears discomfort, for she had openly walked into the dragons waiting maw. It would also be wrong for her as a Priestess to enjoy another's discomfort. Though the dragon was happy with its meal.

"My apologies Priestess" La Roux offered. "It appears that my wife did not expect such an answer. May I ask, your daughter?"

"Is not Sapphic" Oharu admitted. "Nor does she follow either of my paths. Still I look forward to her bringing many cubs to eat at my table. But this has nothing to do with religion."

"Not yours no" the bear agreed. "Ours, the ability to open ones heart to another even though that one is unlike yourself is considered Holy."

"We do not consider it Holy, only the correct way to accept others. It is unfortunate that you do not apply this consideration to cultures not your own" the mouse noted. "There would be many fewer wars, many fewer hates. You have further questions?"

"Your great project. Is it to convert these people to your belief?"

"There is almost no real difference between Shinto and this lands Gods. Almost none of any account. Thanks to the actions of your kind much knowledge was lost here. I was sent because I have a talent to, as Euros say, fill in the blanks. My duty is to write down every Priestess knowledge, then to bring together into a single whole what is. Where there are missing pieces, with the help of our Great Mother I will bridge those gaps. While I work I am learning, to learn is always a good thing. Thus that is why I am here. No other reason."

"I note your neck is bleached" Jolie said, again stepping into the dragons waiting maw. "I have discovered the meanings of many of your combed pattering. But the bleaching?"

"My fur is not bleached" Oharu answered calmly. "It white because of the scar underneath it. I was hung. Those who brought me here did not desire for me to arrive alive. Nor in any way known to them as pure. Yet though they did their worst, through the grace of those Gods and Goddess's I serve I have survived."

"Oh... Oh... Oh my." Jolie looked at her husband as though begging him to make this woman vanish. Instead he stood.

"My thanks Priestess, but I believe that we are taking up your time. You say you do this daily and I do see a large stack of cut flowers waiting. We will leave you and your daughter to complete your tasks. Until another day. Perhaps tomorrow."

"Come to the Great Stone Glen. It is the place I have been given. It is an ancient Holy place." She paused, looking at the woman. "It is truly older than any known civilization."

Helping his still upset wife up LaRoux called for his guide. "I think I shall visit you alone. I do not believe that my dear wife ever expected to meet someone like you Priestess. Until the morrow." Their guide appeared a few moments later still pressing water from his fur. "We will return now" La Roux informed him.

Oharu watched them walk away in silence. Though a bit more open minded than most they had left as soon as their first prepared arguments failed. Soon Tatiana stepped out of the forest, her fur still dry. "You did not swim?" the mouse asked.

"I am particular whom I share my pleasures with" the sable answered in heavily accented Spontoon while she gathered up the waiting flowers. "I am afraid he was not of a kind that I favor, though handsome. My taste is for a different species, to his misfortune. For he truly is handsome."

"Yet you share tea with me and claim that is a pleasure."

"I said I was particular mother." She had switched to English again.

Oharu started walking, leading the way to their next shrine. "Tatiana" she said calmly, not looking back. "Do not fall in love with me."

Tatiana had laughed. "You? You are my adopted mother. I love you as my mother. For the other apparently I have forever my Millicent. You are not even communist. Besides no one will ever fall in love with you mother. Not with her eating your soul away."

"Not today. Please."

Tatiana snorted, shifting her load. "And what this apprentice thing he talk about while he swam" she asked.

This time Oharu stopped, turning to face her daughter. "One day someone must replace me" she answered. "It is possible that I may not complete Huakava's great work. Of all I have met my daughter. You are my first choice."

"Nyet. Am going back to Russia. To free her from those who hold a boot to her neck. I am not to living my life here on backwater little island."

"Russia is now certain death for you Tatiana. As long as Sterling rules. No one else but Millicent will accept you in their family as yet. Tatiana I have my failings. I have my weakness. In no way am I perfect. I am of all things mortal. I need someone to be prepared should I fail. To step into my footprints, to finish my duties. I have chosen you because of all the women at Songmark you are the only one who can learn that isn't already on the path."

"If I say nyet?"

"Then lay flowers down. Return to Songmark. Now."

Silently the mouse watched as Tatiana did exactly as she had expected. Waiting until the sable was out of sight Oharu knelt, gathering up the flowers to continue her duties. She could only offer. It was up to

Tatiana to accept. With today, or years from now or never. In truth right now there was only Tatiana to choose from. None of the other Songmark students had showed any interest. Certainly Helen would soon take Saimmi's place, the one she had relinquished when she became High Priestess. The young woman Amelia had a different path, one that worried Oharu. For it was a deadly dangerous path that wandered into and out of darkness as though alive. But Amelia was not her student nor her concern. Singing softly to herself in her ruined voice the mouse continued with her duties.

November 14th, 1936

Helen Whitehall laid her school papers aside, pressing the sides of her face with both paws. It had been a very long day yesterday, with two boys getting into a pawfight right in the middle of her class. By no means a combatant herself all she could do was evacuate the classroom, then lock those two ruffians inside. Both had been natives, a fact which hadn't made any difference when the Principle Mr. Martin arrived. The short crow took one look through the small window in Helen's classroom door and walked to another class. There he used the intercom. Shortly the entire mokomoko team arrived. Those had been impressive boys Helen remembered. Impressive and several had been quite.. Attractive. In short order the group had settled those two ruffians hash quite effectively.

When all was said and done, it turned out that one boy had insulted the others family. This was simply not done, but fighting on school yards was also not done. Both were expelled immediately, with no hope of ever returning. What was upsetting to Helen was that the insulted boy had lost rather badly. It was an event that would probably cause great problems between the two families, and a very long time before the defeated boy regained his self respect. Class of course had been cancelled as it had taken the rest of that period simply to bring some order to the scattered desks, books, thrown down furniture and two shattered book shelves.

"It happens" Mr. Martin had explained as they watched the mokomoko team drag both boys out by their feet. "An incorrect word. A gesture. I have been a principle for twelve years, each year there is at least one fight like this. Usually between these same two families. This though is the worst. I will speak to their village priestess today, no further students from those families will be accepted until this matter is settled. Now care for your class, they have been a bit upset I think." With those words the crow had walked away, leaving Helen on her own.

Now it was late, she had finished grading the last students test and was exhausted. Sleep though would have to wait. There was a new box that had arrived from Tasmania. Was there any place on this planet her husband had not visited, had not left something behind she asked herself. Standing she pressed her paws against her back, both feeling and hearing her spine pop back into place. An entire Saturday had been spent dealing with scoring tests and creating next weeks classes. If anyone thought teachers were overpaid and underworked, she would love to see them try to handle one week of her life.

"Hello Dia-Kura" Helen announced, though she had heard nothing, scented nothing. "Key for the front door is waiting for you, just like always." A rustle from her kitchen window informed the afghan that her calico visitor had heard and understood. That key she had purchased last month, giving it to the Priestess so that she would not have to 'break and enter.' That Dia kept it somewhere around the house Helen was well aware, for the priestess carried almost nothing with her ever. Yet as to where that key was kept she did not know, or care.

As the calico entered in that gentle turning way those wearing grass skirts must use with European doors Helen noticed a flash of silver about the felines neck. "So, you like the gift I gave you" she asked as her guest laid her key on an end table.

"No one ever gave me such" Dia-Kura admitted. "I find that it feels right." She reached between her breasts to touch Ruth's emblem. "When think of it, it is... Correct" she decided. "A true path yes. Not my path. But true path."

"I see. Water or tea."

"Coca?" the smaller woman asked hopefully.

Helen laughed, walking over to her brand new and quite expensive General Electric refrigerator. A lavish expense, but one she had felt more than worth it in this climate. "I have milk" she admitted. "I just hope it is still good." Taking the glass bottle of milk from its place she lifted the waxed cardboard disc holding it closed. "Still good. What brings you to my home tonight? Saturdays your usually over at Wayholme."

"You know me well now" the feline admitted. "I sprain ankle, must rest. So normal path is disrupted. Beside, it storm hard before morning. I too far from all cave with this ankle."

Setting some milk to heat on a low flame Helen returned her milk bottle to its place. "Have you seen a doctor" she asked.

"Yes. Doctor Riverstone very nice. She careful. Much gentle. Tell me stay off for two day. That what disrupt my journey. You wish to see?"

"Not unless you want me too Dia. I'm not a doctor. First aid yes, but if you have already been looked at by a doctor then all I can do is cluck like an old hen and chide you for injuring yourself." Taking a wooden spoon she began stirring the milk. What Helen wanted was scalded milk, not boiling. Certainly not burnt. As she stirred she added coca powder and sugar. Not much sugar, for the calico was unused to the sweetener. "Dia. Just what do you eat anyway?"

"Food" the priestess answered. "Any word from sister?"

"No and don't change the subject."

Shrugging the calico settled down on the same stool Nikki had used when she visited, taking care to spread her grass skirt so as not to damage it. "Fish. Vegetable. What I find or catch. When here, exotic things. Coca. Tea. Even once wonderful eclair."

"I remember that" Helen admitted. "Much too sweet for you. You were bouncing off the walls for simply hours." She lifted the small pot, carefully filling two waiting mugs. Steam wafted up around her as the mugs filled, giving their wonderful rich scent to the world. Setting her pot aside she shut off the propane flame. "There is more to life than vegetables and fish" Helen told her guest as she carried the steaming cups into her parlor. "Dia. I know that you are a priestess and used to living off what people give you." Giving Dia one of the mugs she sat near her. "I also know that you don't have a family. At least not like other priestess's do. You rarely visit your parents, and even then only for a few hours at best. Why?"

"You have good spy" Dia observed before she sipped the warm drink.

"Actually no. Last Sunday I walked over to your village with my son. I asked for you, I had a question. It seems that as I was concerned for your welfare everyone wanted me to know that you were well taken care of. By their standards."

Dia sipped some more of her coca, enjoying the rare taste of hot chocolate. "You wish me be your woman" she asked softly.

"No. Not now, not ever. Dia. You're my friend. I seem to have very few of them at present. Besides I'm hungry after a certain yellow furred hound as you recall. Listen carefully though. Please. You have become a little like Ruth to me. You help me when I am confused, you explain things I do not comprehend and you find help for me when I am ill in the way doctors cannot help. I don't want you for your body dear lady. I want. I need you to be my guide. At least until I have my head fully on."

"Drink coca, it get cold" Dia warned. "You still have dreams?"

Helen drank a third of her drink before answering. "I, young lady. Will always have dreams. Occasional nightmares and sometimes I will curl up into a ball and just cry. I expect that. I've seen horrors I never dreamed of. I've been through and done things that without the help of you prestress's would have left me a gibbering ball of mindless wreck for the rest of my life. Its not that. Dia, I still read the bible and the Torah. I still find things that confuse me in both." She sat her mug aside. "I need religious guidance Dia. Just as I did when Ruth was with me. Her passing didn't suddenly make all things clear to me." She shrugged in defeat. "I ask too many questions I think."

"When ones soul is at risk. There never too many questions" the calico priestess corrected. "As friend. As guide. Yes, this little weight I will accept." Dia drank more of her coca, well aware that her constant visits to this home were already causing certain voices to speak. Still it mattered not, for those voices were the seagulls. Always there, always to be ignored. Helen Whitehall needed a guide for her soul. It was what a priestess did. All who needed would understand, for Helen had asked and most softly had she spoken when doing so. Those others could cry into the wind.

November 16th, 1936

"It can not fit in this manner" a muffled voice complained from deep within the Ducks tail. Outside another figure waited, the end of a long thin metal cable held in her paws.

"It must sister. Have you attempted turning the link around?"

A not so muffled curse answered the mink. "Twice" her sisters long suffering voice reported. "It still simply will not fit over the linkage." A thumping noise announced Tina's withdrawal from the amphibians tail. "Alexia, you are quite certain that there are no further resources than the one book" she asked as she sat in the cargo bay, her purple clad legs hanging outside the aircrafts skin.

"No others, and I have personally been to the American Embassy" her older sister admitted. "They quite refuse to release what they consider a classified document."

Tina held up the offending loop of cable in her paw, staring at it as if by will the thing would answer her question. "It is the correct cable" she informed herself. "It is the correct end. It also quite clearly matches the original cable I myself removed this morning. Then why will it simply not fit?" She snatched it away from her sisters paw before the older girl could take it from her. "You can not fit in the area required dear sister. This we are quite aware of. Yet how do the Americans manage to service this part without removing half the aircrafts fuselage?"

"Perhaps they did" her older sister admitted. "Or perhaps we are both simply too tired to see what is in front of our faces. It is time I fear, that we both must admit that we are beyond our knowledge. I shall make a phone call. You should clean up, I am quite afraid that if your beau were to show up you are quite a fright."

Tina stuck her tongue out at her older sisters back, then carefully coiled the offending cable up and stowed it back into the box it had arrived in. Her sister was right Tina had to admit. After two long hours fighting to replace the frayed cable her fur looked as though she had plugged her fingerclaws into a mains socket. Slipping out of the aircraft she headed for the Black Rose.

Doctor Kiwi happened to be the one to accept Alexia call for help. "I shall see what may be done" he told her before hanging up. Twice now that aircraft had saved lives, and it was impossible to know when a call might come in again. That it was grounded due to a frayed elevator cable could simply not be accepted. There was he knew, considering the condition of everyone's finances, only one possibility at the moment. His next call was made to Eastern Island.

Easter Island

A second year came running up to the climbing exercise at Radio Lono's antenna tower, a message held in her paws. Approaching Belle Lapinssen she quickly made her report, giving over what turned out to be a day pass with no return time indicated. Then she whispered something else before turning to run back to Songmark's compound. Normally an instructor would be here for this test of first years, but Miss Windlesham had come down with a serious case of Mountyzoomahs revenge, so the extra load had been farmed out to Prudence's dorm.

"Lisa dear" Belle called without turning around. "Would you be so kind my darling as to return that stone to your pack? Thank you. And dear love, while you are at it add six more of the same size. That's a good dear." She hadn't turned around to see who had removed the stone from her pack, but Lisa was the best bet. A lazier girl Belle had never met, unless you counted Madelene X. Belle had such a low opinion of the French girl she no longer counted her, or on her. "Prudence. I think this mission most fits our dear anteaters physical characteristics."

Coming over Prudence listened as Belle explained the problem. "Your quite right" the canine decided. Turning around she called to their dorms Mixtecan member. "Carmen, day pass to help fix an aircraft on Meeting Island. Interested?"

"Much interested yes" the slender girl answered as she dropped another three pound stone into Lisa's pack. Patting the stubborn Egyptian Cheetah rather fondly on her buttocks, a fact which embarrassed the still somewhat innocent feline she walked over. "Is where must I go" she asked.

"That American amphibian the Hospital uses" Belle explained. "They have a problem refitting an elevator cable. I am very sure this is up your alley?"

"Ah. The beautiful purple red aircraft. Certainly." Accepting the offered pass from Belle she gave the rabbit a smile that would melt frozen butter in seconds. "I must owe you favor, there are two sweet minks yes?"

"There are" the rabbit laughed. "Now off with you. LISA! Put that rock right back in your pack" she continued in a louder voice. "Or I swear I'll throw you to into the Double Lotus with a twenty shell note pinned to your naked back myself."

About forty minutes later Alexia answered a firm knock on the hangers front door. Answering it she found herself face to face with one of the strangest creatures she had ever seen, and this one was wearing a Songmark uniform. "May I help you?" the young mink asked.

"Think it is I who help you" Carmen answered. "May come in please?"

"Certainly, though it is no cooler within than without" the mink admitted, making way for this strange creature to enter.

"Is better" Carmen decided as the buildings slightly cooler atmosphere struck her. Being a native of Mixteca she was better able to appreciate the difference between sun baking heat and the warmth of a shaded building. "You have problem. Attaching elevator cable yes?"

Shutting the door, for every window was already open thus the doors tiny addition to air circulation was unnoticeable Alexia began leading the way to their charge. "Yes. Though my dear sister had little trouble removing the original cable, we have both proven incapable of reattaching the replacement." She was unaware that Carmen had held back, the better to observe the delectable English mink walking before her. Had she known it might have bothered her.

"I Carmen Velasquez" Carmen offered as an introduction. "Songmark third year. You are?"

"Alexia Humber, you will meet my younger sister Tina in a moment." She stopped at the Ducks tail, pointing to a drooping portside elevator. "Tina noted that the original control cable was frayed, though neither of us have been able to discover why. We requested a new cable, which arrived this very morning. Though we have tried every possibility that we are able to think of, neither of us have been able to attach our new cable."

"You have not found reason?" Carmen asked. "Show me. Must find reason, else new cable fail same."

"Very well, but the area is rather very much tight for two" Alexia warned. "If you will kindly follow me?"

Carmen studied the aircraft before her as they walked around to the cargo hatch. It was a sturdy craft she noted. Well built, it would take hard punishment without complaint. It was, she decided, a rather interesting aircraft. Following Alexia into the aircraft she made her way to the place Tina had noted the frayed cable, at the same time finding herself pressed face to face against the most welcome softness of Alexia's body. Yes, there were advantages to being called out for extra work the anteater decided.

"It was here" Alexia explained, absently wiggling further into the tail section, at the same time forcing her body closer to the anteaters. "There are no fittings to be found here, nor are we able to discover any moving part that might be rubbing against it."

Carmen studied the area, all mechanic now. If it was true that the cable had been damaged here, then there was no obvious cause. Still she moved the flashlamp Alexia offered her, studying carefully the area around her. "Was damaged when made first inspection" she asked suddenly.

"It was on Tina's first inspection of this area that we discovered the damage" Alexia admitted. "We are not truly mechanics. Not of aircraft that is. We have been learning as we work."

"So damage. It may be old?"

"Possible. Still" Alexa continued, "It bothers us greatly. There must be a cause for such damage."

"Is" the anteater explained. "See here. Here" she pointed at various scrape markings on the aircrafts inner skin with the flashlamps beam. "Was something stored here. Maybe metal. Would cause such damage. You store here?"

"No Miss Velasquez" Alexia answered. "It would be too difficult for our Doctors to reach and we believe that it would affect the aircrafts handling. Many cables run in this area."

"And connection point?"

Alexia reached up with her free arm, not wondering when her other had become trapped by the anteaters body. "There, about six inches past my paw. Tina has the ability to reach it, I cannot. I am too large by just too much."

'Yes' Carmen thought as her senses were filled by the minks scent. "Then open access port" she explained. "Can see there, yes?" She pointed again with the flashlamps beam.

"Is that what it is" Alexia asked. She turned her head to better see the object Carmen was pointing too. It was a rectangular shape large enough for two paws to easily fit. "We cannot see this from outside. Let me show you." She started to work her way back down only to stop. "Miss Velasquez. I seem to be stuck" she admitted in embarrassment, abruptly aware of just how tightly the two were jammed together.

"Is not problem" Carmen explained. "I show."

To Alexia's delight Carmen's body seemed to turn in strange directions, within moments the Anteater was halfway down Alexia's body. "Must learn swim. Learn move body different ways" Carmen explained as she slowly made her way back into the cargo area. Free now, Alexia soon joined her. "This is for patient?" Carmen asked, her right paw grasping a fold away cot.

"Yes. As you can well see this area will hold two average size people easily. The Duck's load is four average sized passengers. Normally a Doctor and two patients along with the pilot."

"Is good design. I much like. We find access point now yes?"

Alexia grinned sheepishly as she made her way out of the aircraft onto the cast stone dock. "Yes. I very much fear that we brought you over here for nothing. For this I apologize." She turned to the moored Black Rose. "Tina" she called. "Our visitor has discovered what we ourselves missed."

"Out in minutes" came the response. "Still cooking."

Turning back to Carmen Alexia explained. "It is so close to lunchtime that Tina decided to cook for you. Your arrival, and completion of repairs will allow her to attend her date with her boyfriend after all, though please do not call him her boyfriend as yet. I am afraid that Tina has not yet admitted to herself how much she truly enjoys his company."

"I shall not" Carmen agreed. "Please. It is Carmen. Not Miss Velasquez. I not employer."

"Agreed" Alexia answered. "Yet you are a third year, we both much hope to attend Songmark next year. I fear that we both failed entry requirements this year. To call one who may become a superior by their first name, without permission is simply not done."

Carman laughed. "You too polite. I be gone when you start. No need be polite. Unless maybe I hire you one day." She stopped next to the Duck's tail section, quickly discovering the problem. "It badly over-painted" she noted. "Must clean screws first. Have something can stand upon?"

"We most certainly do. If you will wait a moment?"

Carmen watched with secret delight as the English mink hurried over to two tall devices. One was obviously a platform to aid in the removal of patients. The other was a gangly collection of welded pipes and boards that took the anteater a few long seconds to understand. "You make" she asked as Alexia pushed the heavy structure over. Her efforts caused muscles to expand and clothing to stretch. Yes Carmen decided. A very interesting young lady.

"I am afraid not" Alexia admitted as she approached with the structure. "I was designing this when several local workers noted my efforts. One asked what it was for. Before I could much more than answer my paper was taken from me and three of them started working on this. It was done that evening." A last push and Alexia started locking down the wheels so that they would not move.

"Your found an access hatch" Tina asked a moment later. "Oh that is so wonderful. I will have lunch ready very soon. Oh" she hesitated, herself viewing the anteater for the first time. As with her sister Carmen was the first of that species she had seen in the flesh. "Hello. I am Tina Humber, Alexia's younger sister. You are?"

"Carmen Velasquez" Carmen answered. "It is my pleasure meet you both. But please, must fix aircraft before social talk."

"I most fully understand" Tina agreed. "Lunch will be ready when you are." She hesitated, "You are an insectivore correct?"

"Not for many hundreds of generations" Carman answered. "Else I die hunger at Songmark."

"Very well then. I prepared a general meal. You are Spanish?"

"Mixtecan."

"Ah. Then I am much afraid that our meal will be somewhat bland for you. It is good to meet you Miss Velasquez." Then Tina vanished back into the Black Rose's bowels.

Carman was smiling when she turned back to Alexia. "Bland. When you are Songmark. You learn Bland is new experience. Now we work?"

"We will work, if you will be so kind as to instruct me" Alexia agreed.

With Carmen's superior experience and understanding of aircraft it was less than an hour before the new cable was fully installed and tested. To Carmen's surprise, while she and Tina sat to eat Alexia began writing in a book. "We keep complete records of everything" Tina explained softly. "She is writing in when you arrived, your name along with an outline of the repairs as completed. In this way should we make a mistake as we did this morning, it is rather easy to find the answer the next time we need such."

"Along with employers knowing everything" Carmen observed.

"But of course" Tina explained. "We are but employees here. Our employers must be certain that we are working. Not simply sleeping each day away. Is this not the way your family does business?"

"Not... Exactly" Carmen admitted. "Such diligent notes. This not useful in Mixtexas. Is not good business, should revolution occur again. Much be lost."

"I do not understand" Tina admitted. "Yet England has not seen a true revolution since the days of the round tops. Too long ago for it to affect record keeping." She reached for a bowl of salad when the phone rang. Alexia was up in a flash, running to the wall mounted phone.

"SPQR, 1307 hours. Alexia speaking" she stated. For a few moments she listened while writing in her log book. "You will find a pilot in time" she asked.

"I am pilot" Carmen called as she stood.

"You are? Yes, you are" Alexia responded. "Never mind a pilot, we have a third year, Miss Velasquez from Songmark with us. She has offered to fly. Yes, Doctor Riverstone. We will be ready." As Alexia hung up the phone anything Carmen was about to say was drowned out by the Ducks massive engine starting up.

Turning around Carmen looked up at the spinning propeller in amazement. She hadn't even noticed Tina leaving the table. Much less climbing aboard the aircraft. Even more amazed as the young mink slid out of the pilots little window as if boneless, dropping to the lower wing then to the dock. She instantly ran to the Black Rose while Alexia began pre-flight work. With nothing better to do Carmen began her own pre-flight inspection, even though she had just completed doing so after repairing the cable.

"Do you have a helmet" Tina's voice asked from next to the anteater. Turning around Carmen found the lithe mink holding a five gallon can of something. "It is water, do you have a helmet?"

"No" Carmen admitted. The idea that these two might have one to fit her was beyond hope. From Tina's expression the little mink had the same thought. Still after vanishing into the cargo bay she soon was elsewhere, hunting something that would do.

"Pre-flight complete" Alexia announced, again catching Carmen by surprise. Here she was in the presence of two no non-sense young women, where before the phone call they had been acting like nothing more than school girls. "You are flying to Lemon Ridge. Do you know where that is?"

"Seventy three miles East South East" Carmen answered. "You have charts?"

"I am getting them now." Alexia ran to a corner cabinet filled with dozens of drawers. One apparently on its eleventh life Carmen decided, yet the mink hardly paused, opening one drawer, moving something then returning with the needed chart. "Main charts are always in the Duck" she explained as she offered the chart. "Breech Birth. I understand these are always very messy. Your aircraft is fully fueled, it has a maximum speed of 190 miles per hour. Your cruise speed is 155, stall is seventy. Maximum ceiling is twenty angels but you have no oxygen or compatible heater suits. You have a max load range of 780 miles. Winds from the South-East at ten, gusting to fifteen. You are cleared for takeoff at your convince as an Emergency flight, tower and traffic were notified by the people who called us. Anything else?"

"Marry me" Carmen joked as she took the book Alexia offered, signing her name as pilot.

"Marry... Why I hardly know you" Alexia laughed, accepting the book. "Doctor Riverstone was on call, treat her well for she is a kind woman." Alexia accepted a half dozen pairs of goggles Tina had found, going through them quickly she offered two sets to Carmen. "It is the best we can do."

Picking one set Carmen grimaced. No flight helmet, yet the Duck was a closed canopy. Still she felt better with one on. This was going to be odd. Turning around towards the Duck Carmen stopped, spinning around to grab Alexa and kiss her. "I come back" she yelled over the engines roar. "Promise." Then she was climbing aboard the Duck, getting ready for her passenger.

"She kissed you" Tina noted after the aircraft had departed. "I have as yet to be kissed."

"Slacker" her older sister responded before turning away from the open hanger doors. Minutes later otter arrived with her gear and boarded without a word. Then with the Duck gone their building almost echoed. She had been kissed the mink mused as she returned her logbook to its place. By a woman. One she had just met. How rather odd, and why did the base of her tail tingle so.

November 24th, 1936

Helen Whitehall groaned as she slipped her shoes off. It had been a windy day, forcing her water taxi to fight its way from Moon Island to Meeting Island. She had been a full forty or minutes late home, a fact which her son had loudly proclaimed. He wanted his supper, and now. That had been three hours, a feeding, two dypers and thirty some essays ago. Now that her son was asleep in his playpen Helen could relax and read her mail.

There were of course the normal advertisements, a copy of the Thymes and two letters. The first from her sister in law, which she read with some amusement.

"My Lady"

My Lady Helen giggled. Any time Willies letters started with My Lady instead of Dearest Helen it was an official missive of some kind. Settling back she continued to read.

"It is with great pleasure that I am able to report the finding of that missing gold. It had somehow found its way under my bed at my home, which I had not been allowed to visit while my brother remained in charge of my life. How strange."

Perfect Helen laughed. The last place that waste of air she was forced to call a brother in law would think anyone would look. That he had probably been correct was even more irritating.

"We have managed to bring the hemorrhage under control. Though many important properties were lost to us, we have managed to make up for this by selling off those investments you spoke about and buying others. At this time House Whitehall is in the black and gaining slowly.

We have also managed to have the best servants return to your service, though I was forced to offer higher wages. Not that I blame any of them in the least. I have also attended my first day at the House of Lords. A rather noisy bunch I should think. Someone should take a good stout oak branch to many of their seated areas. I absolutely hate wearing formal gowns. Trust me Lady Whitehall, I will attain my revenge upon you when next we meet."

Helen laughed out loud at those words. An image of Willie in formal clothing flashed to the forefront of her mind. "She must be beside herself" the hound said to no-one but herself.

"I thank you for the warning that my brother has left Spontoon. It is regrettable that he was not able to stay longer, yet one simply cannot know what the diplomatic corps was thinking by demanding his release. I am quite ready for any attempts he may make upon his arrival home. I understand that the Government is also much interested in his return.

There has been no sign of agents of another power near me other than when I attended the House of Lords. I feel that in a few months I will have no further problem on that end, as my weight has slowly been rising after returning home.

With nothing further to report, I remain your obedient servant."

Setting down the letter Helen giggled again. Obedient, now that would be the day. Picking up her second letter she examined it. A local postmark, no return address. She shook the envelope yet no sound of any powder came from within. Holding it to the light she could see that there was a small piece of paper inside. Shrugging, for if anyone wanted her dead a poison letter would probably be their last attempt she opened the envelope.

From it she withdrew a newspaper clipping. It was she noted, from the same city as her own University. Intrigued she unfolded the paper, then turned it around to read the correct article. It was an obituary she noted, the face of one of her favorite teachers looked out from the page. *Professor Oscar J. Kinworthy was killed in a freak traffic accident* she read. It went on to detail his work and lack of close family. At the bottom was written in a very elegant paw...

Rose has been avenged.

Helen's heart stopped, the paper slipping from her fingers. It could be only one thing, but Professor Kinworthy? He was one of the most popular professors. Why... Why she asked herself. She had looked up to him, he had been almost a father figure to her. As she sat a tear slipped down her face.

When her son woke later, needing both a dyper and meal even his young heart could tell that something significant had occurred. In his own way he expressed his feeling by holding his still crying mother as tightly as he could.