



He's got to be out of his mind. Or head over heels. Maybe both.

If Silk Jones's superiors think she's going to hide quietly in protective relocation, they have another thing coming. She was bred to be the perfect law-enforcement machine. Quiet isn't her style.

Nothing will stop her from finding her partner's killer. Not the assassin who took him down. Not her own government. Not the fact that she's in a completely different dimension. And certainly not her by-the-book new partner, who thinks she's insane and operates on some antiquated idea that *he's* protecting *her*.

Davis Rule doesn't believe in little green men. Yet, thanks to an interdepartmental shake-up, he's stuck on Sightings duty. No borderline-insane Ufologist is going to hamper his plans to wiggle out of this assignment as soon as possible—until he discovers a little green man can be almost six feet of knockout blonde who's quite capable of knocking *him* out.

Silk would like nothing better than to shake off the doggedly chivalrous Davis, return home and bring the murderer to justice. Except she's got the craziest urge to keep him by her side. Especially when it becomes clear that allies and enemies aren't so easy to define.

Warning: Contains one combustible couple thrown together without a hope of dodging the flames.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Perfect Strangers
Copyright © 2010 by Barbara J. Hancock
ISBN: 978-1-60928-150-2
Edited by Heidi Moore
Cover by Kanaxa

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: August 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

Perfect Strangers

Barbara J. Hancock

Dedication

For Todd—who never seems to notice when I'm far from perfect.

Chapter One

The blow slammed into the side of his head and knocked him against a shelf. He didn't know what hurt worse—the porcelain knick knacks raining down all over his face and shoulders, or the fact that his unseen adversary had taken him by surprise. He didn't have time to decide before his instincts kicked in. In the shadowy apartment, he could see movement, if little else, and the practiced crouch of the form before him told him another blow would follow the first.

His strike connected—with a shoulder? A hip? And then he was pummeled with a series of kicks he couldn't identify as any martial art he was familiar with. Not that he had the time to analyze them. Instead, he was forced to drop and roll away and come up again in a defensive stance he'd rarely had to resort to in the ten plus years since he'd left Quantico.

His opponent was on him before he had a chance to breathe. He was matched strike for strike, blow for blow, feint for feint around the room in a blur of movement that had him shaken with the vicious speed of the match.

A fist—or foot—connected with his cheek and he tasted blood. How many times had he managed to deal out a hit that would have taken most men to their knees? He was beginning to wonder if the last few months of desk duty had taken their toll on his abilities when a body slam sent him up against a wall. His elbow glanced painfully against the tab of a light switch. Then and there, in a split second of shock, he almost lost the fight.

Almost.

She was breathing hard. He couldn't fail to notice her chest rising and falling in a pant beneath a pink sweater that seemed out of place on a kick boxer from hell. Long silvery blond hair was rumpled from the fight, but it was easily reminiscent of wild locks tangled after a passionate night in bed. Her lips were full. Her cheeks flushed. Damn, she was a fantasy come to life. A cheerleader, a prom queen, a centerfold...but, and this thought came quickly as she shifted and prepared to pounce, she was also an Amazon quite capable of kicking his distracted ass.

He didn't know how he did it. It was nice for his ego to think maybe she was distracted too. In a move he would have used against a three-hundred-pound gorilla on its grouchiest day, he lunged. The force as he hit her sent them both across the room.

He cringed when they crashed into the opposite wall and she oofed into his shoulder. His six-two, two-hundred-and-twenty-pound frame must have felt like a three-quarter-ton truck smashing into a sleek high performance sports car.

“I’m not a burglar,” he gasped into her ear.

It was the first explanation he could think of for her attack. After all, it wasn’t every day a woman came home to find a strange man rifling through her things. Then again, it wasn’t every day said woman fought like a marine on steroids.

She seemed startled as he spoke and her blue-violet eyes narrowed.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Jones. But I do have a warrant.”

In truth, he had something better than a warrant. He had top clearance to search almost any residence barring the president’s or the Pope’s.

She still didn’t speak, but she did breathe. Long, slow, calming drafts like those practiced in Yoga. He was just professional enough to feel slimy when her deep breaths caused a reaction far different from what he should feel for a suspect—even an attractive one.

“I can justify your attack, even excuse it, but if you continue to fight, I’ll have to assume you’re guilty of something,” he said.

Surely *not* what he’d been sent to investigate. No one had ever checked out positive and he sure as hell didn’t think Silk Jones would be the first. He never expected to find a first, a second or a third for that matter.

He had photographed crop circles, interviewed men and women who claimed to be victims of alien abduction and documented hundreds of other cases involving strange phenomenon. None of it ever panned out. As far as he was concerned, the government was wasting billions every year on meaningless investigations.

They have to have some sort of busy work to dump on the troublemakers.

Three months ago he had called his superior a bastard, though in truth his real mistake had been trying to prove it. Instead of the department-wide clean up he’d expected, he’d been put on what was derisively called little-green-men duty.

And here I am.

Not an unpleasant place to be, if you could discount the aches and pains beginning to spring up all over his battered body. A sweet floral scent—honeysuckle?—came into his nostrils as his breathing slowed. If he stayed pressed to her, they would be inhaling and exhaling in a synchronized rhythm. It probably wasn’t a good thing that he found that prospect appealing.

With one last sigh, Davis Rule slowly pulled himself off her soft, but firm, body. He would take the chance of loosening his hold so he could hold onto his self control. Maybe she would kick his ass again. If

she did, he would deserve it. No way should he get away with liking the way a suspected alien terrorist felt in his arms.

She was glad when he moved. She hadn't touched another being for three months. Before that, she'd been in semi-isolation for a year. It was no surprise that even an embrace meant to restrain could be almost...pleasant.

He wasn't an assassin. He was obviously law enforcement. And he had a scent like those great green trees in the park next door. *Pines*. They were called *pin*es and had a scent like this big human, tangy, fresh...almost sweet. It caught in her nose as her breathing slowed, and she liked it there. So exotic and yet so calming.

He was calming. He spoke to her as one would speak to a frightened wild animal. Siilcc Aman-shi smiled inside. She had frightened *him* perhaps with her attack. After all, she was a Justice Representative. Her inner smile faded. Or at least she *had* been.

"And you are here, why?"

She knew the phrasing was wrong before her lips closed over the last word. The English language was hard, but she was better at it than this. The whole situation proved that skill level in a virtual-reality training pod was not indicative of what it might be in the field.

If only I could report that to someone.

"Why are you here?" she repeated. This time she was careful to use more appropriate phrasing.

He would think she was nervous and that would be fine, the correct reaction for the woman she was supposed to be. She would have to focus and stop letting physical observations distract her.

It was difficult. She couldn't help noticing his height. She was taller than most females in this dimension, but he topped her by several inches. And his eyes were an unusual gray, so light that she had mistaken them for the silvery orbs *IL-Bah* assassins possessed. His didn't glow, but they did snap with vitality—and curiosity.

"I guess you could say we have a nosy government. That incident last week with the boy? The day you saved the four-year-old with some kind of Heimlich maneuver that ended with a French fry embedded in a wall eight feet away..."

"It was an accident."

"One the boy's mom labels a miracle, but she still didn't ever want to see you again. Seems even the grateful get nervous when they witness something they can't easily explain."

"Stranger things have happened." From her brain she pulled the phrase. One of many gleaned from vids meant to prepare her for her new life. For once, she thought she had chosen a phrase well.

"True."

The man eased back in a casual way and ran his hands through hair she had mussed with her attack. She silently observed his well-practiced movement and noted that the untrimmed dark curls would probably flop over his forehead even if he hadn't spent the last fifteen minutes in hand-to-hand combat.

He spoke again.

"Overactive imaginations in the heat of the moment can easily turn a simple occurrence into something strange or even phenomenal."

"I couldn't let the boy die."

Silk eased off the wall. Its support was unnecessary. This was what they called a *tricky situation* in this world. She had no idea what the man was doing in her living quarters. She had no idea if her cover was blown. It was unlikely he could be here looking into the truth. Most Earth natives didn't believe in other dimensions. They thought their reality was the only reality in the universe. It was a primitive outlook and subject for much humor, but it was also why Earth was the perfect place to disappear. It was why she had been exiled here for her own protection.

The man's eyes narrowed and he looked at her with a probing gaze she recognized. It was a look she would have given to a hallucinogen trafficker if he had claimed to be a perfume salesman.

For the first time, Silk knew she faced a threat other than the *IL-Bah* assassins she expected.

"No, you couldn't let him die. But most people there that day say you barely even touched him. Witnesses say you swept your hand over his back like you were swatting a fly. The boy didn't move, but the French fry popped out of his mouth and flew across the room like a spit ball launched from a cannon. Stranger things may *have* happened, but I'd say this ranks right up there, wouldn't you?"

Silk watched as the man strolled around the room. He was dressed in a dark suit that almost shined in its perfection. Not blemished by crease or lint in spite of their fight. He also looked as if he might come out of the suit at any moment if he were to flex his arms or roll his shoulders. It fit his obviously muscular frame well. Too well. She swallowed as he picked up several little ornaments that had been knocked about by their skirmish. After a brief examination, he placed them back on the crooked shelf.

"Of course, eyewitness accounts in a dramatic situation aren't always reliable."

Her skin tingled. He was speaking casually, but devouring the entire room with his senses. It was full of items assumed to be vital to an Earth person's existence, but items she herself cared little about. From her first day, the hundreds of artificial bears and cats and equine quadrupeds had been overwhelming. Thousands of tiny fake eyes watched her every move.

"Your apartment looks like my great grandmother's vision of heaven. I bet you and Nana could blanket half of Nebraska if you sewed your doilies end to end."

He looked at her with those calm, yet suspicious eyes again. Suddenly, Silk knew the garments she wore did not match with this grandmother style he referred to. She also doubted that this grandmother knew *Tri-jenium* Kung-Fu.

“Exactly.”

He spoke as if *she* had spoken, and perhaps the look on her face had. How many times in her career had a person’s body language proven their guilt more surely than any evidence? She had to take control and stop letting him run the proceedings.

“Since when do a person’s decorating choices and their performance of a civic duty result in this kind of interrogation?” She had him there. He put his hands in his pockets and shrugged. She held her breath, fearing for his seams as muscles bulged. In an instant, he went from investigator to harmless uninvited guest. But he was still waiting for her to say something he wanted to hear, and she knew from moments before that his muscles were not merely decorative. His attempt at casual did not fool her.

“I am a waitress.”

He raised one eyebrow, over which a curl quivered and threatened to flop. The contrast between his unruly hair and his controlled appearance intrigued her. She found herself wanting to smooth his hair or rumple his clothes, and neither impulse was appropriate to the situation.

“*Silk Jones*. That’s an odd name to pin on a kid. Did you have it changed or something?”

Once again, she cursed the department responsible for setting her up on Earth. They had so many vids, so much information, but so little real knowledge about the dimension and its inhabitants. She had been here for less than a week before she realized her name was mistaken for a vanity, or worse, a pseudonym for one whose profession was sex.

On her world, her looks were average. She hadn’t gotten used to the reaction her appearance and name received here.

“I am nothing out of the ordinary.”

In response, the man quietly ran the palm of one hand over his angular jaw. It was beginning to show signs of swelling. His eyes moved to track a glance from the tip of her head to her feet. His expression wasn’t hard to read—incredulity mixed with interest—too much interest for her to have peace in her mind.

“You are not welcome here. Leave.”

That was the appropriate reaction to his presence. He finally seemed prepared to go.

“I’m sorry to disrupt your *normal* routine, Ms.Jones. If you find yourself wanting to talk, engage in *verbal* sparring, debate the merits of Feng shui...” the man gestured at the clutter all around him, “...just give me a call. The name’s Rule. Davis Rule.”

He moved to the door. It wasn’t difficult to hide her smile when he limped because she didn’t even try. She had not forgotten her training as easily as her superiors had forgotten her.

“Speaking of sparring, you could probably make good money at the local gym as a sparring partner if you ever get tired of waiting tables.”

His comment reassured her. He did not know everything. She had interrupted his search before he found the upstairs closet with the false floor. Justice Representatives were paid well in credits not to

mention the funds automatically given to a relocated witness. Converted to U.S. currency, it amounted to almost a million American dollars.

“I’ll keep that in thought.”

His feet were out the door, and yet she was not experiencing relief. If anything, she was more nervous than before. He was *contained*, but like a *Delphi* reactor—full of power and likely to release energy in unexpected bursts. She had no time for the unexpected. No time for this new complication.

“One more thing, you were born in Arkansas and moved to Virginia when you were fifteen. Is that correct?” His voice was smooth and mellow. His eyes sparkled with unexplained humor more in keeping with his hair than his suit.

“Yes,” she replied.

As Davis walked away, Silk Jones stood in the doorway of her small apartment looking and sounding nothing like a life-long Southern Belle.

Chapter Two

So, she had graduated with honors from Pine Valley High School in Virginia. If that was true, he'd eat the notebook computer showing him a display of her records. Silk Jones had wound up in his inbox a few days ago. A video showing the aftermath of the French fry incident had gone viral in twenty four hours, and since it involved the weird and unexplained, it also involved him. The poor quality cell-phone footage of the boy's mother pointing at the fried potato imbedded in the restaurant's grease-stained wall had been downloaded more times than the precocious kid singing Lady Gaga. And no wonder...

Who could turn a French fry into a missile?

Come to think of it, he hadn't eaten since last night. Davis shut down the notebook and rose. His stretch pulled in several places, reminding him that he hadn't been to the gym in several days and that if Silk Jones graduated in Arkansas it was from the Tae-Kwon-Do-Goddess-from-Hell Institute not some wimpy public high school.

His stomach was more than ready for breakfast after his shower and shave. He was also more than ready to see Silk again. He just wasn't prepared to fulfill both needs at the same time. Buzz's Diner served breakfast, but he preferred the greasy fast food he knew to the greasy fast food he didn't.

A quick trip to snag a couple of biscuits from a restaurant that did fries better than bread and he was on the case. It was like he'd been living through a month of rainy days and finally the sun was beginning to shine. He hadn't realized how frustrated he'd become.

Silk Jones had come to Buzz's Diner a month ago with no references and no experience. Buzz had hired her on the spot. As window dressings went, a tall blonde waitress built like an athletic version of a fifty's movie queen couldn't be beat.

The grizzled little man had frowned when Davis questioned him about Silk.

"She brings 'em in like flies to a huckleberry pie, but all my *regulars* know not to bother the girls."

Davis was a good three feet taller than the aged hamburger flipper, but he knew when to take a threat seriously. He imagined Buzz would be like a ferocious terrier if one of his girls were threatened—by a reporter, which Davis pretended to be, or by an overly friendly trucker.

So, Silk had begun working as a waitress a month ago. Her house had been rented two weeks before that by a third party he hadn't been able to trace. Lynnvile, Virginia, was a tiny, non-descript town with "low-profile" written all over it. Silk Jones was obviously a woman in some kind of trouble.

Wouldn't *that* be a bee in William Kale's bonnet? If Davis had stumbled upon an actual crime and could blow it wide open, then no one would be able to deny his credibility again. He might even be able to get someone higher up to look into Kale's strange behavior. Over the last three months Davis' superior had been like a man possessed. Shaking up the department, focusing way too many resources on alien investigations. Davis was one resource who didn't appreciate the shift in focus. A real crime investigation was just what the doctor ordered and he had stumbled upon something.

One thing he knew for sure, innocent women did not have closets full of crisp, newly-minted hundred dollar bills.

He is out there.

Silk served up country-fried steak and eggs with a grimace on her face. Not because people on this planet ate such deadly disgusting food. She just couldn't stand being watched. It always made her jumpy and ready for action. Knowing the watcher was the big man from last night made it all the worse.

As she picked up a platter of biscuits smothered in a pungent mess called gravy, she looked out the window for the hundredth time.

Better to be bored and unnoticed, than to be energized by the presence of this FBI man. She recognized the danger. She'd been on edge for months with nothing to expend nervous energy on. She waited, she watched, she gathered information.

Then, all of a sudden, here was this man.

He seemed intelligent and determined. His presence meant she had to be operating at full capacity, prepared to handle his every move with a countermove of her own. He was an unexpected threat...and she loved every millisecond of it.

"Here," her heart said, "is an outlet for all your pent-up frustration."

"I will have to make a break at this time."

Buzz, an odd little man with no hair and almost no teeth, nodded as he began to sling the mashed meat called hamburger onto the griddle. It began to sizzle and fill the air with a nauseating stench before Silk could flee.

So far, she had only discovered three foods on which she could survive: chocolate, strawberries and Glacier Mint Ice Cream. Everything else in this dimension tasted almost as bad as it looked and smelled.

On her way out the back door, she made a stop at the freezer to grab a carton of ice cream. Unbelievable that such a minty sweet concoction traced its origin back to the same creature Buzz was cooking in the kitchen.

She retrieved two serving utensils from a nearby drawer.

It was much too late for her to fight her instincts. They were as much a part of her as her JR training. She would not play the Earth game of feline and rodent with this man. It would be intoxicating after her months of inactivity and she could not allow that. She needed to stay sober and focused. Her life depended on it.

As she expected, the large black vehicle and the dark haired man waited at the end of the alley when she stepped outside. He was born before yesterday. Any good law enforcement officer kept an eye on every exit—even if he only had two. Now he would learn that a JR did *not* flee from confrontation—unless she had no choice.

It was hard to believe that human food could smell any worse than when it was cooked and served, but *here* was the evidence. She was forced to walk around stinking refuse containers to reach the door of his car.

When she opened the door and sat down beside him in the idling vehicle, he looked surprised. She noted several other quick observances. He wore a perfectly tailored dark suit just as he had the night before. His hair still looked like it had never been combed. And, if you discounted his surprised expression, his face was more pleasant than she remembered. It was a handsome face just this side of perfect. Perfect enough to make her almost sorry when she saw the bruises around his mouth and eyes. Her own skin did not mark easily, but it *was* tender in several places. She could not pretend otherwise. He fought well.

“I would like to share my break with you.” It was said simply in the manner of an invitation to an old friend.

He took the spoon, but otherwise he sat motionless and watched as she pried the lid off the container and began to scoop up mouthfuls of sustenance.

“This is unusual—pleasant, but unusual.” His words were punctuated by a move to scoop up his own bite and place it between two well-formed, but slightly swollen, lips.

She noted that his bite came directly from the same indentation she had made with her own spoon. No doubt he was suspicious. He had waited for her to take the first bite.

Smart. Though a bit naïve to think one man’s poison was the same as another’s.

“Chocolate is pleasant too,” she noted between swallows. “And strawberries.”

He laughed, a robust burst of humor. His eyes widened and he seemed to relax.

His guard drops too easily. He should be more careful.

“You should try Twinkies and Little Debbie cakes. You’d probably like them too,” he mentioned quietly as his laughter stopped. Perhaps he saw something in her eyes. A warning she had not meant to voice.

“Cake. Yes, cake is good.” She had forgotten about cake in her earlier thoughts.

The talk was about food, but there were undercurrents. She took further notice of the bruises on his face and almost regretted the fight that had put them there. She noticed his scent and remembered it from the day before.

Soapy pine trees.

Most importantly, she noticed the intelligence behind the humor in his voice and eyes. He had a look that said, *"I'll play along, but don't think I won't put you to the pavement if you deserve it."* Of course, with her, with any JR, he would fail to implement the implied threat, but she had to admire the man and his manner of operating.

"Have you always liked cake?" he asked, twirling his spoon as he waited for his turn to scoop.

"Not as much as chocolate." She fished a chocolate-covered mint chip out of its icy pool and popped it in her mouth.

"What about chocolate cake?"

For a second, Silk forgot why she had left the restaurant. She forgot the other hunger plaguing her. The one for action and justice when her life was now supposed to be one of quiet retirement.

Chocolate cake?

Her mouth went dry and she licked her lips in anticipation.

"Chocolate cake?"

She had lost several mass units from a lowered caloric intake. Maybe this chocolate cake would replenish her strength.

"You sound as if you've never heard of it before. It isn't exactly exotic cuisine."

She couldn't tell him how exotic it was. So many progressive worlds had opted for daily ration pills to save their natural resources. She had thought Earth food unpalatable, but perhaps she had reached this judgment too quickly. Any culture that would pair cake with chocolate could not be all bad.

"Look, this is nice, tasty even, but I wonder if you came out here to discuss something more serious than junk food," He swirled his empty spoon around in his mouth before continuing, "Something like why a woman with a closet full of money would be serving up bacon and eggs to a bunch of truckers for five bucks an hour."

So, he *had* found the currency.

No wonder relocated witnesses weren't allowed a single item from home. She had been here only a short time and already her position was compromised.

Silk hid her reaction to a sudden surge of adrenaline with an extra-large, cooling bite. She savored the chill on her tongue while she formulated a response.

"I can understand if you don't take me seriously, Ms. Jones. Believe me, I've gotten used to a certain amount of disrespect on this *assignment*. But, I want to assure you of one thing." The FBI agent stuck his

spoon back into the ice cream on her lap and left it there like a silver exclamation mark. "I am very serious about *real* crime and I *am* perfectly capable of arresting you."

Silk allowed herself a slow smile. His tough talk was reminiscent of better times. His attitude confident and somehow familiar. Had she not spoken the same way to suspects herself in the past? Oh, how she would like to indulge in the opportunity to flex a little muscle. It was exhilarating to imagine another physical confrontation with him. She reminded herself she was not free to act at will. She was supposed to be living in a clandestine manner. Having it out with a large man in a public parking lot could get her killed. He was not *IL-Bah*, but they were out there.

She had to maintain her cover long enough to find Ronin and make him pay for what he had done.

"My time for break is over," Silk said, her voice as frosty as the snack they had just shared.

"Have some more ice cream. This is just starting to get interesting."

Before she could exit the vehicle, he pulled away from the alley.

Silk did not want to hurt this FBI man. Not that she was opposed to hurting. He was simply not the type she usually took pleasure in subduing. She doubted if he had ever broken even the most minor civil code. So, why were her digits tingling in anticipation as if she was preparing to engage a gang of rioters?

She eyed the two metal spoons, one in her hand, the other in the ice-cream container. He looked nonchalant. No doubt, he was oblivious to the danger a JR posed with those two seemingly innocent implements at hand.

They didn't speak as he pulled into her driveway. It was good that she lived close to her place of employment. Another minute and she would have forgotten her qualms about hurting another law enforcement officer.

She watched as the man unfolded his tall frame from the car. She watched as he took the time to stretch and yawn and grin at her, that ever-present curl flopping over his forehead. Did he realize she could end all chances of him ever being able to grin again with one well-placed foot against those shining white teeth?

Apparently, he did.

Without speaking, he leaned over and braced himself against the top of his window with both hands. He looked through the car at her with one brow raised. In that instant of silent challenge, Silk realized her tingling digits had nothing to do with self-preservation. She didn't want to *fight* this man. She wanted... Well, she had been alone a long time, but she wasn't prepared to admit what she wanted.

I have no time for pleasure.

He noted her hesitation.

"I love not knowing whether you're going to kick my ass or ask me to dance."

There was laughter in his voice, but not in his eyes. Her tingling awareness increased when she realized he was torn between the two himself.

“I do not dance.”

“Really? You seem made for it.”

Again, his glance brushed her, but almost as if he regretted the urge to look at her. He was already turning away to walk toward her living quarters.

Silk slowly exited the vehicle. She *would* knock him senseless. It was only a matter of where and when. She needed to know how much he knew first.

“The key is at Buzz’s.”

“No problem. I’ll use mine.”

From the large pocket of his coat, he produced a replica of her own key and used it to open her back door. He seemed to relish her look of surprise when he stepped aside to allow her to enter.

If this had been her beloved loft back home and not some impersonal shelter, she would have whipped an elbow into his muscled gut as she walked by.

The tiny tri-cubicle she had been forced to leave behind was her true home—its opaque glass walls that glowed when the third sun set, its welcoming message beacon filled with friends’ recorded voices, its warm mist bath and air bed.

His unwelcome entry here was scarcely a violation. She decided she would give him a few more moments of consciousness. If only to watch him and gain a better understanding of his methods. If only to gauge the level of exposure she faced.

She was seething. It was coming off her in waves that would have drowned a lesser man. Or so he liked to think. As it was, he was feeling pretty rotten. Not so much so that he planned on lessening his bravado. Hell, he figured his swagger was the only thing keeping her from trying to level him on the spot. The fact that he might enjoy her attempt—well, that was one hint at a masochistic tendency he didn’t plan on examining too closely.

“Okay, it’s just you and me and a thousand china animals. You can level with me. What kind of racket involves pounds of cash and the inventory from every flea market this side of Tennessee? Is it counterfeit?”

“The money is real. The décor, an unfortunate mistake.”

The man’s confidence was obnoxious, but oddly attractive. He reminded her of home. She answered him with the truth when she should have come up with something easier for him to believe.

“Real?”

She was treated to a flash of anger in his eyes before he turned to take the stairs two at a time. She followed, imagining him on the heels of a real criminal.

She had known a Justice Representative separated from his or her partner by death or circumstance would experience an emptiness that often proved fatal. To know it wasn't to *feel* it. The shock that had come with her loss had been almost more than she could survive. Training could not prepare you for it.

This man was this world's version of her profession. He had awakened a hunger in her. It was painful and bittersweet all at the same moment. Justice Representatives were not loners. They were matched with a partner almost from conception.

And her partner was dead.

Davis Rule was in her bedroom when she came around the corner. The closet had been thrown wide and the floor loosened. He poured the contents of one case on the bed. Bills cascaded in a green-tinted waterfall down to the carpet.

"This can't be real, Jones. There's at least a million dollars in that closet."

He grabbed up a handful and threw it in the air like so much confetti.

Then it got personal.

Silk bristled as he began to fling open drawers and poke into boxes. Her favorite underclothes—an eccentricity of Earth dress she'd actually found pleasure in—wound up in his hand as he rifled through her garments.

Said hand made a pleasant smack against plaster as she forced him to the wall.

"You can violate this house. You can bust open every case and box and drawer in the place, but you do not need to crush my..."

What was the contraption called? It was made of satin and lace with clever pieces of metal that took back several years from gravity. *Underwire bra*. That was the name for it.

Suddenly, Silk realized she was not holding him anymore as much as she was leaning into his large form. She had thought him much like a JR. With his size, muscled shape and the strength she felt in the hand beneath hers, he could have been an *Enforcer*.

"I guess I got carried away." His voice was whisper soft, and yet it vibrated against her chest.

He held the scrap of lingerie in his fingertips and those digits trembled as if he had just realized what the peach-colored fabric held when *he* wasn't holding it.

"Sorry to interrupt." Once more, Silk grabbed at a phrase that seemed appropriate.

"I think we could safely say my concentration is shot for the day," he replied, his voice oddly choked.

She eased back then, more because he was holding so still than because she really wanted to put space between them. He thought she was some sort of lawbreaker. No one wanted to be attracted to a criminal. And he was a threat. She shouldn't be physically attracted to a threat.

"I should have contacted someone on this before now. I need to arrest you. File reports. Regret you being in jail for the rest of my life. File some more reports."

He stopped and ran his empty hand through hair that seemed to always fall in his face. With a sigh, he leaned sideways against the wall, using its support. He addressed his comments to the air or to himself in an almost absentminded manner as he continued to look at her.

“I am not a crook.” Silk plucked another phrase from her vid-soaked mind. Her cover was entirely compromised. The man was too suspicious for his own good. She could kill him or she could trust him. She opted to try the later—first.

He looked startled for a moment. Then he frowned as if she’d just indulged in a bad jest.

“Who *are* you?”

His eyes seemed to doubt the answer even before she began the tale.

Chapter Three

It was such a shame.

Silk Jones sat on her money-covered bed and spilled forth a story worthy of the Sy-Fy channel on its slowest night. Davis could have groaned out loud. She was tough. She was beautiful. She was the most interesting person he'd met in years—and she was obviously insane.

"My partner, Miilos, was killed during an important arrest. The killer's name is Ronin D'Ja-nar. He was accused of many crimes—drug trafficking, black market slavery. The trial focused on the murder of my partner because for that crime we had proof. My testimony guaranteed a conviction. He was sentenced to life in cryo-stasis at Secure Hold Station. My life, the life I knew, ended with the trial. I was given no choice. Forced into the Relocation Program. Then Ronin escaped." The money beneath Silk crinkled as she moved to take a deep breath. "Miilos is dead. I am here. Ronin is free. He paid no price for his crime."

Damn.

Davis swallowed. It didn't matter that the money she crushed under her perfect rear would probably prove to be the evidence he would need to rejuvenate his career. He got no pleasure from the knowledge that he'd be the one responsible for covering those long strong limbs with a straight jacket.

"Now I have told you everything."

Her voice was throaty, colored by the emotion of her story, a story she obviously believed with all her heart. The pain in her eyes caused a groan to push past his lips. It was a frustrated sound full of impatience.

"No, not everything, but enough."

The cuffs were out and over one surprisingly delicate wrist before she knew what was happening. He wasn't all that surprised when the other hand proved more elusive.

A hard open-fisted whack sent him backward, but he managed to hold onto his precarious position over her on the bed. That showed itself for the mistake it was when both of her feet came up between them to force him up and over her head. His head cracked against the headboard, and for a crazed moment he thought of much more pleasant ways he'd like to wrestle in Silk's bed.

He didn't have long to lose himself in the fantasy because he wanted to live to see tomorrow. Throwing himself sideways, he slid off the bed and onto the floor, bringing Silk with him in a heap of determined aggression. It was like being chained to a tiger in a Roman arena. Instead of claws and fangs, he faced blows that felt like they came from a prize fighter.

It was a bar brawl. It was no holds barred. It was winner take all. And damned if he didn't want to call a truce and kiss her senseless from the very first punch.

"You are not fighting as you did last night."

The complaint came in a gasp from above him as Davis found himself pinned beneath her in a hold he had never encountered because he'd never battled a contortionist from Cirque du Soleil.

"Bullshit."

"You are holding back because I am a woman. A very Earth-based view. What if I was a vicious criminal? You would be dead."

Damn it. She was right. He *was* holding back. Not because she was a woman. But because she was *this* particular woman who had somehow managed to get under his skin in less than twenty-four hours.

"You're not going to kill me," he choked out as her "delicate" wrists managed to support hands that felt like a steel vise around his larynx.

"But you would send me to certain doom with your archaic restraining device." She jangled the handcuffs in the air.

"Doom?" He hadn't figured her for melodrama. Psychotic maybe, but not melodramatic.

"If I am unable to defend myself, if the *IL-Bah* come upon me bound and helpless, they will kill me."

There she sat, pinning him down like some sort of Norse goddess and she was worried about being helpless?

"Silk, what are you really afraid of?"

The idea occurred to him that her delusion might be based on a reality represented by the cash. She was obviously involved in some serious shit. Fear must have pushed her over the edge. He found himself teetering there while he tried to imagine what would scare a woman like her.

A bullet interrupted his impromptu psychoanalysis. It tore into the wall above Silk's head with a deadly, sickening thwack. Plaster erupted in a puffy cloud and rained down straight into his eyes.

Horror filled him as he felt Silk collapse in a heap on top of him. He couldn't see, but he knew which direction the shot had come from. He pushed back with his heels, sliding on his back in the opposite direction. Motionless, Silk came along for the ride.

He thought she was hit. He hoped she had fainted. He never imagined she would snag a lamp by the cord as they scooted past and whip it with deadly accuracy into the nearest attacker's face.

It was all a stinging blur to Davis, but he saw the movement, heard the pop as the light bulb exploded on impact and felt the floor vibrate as the man fell.

She was okay.

Better than okay.

She was *incredible*.

For Silk, the adrenaline flowed and she acted. With one *IL-Bah* temporarily slowed, they only had two to deal with.

She and Rule would surely die.

Rule's face was powdered with a white substance from the damaged wall. He squinted and blinked and she knew he was not operating with full sight.

Had they faced normal adversaries, she would have been glad to have even an incapacitated Davis Rule at her side. She had seen enough to know he would be a strong partner. Unfortunately, *IL-Bah* were far from normal. They were genetically enhanced just as she had been, but where she had been made faster and stronger and smarter in order to be the perfect Justice Representative, they had been turned into killing machines made of flesh and bone.

Another bullet snapped by, missing her cheek by millimeters as she rose. She didn't have time to be thankful that the *IL-Bah* were using Earth weapons without target-locking technology. If she was to die, she would not die without *IL-Bah* blood on her hands.

Davis was already slamming into the man framed in the bedroom's doorway. No doubt he was counting on shadows and outlines to guide him. She relished the look of surprise in the *IL-Bah*'s silvery eyes. He hadn't expected resistance. His weapon flew from his hand and skidded across the floor.

Even without it, he would be able to crush Rule's skull if given the time to get a good hold.

Silk didn't have time to worry about it. She had another *IL-Bah* to deal with and he was pointing a newly drawn gun in her direction. His hand looked steady and his aim might prove better than his companion's.

With a mighty heave, she lifted the giant pad and its support frame off the bed in front of her. The two giant rectangles of fabric, springs and wood fell forward onto the *IL-Bah*. She heard the whump as a thwarted projectile became imbedded in layers of foam.

She was already moving to engage the *IL-Bah* recovering from her lamp-strike when a hand gripped her arm and jerked her out the bedroom door.

"Time to go, terminator."

Silk was hot with adrenaline. Ready to fight. She resisted as Rule pulled her down the dark hallway.

"In case you hadn't noticed, I'm operating blind here. And those guys mean business."

As if to illustrate his point, Rule practically fell down the stairs, dragging her and a half-open suitcase spilling crumpled hundred dollar bills after him.

She knew it was insane, but she wanted to stay and face the *IL-Bah*. Needed to.

"I am tired of hiding."

"We're not hiding. We're running."

She could hear the *IL-Bah* on the stairway behind them as Davis pulled her out the back door. He must have an impeccable memory. He managed to lead their way out of the house with only one minor crash into the side of the kitchen table.

“Lose the battle, win the war. Live to fight another day. Cut your losses. Come with me if you want to live. Any of that ring a bell?”

She couldn’t answer. He was shoving her into the car. Apparently, he could see a little better outside because he rounded the vehicle and jumped inside with only a single trip slowing him down. He pushed the case behind them, spilling more money out onto the seat. She didn’t know how he’d managed to scoop any of it up while the *IL-Bah* were attacking.

One rear window exploded as they pulled out of the driveway.

Alive.

“Have you no pride? We should have fought.” She was furious. It pounded at the back of her head and she ground her teeth against it. She didn’t know if her anger came more from leaving the fight before she was ready or from her disappointment at Rule’s cowardice. JR? *Enforcer*? At this moment, he seemed more like a *Ti-viin* sheep herder.

“We were facing three men with silencer-equipped 9mm and I couldn’t even see to use my own weapon.” Rule wiped his hand across his eyes, weaving erratically as he tried to see the road. “The guy I tackled was made like a brick wall. I was lucky to take him down long enough to grab you and make a break for it. And you’re gonna complain because you’re alive?”

“JRs do not ‘make a break for it’.”

“No? Then what are you doing on Earth? Supposing I believe your crazy story. I’d say that’s one major break.”

Silk felt warmth in her cheeks. He was right. It mattered not that her run had been forced by a justice system she had sworn to obey. To Rule, it must look like running. Hiding even, like a stag from a pack of starving carnivores.

“I had no choice.” Surely he operated within a chain of command.

“Neither did I.”

Rule glanced her way. His eyes were bloodshot. His expression grim.

“We almost bought the farm back there and I don’t even know why.”

An alien from another dimension.

She was sticking with the lie. He didn’t know if that made him angry with her or sorry for her. They had driven for an hour until they came to tiny motor inn so convenient to the road that the sound of passing cars competed with the rumble of the ancient air-conditioning unit.

He hadn't called for backup.

She was sitting on the edge of a hotel bed wrapped in a towel instead of sitting in a padded room wrapped in a straight jacket. He must have spent too many months dealing with imbalanced, delusional people. He had gone worse than soft. He was neglecting his duty.

"I will have to take you in, Silk. Eventually. You need help."

Even as he said it, he couldn't really imagine her locked up in some nut ward.

"You cannot help me."

She was a contradiction. A living contradiction. She was obviously in it deep, up to her pretty ears, and her only reaction was steel fury.

"You must understand that a JR is bred for the job. We are matched with our partners as infants. We grow together. Train together. Think together. Now Miilos is dead and I have to handle the aftermath alone."

A feeling stabbed his gut when she mentioned her supposed partner's name. Envy. He recognized it, but couldn't credit it. She was beautiful, unusual and strong. Perfect from her head to her toes. Hell, his ribs would never be the same. But he couldn't feel envy for a man whose existence he didn't accept. He couldn't feel a sense of propriety toward an insane—possibly criminal—stranger. Not unless he was on his way toward insanity too.

"So, those men who tried to kill us. They killed this Me-lows guy and now they want to kill you."

"Ronin killed Miilos. Those men we just saw are *IL-Bah*. They belong to Ronin. He wants me dead because he knows as long as I am alive, his life is in danger."

"Saw. Well, I can't say that I actually saw them. My eyes were out of commission at that point. Remember?"

"If you could have seen their eyes you would know I speak the truth."

"Right. *Silver*. You mentioned that."

He didn't believe her. She knew now that she had been foolish to try truth, but she did not think she would need to kill him. She need not worry about her true identity being revealed. He was blind even when his eyes were clean.

"If you could just sprout an antenna or two. Maybe flick open your communicator and talk to the mother ship."

Sarcasm. She recognized it. Was surprised to feel his mockery prick a nerve. She was a decorated Justice Representative, reduced to this.

"There is no mother ship. I am alone." She had lost Miilos, but she would not shrivel and die. She would not become a useless shadow of her former self like so many other Representatives who had lost their partners.

“So, you’re saying you can’t send out some sort of S.O.S to the high command and they’ll come beam you up?”

He was unfastening his shirt as he spoke. Silk tried not to become distracted by the intimacy of their situation. He thought she was insane. He was mocking her and discounting her every word. He was also not informing his superiors. Why not?

She couldn’t decide. Perhaps he couldn’t either. That thought was quickly overshadowed by another. She had felt the firmness of his chest before, but seeing it bare for the first time made her mouth go dry. It had been a long time and she couldn’t help admiring the muscled ridges his loosened shirt revealed. That he had achieved such a level of perfection and fitness with no genetic manipulation was...intriguing.

She rose to turn and comb out the wet tangles in her hair. In the mirror, she saw him cross to the bathing room. Their gazes met. Even the cool glass couldn’t take away from the probing nature of those stormy eyes. He tried to see into her soul. She shuttered it, tamped it down and closed it off tight.

“I’m not arresting you right now, but I do know it’s not because of this...” He motioned his hands between them, indicating the flow of electricity that was obviously mutual. “When I decide the right course of action, I won’t be influenced by a pretty face.”

“And I won’t try and influence you. Not in that way.”

“Then we understand each other.”

The door closed with a snap and Silk listened as the water began to flow.

“No, Davis Rule. I do not think we understand each other at all.”

William Kale couldn’t be trusted.

As Davis soaped plaster dust out of his hair, he knew his superior would take the case out of his hands and give it to one of his automatons—one of those junior officers who thought Kale was a god in a three-piece suit.

Davis didn’t relish the idea of going back to investigating saucer sightings in Kansas. Surprisingly, that wasn’t his only reason for keeping quiet until he learned more. He wanted to revitalize his career, true. But he also cringed at the idea of turning someone like Silk over to William Kale. The guy was crooked. He knew it. Silk needed help, but Kale would be the last person she could count on to provide it.

Davis allowed hot water to wash suds down his body to puddle in a gurgling mass of white at his feet.

He would bide his time and try to learn the truth on his own. Then he *would* turn her in. If he could re-establish his credibility, then William Kale wouldn’t be a threat. Not to his career or to Silk’s well-being. *And maybe, just maybe, he could reclaim the life that had been stolen from him when William Kale had gone bad.*

Silk slipped back into the only clothing she had. She ignored the desire for clean sleeping garments. She ignored the lumpy padding beneath scratchy linen sheets. Her body required rest.

Davis thought she was in his custody.

The thought was equal parts amusing and annoying. Still, it was good to have a temporary reprieve while he decided on a course of action. Her course was clear. She needed to find Ronin as soon as possible, before his assassins succeeded in their mission. The fiend had a whole universe, but he knew she was here and Ronin was a hands-on kind of guy.

An image of Miilos blazed through her brain. His face had been burned black beyond recognition by close-range fire from the weapon in Ronin's hand.

Hands-on.

Silk grimaced as one tear slipped free to slide down her cheek. She willed it to dry and refused to allow others to follow. Even the cloak of darkness did not encourage her to indulge in such a weakness.

After the sleep her body required, she would deal with Rule. Then she would deal with Ronin.

Her hands clenched the blanket over her chest. After all, she had been trained to be a hands-on kind of girl.

Chapter Four

It was easy to part ways with Davis Rule. She did not want to hurt him, but she had learned long ago not to let her wants dictate her actions.

It was eight p.m. when she rose from a two-hour sleep refreshed and ready. Rule had just entered the room with a brown bag in his hands. Without speaking, he began to set out cans of soda and sandwiches on a nearby table. Silk approached him casually. He did not turn from his task. She timed the blow carefully, waited for him to move just so, and struck with precision.

The big man slumped to the floor as if his bones had suddenly decided to dissolve beneath his skin. He made an attractive heap, but Silk didn't waste time admiring the subject of her handy work. She had been lying low, gathering information, waiting to act. Now the time was upon her. And it felt good.

Miilos had been the investigator. She had always chafed during those times when inaction was required.

Moving to the closet, she pulled out her case. It wouldn't be necessary to take it all. The funds seemed important to Davis and she didn't want to leave him completely empty handed. A few bundles should suffice for her needs and she could carry them in her pockets until she made other arrangements.

She needed supplies and she couldn't go back. The *IL-Bah* negated that option. The equipment she had carefully gathered over the last month was lost. All of it would be left to gather greasy dust in a locker behind the storage room at Buzz's. She would have to start from scratch.

So Silk went shopping.

Some things, this backwards dimension had gotten right. Shopping malls for instance. These centralized locations were packed with everything a person might need for any given situation. Including the hunt for one evil man.

Of course, Silk could kill with cutlery, but she preferred more efficient methods.

As she traversed the length of the mall, she made several quick stops. She purchased jeans, sweaters and undergarments and took the time to pack them into a small bag she could wear on her back.

She picked the bag with care. It rode high on her shoulder blades with one small exterior pocket that was perfect for her needs. The bag would serve as a holster for her next purchase.

Attached to the mall by a tree-lined walkway, a large store with a sign that read sporting goods attracted Silk. Though she couldn't imagine what "sport" was played with them, she was pleased to see the familiar shape of projectile weapons through the windows.

Silk entered, ignoring the tone that signaled admittance. Right away she smelled the comforting scent of well-oiled metal. The more acrid hint of discharged ammunition was also in the air.

From the rear, muffled no doubt by soundproof walls, she could hear weapons fire. A sign that read Firing Range—No entry without authorization marked the portal to this "range". Beside the portal was a glass counter, behind that, a man in a brightly colored, square-patterned shirt waited on customers with a bored expression on his face. She recognized a cash register computer similar to the one at Buzz's.

Unfortunately, lines were universal.

Silk waited. The stares of the other, mostly male patrons pricked her nerves. She wondered how they would all react if she was clothed in the skin-tight, flexible body armor of a Justice Representative. Compared to her old uniform, the pink fuzzy sweater of her new uniform was roomy.

When it was her turn, the man behind the counter perked up with a grin as if he had just woken from a nap. "Do I know you?"

Silk shook her head, but the man's grin widened and he continued. "Yeah, yeah...I know...you're the one in the metallic bikini." He looked around her and spoke over her shoulder. "Jesus man, this girl was in the swimsuit issue last year."

"Really?" The man behind her sounded excited as he pressed closer.

"I would like a semi-automatic 9mm handgun." Silk ignored his proximity and focused on her goal.

"What?" The man who thought he knew her was a poor salesman. He seemed taken aback by her request.

"A Glock or a Beretta, 3082 Tomcat," Silk added, impatient with the man's ignorance.

Understanding seemed to dawn on his face.

"Oh, oh right. You probably need something for protection. Really, a .22 caliber should do it. Great for your purse. Not too much weapon to handle."

Silk sighed. *IL-Bah* had skin like body armor. What this man suggested would only irritate them. And she doubted if she could irritate them to death.

"The Glock, please."

If the man pressing her from behind did not ease up soon, she would have to hurt him, thus ruining her chances of laying low. She should have taken Rule's weapon. If she had, this stop would not have been necessary. If she had, Rule would not have been able to defend himself.

Her duty was to find Ronin. Rule had a sense of duty as well. She could not leave him defenseless no matter if it would have been easier.

The salesman pulled out a sheaf of papers and began a stuttering spiel about signatures and waiting periods and background checks. Silk's patience was almost spent when this unexpected complication was interrupted by the sound of breaking glass.

Silk whipped around. Her movement, and the shove that came with it, knocked the man behind her on his ass. His shock would have been amusing if *IL-Bah* assassins were not preparing to kill her.

A flash of light melted the glass of the counter and the poor salesman behind it was left charred and stuttering. He was in the open with no cover and no .22 caliber with which to defend himself.

Silk leapt, taking him down just as another laser blast hit where she had been standing a second before. Speed was crucial. Target-locking weapons always had a delay before firing. *A one second delay.* The *IL-Bah* were no longer relying on this world's technology.

Using the slick floor to her advantage, she slid the now shocked and silent salesman under the nearest display case and rolled away as another flash vaporized a rack of clothing. The impatient *IL-Bah* had not waited for target-lock that time. His impatience saved her life.

She had no choice. There were too many innocents around them. Retreat was her only option.

Springing to her feet, Silk made for the door of the firing range. She needed to find a rear exit or die.

The soundproof walls and ear muffs of the people on the range had prevented them from hearing the *IL-Bah* attack. Few looked her way as she barreled down the aisle behind them.

She spotted a suitable weapon and commandeered it from a little old lady who had gripped it fiercely between two knotty hands.

"Good aim," Silk commented when she saw the target the woman had just destroyed with a bevy of bullets. "Get down."

The old woman was surprised. She released the weapon and sat on the floor without protest. *Just in time.* The door behind Silk came off its hinges with a protesting metal scream and the *IL-Bah* came into the room. One eager monster discharged his laser. The wall near Silk began to burn.

She ran. The only way to save anyone around her was to distance herself from them as soon as possible.

She saw a brightly lit sign that read Fire Exit and sprinted for that door while shrieks and curses and small-arms fire erupted all around.

"Come for me. Come for me," Silk gasped as she hit the door full force. An alarm began to sound and it echoed in the cave of the stairway she found on the other side of the door. She wasn't running scared. She was running to draw the monsters away from innocent bystanders.

The mall was only two stories high. Without a pause, Silk tucked the commandeered weapon into her waistband and made for the rail. Quickly, she sat on it and whirled around so that her legs dangled over the chasm, but only for an instant. Then she dropped her body down the shaft.

She landed on her feet, bending her knees and relaxing her spine to avoid injury.

She heard the whump of more laser fire, but she also continued to hear other weapons fire. Many on the firing range had turned their weapons on the *IL-Bah*. Buying her time. She hoped they hadn't brought death to themselves.

Silk paused for only a moment before she pushed through another exit. Ronin had brought these assassins to Earth because of her, and now he was responsible for more death.

Death. As Silk blended into the night, she thought of Davis Rule. She had left him unconscious and alone. If he was dead, his blood would be on her hands.

Chapter Five

Davis Rule was not dead. He was royally pissed. He had a lump on the skin covering his occipital bone the size of a golf ball and his whole spine was tingling.

Silk Jones was dangerous. She was also in a lot of trouble. Davis held a cell phone in his lap. Kale's number was already keyed into it. For some reason, he didn't hit send. Damn. He'd always acted on instinct and this time he'd been off, way off. He could have sworn that beneath her tough exterior, Silk was happy to have his help. Despite learning his lesson to the contrary, he didn't want to bring Kale and his goons into this. Not yet.

When the door to the hotel room opened, he rose and grabbed for his weapon.

"Do not do it, Rule. It has been a long night."

Silk limped into the room, covered in blood.

Rule was worse than Miilos. Much worse. Her partner had always worried about her safety, but he knew she was made for danger. Her body was stronger, more resilient, genetically altered to withstand assault.

Davis Rule wouldn't listen. He pulled her into the bathroom and began to dab a stinging substance on the cuts she had sustained while rolling in glass back at the mall.

"You say these *IL-Bah* attacked a shopping center?"

"Technically, they were attacking me. The shopping center merely got in the way."

"You need to see a doctor." Davis said this shakily as he pulled a two-inch shard of glass from a wound on the back of her arm.

"I heal quickly. This is nothing."

"Your delusion is going to get you killed."

"I need no delusion to accomplish that feat."

The man was impossible. So big, so dangerous and tsking over her injuries like a child's nurse. Suddenly, she wanted very badly to show him just how healthy she was.

"I came back because I thought they had killed you," she spoke the words softly as the top of his head came close to her lips. He was dabbing her chest now, his head turned down so that she couldn't see his expression. She could imagine it. After all, she had no cuts on the skin he was bathing above her breasts.

"You wanted to see their handiwork?" he asked, his voice sounding as if he needed to clear his throat.

"I needed to know," Silk admitted.

"Well, I'm better off than you are." Rule tossed a blood-soaked pad of cotton into the trash and took another from a tiny box marked with a blue cross. "You need stitches."

"I do not." Silk shuddered at the very idea of seeking medical attention on this planet. Stitches. Her stomach rolled. She could slide through shattered glass without flinching, but *stitches* would be unnecessary, archaic torture. "I will heal."

"You took me by surprise. What did you use on my head, a cinder block?"

"My hand."

Rule picked up one of her hands. Blood had dripped down her arm and onto her fingers, staining the nails a rusty reddish brown. His hand was easily twice as large as hers. And she could break every bone in it if she chose.

"This hand knocked me out for over an hour and gave me this knot on the back of my head?" He sounded amused.

Silk raised her other hand and used it to skim through the thick curls above the nape of his neck. She cupped his skull, brushing over the bump lightly with questing fingers.

"I am sorry. It was necessary."

Rule did not look up. He dabbed another piece of fluff over the palm of the hand he held.

"I have work to do, Rule. You must not interfere," Silk insisted.

"I have work to do, Silk. Right now, you're my work."

"I cannot promise that I will stay with you. But I will until I know that you will be safe without me."

He looked up at her. On his knees on the bathroom floor, he looked like a supplicant, but his eyes were defiant. They were also amused as if he couldn't believe she was talking like she was in charge when she looked like a bruised and battered victim.

One day he would learn that appearances were deceiving.

"So, we'll humor each other as we go along," Davis surmised.

"I see no harm in it." Silk pulled her hand from his. She saw no harm in staying with him, but she did see harm in his gentle ministrations, and in the way those ministrations made warmth rise in her belly.

"I will have to turn you in at some point." Rule sat back on his heels and threw the last pad in the trash.

"Feel free to try, Davis Rule. Feel free to try."

Silk rose and left the tiny bathroom. Having the warm, solicitous Rule at her feet was heady, and she already fought the dizziness that came from loss of blood. She needed sleep. Her body needed to heal. What Davis Rule needed from her she couldn't begin to fathom.

Chapter Six

Piper Jo Harding was five feet tall. That in itself was enough to make Silk feel astonishment. The fact that she showed her great age was another. Silk had never seen such a display of wrinkles. It was amazing. The ancient little woman met them at her back door with a shrug and a whistle as she looked Silk over from head to toe. An odd habit the inhabitants of this world found necessary that Silk was beginning to find more than annoying. She was already grumpy because this FBI man knew the first person she needed to contact, and his laughter was still ringing in her ears.

Davis didn't waste time on polite introductions.

"Heard any voices lately, Mrs. Harding?"

"Not so's you'd believe me if I said I had. Won't ask what brings you 'round. Guess I can see *that* for myself."

That.

Well, Silk supposed *that* was only a little more insulting than her actual moniker. Especially coming from a woman who thought her microwave oven was broadcasting some kind of alien Top Forty. Any child would know it had more to do with the fact that Harding lived in a giant metal box called a mobile home and that this *home* was placed directly on top of a combination of mineral deposits that naturally replicated a synthetic receiver.

"Don't suppose you can deny the proof right before your eyes, now can you?" The old woman stopped in mid-cackle when Davis swiped an imaginary piece of lint from his sleeve.

"What? You think they make 'em like *this* on our planet? You've been watchin' too much television."

Silk resisted the urge to look smug. Having one slightly unstable person believe her would not convince Rule. It was however, some consolation to her pride.

"We need information." She urged the conversation back to the purpose of their visit.

"Well, you have come to the right place. Information I have by the truckload, honey."

Suddenly, their hostess sounded much more polished than before. Her thick accent softened. She spoke to Silk with a voice that had been influenced by the blending of accents from transmissions broadcasting multiple translations.

"You aren't from around here," Piper stated the obvious with interest.

"No," Silk confirmed.

"Tourist?"

“Witness relocation.”

“Ahhh, you must feel completely cut off. Stranded in no-man’s land.”

Surprisingly, the old woman’s empathy caused a knot to form in Silk’s throat. Not so surprisingly, the ever-observant Davis Rule noted her emotions.

He didn’t believe her. He mocked the whole situation. And yet his warm hand slid up her arm to end on her shoulder in a comforting gesture not unlike one she would have received from a friend back home. The bandage on her forearm was also due to his unnecessary concern. He had applied it that morning without comment. She wondered what he would think when the cuts were healed by tonight.

“She’s not stranded, Mrs. H. Just a little confused.”

The wily woman looked from Davis’ hand to Silk’s face and back again.

“Well, I must say, if I was twenty years younger you’d mess with my equilibrium too, Rule.”

Silk stepped away from him, taking her tingling arm with her. How many times would she have to take the big man down before he realized that she wasn’t in need of his aid?

With an eye roll and another cackle, Piper Jo shuffled with surprising speed into the next room which proved to be the dining room. At least, Silk thought she could identify a table and chairs beneath the mounds of paper stacked on every available surface.

“My home office, so to speak. I like to keep records of everything I hear.”

Silk picked up the top sheet on the nearest chair. With painstaking accuracy, Piper Jo Harding had transcribed a commercial for a mouthwash derived from the freshwater springs on *N-leh* Seven.

“I still maintain that red crayon is not the most professional instrument to use for your records, Mrs. H.” Rule shifted a few papers around and shook his head.

Silk did think a digital display might be easier to read, but she didn’t quite understand the lack of interest Rule showed toward the heaps of evidence right at his fingertips. It might be bright red, waxy and somewhat sloppy, but it was extremely precise.

She recognized the lyrics to her favorite song.

As Rule and Piper Jo continued to discuss the merits of Crayola versus Packard Bell, Silk began to hum. The song had become a hit just before she’d been sequestered for the trial. It had a haunting refrain about the rains on Sylviin’s moon.

Suddenly, a clear voice began singing the words. Piper Jo had a pleasant deep tone that almost captured the original’s grace. Silk joined in with her own whispery attempt, and for one long moment she enjoyed a taste of home with this new found friend.

It wasn’t until they came to the end of the chorus that Silk noticed Davis. One dark curl had fallen in his eyes, but for once he didn’t seem to care. Amazement suited him as well as any other emotion. It colored his handsome face, almost overshadowing the disbelief.

“I may not sing any better than I dance, Davis Rule. But you need not look horrified.”

“Give him time, he’ll come ’round. He’s got a heart of gold and I honestly don’t think he was born obtuse.” The little woman at her side giggled as the man almost twice her size frowned in her direction.

Silk placed the sheet of paper carefully back on top of its stack. She would have to be just as careful with Rule. He was easy company, but it would be dangerous to start thinking of him as a par—an ally.

She turned her attention away from the man across the room.

“Ronin D’Ja-nar. I need to know anything you might have heard.”

“That’s not a name I would forget,” Piper Jo said, suddenly solemn. “Monstrous news reports. Hold on...” She walked along her seemingly haphazard stacks, pulling sheets until she had a new pile built in her arms. She brought the papers to Silk and deposited them in her arms. Then she plucked the top sheet off and began to summarize from its contents.

“Escaped a little over three months ago from Secure Hold station. Inside job. Has contacts known and unknown throughout the Confederation of Worlds. Nasty customer. Took one guard’s stunner and repeatedly shocked the guy until his brain was toast. Completely disappeared. No sightings. No leads.”

Silk crushed the papers to her chest. No sightings. Silk had not killed him when she had the chance because she thought the Justice System would make him pay for killing Miilos. News of his escape had reached her just before her placement in this world. Now that she knew he hadn’t been seen...

“You’ll need contacts. Other people with their ears to the ground and eyes to the sky.” The older woman looked nervous as if she’d rather listen than participate in strange goings on.

“Don’t encourage her, Piper. She’s in enough trouble as it is.” Rule’s hands were in his pockets. Something told Silk he wasn’t as bored as he pretended to be.

“Someone needs to counteract your Doubting Thomas routine,” Piper argued.

“I’m only interested in whatever real crime she’s involved in.”

Silk ignored the threat inherent in those words. She had what she came for. Information on Ronin. If Piper offered more help, she would take it.

“Read through some of that if you’re interested in real crime.” Their hostess nodded at the papers in Silk’s hand. Davis made no move to do as she suggested.

Piper Jo huffed in frustration and picked up the stub of a red crayon. She scribbled something on a piece of paper. Then she handed the paper to Silk with a solemn smile.

“This man will probably treat you like the second coming. Just ignore that. He won’t look it, but he knows things.” Piper patted Silk on the back and her hand lingered in the manner of a mother who did not want her daughter’s visit to end. “I’d ask you to stay and listen to the evening news, but I can never pick up anything when I want to. It’s a sporadic thing at best. Sun spots, solar winds...who knows why.”

Silk didn’t have the heart to tell her they were perfecting a scrambling technology that would end Piper Jo’s sporadic visitations before long. She squeezed the paper tightly in her fist and said goodbye to the closest contact she had had with home for a very long time.

They headed out of Virginia toward the craggy hills on the border of West Virginia. It was a route Davis knew too well. The joke was only Midwestern farm folk saw UFOs, but many a rural community boasted its share of believers. Not all of them born and raised in the country. There were quite a few transplanted conspiracy theorists in them there hills. He'd met retired Harvard professors, multi-millionaire computer gurus and former beauty queens who all believed in one way or another.

He operated on automatic as his brain tried to wrap itself around the incident back at Piper Jo's. He wasn't exactly up on the latest pop sound, but the eerie chorus of that song the two women had sung—Enya didn't come close. And the sheet of lyrics that Silk had been holding hadn't been scored with musical notes. Yet they had sung together like he and his old man would have if they'd decided to belt out an old Eagles hit.

Curiouser and curiouser.

He was on a road trip with an enigma. He was making or breaking his career. And he was beginning to feel a whole lot like Alice down the rabbit hole.

Silk was quiet beside him.

He supposed she needed a nap as bad as he did. Ancient motor inns with clacking air conditioners weren't very conducive to a good night's sleep. Not that he could blame his wakefulness on a cantankerous window unit. Even after a shower with motel soap that smelled like disinfectant, Silk had filled the room with her honeysuckle scent.

Suddenly, the object of his thoughts slid sideways and snuggled into his shoulder as if it was a long-lost feather pillow. Okay, so a decent man would have woken her and given her a lecture on the necessity of wearing a seat belt.

He hadn't felt very decent since the first night he'd met Silk.

Risking a flat tire as the car pulled sideways to brush the edge of the highway, Davis leaned over. Her hair was so unusual—soft, yet heavy against his cheek. She could make twice the amount he'd found in her closet making shampoo commercials. Then again, he didn't think any Breck Girl in history would deck the camera man for using a bad angle.

Jeez, this was bad. He was driving to see another crazy person in another backwoods burg. He had a trunk full of cash that may or may not get him killed and he was enjoying it.

He may as well admit it. He didn't know how the case would unfold and he was so far from following procedure he may as well be labeled a rogue, but it was so much better than pencil pushing and cataloging tons of junk evidence that would never see the light of day.

Piper Jo's crayon scratchings for instance, who would ever see them? He knew his report on them was stacked in some numbered box in some numbered warehouse, forgotten.

William Kale read over the sheet in front of him with interest. In fact, he gave the red crayon missive as much attention as he would have given a letter gilded in solid gold.

He prided himself on his versatility. His ability to handle any situation.

Take this turn of events with Davis Rule and “Silk Jones”. Who would have thought that a man like Rule would get sidetracked by a pretty face? Kale knew a by-the-book agent when he saw one. It was precisely why Davis had been handpicked by him to head up a mission Davis himself thought was a joke. Oh, he knew Rule *thought* he was being punished. And of course, there was that matter of the suspicious glint in Rule’s eyes every time the fellow was in the same room with him. But, in truth, Kale had thought he was the perfect man for a very important job. He may have miscalculated.

The paper let out a crinkled gasp as his hand tightened around it. Kale forced himself to loosen his hold.

Davis Rule *had* found Silk for him. And Rule’s inquisitive nature was busy with Silk rather than him. On those two counts, Kale had been successful. He could handle this current hiccup—this unexplainable lack of contact from Rule and the sudden movement of them, Rule and Jones, together.

He smiled humorlessly as he fed the paper into the grinding teeth of a shredder. Dear Piper Harding. So painstakingly careful about her records. Only she would have taken the time to copy out in triplicate the information she had given Silk Jones. The nutty old gal was a jewel. Was being the operative word.

William Kale walked away from his desk as strips of shredded paper fell into a waste basket, red splotches on white, floating down to be forgotten.

His men were mere steps behind Rule. With the other resources at his disposal, he wouldn’t fail.

She almost dismissed the feather-light touch of fingers on her face as a phantom of memory. It had been many, many months since the warm touch of a male hand had caressed her cheek.

The fog of sleep slid farther away from her mind and she noticed the tangy scent of pine in her nostrils. It was then that she realized the touch came from the unlikeliest source.

Rule.

Davis Rule slid the pads of his fingers across one cheek and down to her chin. Her eyelids fluttered open and sleepiness fled. Her head was propped on rough blue material—a fabric called denim—and this material was wrapped around the very firm, very warm thigh of Rule himself.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Wake her? Every nerve ending she possessed was on high alert.

"Where *are* your antennae, anyway?" He sounded only half in jest. As if he had been softly searching for some physical evidence to prove her story as she slept.

"Some say we have simian progenitors similar to those in this dimension. Some creationist theories hypothesize that we were all made by the same divine hand in His or Her image." Silk reluctantly rose and put some distance between herself and her divinely fashioned pillow. It would be easy to believe Davis Rule's thigh had been sculpted by something other than chance.

"So, there *are* no little green men?"

"There is variety, but nothing such as you see in one of your movie theatres."

Davis placed his wandering, wondering fingers back on the steering wheel.

"I guess it's safe then. You aren't going to shape shift and morph into some kind of giant insect."

Silk sighed. Davis was indulging in humor. He would never believe her. Her desire for his belief was a surprise. It would be smarter to keep him in the dark, wouldn't it?

"These *IL-Bah*, aren't they freaky enough to qualify for a Hollywood script?"

"Even your scientists are beginning to experiment with genetic manipulation. Think of the *IL-Bah* as man-made monsters, engineered for a purpose."

"And their current purpose is to kill you."

"Us, if you are by my side when they attack."

Silk looked at Davis. His eyes were fixated on the road ahead. His fingers relaxed on the wheel. She resisted the urge to trace the warm trail those digits had made on her face with her own hand. Davis didn't seem concerned with his fate and he didn't seem aware of her reaction to his touch.

"I am not prone to falsehood or exaggeration. We are in danger. I was bred to be a Justice Representative, but even I cannot go against the *IL-Bah* and expect to win."

"I was in the line of fire back at your house. I know danger. I'm just not sure you're in a state of mind right now where you would recognize a falsehood if it bit you on your ass. Your *perfect* ass."

His fingers tightened on the wheel as if he could wring a predictable, believable truth from its synthetic covering.

"The truth is out there." This time the phrase she pulled, taken from some vid she couldn't remember, caused an instant reaction.

Silk was thrown forward as Davis brought the vehicle to a skidding halt on the side of the road.

"That's it. The last straw. The icing on the cake." Davis reached for her and wrenched her toward him, her shoulders gripped in two strong hands. "You've completely lost touch with reality. This whole science fiction story you've invented is some kind of warped delusion fueled by late night TV."

His hands held her, but his eyes were the real reason for her immobility. His gaze was locked onto hers, willing her to be sane, needing her to negate everything she'd told him. For a moment, she was tempted to play along.

He had pulled her close. Too close. Only inches from his chest. She wanted to be closer.

Silk closed her eyes, willing his hands to soften. She willed him to accept reality. Normally, if she wanted something, she acted upon her desires. Many times she had climbed up on Miilos' lap and kissed him into such a state that he was able to forget work for their few precious non-duty hours.

This was different. She wanted to taste Davis. Badly. But his reluctance was palpable.

His hands, so full of power, shook slightly as if he fought to control them. His breath fanned warmly over her face as he exhaled.

Silk realized she had tilted her chin, daring him to take his loss of control to the next level, knowing he would not.

Not for the first time since they had met, Davis surprised her.

With an angry half-groan of protest, he pressed his lips to hers. That first contact was a shock, a sudden unexpected, hoped-for intimacy, but Silk was a woman of action and she wasn't going to let shock slow her down.

It was Silk who deepened the kiss. Silk who first teased her tongue into his mouth. Silk who pulled him over her. The awkward positioning caused by the tight quarters in the automobile only helped her to press him close.

Davis responded to her hunger like an addict given his chance to overdose on his favorite drug. He moaned and shifted to slip one large thigh between her legs. The heat from it radiated upward to meet the heat her body generated in hidden, neglected places. Combustion followed. Oh, she was still neglected, but there was suddenly the tantalizing promise of touch, there, right there. If only he'd slide his thigh higher. His hands moved from her shoulders up to her face where he cupped her jaw. Several long dizzying seconds found her held in place for the explorations of his mouth. She remembered other kisses, with another man strong enough to give as good as he got, but those she pushed back into the recesses of memory where they belonged. This was now, achingly present, a crystallized moment.

Davis had lips that were firm and sweet, faintly flavored by the mint paste he had used to cleanse his teeth.

So much better than ice cream.

His tongue teased, licking deep, sparring lightly.

Better than strawberries. Better than chocolate.

Silk enjoyed being held, firm and insistent. He showed his strength even as they both enjoyed his weakness, his capitulation to the desire he felt for her.

His hands left her face to move down and press her curves more fully against him. She eagerly pressed back, unable to get the position her body demanded in the confines of the vehicle's seat. She would have thought a man from this dimension would be overwhelmed by her strength, her passion. Davis met her and matched her, move for move.

Silk gasped as he pulled back only to plunge his face into the valley of her neck where he slowed to lick and nibble and taste until she thought she would drown as her body responded.

Her hands threaded through his curls and she gasped as they were finally able to maneuver their hips intimately together. She felt his arousal and responded by wrapping her legs around him to cradle his heat right where she needed it most.

Only layers of clothing prevented the mating of her body to his. And even through these layers, she could feel the evidence of his desire for their coupling.

He was hot when she pulled his mouth back to hers. His kisses slightly salty from the perspiration they were generating from their actions. In contrast, the air felt cool on her skin as Davis pulled her shirt up to gain access for his hands. He slid them up either side of her torso and once again he surprised her. Because it wasn't a hurried groping. It was a soft exploration. Soft and slow. It was a sexy appreciation. Sexy and trembling.

She followed suit, her shaking hands slipping down to his taunt stomach where a streak of springy curls disappeared. As her fingers fumbled to unfasten the barrier keeping them apart, Davis froze.

His hands left her before they could cup one aching breast. He jerked them down to stall her movements. His warm fingers curled around hers. For long moments, as their breathing slowed, neither spoke or moved.

The rejection angered her all the more because she should have expected it.

Davis shifted to reclaim his seat behind the wheel. Silk was left, disheveled and alone. She didn't move. She allowed anger to settle in her gut. Its warmth replaced the heat he had started to build. Yes, she was alone. Yes, she was attracted to Davis. Why had he stopped?

The answer was clear. He felt sorry for her. The story he had invented came between them worse than any restrictive earth clothing. He thought she was imbalanced. In denying their passions, he thought he was being noble.

Cold fury replaced the anger, replaced the more heated emotions from moments before.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have touched you. I can't...that won't happen again." The shakiness in his deep voice did nothing to calm her.

"For once, we agree."

Davis, in the process of pulling the car back onto the roadway, paused in surprise at her vehement agreement. Apparently, he thought she would beg him to take her, weep for his kisses, pray for his embrace.

Silk spoke with a steady voice. The trembling in her body subsided. "If you ever start what you do not intend to finish with me again, I will make it very difficult for you to enjoy such pleasures with anyone ever again."

Davis mashed on the gas in response, as if he needed to expel energy on something. The vehicle's controls were easier to handle than the forbidden attraction between them.

His mouth was swollen and heated from her kisses. Her wild response was still causing him to ache in places he was trying damn hard to ignore.

Davis was a considerate lover. Controlled, patient, gentle, seductive. None of that had been necessary with Silk. They had come together with an elemental force that left him feeling shaken, and not a little bit insane, for putting on the brakes.

She was a fantasy. All sweet lips and luscious curves blended with a passionate response that would overwhelm a jaded sex addict in three seconds flat.

Davis was not a sex addict. Though he was beginning to wonder if he didn't harbor some kind of dark addiction for a woman obviously teetering on the edge of insanity.

She is mad. In more ways than one.

He could feel the emotion in the stiffened form at his side. On the outside, she had smoothed her clothes and hair and appeared calm. He didn't want to know why he was so in tune with her emotions. He could feel the heat of her anger simmering beneath the cool exterior.

"We're going to follow the lead Piper Jo gave you. Only because I think you'll realize we're on a fool's errand. When you come to your senses, maybe we can figure out who's after the cash and why. These are dangerous men we're dealing with. They aren't playing games. You have something they want and they don't care if you have to die for them to get it. Until I learn more, we'll have to suffer each other's company."

Silk didn't acknowledge his words in any way. It would be foolish to point out that he'd been far from suffering moments before. Foolish to illustrate that she was with him of her own accord. He wouldn't believe her if she told him that he was the one who would need to come to his senses before it was too late.

The IL-Bah would be coming.

She had seen them hunt and kill her whole life. They wouldn't stop. They wouldn't hesitate. There was a cold savagery to their determination. They were flesh and blood machines and they'd been manufactured for one purpose.

Death.

She'd always thought of them as invulnerable. It had bothered her deep down even when she hadn't been a target. Now? It left her with a feeling of desperation no JR should ever have to experience.

She knew the days of her life were numbered. And Rule's were as well whether he believed it or not.

Chapter Seven

The next day was rainy and Davis couldn't blame it. If he'd had the ability to express himself with storm clouds, he would have. It was just that kind of day. The air turned cool as they drove to a higher elevation, but the coolness didn't bring any crispness with it. It was a soggy scene outside the car's windows. In the forest around the country lane, leaves sagged as the weight of a morning's worth of moisture weighted them down.

Damn.

She was still mad. And he didn't mean insane, although she was still that too. She hadn't woken from a night's sleep with the cobwebs of delusion dusted from her brain. What he meant was that she was still *angry*—like a hornet stirred from its nest. He'd been the stirrer. Had enjoyed the stirring more than he should have.

The taste of her lips had followed him into his dreams until he'd awoken half crazy this morning himself. So nuts that he'd been tempted to toss aside reality long enough to taste those lips again.

Thank God, the wet, cold weather and an icy shower had dispelled his momentary lunacy.

They were on their way to an address provided by Piper Jo. It was one Davis didn't recognize. And apparently, it was one that was going to be hard to find without a four-wheel drive.

The mountain road became narrower and twisting as the car climbed. Its V-6 engine began to protest the incline. Silk was quiet. Mad and quiet. The silence made him nervous. She didn't seem like the pouting type. She seemed like a kick 'em in the ass and see if they holler type. Neither was pleasant. He supposed he deserved her wrath. He never should have touched her. Never should have kissed her. Still, he hated the wait. He knew she was going to explode. He just hated wondering *when*.

"There it is," she said, her voice deceptively calm.

A mailbox leaned sideways by an overgrown drive. The number on its side matched the one in red crayon on the paper Silk held in her hand.

"The car won't make it," Davis noted as he pulled the sedan to the side of the road.

There was just enough gravel to make a crunch, but not enough to make the driveway anything other than a mud-soup mess. He and Silk would have to hoof it if they were going to find the person that Piper Jo had sent them to find. Problem was it didn't look like the guy wanted to be found.

"We will walk," Silk said with resignation in her voice.

"Or swim," Davis replied as the rain seemed to get heavier with her words.

They didn't have umbrellas or raincoats, but Silk didn't seem to care. She climbed from the car and he followed. He noticed puddles around his ankles. He noticed rivulets of rain coming from the sodden mass of curls on his forehead. He tried *not* to notice the way the rain caused Silk's shirt to conform to her chest.

"We have people like this on my world. People who want to live in the wilderness. They come to Earth or other places like it."

That helped. No way was he going to enjoy the way she looked in a wet T-shirt while she was lost in Wonderland. He wasn't a jerk. Not a *total* jerk anyway.

Silk's long legs were strong as well. Even in the slippery mud, she made short work of the hike. He struggled to keep up. He was in reasonably good shape, but Silk weighed less than he did. She didn't sink deep into the muck with every step. In fact, she made walking in sloppy mud seem almost graceful. He tried very hard not to appreciate the sway of her hips as she slipped and slid. He was grateful she slipped and slid less than he did.

By the time they came to the crest of a small rise, he was almost winded and glad to see a tiny shack in a clearing down below. It looked like a scene that time had forgotten. As if telephones, microwaves and cell phones had never happened. As if a pioneer could step out the door at any second. It was weird to look back in time with a woman who claimed to be from another more-advanced world by his side. Even weirder to breathe deeply of the wood smoke that teased his nose and hope they would find some warmth and shelter here, even if they found little else.

"There's a fire!" Silk exclaimed. Before he could stop her, she ran toward the little house and wrenched open the door. He followed in a slipping rush, unsure of what he would see.

"I apologize. I did not recall that wood was burned for heat in your world."

Silk was wrapped in a blanket beside a blazing fire that was kept contained in a small square hole in the wall. Davis was just pulling off his muddy shoes and wet socks.

"No need to be sorry, babe. That was wild. I never saw a Playboy Bunny covered in mud and playing fireman. You'll forgive me if I remember it often."

Silk did not understand his words, but the man who had greeted her entrance with laughter instead of surprise seemed very kind and helpful. He had helped her take off her shoes and he had frowned at Davis. Two things she found endearing at the moment.

Davis had frowned right back. In truth, he was still frowning, especially when the man mentioned bunnies and thoughts of her at night.

"So, old Pipe sent ya'. Hell, I'm glad she shared. I moved up here several years ago after some campers saw a UFO. Haven't had any luck myself. Was just about ready to move on. Then I got her call."

Davis Rule rolled his eyes. Silk saw him. He didn't even try to hide his opinions of her or their host. He thought they were both crazy. That made her feel even warmer toward the gray-headed man looking at her as if she had single-handedly placed the stars in the sky.

"She thought you might be able to help me?" Silk said, pushing damp hair back from her face. She enjoyed the pleasant heat from the fire as it warmed her cheeks.

"Only if he has a degree in psychology," Davis muttered.

This time, Solstice Meadows was the one who rolled his eyes.

"Man, you put off a seriously bad vibe. You should be thankful you were chosen for this experience."

"He wasn't really chosen, Solstice. It doesn't work that way. We aren't higher beings in the sense that we know the secrets of the universe," she said it gently, hoping not to disillusion the man who seemed so kind.

He did look disappointed, but not for long.

"Answers? Hell, I gave up on answers a long time ago. I'm just looking to meet and greet. I want to be the welcoming committee, ya' know?"

"Some, you would not want to welcome."

She hated to spoil this carefree man's existence. But he was playing with fire and not only to heat his home. With his long hair bound in a tail and his loose, brightly checked shirt, he was no match for the *IL-Bah*. Even the universal symbol for peace he wore around his neck on a chain would not save him should the *IL-Bah* come to this place.

"Don't worry about me. I wasn't always a hippy." Solstice walked across the room and pulled open a narrow door. From inside the small storage space, he pulled a long, wicked looking projectile weapon. Even by Earth standards, it seemed dated. "I figure if I could survive 'Nam, I ain't gonna be afraid of no little green men."

"You can put that back now. Nice and slow."

Both of them turned to Davis in surprise. His feet were bare. His legs spread. *His gun drawn*. He looked like a different man from the one who'd been removing his muddy shoes moments before. He looked serious and deadly.

"Hey, dude. No problem. If you're with her, that's good enough for me."

Solstice slowly placed his gun back where he stored it. He carefully closed and bolted the door.

"Want some Darjeeling? Great brew. The best. Warm ya' right up." The older man grinned at the muscular young agent facing him down as if he was not staring at the firing end of a loaded weapon.

Davis was magnificent. He could have been in a sport arena preparing to do battle with a mechanized gladiator. His shirt was still damp from the rain. It hugged over his chest like a second skin. Silk swallowed. The curls on his head glistened with moisture in the firelight. She wished they were alone in this place. She wished he would accept her for who she really was.

Davis slipped his gun back in the holster hidden beneath his shirt and nodded curtly to Solstice's offer. He did not look at her. She forced her thoughts and her gaze away from Davis. Though he had overreacted, Silk was glad to see his quick reflexes in action.

We might have a chance.

That optimistic thought sent shivers of fear down her spine.

Surely it was lunacy to believe it.

The floral arrangement sat in the corner of his office near a window both large and small enough to denote his position. Medium. Medium importance. It was a level he had chosen with care. He wielded enough power to accomplish what he needed to accomplish, yet not so much that he would arouse suspicion with unusual behavior. At least, not in anyone he'd have a problem dealing with. Davis Rule's watchful eyes had been easy enough to direct elsewhere.

He walked over to the exotic bouquet and softly trailed the pads of his fingers along the creamy fuchsia-tipped blossoms. Their scent, slightly sultry, slightly sweet, came to him in a pleasant waft. His groin tightened in response and he relished the not-unpleasant ache. He allowed himself a moment to remember. Even a strong man could be nostalgic.

It was her scent. She'd had the injection several years ago and the quick cosmetic procedure subtly caused her skin to emit this fragrance. It was the only vanity he'd ever known her to adopt. She would need another injection in a month or so, but by that time she wouldn't need anything except the grave she slept in.

He grasped a petal between his thumb and forefinger and slowly slid those digits in a crushing slide, smearing the silky fluids of the ruined flower on his fingers. He regretted the necessity of her death even as he anticipated the execution of it. He was restless. The need for action was a part of him. It would always be there, coursing through his veins just as the flowers had their scent. Silk's scent.

She had to die.

He brought his hand to his face and breathed deeply. Remembering. The door opened behind him.

"Mr. Kale. They've been spotted."

The name still felt odd to his ears and he didn't turn to acknowledge the man who had interrupted his thoughts. That didn't stop the FBI agent from stepping through the door he had opened without a knock.

"The information we retrieved from Harding was accurate. They drove into the West Virginia hills." Larkin paused as if he waited for a response.

Instead of responding, he reached to pluck the ruined bloom from the bouquet. He looked at the destroyed beauty of it as it rested on the palm of his hand for a long moment before he closed his fist around it.

"I never saw flowers like those before. You got connections in the rainforest?"

"I have connections," he replied. He wondered what Larkin would think if he knew the flowers came from another world.

Finally, he turned. The tall, thin agent who called him William Kale stood just inside the threshold.

"Go."

Larkin jumped as if his boss had shouted. Perhaps his expression had lent more force to the softly spoken command. He was still getting used to this new face.

"Bring her to me."

"And Rule?"

He put the pulp of the crushed flower in his pocket and carefully composed the surgically crafted features of his new face into a smile.

"That depends on how badly he gets in the way."

Larkin smiled in return, and with a quick nod that was just short of a bow, he left to do as he had been told.

The man who posed as William Kale sat down at his borrowed desk and picked up the phone. He didn't press a button. He didn't have to.

"We'll have her soon."

A bittersweet ache squeezed his heart as he spoke the words. It didn't sway his resolve. He simply couldn't wait to see her again. Besides, he knew Siilc. He knew she would die well.

They'd received an address in Pennsylvania from Solstice Meadows. This one they had to memorize because the man who described himself as a *hip-ee* didn't believe in writing implements. He wrote nothing and burned the letters he received from Piper Jo. Silk let him burn the tiny note that had led them to him. They all watched as Piper's red crayon scratches bled and melted and burned into nothingness.

"You can never be too careful, ya' know? Never."

Privately, Davis agreed. Not that there was anything to hide in the dusty little shack. They had learned nothing from Meadows. Aside from how to brew a great cup of tea.

He sipped his and watched as Silk laughed easily with their host. If he didn't know better, he'd think she was a flower child herself. Her bare toes peaked out from under her rump where she'd tucked her legs beneath her. She had a ratty old quilt draped around her shoulders like a shawl and her hair had dried in a frizzy mass of waves kissed by firelight.

He didn't blame Meadows for fawning. He watched the older man taking every opportunity to touch Silk on the cheek, the shoulder, the top of her white-blonde head. At least he knew he wasn't alone in the compulsion to touch her. He was just alone in resisting it.

“We should go,” he said, not hating the need to break up their love-fest, but hating his pleasure in doing so. Jealousy in this situation was ridiculous. The man was old enough to be Silk’s father. He didn’t understand the need he felt to get Silk away from Meadows and back into his sedan, alone.

“He is correct. It would be wrong for us to linger. We could bring danger to you.”

“I’ve had a lot of danger in my life. I haven’t had a lot of what you’ve brought into it, Silk. Wonder, joy, excitement—you’re a dream come true. I guess I always hoped there was more to life than what I’ve seen,” Meadows cleared his throat and reluctantly stood to see them out.

Davis felt like he’d conjured up a few of those storm clouds he’d thought of earlier in the day. They were currently raining all over Solstice Meadows’ parade. He didn’t know how he knew it, but he knew Meadows had not had the easiest life. It went beyond the man’s mention of Vietnam. You could see it in his eyes. He had come to these woods looking for something. He seemed to have found a mini-salvation in Silk’s visitation.

“Maybe we could stay a while longer,” Davis suggested. He doubted that they would be followed this soon.

“No. We must go,” Silk insisted.

Meadows hugged her then. A bone-crushing, full-body hug that lasted long enough to make Davis itch to break it up. Silk touched the man on one fuzzy cheek.

“I am grateful to you.”

“Likewise,” Meadows replied.

As Davis prepared to follow Silk out the door, a surprisingly strong hand grasped him by the arm.

“She’s tough, but she can’t do this alone.” The words were spoken in an urgent whisper.

Davis didn’t have the heart to throw the man’s sincerity back in his face.

“I’ll take care of her,” he promised, meaning something entirely different than what Meadows intended. The best way he could care for Silk would be to help her get psychiatric attention...as soon as he knew it wouldn’t endanger her life.

The trip down the drive took more time than the trip up. It was awkward, filled with missteps and sliding feet. They made it to the main road before dark. Dusk. That was the name for this shifting of day to night. Silk couldn’t see into the woods more than a few inches because of the ever-increasing darkness, but she could see the car. Rule had taped up the busted side window with something he called *cardboard*. The patch was a lopsided reminder that time was on Ronin’s side. Each day she wasted on the hunt meant another day his hunters could stalk her.

Silk stopped. She stood several paces in front of Davis Rule and swiveled in a circle.

“Something is wrong,” she said as Rule moved to her side. He attempted to keep walking, but she reached and grabbed his hand. The woods were silent. The road was silent. It was not a noise that made the hair on the back of her neck rising to attention. It was not a noise that made her nose burn.

Her fingers were small and cold against the warmth of Rule’s palm. He wrapped his hand around hers and squeezed. She ignored the silly gesture, but she was too busy looking into the trees to pull away.

“I smell fresh gasoline fumes.”

“It’s a public road, Silk. You might have caught a whiff from a passing car,” Davis reassured her, though he didn’t smell anything but wet leaves himself.

“No, it is a quiet road and the smell does not come from there.” Suddenly, from the dark trees to the left a motor roared into life. It was the spitting, jack-hammering roar of a small motor—high-pitched and revved hard.

“Dirt bikes,” Rule shouted over the din, but he did not seem concerned.

Silk didn’t think. She reacted. With a move that would have made an Enforcer proud, she shouldered her two hundred pound companion the last few feet to the car.

In the meantime, several other motors screamed from points all around. Hidden in the forest, the roar sounded like a pack of wild creatures converging for the hunt.

Silk caught a glimpse of more bikes erupting from shadows, spewing ripped-up foliage in their wake. At that point, she didn’t have to shove Davis into the car. He dove for cover and she followed. She ended up behind the wheel of a vehicle she had never driven. Fortunately, it was not a complicated machine.

The motor of the sedan sounded like a whisper compared to the angry dirt bike howl, but Silk didn’t mind. She knew she could drive right over the small vehicles once she had the car on the road, *if* she got the car on the road. Her foot pressed the pad meant to cause forward motion, but the engine only revved louder. She stomped and received nothing but angry noise in return.

Davis reached across her lap and tugged a handle.

“Emergency brake,” he explained as the car popped forward. Great sprays of churned earth flew out beneath their wheels. A thunderous screech of rubber on metal assailed her eardrums. One biker had driven on top of the car. The car’s roof caved from the weight.

“Go, go, go,” Davis shouted.

They were already on the main road. She did not have time to point this out before she heard the biker from the roof yell as he and his bike were tossed off onto the pavement. She didn’t pause to wonder how a bike sliding on asphalt could sound like a snake’s scream. She knew it was an *IL-Bah* death cry.

There were three other dirt bikes, but their drivers thought twice about what she might do to them. The heavy sedan was deadly. When their comrade fell from the top of Rule’s car onto the road, he was a graphic illustration. The angry sound of their motors faded as she put distance between them.

"If they were after the cash, they could have taken it," Davis almost shouted. Adrenaline rush made his words louder than necessary. "I can't believe we left it in the trunk."

"They do not want the cash. The cash is nothing. They want me—dead. That is what Ronin desires." Silk's voice was quiet in comparison to Rule's shout. Almost a whisper. The close call had left her more shaken than she would care to admit. She was far from home, far from the usual resources she had always depended upon. And she had come close to death too many times.

"It's probably gone. They probably jimmied the trunk and took it."

Silk tried not to be annoyed. For Davis, the money was evidence. He would be upset with himself for not protecting it. She glanced at his face as she maneuvered the car down the twisty mountain road. In the light from the instrument panel, he looked stunned. He was shaken as well. Not by the attack, but by what he perceived as his failure to perform his duty.

"The money is there, Rule. The *IL-Bah* are not thieves."

"We need to check."

"I will stop the vehicle at the nearest town. Not before." She did not glance his way. She knew the correct course of action and would not be swayed.

"We left them behind," Davis argued gently. He tapped on the deserted road reflected in the rear view mirror.

"Only if we keep moving." Silk insisted.

"This is turning into a road trip—I'm not sure how much longer I can allow—"

"Perhaps you should try withdrawing your permission." Silk interrupted. "I do not think the result would please you."

"Is that a threat?" Davis Rule turned toward her. Night was upon them now and his face was a blur of mysterious shadows.

A delicious thrill followed Rule's deep-voiced, deadly soft query into her ear and down her spine. Her blood flowed quickly beneath her skin. Running with Rule by her side no longer felt cowardly. It felt—good. The close call they had just survived blended well with the tone of his voice. She was on alert and it felt right. It was exciting to escape the *IL-Bah* yet still have the challenge of Rule nearby.

"A warning," Silk admitted. "Or simple, friendly advice."

"We aren't friends, Silk." His voice had gone flat, emotionless.

"No?"

"No."

"Then we are enemies," Silk concluded.

"At this point, I would say our relationship defies definition." Davis sat back with a sigh.

"On that, we can agree."

She drove on and Davis didn't try to stop her. She was almost disappointed. Almost. She could not afford to let recreational sparring distract her. She was on the right track.

Solstice Meadows had given her an important lead. Nothing, not *IL-Bah* or Davis Rule, would stand in her way.

Solstice Meadows' whole body was shivering. Didn't matter that the fire was blazin'. He recognized it for what it was. Adrenaline. It had been a long time since the heady stuff had pumped through his veins.

A very long time.

The cool wash of electricity beneath his skin was a wake-up call.

Solstice didn't reach to wipe the tears off his cheeks. He figured they needed to fall, cleansing, releasing, emptying him out for all that was to come. And plenty was coming. The hair on the back of his neck was stickin' straight up. It had been a long time since he'd needed his survival instincts, but apparently he hadn't left them in the jungle.

He stood, propelled by those instincts, and walked across the room to retrieve the rifle that had gotten Davis Rule's attention so quickly. He didn't like the way it fit to his hands like it had been made for them, but as always, he could use the weapon without being in love with it.

And Silk was reason enough to use it.

He readied it gracefully as if it hadn't been many years since he'd cleaned it and put it away. Gleaming and deadly in his hands, the damn thing looked like it had just been waiting for this moment to come while he'd been...well...practically sleep walking.

Solstice could admit it now. He hadn't expected to find anything in these hills. He'd needed a fantasy to believe in because reality had let him down one too many times. He'd been in kind of a daze, going through the motions of being an eccentric believer in everything from aliens to Bigfoot, but not really feeling or believing in much of anything at all.

In only a few hours, hell, in only a few minutes, Silk had changed all of that.

He headed to the windows at the front of his cabin with purpose in his steps.

He'd dropped off the grid. He'd chosen la la land over real people and real things in order to find a safe place to hide. Funny thing that. La la land had proven to be populated after all. Folks like Piper lived here. Folks like Davis and Silk too. Belief had found him once more, hard and fast.

And just like that he was awake again.

Afraid? Damn straight. You couldn't sit alone with nothing but tea and star gazing for years without being afraid when life came knocking, asking for you to do a little bit more. But the fear didn't stop him from opening up the front door and heading out into the damp, dreary day.

Because somehow, he was more excited than fearful.

He hadn't really expected to find hope in these hills and maybe he hadn't.
Hope had found him.

Chapter Eight

While Davis spent the day on the meaningless task of placing large sums of cash into what he called *safety deposit boxes* throughout the town of Beckley, West Virginia, Silk paced the cramped confines of a hotel room.

She stepped off twelve paces to the closet without doors. Then two more steps to the bathing room with the pink and blue tiles. From there, there were four steps from the television bolted to the wall to the foot of the bed.

She knew she could leave if she wanted to. However, her conscience would not allow her to leave without Davis. She had brought danger into his life. She could not leave him to face it alone.

Already, she worried for Solstice Meadows as she paced. If the *IL-Bah* had decided to interrogate him for information, he would be dead. *Dead because of me.*

And what of Piper Jo Harding? The *IL-Bah* had found them on the mountain. Only Piper had known where they were going. Separated from the technology of home just as she was, the *IL-Bah* would have to hunt as these human's hunted. By following a trail on foot. And their trail had started at Piper Jo's.

By the time Davis came back to the hotel with his arms full of white bags, she was more angry than hungry. The contents of the bags emitted an odor that stung her nose.

"Do they have Chinese take-out on Mars? I thought you might like some Szechwan." The big man grinned and began to pull little white boxes with metal handles from the bags he held.

"I like chocolate," Silk reminded him with her gaze on the stinky boxes and a fearful feeling growing in her stomach.

"Right, that's been established. But a girl can't live on junk food alone. Besides, every culture in the world loves rice. Let's eat."

"It does not smell—*palatable*," Silk said, hesitantly coming to his side.

She watched in consternation as Davis placed paper plates on the tiny table in the corner. Her concern turned to horror when he piled a large mound of what looked like *chala-bugs* on each trencher. White and fat, they clung together in a cooked mass. She did not risk prodding them with one of the wooden sticks Davis handed her. She was afraid they would move in response.

"It's rice, Silk. Plain white rice. The most harmless, innocuous food on the planet. Surely, Ole Buzz boiled a few pots of it in his time."

"How is it killed?" Silk asked, for the perfect little pale creatures did not look damaged in any way.

“Killed? Rice is a grain. It’s *harvested*.”

Silk was only slightly relieved. She didn’t think she could stomach the small white *grains* even if they didn’t wiggle in her mouth. On her world, chala-bugs were only found on or near decaying meat. Buzz had not cooked *rice*. Not during the breakfast shift when she was at the restaurant.

“Okay, no rice. How about some noodles?”

Davis tipped a container above her plate and several fistfuls of slippery worms landed wetly beside the rice. Silk watched in horror as they settled in a mess of coils. Her stomach refused to settle.

She ran for the bathing room just as Davis asked her if she wanted some sauce.

When Silk had washed her face and her stomach had ceased to roll, she cautiously came back into the main room. The strong scent of the Chinese food lingered, but thankfully the worms and the *rice* were gone.

She had showered and now stretched out on the bed. Davis was gone as well. No doubt she had spoiled his meal with her repugnant reaction. He would slurp his worms elsewhere while she starved all alone.

She had known it would be a difficult transition. She had been in a fog caused by grief and loss during the preparatory phase of relocation. No amount of training could have prepared her for the strangeness of it all. Preparing for life on Earth had been surreal, especially when she had still been numb following Miilos’ death.

Davis could not understand when he did not even believe her. She allowed herself a few moments of lowness while she contemplated what it was like to feel marooned on a foreign world with no one by her side. She fisted her hands in the cool white sheets. This weakness was unacceptable. She was strong and well-trained. She could do this alone.

The door started to open. Silk jumped up, poised to retreat back into the bathing room. She would not suffer through the presentation of any more Earth delicacies tonight.

Davis walked into the room with his hands outstretched. In one hand, he held a frosty container of Glacier Mint Ice Cream. In the other, a white, plastic spoon.

“Oh,” Silk exclaimed and sat back on the bed in surprise.

He brought the ice cream over and sat beside her on the bed.

“Noodles are made from grain too, Silk.” He spoke calmly as if he was soothing a simpleton. It would have been infuriating if it was not for the delicious offering in his hands.

Silk grimaced. She had not learned enough about Earth food in her training. It had been rushed. And perhaps they had not wanted to sicken her needlessly before her placement.

“This is better than rice or *noodles*, Davis. Much better. Thank you.”

She took the icy cool container from him and the white plastic spoon. She pried off the lid and almost swooned as the scent of minty chocolate cleansed the other less-pleasant smell from her nose. When the soothing first bite hit her queasy stomach, she felt light headed with gratitude.

"I don't think you survived to the ripe old age of—twenty-five?—without eating rice or noodles. What gives, Silk, are you really this troubled or is it an act?"

"Our food is very different. Sweet and delicate. And none of it resembles parasitic organisms."

"I don't think I'd like it if I couldn't have a juicy steak every now and then."

He seemed to regret his observation when she closed her eyes against the remembered smells of Buzz's Diner.

"You would *never* want another steak if you could sample a trencher of Lipitian stew."

Suddenly, Silk realized they were not only talking about food. Davis was close beside her and his large frame was indenting the mattress just enough to bring her left hip against his side.

"Never is a long time. Do you think a *taste* from your world would affect me so strongly?"

"Yes, Davis. It would. If you had a taste from my world, you would never hunger for another."

His eyes looked troubled, as if he already knew what she said was true. She knew the double meaning behind the words was arrogant. He had kissed her once and did not seem inclined to take another taste. Still, she had her pride. She was almost a year out of practice, but she had her pride. And with her stomach full of Glacier Mint, she also had her strength.

For a tempting moment, she thought about throwing pride aside to show him what he was missing. All of what he was missing. Would he reject her again or would he be seduced? Her thoughts must have shown in her eyes because his widened slightly and his chest rose as if he'd caught his breath.

Slowly, Davis reached up to her face. With a move so light and soft she barely felt the brush of his finger; he tipped his thumb along the edge of her mouth as he sighed to catch a stray drop of ice cream. Then, as she watched mesmerized, he brought the thumb back to his lips.

"I have a large appetite, Silk. Be careful you don't tempt me with sweets I shouldn't sample."

He smiled. And it wasn't an expression of humor. It was a bittersweet confession. He wanted to taste her, but he wouldn't. His control was admirable, but frustrating. Especially when it illustrated his mistaken assumption about her mental instability.

"I offer no sample," Silk warned.

"No, you wouldn't. With you it would be all or nothing. Me-lows is a lucky man. If he's real."

Silk's mouth went dry despite the ice cream she had just swallowed. He threw about the facts of her life as if they were a fairytale she had created. Her past was no illusion. The pain of it was still heavy in her chest more often than not.

"*Was* real. Miilos *was* very real. As I told you, he is dead. Please do not speak of him as if he was a character from one of your cartoons."

She stood and left the room before she could negate the generosity of the ice cream with an angry fist.

Chapter Nine

You're a grandmother for heaven's sake.

Piper Jo Harding sat in the basement of a split-level in Charlottesville, Virginia, surrounded by the graphic art of thousands of superheroes. They covered the walls—pages and pages of them—like a wild, colorful collage of bulging biceps, bared teeth and miniscule bikinis.

The pimply faced king of her refuge was addicted to comic books. How that tied in with running some sort of anti-establishment, underground railroad she couldn't say. She also couldn't say how her grandson had known about this place.

Her heart still pounded. Her breath still came quicker than it should.

She had seen the black sedan pull into her driveway. Had thought it was Silk and Davis until two strange men had climbed out. Piper had known the men weren't hawking bibles door to door before they even knocked.

It hadn't been easy to cooperate, to hand over her special papers. The tears that flowed as they tied her to a kitchen chair had been real. She knew she wasn't alone. She knew her grandson might try to help her and she didn't want him to die too.

They had torched her house, burned it to the ground, with all the emotion of robots. Then they had driven away without a backward glance. She had seen them drive away. If they had looked back, they would have seen a scared, old granny riding on the back of a four wheeler. Her grandson, her hero, had driven them deep into the woods.

Piper smoothed the skirt of her charred housedress for the hundredth time. Her hands trembled. Those men had been FBI. They had the car, the suits, the badges.

Her little hobby had gained her a lot of attention, some good, some bad. She had met some serious nuts and some, like Solstice Meadows, who just wanted to reach out to something bigger than themselves and the life they had known.

She'd never held much respect for people who let their imagination run away with them. Conspiracy theories weren't for her. Now she wasn't so sure if she hadn't been the nut all along. She'd been crazy to think she was safe in her little trailer by the woods when she was dabbling in secrets that didn't belong to her.

"Piper?"

A familiar voice startled her.

Solstice Meadows came down the creaky stairs and crossed the room to her side. Concern warred with anger on his grizzled face when he came closer. She was probably a sight.

He reached to touch her cheek and his fingers came away smeared with soot. He didn't look much better than she did. His customary fatigues were torn and the dark splotches down one side of his pants looked suspiciously like blood.

"Those alien assassins are flat out bastards," he grunted through clenched teeth. Piper frowned, confused by his words.

"They weren't aliens, Sol. They were FBI."

The backpack bothered Rule.

Silk changed her clothes in the small motel bathroom, leaving the 9mm nestled in the bag surrounded by her silky undergarments. She saw no point in antagonizing Rule by placing it anywhere visible. Still, he had eyed the bag. Repeatedly. If she had to, she would defend her possession of the weapon. The man she traveled with had not commented on her smooth, healed arms.

Silk took a moment to inspect her former injuries. Tiny white lines were the only evidence that she had been wounded.

Rule walked a fine line. Eventually, it would have to be crossed. Eventually, he would have to acknowledge that he was not in charge. She wondered if he was beginning to believe. If he was, he didn't show it.

Silk slicked some hotel lotion over her arms. The scent was more medicinal than pleasant, but it would diminish the itchiness of her freshly healed skin.

She knew she lingered. She avoided going back into the outer room because she wanted to so badly. Rule's patience had run out. She knew he was ready to act.

She should hate the thought of a fight with him when she needed to focus her energy elsewhere. Should, but didn't.

Today, she hoped to gain vital information about Ronin. If her suspicions proved correct and he was on Earth, she would find him. If he was elsewhere, she would find a way.

And, Silk thought with relish, she would deal with Davis Rule if he got in her way.

Solstice Meadows looked almost as comfortable in faded jeans and a worn Creed T-shirt as he did in fatigues.

His hair was washed and pulled back in its regular tail. Damp tendrils made the shoulders of his borrowed shirt gleam with dark, black patches.

Above one bushy eyebrow, he sported a gauze pad and from elbow to wrist of one arm, a nasty scratch stood out even brighter now that she had painted it with mercurochrome.

“Lousy sons-of-bitches would have had me good if I hadn’t gone commando on ’em. I slept in leaves during the day and spent the night hitchin’ and hoofin’ it to your place.”

“Which you found still smoking.”

“Almost lost it. I knew you were toast.”

“I would have been if it hadn’t been for my Jaime. He visits most Saturdays. Rides an old four wheeler all over that mountain behind my house.”

“So why would the FBI wanna torch an old lady?”

Piper Jo glared at Meadows. Typical man. He thought he was still a teenager.

“You aren’t that much younger than me, Graybeard.”

He grinned and gave a sheepish shrug.

“Sorry.”

Piper Jo waved his apology aside.

“It has to be Silk. I’ve never been bothered by the government before, unless you count Davis and he’s no bother.” Piper arched one eyebrow when she referred to the muscle-bound agent.

Solstice rolled his eyes when she attempted a lascivious grin.

“His buddies burnt your home to the ground,” he reminded her.

“Davis didn’t know they were going to do it. He wouldn’t have stood for that. He would have warned me or stopped them. I think he’s out of the loop.”

“So, someone else at the FBI is after Silk and Davis has her.”

“Well, she’s with him. He doesn’t have much say in it.” Piper chuckled, remembering how nice it was to see the steady and stoic Rule up against someone capable of giving him hell.

“At least she’s not alone. These guys are playing dirty.” Solstice looked darkly at the scratch on his arm.

“I’d say she’s about as alone as a body can get. Partner murdered and so far from home. But she’s tough. She’ll handle ’em all.”

Meadows walked over to the wall and squinted at the many images vying for attention. He probably needed glasses, but didn’t want to admit it.

“Hell, even Batman had Robin,” he said, nodding to a particularly graphic drawing of the Caped Crusader.

“Wonder Woman didn’t need anybody,” Piper joked. She didn’t like the look Sol had in his eyes.

“What about the Super Friends?” Now he was flat out scaring her. He had an expression on his face not unlike the ones worn by the wall full of heroes at his side.

“We aren’t super, Solstice. You can’t even talk to whales.” Piper tried. She really did, but even humor didn’t dull Sol’s enthusiasm.

“I don’t think she needs super. I think she needs friends,” he insisted with a stubborn tilt to his chin.

“What do you propose we do? How can two senior citizens take on the FBI *and* alien assassins?” Piper felt the panic of yesterday return full force. Her friend was going to get them killed. She was a grandmother for heaven’s sake.

“We go commando. That’s how.” Sol’s grin did nothing to ease Piper’s fear.

Silk stepped from the bathroom to find Rule calmly waiting on the edge of the bed nearest the bathroom door. The look on his face was cold and harsh. He wasn’t waiting for his turn.

“Hand over the gun, Silk.” His tone dared her to refuse.

So of course, she did.

Chapter Ten

Davis expected Silk to deny that she had a gun in the little backpack she'd had since the night she'd clonked him on the head. He didn't expect her to slowly put her arms through the straps and hoist the pack onto her back.

"I don't want this to get ugly," he warned. He maintained his position on the bed...for now.

"It will," Silk replied. She stood in another soft fuzzy sweater and hip-hugging jeans. She looked more like a teenager than a threat with her damp hair and fresh-scrubbed face. He knew better.

"I don't want to hurt you." Davis rose and took a step in her direction.

"You will not." He didn't like the confidence in her voice. She wasn't afraid.

"Are you going to give me the gun?"

She answered that with a no in the form of a kick—a Ked-flavored kiss against the side of his face.

Davis rolled with it, down to the floor and then up again so that the blow didn't pack as much wallop as it would have if he had held firm.

He rose quickly and tackled low, bringing Silk down beneath him on the puke-green carpet that smelled oddly worse than it looked.

"I'm bigger than you," he said, wondering why he had to say it when his body was mashing hers flat.

"Size doesn't matter," Silk grunted and proved what she meant by wrapping both legs around his middle and executing a roll that brought her on top.

"It doesn't have to be like this." Davis looked up at her. His brain knew they were fighting. His body was reacting as if it knew something his brain didn't. She was serious. She was deadly. She was also sexy as hell straddling his thighs.

"Yes, it does. It does have to be like this," Silk insisted. "I am not your prisoner. I have never been your prisoner. You are not my partner. You could *never* be my partner."

Something in him resented the implication that the glorious Me-lows had shoes too big for him to fill. He might be humoring her more than he should, but he was a damn fine investigator, and he could certainly handle this woman—whether she was on top or not.

"You don't want me to be your partner." He sensed something in her. Warmth spread from her body to his as she reacted to the hardening she must feel between her thighs. He saw something in her eyes—a heat, a hunger—that made him continue. "You just want me, period."

Silk's hands were on his shoulders, his hands reached to grip her bottom and pull her even closer than she was. Her eyes widened and he held his breath. She would either deck him or kiss him. He prepared for either, for both.

"We have no time for this, Rule."

He didn't know if she meant fighting or fornication, but he knew he would explode without one or the other. The energy between them needed an outlet. Suddenly, despite his reservations about her past, his vote was on the later.

"Make time, Jones."

Her eyes went all liquid fire when he voiced the request in a hoarse, needy whisper. Finally, after one long aching moment of suspense, she obliged.

Rule was big and warm beneath her, and Silk brought her mouth down to his as if she could soak up some of that warmth. Parts of her were on fire, parts of her—the inner most depths of her soul—felt like they had not experienced a thaw in an age.

His lips were full and hot and sweet. His hands moved from her bottom up to the back of her head. She enjoyed the large, warm palms and the spread of his fingers through her hair. She enjoyed the trembling she felt in his thumbs as he slid them forward to caress her cheeks. His tongue met hers and followed it, questing into her mouth to dip and whirl and tease.

He was hard for her. She could feel—had felt as soon as he had pressed her to the floor.

"*Make time.*" He had said, asking her for this mating between them.

Silk felt the time he had asked for stand still as they kissed. Nothing else mattered as their hips moved together.

Davis had shaved before her turn in the bathroom. The skin of his face was smooth, and the scent of spice filled her nose. He gasped when she broke away from his lips to nudge her nose along his cheek and down to his neck, breathing in his scent and using the tip of her tongue to taste the hollow at the base of his throat.

"We can do better than this," Davis said gruffly as he sat up. He lifted her with him, "Come on." He stood and paused for a long moment as she wrapped her legs around his waist and dove her mouth down for another taste of his. This time he was a little salty as the heat between them generated perspiration above his lip. She took his lip between hers and sucked.

His groan vibrated against her chest as he fell back onto the bed. She took advantage of the pause to pull her sweater up and over her head. The backpack went with it and fell in a heap, forgotten, on the floor.

Davis groaned again and lifted his hands up to undo the bra that cupped her breasts. She sat up, allowing him to look his fill as they were freed. Her nipples were already taunt and achy.

"This can't be slow, Silk. Not this time."

His hands replaced the satin bra. Warm, calloused palms felt much better than cloth.

“I do not need slow, Davis. I do not want slow.”

She helped him pull off his shirt. He assured her that buttons were replaceable. She slid his pants down muscled thighs. He insisted that halfway was good enough.

She stood to pull off her own pants while Davis slid free of the last white barrier between them. He looked almost bound by the garments twisted at his knees, just waiting for her to take him. He was made well. His hard member jutted up to his stomach. She felt her body’s wet response as it anticipated the feel of him inside of her.

Then anticipation was over. She caressed her palms through the light sprinkling of dark hair on his chest as she straddled him. Davis reached for her, guided her down, held her bottom as she took him in.

He was long and hot and filled her so well that she gasped from the sensation of heated, hard flesh sliding into her. And he did slide, easily. She was slick, ready. When he lifted his hips, her gasp was not a protest. She met him with a counter move, a downward thrust meant to meld them together. It did. The entire length of him was wrapped by her.

Silk licked her lips and found salty perspiration there as well. Davis took it as an invitation. He sat up just enough to reach up and pull her face down to his. Then they were matching the rhythm of their tongues with the rhythm of their bodies.

Her breasts slid on his chest as he slid between her thighs. She was tender—it had been so long. The sliding, his tongue, *him* so good, so connected to her...

She peaked, and her movements stilled as she rode with it. Davis moaned and made up for her stillness with movements of his own. His hands gripped her hips as he tensed. She felt her muscles contracting around him as he hardened to the point of almost being painful inside of her, and then he climaxed. She nuzzled into his neck and nipped the skin under his chin as he filled her. His head was thrown back, his curls damp and messy. She brushed them back from his face.

“I will keep the gun, Rule.”

She did not wait for him to respond. He was relaxed beneath her. Too relaxed to argue. She was suddenly out of her element. She did not know how to handle an aftermath with a man who wasn’t...

Silk rose from the bed and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Davis didn’t like it. He felt like a fool. Women who looked like Silk must be used to getting their way. *Especially with lovers.*

He lay half-naked in the middle of twisted sheets. Hell, he hadn’t even been in control enough to remove his clothes. Now she thought she was calling the shots.

Suddenly, he wondered if Silk was as crazy as he’d thought.

He didn't know what was worse. Thinking she had planned this with cold, calculated logic or thinking that he'd taken advantage of an imbalanced woman.

Then again, he was the one laid out on the bed like some sort of offering. Davis shifted around to pull up his pants. He jumped up from the bed, not wanting to think of what Silk may or may not do should she find him there when she finished her shower.

He needed to stay focused.

His foot bumped into something soft yet solid on the floor. Silk's blue sweater, and under it her backpack.

Chapter Eleven

Once again, Silk exited the bathing room with her focus back where it belonged—on Ronin. She was pleased to see Rule dressed.

“We must leave. We have been here too long.”

She pulled on her jeans and moved to pick up the blue sweater. It had been moved. It still lay on the floor where she had dropped it, but it had been moved.

Slowly, Silk bent to retrieve it, very conscious of Davis and where he was in the room. As she lifted the sweater, the backpack was revealed. It looked the same and all of its fasteners, *zippers*, were closed.

She pulled the sweater over her head and shot a glance in Rule’s direction. He was tossing his ruined shirt into the trash receptacle. He did not look her way as she reached to lift the backpack from the floor. She realized she was holding her breath when the weight of the bag made her release it in a soundless sigh.

He had not taken the gun.

Silk began to thread her arms through the straps, but paused long enough to unzip the compartment that held the weapon. Now that Rule knew it was there, she would leave it open in case she needed it quickly.

Davis watched her as she did this, his movements stilled. When she put the opened bag on her back, he continued across the room.

“It’s a good thing this next guy you want to contact doesn’t live in Alaska,” he began. His words were interrupted by the motel room door.

Cheap wood splintered with a loud crack as the door flew open and bounced against the wall. Two armed men entered, crouched low, guns high.

They’re not IL-Bah.

Silk’s body relaxed as she noticed this. Cornered in the tiny room by two *IL-Bah* would be bad. Two men, she could handle.

“Larkin. Steele,” Davis said as if he greeted old friends.

Three men. She could handle three men. Would she have to?

She looked to Davis Rule. His words were friendly, but there was tension on his face. And this Larkin and Steele did not lower their weapons.

“Rule. You’re screwed this time.”

“Screwed,” Steele laughed and his eyes shifted to the rumpled bed. “Well and truly screwed.”

“What’s up, gentlemen?” Rule asked. Deadly calm was evident in every syllable.

Steele snickered as if Rule had just told a joke.

“Up,” he said, becoming a weird echo to the proceedings.

“Seems you’ve gotten a little distracted, my man.” Larkin had his gun leveled on Rule. He moved closer to Silk. “Not that I can blame you.”

His gun was aimed at Davis, but his eyes were directed at Silk. His hot gaze slid over her body from head to toe, lingering on her braless chest.

“Did you think Kale was just going to let you take a sexy sabbatical funded with evidence?”

“I haven’t touched the money,” Davis stated, flat and truthful.

“No, not the money,” Steele echoed with a laugh.

Larkin smiled a thin, oily smile.

“He doesn’t say he hadn’t touched you, does he?”

Steele had moved to Rule’s side, his gun level with the larger man’s chest.

“The big guy resisted the bucks, but he couldn’t resist this.” Larkin used his gun to brush across one of her breasts. He used the metal to tease her around the nipple, a sick caress.

In one smooth, fast move, Silk reached her hand back and drew the 9mm from her bag. She pressed it to the middle of Larkin’s forehead. His face went ashen as his eyes crossed to focus on the gun.

“Drop your weapon,” she advised.

Though her attention was focused on Larkin, she heard a wet thwack followed by a howl. From the corner of her eye, she saw Steele fall to his knees with his hands over his nose and mouth. His hands turned red as blood seeped through his fingers.

“Shit, oh shit, man, *I* didn’t touch her.” His whine was nasal and muffled by gory fingers.

Larkin dropped his gun. Silk pressed hers harder against his head.

“Wait, Silk. You can’t kill him.” Davis moved toward them.

Perhaps it will be three after all.

“If you kill him, they’ll hunt you down with every available resource. You’ll never get the chance to find Ronin.”

Larkin was a white statue. He waited for her to decide.

Silk knocked Larkin’s legs out from under him and brought the hand-cushioned butt of her weapon down on the back of his head. The man fell face forward onto the carpet. Davis did not interfere.

“We have wasted enough time here.”

“Right. Wasted,” Davis muttered.

She barely noticed Rule digging into the front pocket of his pants as she tucked the useful gun into her waistband.

“Just so you know, this doesn’t mean I’ve changed sides. They work for Kale and I don’t trust Kale. End of story.” Davis came close with his hand outstretched.

Her full attention was caught when he turned and opened his fist. There in his palm gleamed a pile of ammunition. The bullets from her 9mm.

“You might need these next time,” he said, spilling them into her hand. He turned to lift Steele from the floor.

Silk reloaded her weapon. Surprise, mortification and admiration warred within her chest. Rule had outmaneuvered her. Her shock and embarrassment were only slightly appeased by the hot curl of lust his cleverness reawakened.

She tried to ignore her desire as they worked together without words. The bathroom made a fine holding cell. As Davis handcuffed Steele to the towel rack, he watched her lift Larkin.

“Where do you hide the muscle?”

Silk dumped Larkin in the bathtub. She walked by Rule and briefly pressed a finger against one of his impressive biceps.

“Brawn is not the only indicator of strength.”

“No,” Rule replied as he shut the bathroom door. He twisted the knob until it was bent, fashioning a makeshift lock for the makeshift jail. “But it comes in handy at times.”

Silk felt her body respond to the emphasis Rule placed on “at times”. He had been strong and more than enough in her arms and between her thighs. He truly was magnificent, physically and mentally.

But that was over.

She could not dwell on their coupling. She had business to attend. She had a life to reclaim and the day was already speeding away from her.

Chapter Twelve

The tower rose up from the middle of an overgrown field in Mercer County, Pennsylvania. From the road, it looked abandoned, like some ancient ruin left to crumble alone and forgotten. It was built of gray stone blocks, but the blocks must have been a hundred years old.

Davis explained that the cylindrical structure was called a silo and it had once been used to store feed for cattle. *Hamburgers*. Silk swallowed. *Better to chew the dusty grain*.

They had no choice but to park in the open. The little white car they had purchased in the last town was not hidden in the tall grass by the road, but at least it wasn't the sedan. They had left that in a parking lot. It would be found, but not until they were far away. And it should be some time before the FBI discovered what they now relied upon for transport.

Evidence of occupancy became apparent as they approached the silo. To the rear, a camouflaged satellite dish pointed to the sky. And at intervals along the silo's wall, stone blocks had been removed. Glass now covered these holes, making a dozen miniature windows.

A rotted door hung off rusted hinges on the front of the silo, but to the side a small entrance shielded by scrub bushes was obvious to someone with inside information.

Solstice Meadows had given them perfect directions.

He had also told them how to approach the building without getting shot.

Silk held her hands open and to the side, as did Davis, to show they presented no threat to the man they had come to see. They waited like this for several long moments by the entrance.

"It's easier to get in the Pentagon," Davis grumbled.

The door slid open with a quiet hiss. Silk went first, scrapping one shoulder. Davis came after, manipulating his large frame with care. The door closed behind him with a snap.

As their eyes adjusted, Silk noted that the interior was surprising. Sunlight filtered through the windows they had seen outside. Small beams of light illuminated a shadowy, lofted world that opened into an expanse all the way to the roof of the silo.

A twisted, framework of woven metal wound around and around the outer edges of the room. It reached up and up to two other levels made with the same woven steel. When their host rolled to meet them, Silk realized these ramps and levels expanded his use of space while the weaving allowed him to see his entire domain.

“Who sent you?” the man in the wheeled chair asked. His legs were withered and small. His arms were huge, even bigger than Rule’s. He could have wrestled an Enforcer and won. His face was shadowed. His voice was strong.

And he had a Mahberg Laser on his lap.

“Meadows. Solstice Meadows. And you won’t need that,” Davis answered, nodding to the weapon.

“No? I haven’t heard from Sol and he e-mails me every couple of days. Maybe *he* could have used one.”

Silk was sorry. Sorry that Solstice might have died. Sorry that she might bring danger to this man as well. Still, the laser made her heart sing. It was much like the one she had left behind. The one she had carried for nine years with Miilos by her side. The laser represented home and this man was like the key.

“Believe him. You may be in danger because of us, but we are no threat to you ourselves.” She tried to be patient and allow this man the time he needed to evaluate them, but it was hard. The laser caused her hopes to rise. He wasn’t another Earth person treating extraterrestrial life as a hobby. He was serious and he knew things. She could hear it in his voice.

“And Sol?” the man asked softly.

“He may be dead,” Silk replied.

The chair was nudged by one hand into a beam of light. The man’s face was scarred. Badly so. Silk ached, reminded of Miilos’ death. This man had suffered burns on his face as well, minor compared to those of a close-range laser blast, but still bad. One whole side of his face was pitted and pink while the other side gave a glimpse of the handsome man he must once have been.

Silk noted the strong, set jaw, the wide cheekbones, the creamy dark skin and the startling green of his glittering eyes.

“Who killed him?” The hand he hadn’t used to move his chair was clenched around the butt of the laser.

“*IL-Bah*. There was nothing I could do.”

“Rogue agents. I didn’t know.”

Silk and Davis answered at the same time. Their words came together in an odd joint explanation.

“And what do you need from me?” the man asked. He looked from Silk to Davis in confusion.

“Your name, for starters,” Davis answered, stretching forth his hand.

Harold Striker was nobody’s fool. He could smell FBI on the big man at thirty paces. The hard-ass Barbie doll was a little harder to figure out. It took him fifteen minutes to know, *know*, that she was the genuine article. He was struck. Not because he was surprised, he had monitored the portals too long for that. He was struck because he hadn’t seen her come in.

“Look, this is professional curiosity, and I don’t mean to be rude, but how the hell did you get here?”

She smiled and the expression lit her whole face in such a way that he had to swallow and look away. He was out of practice with women. And he'd never been *in* practice with a woman who looked like Silk.

"I would have been listed as cargo."

"Listed?" The FBI agent took up way too much room at Harry's workstation, but he didn't mind. The agent's bulk forced Silk close to Harry's chair. Hell, one bump from him, one nudge of his right wheel, and she'd wind up on his lap. Harry considered it. Then he figured he better just answer Rule's question.

"I was an undercover cop for ten years. I pissed off the wrong man. He had me shot and left for dead, and they torched the warehouse where I lay. Lucky for me, one of his goons had bad aim. I managed to crawl out half-alive."

Harry kept it simple. He didn't need to go into detail about what it felt like to crawl inch by inch through flames that were eating your flesh. He could see by their eyes as he told the story that their imaginations could fill in the rest.

"So my days as a cop were over. Only thing is, a guy has to fill his days. So I got interested in computers. Real interested. I started dabbling in secrets. Pretty soon I was all out diggin'. Soon after that I got some new friends to help me with this set up here. I watch. I catalog. I hack. By 'lists' the woman means that even aliens keep records."

Davis Rule looked mad. For a second, Harry wondered if it was because he'd been caught making eyes at Silk, but then the other man turned away from them both.

"Look, I'm going to let the two of you play while I keep an eye on the road." His voice sounded tired, disgusted and a little lost as if he was a kid whose playmates had just started playing a game where he didn't understand the rules.

Rule walked out. His retreat opened up more room on the catwalk. That allowed Silk to move a few inches away from Harry's chair which seriously ruined his day.

"He does not believe."

"No kidding. What is he, an idiot?"

"I would say stubborn, far from stupid and used to relying on evidence to form his opinions."

Harry watched the lady beside him. She didn't glance at Rule's retreating back. She didn't seem to miss him. Still, something in her manner made Harry disagree with her assessment. Rule was definitely stupid if he was giving this babe a hard time.

"So, what do you need to know?" he asked.

Silk looked grim as she began to fill him in.

Silk told Harry everything she knew about Ronin. As she spoke, his hands flew across the keys of a computer. There was little evidence of scarring on his agile digits.

“How did your hands survive the fire?” she asked. The blur of moment from his fingers didn’t slow as he answered.

“Reconstructive surgery....a fortune’s worth. Still saving for the face.”

He did not glance her way, but Silk detected a flush along his perfect cheek. She realized it was hard for anyone to start over in a new life. The scars she had were not as obvious as Harry’s, but they were there in her heart, on her soul. She felt a kinship to this man in the rolling chair.

“The *IL-Bah*. I think I’ve got them. They came in legal, as pretty as you please. I’ve even got a video stream.”

Silk watched as fuzzy black and white images of the men who had repeatedly tried to kill her flashed across his screen.

“They came through with a dozen refugees from T-Bek’s moon. Drought there. Real bad. Anyway, no sign of a man fitting Ronin’s description with them.”

“He might have traveled alone.”

“It’s doubtful. A single passage stands out like a sore thumb, especially if it’s not official. And you would have to have access to official channels to come in like you did. Listed as cargo. Shit, I never thought of that one.”

“Ronin’s not here,” Silk concluded.

She sagged against a nearby table, propping her bottom against its side. Suddenly, Ronin seemed almost out of reach.

“Harry, how do I get back home?”

“You know it’s a one way ticket, Silk. They allow drops. They don’t allow returns.”

“There has to be a way I can get to Ronin.”

“Why?” Harry rolled close to her perch. “Are you doing all this for revenge? It won’t bring your partner back. Just like huntin’ down the man who wasted my face isn’t gonna make me look like Denzel Washington again.”

“Some part of me wants revenge and some part of me wants justice. A big part of me wants to keep Ronin from hurting anyone ever again. But mostly, I have to take care of him before I can start over. He will never let me rest. Never let me live a normal life.”

“Okay,” Harry said, placing one hand on her hip and giving it a pat. “Let’s see what I can do.”

Chapter Thirteen

Davis knew he'd let things go too far. Something was seriously wrong with William Kale, and he was never going to figure out what it was if he continued on this nutty, no-good trip with Silk. There were too many loons in the world. His work before he'd met Silk had proven it. So many people were willing to believe anything just because they had nothing real to believe in anymore. Take Striker, for instance. The man had probably been a fine cop at one time, but the horrible torture he'd lived through had left him scarred, inside and out. He was creating a purpose for his life out of moonbeams and make-believe. Then there was Solstice. Another burnt-out survivor looking for a reason to keep getting out of bed each day. And Piper? Well, Piper was harder to figure out. She should be knitting or playing bingo, and most of the time she acted like she wished she was. Davis wasn't sure why she had picked up a crayon and started her first "transcription". The truth was it didn't matter. Silk could tie him up for the rest of his life making stop after stop on the insanity trail because the world was full of Pipers.

Late summer in Pennsylvania smelled good. It had been a moist season. Tall grass and wet earth blended into a natural bouquet that eased into his nose with a richness he enjoyed. Night was descending and somewhere at the edge of Striker's field crickets, or frogs or both began to sing. This was real. Silk's alien story was pure fantasy. Alternate dimensions. Infinite worlds. He'd never been a fan of *The Twilight Zone*.

The question was why did William Kale want her?

Because she's an alien. That thought flashed through his mind to be dismissed with a determined shake of his head. His brain sought a more realistic answer. *Because she's a seriously deranged criminal.* That thought held slightly longer.

His instincts had never steered him wrong. They had started firing off warnings about Kale three months ago. And the man had just sent two of his coworkers after him with guns. Two men he'd never thought much of in the first place. Kale was dirty. He knew it. He was only up in the air about how to handle it. His instincts about Silk were not as clear. His gut told him to trust her. His head told him she was a nut spiraling out of control. His heart... Well, he wasn't used to following that organ anyway.

He'd been a dumb jock in high school. Dumb only in that his ability to make easy Cs hadn't encouraged him to try harder. He had only cared about the game—whatever game was in season. Then a trip to Washington had shifted his focus. His class had joked about the FBI's Most Wanted. Had joked about growing up to be a part of it. Davis had seen the faces on that wall for months afterward. For once, he

began to think about what it would be like to use his strength for something more important than scoring points.

His grades had gone up to As with little effort and he'd aimed for Quantico instead of a football scholarship. For awhile, it had been fine. Lately, because of Kale, he'd begun to have that itchy feeling again. The same itchy feeling he'd had during his last ballgame. Like he was meant for something more.

Davis sat down on a rock that jutted up above the waving tips of grass. He looked up at the sky. He didn't believe Silk, but the stars that had always twinkled up there, unnoticed and unremarkable, now held a certain fascination he couldn't explain. Could there be different worlds with different skies only a portal away from this one?

He knew two things. He couldn't let William Kale get his hands on Silk, and he needed to find some way to snap Silk out of her delusion, some way to stop her without resorting to violence.

Davis ignored the damp feeling of dew as it soaked through his trousers from the rock beneath him.

His integrity was compromised. He had to admit it. He didn't want to hurt Silk. He wouldn't hurt her. He just had to figure out a way to stop her.

There were two major portals in North America. The portals were naturally occurring ripples in reality that created passages to other places, other worlds. One was in Las Vegas, Nevada, and one was in New York City. Use of the portals was carefully controlled by the Confederation of Worlds to protect the less advanced. Travel was especially restricted on backwards planets like Earth. Silk remembered New York, vaguely. She had been groggy and it had been loud. Full of the new and the dangerous. Full of foreign objects and foreign languages and a foreign way of life. She had virtually limped her way to Virginia. Slowly regaining her equilibrium. Slowly rediscovering her purpose.

Once she had gone through the motions of setting up her new life, she had used the peace and quiet of her rural surroundings to recover just enough to move on.

"New York would be best. I do not think Davis would go easily across the country. And he would be in danger if I left him behind."

"That big guy?" Harry barked, doubtful.

He had created a sort of chair for her with bright plastic cubes he called crates. Now they sat together, illuminated by the glow from his computer screen.

"The *IL-Bah* are bigger and there are more of them." Silk reached out to tap the key that caused the video stream of the *IL-Bah* to rewind and repeat.

"I guess I better be thinkin' about my own relocation plans," Harry mused, shifting the focus of his eyes from her cleavage to the screen.

"I think he will come with me to New York," Silk thought out loud.

“What about beyond that? If you’re plannin’ on skippin’ town in the biggest way possible, won’t that be leavin’ him behind?” Harry’s eyes were on the screen, but she felt the awareness he had for her. Perhaps he wondered if she considered Rule to be a permanent part of her life.

Silk felt a tightness squeeze around the air in her chest. How could she leave Davis to face the FBI and possibly even the *IL-Bah* on his own?

“You could always clonk him over the head and take him along. When he woke up, he’d realize you were tellin’ him the truth all along,” Harry suggested. He didn’t sound like he wanted her to accept that course of action.

“I would not force him to leave his home behind,” Silk said softly.

“No, I guess you wouldn’t. You know how hard that can be.” Harry’s hand closed over hers on the keyboard. She didn’t mind the moral support or the smooth, warm feel of his fingers.

“Find me a passage, Harry.” Silk turned her hand up so that she could grasp his. “I will figure out what to do about Davis once I’m able to return home.”

Piper Jo threw a borrowed satchel into the backseat of an old Volkswagen Jetta. The new slacks and blouses they had picked up at the local discount store had looked out of place when she’d zipped them into a bag decorated with half-naked heroines from some comic she didn’t recognize. *Things sure have come a long way since Lois Lane.*

“Ready, ol’ girl?” Solstice asked with a wicked grin.

“You better be talkin’ to this old rust bucket you call a car,” Piper replied. *Ol’ girl, indeed.*

“If we put it to the floor, we just might get there before they hurt Harry,” Sol added, ignoring the insult to his car.

“And then what?” Piper asked. “They hurt us too?”

“Maybe, but I’m thinkin’ all of us together might just even the odds.”

They needed sleep, and Harry insisted he needed time to pack.

“I’m not going to sit here and wait for them to come crashin’ in on me. You guys don’t have the best track record, you know.”

Silk agreed and even Davis didn’t protest. He had been scarce since they had shared a dinner of peanut butter and crackers. Peanut butter was now on Silk’s growing list of Earth foods she could stomach.

When she had gotten as dizzy as she could get watching Harry wheel around and around his ramps with his arms full of equipment and supplies, she excused herself.

“Sure, sure, go on out of here. I didn’t design this place for two and definitely not three.”

Silk walked out of the silo and into the night. She found Davis easily. There was no place to hide in the open field. He sat on a rock, looking up at the sky. The sight gave her pause. He was a handsome man, but he'd become more to her than that. More than an almost perfect face and form. The sight of him was visually appealing, but it was the sight of him sitting alone and deep in thought that made her ache to go to him. She wanted to hold him. She wanted to make him smile.

Of course, she did neither. The former was unthinkable. The latter impossible. Instead, she approached with her hands under control and her wishes in check.

"Is Harry still packing? He can't fit the whole silo in the car," Davis said. His joke was half-hearted at best.

"I have disrupted everyone's life. He loves this silo. It is his home. He shouldn't have to leave it," Silk replied as she sank down to sit beside him.

"I think he loves the idea of traveling with someone he thinks is an alien even more. Throw in the part about the alien looking like you...it's no contest."

"He does seem *enthusiastic*," Silk admitted with a smile.

"He certainly is an expert at copping a feel," Davis commented. "You don't seem to mind."

"I thought it was cultural. Everyone on this planet seems to want to touch me when they know who I am—Piper, Solstice, Harry."

"Me?" Davis added.

"You? No, not you. You do not *want* to touch me. And when you do, you regret it." Silk arranged herself carefully on the hard rock, but the small surface meant that their bodies brushed together.

Davis didn't pull away.

"Harry is touching you because you're a beautiful woman. He probably doesn't get too many of those around here." It seemed like a reluctant confession. As if he didn't think it was wise to call her beautiful.

"And you? Why do you touch me, Rule?"

"Because sometimes it feels like I have to. Like if I don't hold onto you you'll just get further and further out there until you're gone. Wacko. Totally in the clouds." He sounded almost desperate, almost mad.

"I only knew one other person in my whole life who treated me like I couldn't take care of myself."

"Me-lows," Davis guessed. He didn't sound pleased.

"Miilos."

"I'm not sure what that means." He was stiff beside her, as if the night-chilled rock was sucking all the warmth from him.

"It means you make me as angry as he made me when you act like you need to protect me. It means, if you touch me, it should be because you want to and not because you have to. Not because you are trying to save me from something. I do not need saving." Silk's own limbs were stiff and cold from the inside out.

“You need to get a grip on reality, Silk. If we weren’t so busy running for our lives, I would take you to see a psychiatrist.” Davis cupped his hands together and gripped them tight. He sounded like he would rather use them to shake her senseless.

“If our lives were not in danger, you would not be here with me right now. I am going to face Ronin, and I will need to face him alone.” She was tired of Rule’s disbelief. She didn’t need his support.

“You’re a strong woman, Silk. A strong person who just happens to be emotionally...tilted...right now. Whoever Ronin really is, whatever he did to you, this isn’t something that you need to face alone. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone by facing it alone.” Davis no longer sounded mad. He sounded desperately persuasive as if he believed the right words would change everything.

“There was a time when I needed to prove to myself that I could function alone. For months after Miilos died, I had to relearn how to live, how to get through my day-to-day life without him by my side. Most JRs aren’t able to recover. They waste away when their partner dies. I am not going to face Ronin alone in order to prove something. I am going to face him alone because only a JR can stop him. I am the person who can stop him. No one else can.” Nothing had changed. Meeting Davis, getting to know him, did not change the path she must take.

“So, I guess I’m relegated to Tonto in this little scenario?” Once more, he sounded mad.

“Ton-toe?”

“A side-kick thrown in for comic relief.”

“Side-kick?”

“An extraneous person without purpose.” Davis spit out the explanation as if the words left a bad taste in his mouth.

“You have purpose, Davis Rule. But I cannot allow you to have a say in *my* purpose.”

Silk tried to brush the hair from Rule’s eyes, but he pulled away. He stood and walked several steps away with his eyes on the sky. Once again, the sight of him silhouetted against the night sky gave her pause. If the moment had been right, she would have called him beautiful. But it wasn’t right. It would probably never be.

There was too much between them and not enough. She wanted to share everything with him, the challenges, the triumphs, the exhilaration, the pain. And yet what she’d already shared had been more than he could accept.

Silk rose and went back to the silo. There was nothing left to say.

Harry had risked a slap to the face or a slug from the increasingly grumpy Rule more times than he could count to get the samples he needed. He had wanted a strand of Silk’s hair to run the tests he now monitored on a discreet handheld computer screen. Knowing and *knowing* were miles apart even for a

retired cop who always trusted his instincts. Okay, so maybe he'd enjoyed getting close enough to Silk to get the samples a little more than he should have. Touching Silk was no hardship, and he was a lonely retired cop, after all. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman. Having one like Silk almost fall in his lap...literally...several times in one night when he'd nudged her with his chair...that was a bonus he was just bored and playful enough to enjoy. Especially when she'd laughed in response. Gorgeous full-throated laughter as perfect and appealing as she was herself.

It was a sound Davis Rule should be basking in every chance he got, because the amazing alien woman was obviously interested in the frowning agent who was keeping her at arm's length.

Harry had made her laugh, but it was the big FBI agent who made her sigh.

So her laughter and her soft, supple skin against his fingers was definitely appreciated while he took his samples. Couldn't be helped. Hazard of the job.

Be sure to guard your heart, man, and your—other things—so you don't get carried away.

Even beneath the watchful eyes of Rule, Harry had managed to get a few long strands of Silk's beautiful silvery hair. He'd used a tiny vacuum in the palm of his hand to snag flakes of skin. He'd even taken her plastic cup after dinner and swabbed where her lovely full lips had pressed again and again.

If there'd been any doubt before, using the evidence of his eyes, the results on the screen put them to rest.

Silk wasn't human.

She was beautiful and amazing and he'd forget about being guarded if she so much as crooked her finger, but she wasn't human.

The dilemma he faced now was whether or not to show the tests results to Davis Rule.

Chapter Fourteen

Silk woke from a deep sleep. The floor was hard beneath her. She had refused to share Harry's bed. It had been more tempting than it should have been under the circumstances. Not that he wasn't attractive. His scars did not reach to his soul. He was good and honest and strong. He was also gentle and lonely and kind. She had been tempted because of Rule's rejection. And it would not have been fair to use Harry for warmth and companionship and acceptance. When she had explained as much, he had not been pleased.

"Use me any way you'd like. I think I speak for every man in America when I say, use me, please."

She had laughed. And she had slept on the floor. Davis had slept on another level, suspended above her on what Harry called a *catwalk*.

Silk lay very still. The sun was just creeping through the windows. She could see Rule's blankets and his pallet above her. The middle of the foam pad was pressed down into the holes created by the metal weaving. Rule must be on the pad pressing it down. Farther up, on the third level, she could see Harry's chair empty by his bed.

So what noise had she heard? Had one of the men shifted in his sleep enough to waken her?

Silk held her breath. Nothing. No new noise betrayed itself to her ears. And that was what bothered her most. If some normal, harmless sound had disturbed her sleep, why didn't she hear it now? The quiet held a menacing quality. As if it waited for her to move, as if *someone* waited for her to act.

Silk sighed loudly and snuggled into her pillow. Then she forced herself to resume a regular pattern of deep breathing. In, out. In, out. In, out. She feigned sleep. She listened. She waited.

Long minutes went by, but she did not sit up. She did not give up. Someone was in the silo. She waited for them to reveal themselves.

Her eyes were closed, but her ears were not. Finally, a shifting of foot against floor, right at the foot of her makeshift bed gave her an indication of where to aim her attack.

With a shout, she rolled, kicking out at the same time. A large form came down on top of her, hard. Now that her eyes were open she could see the glowing silver of *IL-Bah* eyes.

The monster held her down, and to her disgust she felt the excitement he felt for an imminent kill. She used his excitement to her advantage. He was trying to grip her hands, but she managed to keep control of one. She only needed one to grab, twist and squeeze.

She had thought an *IL-Bah* death cry was the loudest sound they ever made.

With all her strength, she pushed the *IL-Bah* off her body and rolled away, coming up on her feet in one efficient move. Above her, she heard shots fired. More importantly, she saw the blazing flash of a pulse laser discharge. She hoped it was Harry's.

Silk ran for the ramp. She hoped she could get to the men before they were killed. The *IL-Bah* she had injured was already on his feet. But he was moving slowly. Silk made it to the second story catwalk before he grabbed her from behind.

A large arm wrapped around her neck, cutting off her air. Silk brought her elbow back, once, twice, a third time, but his gut was made of rock. The momentum of her blows took them to the edge of the catwalk. There, Silk knew what she had to do.

She struggled to bring herself around. Finally, down to her last breath, she faced the rail with the *IL-Bah* behind her. Letting go of his arm, she gripped the rail with both hands. He held her throat, his weight on her back, as she leaned forward over the rail. Using the strength in her legs, she jumped over the rail in a flipping maneuver that threw the *IL-Bah* over as well. Taken by surprise, his hold around her neck slipped and he was pitched into space. Silk's legs dangled as she watched him fall to the cement floor below. This time, she heard the death cry as she went hand over hand to turn and pull herself back up.

Davis waited at the rail to give her a hand. She took it as a courtesy when she saw the concern on his face.

She was relieved to see Harry in his chair with the laser on his lap when she climbed over the rail.

"I shot him. Twice. I don't think he's dead." Harry's voice was shaky. No doubt the sight of miniature *IL-Bah* on a computer screen had not prepared him for the real thing.

"Probably not. May I?" Harry let Silk take the laser. She climbed the ramp to the third level. An *IL-Bah* assassin lay in a growing puddle of red ooze that seeped from his chest. He was not conscious when she shot him. The monster would never be conscious again.

Davis Rule stood behind her with his gun in his hand. He looked horrified.

"You just shot him in cold blood."

She had never heard that tone in his voice. "His blood is warm like ours."

"Of course it is. He's a *man*, Silk. I'm going to have to arrest you now." He sounded serious and shocked.

"You did not see his eyes?" Suddenly, she knew it was bad. Davis was an honorable man. He wouldn't understand.

"I was asleep. I woke up to that laser flashing and you shouting. I fired at the guy attacking you, but couldn't get a good shot." He described his actions by rote, without inflection.

"You did not see the glowing eyes." It wasn't a question. She could tell by the look in *his* eyes that he hadn't.

"I did, damn it. I saw 'em. I'll never forget it." Harry had rolled up behind Davis.

She could see his testimony meant nothing to Rule.

“If I went over there right now, and lifted up his eyelid, what would I see?” There, finally, some emotion in his voice. It killed her to know she would have to dash his hopes.

“You would see pale blue eyes. They do not glow in death.”

“That’s not good enough, Silk, and you know it.” Davis lifted the gun in his hand, slightly showing a deadly serious intent.

“There is at least one more. Ronin might have sent others. We cannot stand here and discuss this.” Silk wanted the look in his eyes to change.

“Delusion is one thing. Self-defense is one thing. This is another thing altogether.” He would not be swayed. The aim of his weapon was steady and sure.

“You will have to kill me to stop me, Rule. Will you kill me?”

Harry watched them. He looked sick, as if he didn’t know what decision Rule would make. Silk felt ill herself. She didn’t like the look of disgust on Rule’s face. He did not understand that *IL-Bah* were not normal men. They were killing machines. You could not let one live to kill again.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Silk, but I will if I have to.”

Likewise. She thought, dreading the need to cause him pain.

“Okay, big guy. Take it down a notch or two, and while you’re at it, put the gun down too.”

The laser was no longer in Harry’s lap. It was now pointing at Rule. Harry held it in his right hand. His voice didn’t waver.

“You saw her pull the trigger. You’re a witness. If you do this you’ll be an accessory to murder.” Davis kept his attention on her as he spoke to Harry.

“I know the law, Rule. You don’t have to quote it to me.” Harry wouldn’t be persuaded to turn against her. “I also know more than you know. I ran some tests. I should have shown you the results. You wouldn’t trust them or me now. So we’re down to this.”

Silk moved toward Davis, ignoring the gun he had trained on her chest. She came close, and closer still. She could smell the spicy pine of him. The scent had become familiar. She felt an ache swell up in the very chest he targeted. As usual, his dark curls were messy over his forehead. Not so usual, was the look on his face. Disgust, anger and dislike.

At this moment he hated her.

“I don’t have time to convince you that I had no choice. I don’t have any more time to humor your suspicions about me. I have no time for tests, not Harry’s or yours. We have to go.”

“I won’t go along this time, Silk. Harry will have to shoot me.”

Silk felt the tip of his gun as she walked right into it. The point of it dug into the soft skin of her left breast. She looked into his eyes and knew that he wouldn’t pull the trigger. She also saw how much he hated that he couldn’t. She saw that some of the disgust on his features was for himself and his inability to

shoot her. She also knew that he would give no further. If she forced him to come with them, he would put up a fight. It was a battle she no longer wanted to wage. She would never gain his trust. He would never believe in her.

“Harry, we will leave now. Rule will keep his weapon. He will need it.”

She turned away from the gun and Rule and walked down the ramp. Harry rolled after her.

“Just let me grab a few things—”

“Now, Harry. We must leave now.”

“Right. That bag in the corner should do it.”

Silk shrugged into her backpack and went to the corner to pick up the large black duffel bag that Harry had indicated. It weighed more than she did. She noted that Harry hadn’t taken his laser off of Davis Rule. She didn’t blame him. Rule looked as if he was teetering on the edge of fury.

“Come this way, Silk. I have a back door.”

Harry rolled over to a break in the cement floor where a sheet of metal lay. He positioned his chair on the middle of this sheet. Silk joined him.

“Don’t bother trying to follow us, Rule. This locks on the other end of the shaft. And, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about those tests when I had the chance of making you believe in the results.”

Harry pushed a button on the wall beside them and the floor dropped with a whirring moan beneath their feet. Silk grabbed the back of Harry’s chair.

“Cool, huh? The elevator was Sol’s idea. Wait ’til you see my Bat Cave.”

Silk knew bats were flying nocturnal animals. She did not see any of the creatures as they descended or as they stepped into a cavernous room. Lights flickered on to reveal a shiny black van parked several feet away.

“Rule may try to stop us.”

“We’ll be driving through about a quarter of a mile of tunnel before we drive outside. The exit is in another field. We’ll take a side road after that. Rule would need a crystal ball to find us.”

“He knows our plans.”

Harry rolled onto a ramp attached to the side of the van and pushed another button. This time the button was on a key chain he had pulled from his pocket. The ramp began to lift Harry’s chair up to sit parallel to the van’s side door. Then he pushed another button. The ramp retracted, taking Harry and his chair into the belly of the van.

“He’ll try to head us off at the pass,” he noted as he waited for the ramp to stop.

“The pass?”

“He’ll try to find us in New York.”

Silk knew it was true. Rule wouldn't give up. He was probably already regretting that he hadn't shot her in the chest.

"Then we will not go to New York," Silk decided.

She pulled the side door closed with a bang and opened the passenger side door for herself. She climbed up onto the plush gray seat and fastened her seatbelt. She watched with interest as Harry rolled up to the wheel and attached a safety harness to himself. He locked the wheels of his chair and attached it as well. The controls were obviously configured especially for him.

As he started the van's motor and revved the gas, Harry grinned.

"Viva Las Vegas."

Chapter Fifteen

Piper Jo Harding sat at a gas station just outside of Sharon, Pennsylvania. Solstice had gone inside to pay for gas and grab a few snacks. The place was one of those discount superstores with tons of traffic and a myriad of pumps. So it was pure and simple bad luck when the two FBI agents who had tried to kill her pulled up next to the car she was sitting in to get gas from a pump across the way.

Piper scrunched down in her seat and watched as both agents climbed out of their car. One, the smaller one sporting a white bandage over his nose, got out and prepared to pump gas. The other one disappeared into the store.

She was thankful that the tall bucket seat helped to shield her from view. She was also quite glad she had already made a pit stop. If she hadn't just used the restroom, she probably would have wet her pants.

Several long moments passed. The agent was only about four paces from her. As he dispensed gas into the car, he looked around. Piper prayed he wouldn't look her way.

Solstice came out of the store with his arms full of tiny snack packages and two bottles of soda. He sauntered across the lot, his lips pursed in a whistle. He nodded at the agent as he passed.

Piper wanted to pop him when she heard the tune "Pop goes the Weasel".

"All right, ol' girl. Pick your poison—peanuts or sunflower seeds."

For once, Piper was thrilled with the nickname. Piper wasn't common. If Solstice had called out her real name in his jovial bellow, they might've been in big trouble.

"Sol, it's them. The agents who burned down my house," Piper hissed as soon as Solstice closed his car door.

"Where?" Sol leaned forward to see the bandaged agent. Piper noticed out of the corner of her eye that the agent was replacing the gas cap on his car.

"Just one?" he asked.

"The other one went inside." As she spoke, the bandaged agent finished his task and turned toward them.

Piper quickly averted her eyes and turned her head. Solstice started the engine and slowly pulled away. In the side mirror, Piper saw the agent follow his partner into the store.

She was relieved. They would be long gone before the killers came back to their car. Not being seen felt very much like winning a big lotto jackpot.

Her relief died as Sol whipped the car into a parking space on the other side of the building. They were now on the opposite side of the gas station where an ice machine hid them from view.

“They’ll hit the restrooms. Buy some grub. If we’re lucky, they’ll sit down and order a hot dog or some nachos.” Solstice was formulating a plan. She could see the wheels turning behind his twinkling blue eyes.

“Not while their car is blocking a pump,” Piper argued.

“Right. Killers would never be that rude.” The man beside her chuckled.

“What are you going to do?” She didn’t want to know.

“I’m gonna steal their car.”

“What?” She had known better than to ask. Why had she asked?

“I’m gonna jump behind the wheel and take that sucker across town. You follow me. We’ll dump it before we head to Harry’s.” He acted like a teenager about to pull a prank on a local gang of bullies.

“What good will that do, Sol? You know they’ll just get another car.” She had to try to reason him out of it.

“I don’t like that they’re this close to Harry’s place.” Now he was serious. Sol would be thinking of someone other than himself. He didn’t stop to think they were in more danger because they were much closer to the dirty agents than Harry was.

“We can’t stop them,” Piper argued.

“No, you’re right. We can’t stop them. But we can sure as hell can slow them down.” The prospect was so pleasing to Solstice that he grabbed Piper and planted a kiss right on her surprised lips. His beard scratched, but Piper found herself kissing him right back.

Sol pulled back and brushed his hand across her face.

For the first time since she had known him, his determined mischievousness disappeared and his sparkling eyes went dark. He focused, really focused on her. And he didn’t look like he thought she was too old for kisses. He looked like, maybe, he’d been thinking about kissing her for a very long time.

Piper had only been more afraid once in her life. Considering that the fear she had felt the day her home was burned to the ground was directly linked to her present terror, she decided to call it a draw.

She waited behind the wheel of the Jetta and hoped Sol wouldn’t see the keys in the ignition of the agents’ car. Surely an FBI agent knew better than to leave a car unattended with the keys in the switch.

While she waited, she thought about a few things. Things like cross-stitch and needle-point and quilting. It was definitely time to give up transcribing alien radio broadcasts and focus on something more suitable for a grandmother. What the heck. She might even take up knitting. Yarn came in red after all. She didn’t spend too much time dwelling on the quick kiss she’d shared with Sol just before he jumped out of

the car. She needed to bring a sense of calm into her life and that meant Sol would need to be much less a part of it.

When the dark gray sedan popped into sight, Piper knew she had hoped in vain. The keys had been there. Ready and waiting for her lunatic friend.

Piper slipped the car into drive and followed. Her heart pounded. Her hands were slippery on the wheel. And she thought she just might need another pit stop after all. She didn't know what Solstice Meadows was thinking, but she knew she didn't like her first taste of going commando. She didn't like it at all.

They left the gray sedan in a quiet residential neighborhood far from the gas station. Piper braked in the middle of the street and waited for Sol to jump into the car on the passenger side. His laughter eased her nerves only slightly as they pulled away from the scene of the crime.

"I wish I could have seen their faces when they came out and it was gone," he hooted with customary jubilation.

"I don't ever want to see their faces again," Piper insisted quietly.

Her old friend reached over, suddenly solemn. His warm hand closed over hers where it gripped the wheel.

"I hope you won't have to, Piper. But we have to do what we can." His hand felt different somehow. It was awfully hard to think of knitting.

"I don't have to like it," Piper insisted, wondering why he left his hand on hers.

"We need to hotfoot it to Harry's. If Silk and Davis made it that far, he's gonna need our help."

"Did you see the bandage on that agent's face?" Piper asked.

"Yeah, I saw it." Sol's good humor evaporated. He looked like he was imagining the fight that might have injured the agent's nose.

They drove on, both of them hoping that Silk was okay.

Davis threw his bag onto the back seat of the little hatchback he and Silk had bought the day before. The car was twenty years old and it had over one hundred and fifty thousand miles on the odometer. He had used what he had in his wallet because he refused to touch the money he'd found in Silk's closet.

He slammed both hands on the roof as he stood by the open door. He didn't relish the thought of folding his large frame behind the wheel. He sure as hell wasn't looking forward to a cross-country drive.

He knew Silk wasn't headed for New York.

Unless they triple guessed each other, Silk and Harry would head for Vegas.

Now Davis didn't just suspect that Silk was involved in something criminal. He had seen her commit a horrendous crime right before his eyes.

His gut clenched as he remembered the coldness he'd seen in her violet blue eyes. Davis put both hands on the roof of the car and rested his forehead against them.

He had let her walk away.

Forget for a moment that Harry had aimed some kind of homemade death ray at his chest. He should have done something to stop them.

Davis pushed off from the car and prepared to squish himself behind the wheel. Just then, he noticed another car headed his way. It came slowly down the deserted highway toward the silo. Davis paused and reached for the gun hidden beneath the rumpled jacket of his suit.

The car was moving slow. Too slow. Suspiciously slow. Davis waited. He was ready to draw his gun when he noticed the woman behind the wheel.

"Davis Rule as I live and breathe. What brings you to Pennsylvania?" Piper Jo Harding looked gray around the gills. He imagined he might look a little like that himself. Her voice was as chipper as ever, but she looked worn and tired.

"Where's Silk?" Solstice asked.

Davis was surprised to see Solstice Meadows. He wasn't surprised that the man had a one-woman, one-track mind. Silk seemed to have that affect on every man she met.

"Is she okay?" Piper asked. Every *person* she met, he amended.

"Just dandy. On her way to Nevada."

"Harry too?" Solstice asked. The older man's eyes were narrowed to almost a squint. And the sun was not that bright.

"Harry too." Davis replied.

"If she's goin' there, what are you doin' here?" Piper wondered.

Davis knew he was dealing with fanatics. Some likeable like Piper, some militant and dangerous like Harry and Solstice. He decided to tread carefully around the truth.

"We had some trouble this morning. I stayed behind to clean up."

If possible, Piper's face went a little whiter, and Solstice looked crestfallen as if he was crushed to have missed the action.

"*IL-Bah*. Two big ugly ones. Silk took both of them out."

He almost choked on the words. Solstice nodded, but he didn't smile.

"Can we do anything to help?" Piper looked like she hoped he'd tell her to go home.

Davis glanced from his little white car to theirs. Neither vehicle looked like it was ready for a cross-country trip.

"You could give me a lift," he said with the biggest smile he could muster.

He realized a break when he saw one. On his own, he would be flying blind. But he figured Solstice knew just where to go.

Davis grabbed his bag from the back seat. He locked up the little hatchback and threw the keys as far as he could throw them into the tall grass of the nearby field.

He didn't miss the suspicion on Solstice's face when he rounded the car to climb in behind them. He noted it for future reference. He would travel with them to Nevada, and when they hooked up with Silk he would figure a way to arrest them all.

Chapter Sixteen

William Kale hadn't been an ugly man. The face in the mirror looked back at him and it was only marred by anger. The thick brown hair, the hazel eyes, even the hawkish nose were all acceptable. The events leading up to the drawn lips and furrowed brow were not.

"You didn't tell us she was some kind of magician. I'm tellin' you, one minute she was defenseless and the next minute she had a gun in my face." Larkin spoke from the corner where he had perched patiently waiting for Kale to speak. Kale's silence made him lean forward and gesture with his hands in an effort to gain his superior's sympathy.

"In his face," Steele repeated. The smaller man was oblivious to the narrowed eyes and tightened jaw showing on Kale's face in the mirror. It looked impressively furious.

Imbeciles. Incompetent imbeciles. Davis Rule should have been here by his side. Rule had been in a perfect position to bring Silk to him.

"And Rule helped her?" he asked with deceptive calm.

"He broke my freakin' nose," Steele exclaimed, for once beginning and ending his own sentence.

"And your car was stolen at a gas station in Pennsylvania?" he reiterated.

"I know it looks bad, Mr. Kale—" Larkin began.

"It looks exceedingly bad, gentlemen." He turned from the mirror. "My other...resources have also failed to take this woman into custody."

"Take..." Steele grabbed at the word and shot his partner a look that Kale intercepted.

"What? Is there something else I should know, Mr. Larkin?" He waited as the two men leaned back in their chairs. Steele poked his tongue into his cheek and gave an enthusiastic nod to his friend.

"She's got Rule panting after her, sir. They had just finished a little mattress tango when we busted in on them." Larkin grinned. "Five minutes sooner and we could have seen what she had under that sweater."

"That sweater," Steele groaned, shifting in his seat.

Kale felt his vision blur in a momentary rush of discovery. He had assumed that Rule was taken with his quarry. But he had not even begun to imagine that it was reciprocated. Who could fathom woman's fickle heart?

He came around his desk, leaving the mirror behind in favor of envisioning the woman he hunted in his mind's eye. This was a revelation almost too surprising to credit.

Silk and Davis.

Davis and Silk.

Partners in so many ways.

Suddenly, he knew he no longer needed to focus all his energy and resources on Silk. Davis would do just as well.

He began to share his rapidly forming plan with Larkin and Steele. Steele's hand reached up carefully to tap at his bandaged nose, but he didn't protest. Which was fortunate for him. Until this latest revelation, until he had discovered a new course of action open to him, he had planned to kill them both for their incompetence.

This news had bought them one more try.

Silk braided her hair as Harry unpacked a miniature version of the computer system he had left behind. Miilos had loved the long professional braid that fell to her waist. She had not worn her hair in this regulation style since the day of his death.

"I am seriously in need of an online fix. I haven't gone this long without e-mail in four years."

Silk didn't mind her companion's addiction to data ports. For the first time in a week, the hotel she sat in was clean and modern by this world's standards.

"We will rest here for six hours. Then we will continue." Silk rose to pull the curtains on the window.

"No time for sightseeing, I presume?" Harry teased. "You know, there's more to America than interstates and hotel rooms."

"Yes, there is hamburger and rice," Silk teased back and shuddered to illustrate her point.

"Don't forget strawberries and peanut butter." Harry paused as he opened his small, portable computer and pointed a finger at the stack of empty green baskets on the table beside Silk's bed. They had purchased several plastic containers of strawberries for her dinner. She had dipped them into a jar of peanut butter while Harry had eaten something called chicken nuggets.

"And chocolate," Silk added to be fair. Finished with the braid, she reached for a foil-wrapped second course.

Harry chuckled.

"There's not a woman in America who wouldn't kill for your metabolism."

Silk finished the chocolate bar in several bites and washed it down with a cool mouthful of milkshake. It wasn't minty, but the sweet vanilla was good alone.

As Harry tapped on his computer keys, she lay back and prepared to drop into a deep sleep. A JR was trained to recognize their body's signals. Hers needed to shut down. She would need every ounce of energy she possessed for what was ahead.

Unfortunately, even her training couldn't stop the images of Davis that flickered behind her eyelids once they were closed.

She saw him as she'd first seen him, gasping from their fight with his eyes wide in shock and that thick curl flopping over his forehead. Her fingers twitched against the sheet as she also remembered what it was like to brush his hair out of his eyes when they were more heated than shocked. She remembered him beneath her, joining with her, as if they had been made to join by a divine hand. So perfect, that moment. How could she forget? How would she forget? His distrust stood between them. She forced her eyes to remain closed as another image of Davis made her want to open them. The Davis she'd last seen. Hard, angry, hating her because of what he thought she'd done, and hating himself for not hating her enough.

Harry typed nearby blissfully oblivious to her pain as she fought against the urge to cry. Worse than that urge was the urge to jump up and go back to find Rule and make him believe in her. Harry had told her about the tests he'd run. He'd been apologetic and more than a little bit sheepish, but science didn't offend her. She wished she'd known. She wished she could have shown the results to Davis.

But forcing him to believe with cold, hard scientific facts wouldn't have achieved what she most desired from him.

Trust.

The need for it was like the need to breathe. She'd been bred to have complete and utter trust in Miilos and him in her. It was part of what made them function as a team. She had found a feeling of partnership with Davis that she'd never thought she would experience again. But their partnership lacked trust which meant they'd found nothing together at all.

Silk accepted it. She accepted the loss of Davis and the startlingly fierce bereavement of it. The ache filled her and she lay quietly shivering. She was determined to handle it, deal with it. She was hurting, but she was also determined to go on. That determination had saved her when she'd lost Miilos. Surely it would help her survive the loss of Davis. And yet, even as she began to drift into a restless slumber, she somehow couldn't stop the images of the FBI agent from following her into her dreams.

Davis and his odd traveling companions made it as far as Indiana before they had to stop. The car was overheated, they were exhausted, their stomachs rumbled and Piper had been asking for a pit stop since Pittsburgh.

They pulled into a gas station that was combined with a fast-food restaurant. It wouldn't provide much opportunity for rest, but two out of three wasn't bad.

They had been on the road for nine hours. He figured Silk and Harry were ahead of them by three or four.

"We need to stick together. You two sit tight while I pump the gas." Davis jumped out before they could argue.

"I'll go with Piper and stand outside the ladies room," Solstice opened the passenger side door. Apparently, he didn't intend to argue. He intended to do as he pleased.

Davis watched the older couple walk toward the station. He didn't want to protest. He couldn't afford to make waves. They had an uneasy truce at best, and he needed to keep it from busting apart. If Solstice Meadows knew why he wanted to find Silk, the man would be a problem.

Even surrounded by the bustling action of the popular service station, Davis couldn't get those last moments with Silk out of his head. He hadn't pulled the trigger and it hadn't been a struggle. Truth was, he wouldn't have pulled the trigger if his life depended on it, or if ten other lives depended on it. Why? He'd never had a problem putting duty and justice first. Never before. For some reason, Silk came first, middle and last now. If killing her was his duty, then to hell with duty. And he hated that she'd done that to him. His priorities were so screwed they should be setting up a nursery and preparing for quintuplets.

Only with her somewhere other than beside him was he able to convince himself that he could do the right thing. Not kill her. Ever. But he could arrest her as he should have done from the start.

After filling the car with gas, Davis got in and pulled it around to one of the parking spaces at the front of the store. That way he could get to them quickly if there was a problem. Solstice and Piper walked out with their arms full of bags as he headed in.

"I'll be right back," Davis said as he passed them. He needed to visit the restroom. He didn't like leaving the two seniors alone, but it couldn't be helped. He couldn't force them to listen, but his concern for them lay heavily on his mind.

Worry and fatigue and aching for a woman he was duty-bound to hate caused Davis Rule to walk right into an ambush.

Silk brushed her teeth while Harry packed up his equipment. He had checked for Ronin one more time. If he or more of his *IL-Bah* were here, Harry could find no evidence of them.

Silk faced a momentous decision. If she managed to get home, if she managed to leave Earth, she would be in direct violation of more codes than she could name. She would be a criminal, a fugitive. These last days on the run had proven it was a way of life she didn't anticipate.

The Coalition of World Governments would not allow a renegade JR to go unpunished.

She could only hope Ronin did not prove too elusive. She wouldn't have much time to hunt him down. If she could find him, if she could kill him, she would get the opportunity to start over again. But she could never go home. He had taken that option from her months ago.

She would have to begin again on Earth or someplace like it. She would never be safe on a civilized world again.

“Silk!” Harry’s shout brought her out of the bathroom with her gun in her hand. “Whoa, no need for shootin,’ Tex. I surrender. Put that thing down.”

Harry held both hands in the air as Silk aimed her weapon in his direction. Seeing no immediate danger, she slipped the gun back in her waistband.

“You’re not gonna like this,” he warned.

Harry’s face was gray beneath his dark skin. She came to his side. For some reason, the adrenaline rush that had fueled her first reaction did not subside. Instead, her heart began to pound as if she’d run a race with a jet bike to cross the room. Her pulse raced, but the world around her seemed to slow down until even Harry’s voice sounded distorted and strange.

“I got an e-mail from Sol.”

“But that is good. He is not dead.” Silk was relieved. She was. She willed her body to feel the relief, but it refused. Her heart still pounded. Her skin became numb. There was an odd echo in her ears as if she listened to Harry through a long tunnel even though he was only inches away.

“Right, well, that’s the good part.”

The echo didn’t stop her from hearing the sadness and hesitation in his words. Silk reached for the back of his chair, and thankfully the brakes were locked. It held her steady and firm as her body began to quake. She knew this moment. She’d been here before. Those same reluctant eyes had looked at her. That same hollow voice had been filled with regret for having to cause her pain.

“And the bad?” she forced herself to ask and her own voice echoed worse than Harry’s. As if the hollow tone of his had found its way all the way to her heart.

“Rule. Davis Rule might be dead.”

Chapter Seventeen

Silk reached for Harry's computer. She was going to throw it against the wall.

"Wait. Sol says the restroom was covered in blood, but Rule was gone. He might still be alive." Harry summarized what he'd read while he held his beloved computer with a protective hand. "There was nothing he or Piper could do. Davis was gone before they knew what happened. They're at a library in Illinois. And he wants to know where we are."

Harry began to type, but Silk pressed her hand over his fingers to still their movement.

"Some of the blood was not Rule's," Silk thought out loud. No body. Davis had lost the fight because he had disappeared, but she knew the big muscular agent would have inflicted damage on whoever snatched him.

She knew this because the alternative was unthinkable.

Suddenly, the world resumed normal speed and the echo was gone. Her heart still beat faster, but now it was because she knew there was work to do.

Harry read more.

"Sol says he and Piper slipped away when the bloody bathroom was discovered. Must have been some ruckus."

"Tell him to take Piper somewhere safe and quiet," she advised.

"He won't like that," Harry responded, pausing. A hard look from Silk turned his pause into a typing frenzy.

"Tell him I said it's imperative for them to avoid the authorities," Silk instructed. She was already thinking ahead. Her panic had turned into focus. Her fear into action.

"Maybe they should go to the police for protection. Those alien assassins mean business," Harry suggested, pausing again.

Silk walked across the room to retrieve her bag and their guns.

"The *IL-Bah* did not attack Rule," she explained to Harry as she worked.

"How do you know?" he asked, but at the same time he resumed typing.

"If the *IL-Bah* had attacked him, there would have been a body."

No body meant their friends Larkin and Steele. No body meant FBI. But why would the FBI hurt one of their own? Silk didn't know...but she intended to find out.

Davis didn't trust her. He needed her. One did not negate the other. They might never be together again, but she wouldn't let him die without bringing down Armageddon on anyone who would hurt him. Somehow, like it or not, he felt like her partner. Even if he never accepted that fact himself.

"I guess this means those Vegas showgirls are gonna have to do without me for a little while longer," Harry sighed and quickly finished typing the message to Piper and Sol.

"Silk is on her way."

While Piper and Sol went into hiding, Silk and Harry headed east. Davis Rule needed her now. Ronin could wait. Silk fought an adrenaline surge as it threatened to overpower her intellect. Davis needed her. That thought made her muscles bunch and her fists clench. Her physical reaction was nothing but a nuisance as long as there was no one to fight. She needed to focus on finding Rule. It took every ounce of JR training to discipline her emotions.

She didn't spend much time wondering why. She had known the FBI agent less than a week. In that time, she had battled him, wanted him and forced herself to leave him behind. She had also learned to respect him. While she could hurt him and had, she was furious to think of Larkin or Steele subjecting him to pain. They did not deserve the honor of bettering Davis Rule.

By the time they reached the gas station where Davis had disappeared, she had achieved an icy calm tinged only slightly with fury.

The training compound was perfect for his needs. Down for renovation, the facility was deserted and isolated. It also provided a delightful playing field.

Designed to replicate a small town, it was meant to be used in training soldiers for urban warfare. Every square inch of it was wired with cameras, pressure-sensitive alarms and listening devices.

He sat in the control tower located in the church steeple in the middle of this town and rubbed his hands together in anticipation. From here, he would watch Silk fight. He would allow her one final glorious hour and then he would be on hand to take her life. Thus, he would guarantee his future.

With the flick of a switch, he zeroed in a camera located in one of the pretty little bungalows made to resemble a humble American home. Davis Rule did not look good. He sat bound to a chair, and from this distance miniaturized in black and white on the television screen, he looked more than diminished. He looked dead.

With another flick of another switch, he was able to key on a speaker in the bungalow.

"Yeah, Mr. Kale?" Larkin's voice was tremulous. No doubt he was intimidated by the torture he had witnessed.

“Enough. I want him to be alive when she gets here.”

“Ah, sure thing, Mr. Kale.” Larkin sounded relieved.

He saw Rule move slightly with the sound of their voices. Good. The man would be alive, barely. It pleased him. He would be the one to kill Rule as well.

With his own two hands.

Bobby Steele had a bad case of the jitters. They shimmied and shook from the toes of his wingtips all the way up to the starched collar of his department-store shirt.

He sat in his car outside of the gas station where Rule had been taken just as he’d been ordered to do. He had left Larkin with that creep at the training center just as he’d been ordered to do. He was going to deliver his message to the foxy blonde when she showed up, as ordered. Then he was going to disappear.

A particularly bad shiver rocked Steele’s spine. It caused his knee to bump against the steering wheel. Something was wrong with William Kale. Very wrong. The guy had gone loco. He hated to leave Larkin with Kale. He really hated to leave him in the company of the big creep who tortured Rule. The guy wore sunglasses so you couldn’t see his eyes, but Bobby didn’t have to. He knew the guy was nuts just by watching some of what he’d done to Rule.

Sometimes you couldn’t control the way things went down. Larkin was on his own. He was pretty sure his partner would have done the same thing.

Neither one of them had ever liked Davis Rule. The guy was just too all-star-quarterback-top-of-the-class. He’d been a favored agent. Then things had changed. Suddenly, Bobby and Larkin were getting preferred treatment. For a while, it had been good. For a while. He didn’t mind showing Rule up, but the guy sure as hell didn’t deserve what he was getting back at the compound. Nobody deserved that shit. He hoped Larkin found a way out.

Finally, Bobby saw her. A shock of silvery blonde hair and a tight fuzzy sweater exited a van across the deserted lot. The place had been closed down since yesterday. Right now, a cleaning crew was busy scrubbing smears from Davis Rule off the bathroom walls.

She walked toward him with strong, purposeful strides. He knew he was probably in for it, but he was still glad he’d been the one chosen to give her a message. Silk Jones might beat the hell out of him, but she was nothing compared to what he’d left behind.

Chapter Eighteen

Late afternoon sun bathed the picturesque village in soft yellow light. Rows of houses, a grassy town square and a deserted main street gave off an eerie air of serenity. This was broken by the presence of an eight-foot-high chain-link fence topped with barbed wire.

Silk stood on the west side of this barrier, knowing if she breached the fence and entered the facility she would walk into a trap.

She had no choice.

Davis Rule might be dead. He might be five hundred miles away, but he also might be beyond the fence. Judging from the expression on Steele's face as he'd given her the message from William Kale, Rule was hurt and he needed her help.

Her head told her she could handle whatever Kale threw her way, but her instincts told her something else altogether. Steele had been terrified of something he'd seen within this gated compound. And now, standing several hundred feet away from the nearest house, Silk felt the danger.

It was in the air, blanketing the town darkly even as waning sunlight twinkled in glass-paned windows.

She took a deep breath. It was time. The setting sun glared perfectly to her advantage. The stationary surveillance camera mounted on the fence would be blinded for a few seconds.

Now.

Silk climbed hand over hand, her muscles protesting after days of inactivity. Still, she was fast. She made it to the top with seconds to spare. The large coils of spiked wire couldn't be avoided. She had dressed carefully. Jeans would protect her legs and a borrowed jean jacket from Harry should do the same for her arms.

Placing her hands on the smooth top rail, Silk launched herself over and through the coils. She heard razor sharp wire shred fabric as she moved between the strands. She averted her face toward the sky.

One jagged spike managed to part her skin along her back. It made a deep scratch that began at her waist and ended between her shoulder blades. She dropped to the ground on the opposite side of the fence. She dismissed the stinging slash on her back to focus on her next objective.

Finding Rule.

It wouldn't be easy. She counted fifteen buildings made to resemble residential housing, two long rows of faux businesses on either side of a central thoroughfare as well as a library, a courthouse and a church, its tall white steeple reaching high above the rest of the town.

Silk's eyes were drawn to that steeple. Strategically, it would be an excellent spot to survey the whole compound. The skin on the back of her neck prickled with awareness. She moved to the shadows of the nearest building. There was little cover. In the whole town, less than ten trees and these were small with sparse foliage. Bushes were small and equally useless for her purposes.

Silk crouched down with her back against the wall. She waited for night to fall. She would need complete darkness to search the town without detection.

He grew impatient. Darkness crept over the town and with it came the certainty that Silk had arrived. Sensors were at the ready. Cameras were all operational. He double checked screens and switches and readouts.

Nothing.

Had he been wrong about Davis Rule? Had Silk been a one-man kind of woman after all?

He reached his hand forward to key the switch.

"Yes, Mr. Kale?" Larkin's voice sounded tired and leery.

"Be on alert."

"Yes, sir."

"How is our guest?"

"He's alive, but he's gonna need medical attention to stay that way. You might want to tell your guy here to ease up again. He's kind of—pacing. And he looks—"

"Hungry?" he interrupted the FBI agent, enjoying the fear he could hear in his voice. "It's the smell of blood. I wouldn't get too close to him if I were you."

In another tone of voice altogether, he gave a command.

"Stand down. Enough. Wait."

On the tiny screen, he could see the large form obey. It moved to a corner and crossed its arms over its chest.

"Jeez," Larkin groaned. "Why don't I come up there with you, Mr. Kale?"

"Stay where you are."

He flipped the switch to kill the speaker before Larkin could begin to beg. He couldn't afford such idle amusements. More serious pleasures walked the streets below. He was sure of it.

Cool air caressed Silk's skin as she shed the ruined jacket. Her shirt was sliced through as well, but she needed the black stretchy turtleneck also borrowed from Harry to mask her pale skin in the moonlight.

Night was good. She moved with some confidence, knowing that cameras would have a diminished range.

Silk edged along the wall, embracing the shadows as she slipped into the first house. Cold, empty rooms greeted her, upstairs and down. She knew her time was limited. She knew there were probably unseen sensors in the floors or ceilings or walls.

She also forced herself to ignore the urgency that prickled beneath her skin. She needed to be methodical. Rule could be anywhere. And she had to find him before it was too late.

There. Movement. Pressure sensors in a house on the west end of the compound had lit up lights on the map grid he watched. The lights had gone off almost as quickly as they had gone on. Silk moved fast, but she wouldn't be fast enough.

Two more houses checked out negative as Silk made her way to the center of the town. The church still called to her, but she rejected it. Davis wasn't there. The steeple called to her for reasons she couldn't fathom. A constant nagging pull in her gut.

The church would have to wait. She had to check each building along the way.

After the gloom of seven empty houses, Silk came to a sign that read "Main Street". Here were numerous store fronts, barber and beauty shops and the bank. And nowhere to hide. The buildings were joined with no crevices or alleyways between them. The glimmer from a hundred windows faced the street, watchful and wary.

Silk was horribly exposed as she edged along those windowed walls. She avoided the street, but the cold windows at her side were scarcely better. Behind them, the contents of the buildings were a mystery. The rising moon shone off the glass until only her reflection and the reflection of the street behind her could be seen.

Beyond the glass, anything could lurk unseen in each building she passed. Seconds ticked by.

Silk slipped from one store to another using the same procedure to check the interior of each one. Up, down, all around and out. She made it as far as the beauty shop. This designation was printed in block letters on the window at her back. Just as with each building before, she wouldn't be able to see the interior until she went through the door. The door was three feet away.

The window exploded in a spray of glass shards as two arms busted through to grab Silk and pull her inside. She was gripped and pressed to her attacker who ignored the slicing wedges of glass trapped

between their bodies. The edge of one cut across her stomach before she could bring her feet up. Then she pushed off from the man who held her. Once, twice, three times, she pushed with her legs. Her legs pounded him right in the gut, but it took three strikes to break free.

By the time she faced him in a defensive stance, she knew it was no FBI agent she fought.

Silvery orbs glowed in the dark interior of the shop, and the *IL-Bah* stood tall regardless of the cuts he must have sustained in the attack.

Silk had no time to wonder if Davis was alive. She had no time to wonder why the *IL-Bah* was here where she least expected him. She could only prepare to fight, knowing it would probably be her last.

She pulled her gun from the waistband of her jeans. She heard one of her fingers snap as the *IL-Bah*'s fist knocked it from her hand like a child's toy.

She ignored the pain.

Putting all her weight behind a foot to his jaw bought her enough time to whirl and rip a large metal arm with a plastic hood from the back of a nearby chair. She used this strange object as a club. The plastic shattered as she made several rapid successive hits against the *IL-Bah*'s head.

He wasn't deterred.

The monster reached for her make-shift club and jerked it so hard and so fast that she was carried along for the ride. She and her club were hurled over a counter to crash against a wall of bottles.

Silk gasped for air as the impact forced oxygen from her lungs. Her hitches for breath sent pain exploding through her chest. Broken ribs, she thought. She struggled to detach herself from the pain.

The *IL-Bah* was coming.

Silk looked for a weapon and focused upon the bottles under her body. Chemicals and substances Earth women used to color and curl their hair. She wrenched the lid off of a bottle and threw the contents in the face that appeared over the counter. The *IL-Bah* was undeterred. He lifted her from the floor and threw her again.

She landed on the opposite side of the room with the bottle still in her hand. A sniff told her that her weapon had been nothing but colored water, a prop for a prop.

Then, through an archway into a backroom, she saw a row of sinks. Lined up to pair with the sinks were heavy padded, reclining chairs, each one sitting on metal runners for legs.

Silk ran for the nearest chair, hoping it wasn't bolted to the floor. She skidded into it and was thrilled when the *IL-Bah* stalked her slowly as if he had all the time in the universe to play with her. The chair moved. It wasn't bolted down. Her impact slid it a foot before she and it came to a stop.

The *IL-Bah* was unconcerned. He had no idea what she planned.

Biting down on her lip against the pain in her chest and finger, Silk hoisted the heavy chair and used it to knock the *IL-Bah*'s feet out from under him. In one smooth move, she jammed a runner against the fallen assassin's neck and threw herself into the chair.

Her weight combined with the weight of the chair pressed down on the IL-Bah's vulnerable larynx. Cartilage was crushed beneath his tough skin.

Silk steeled herself against the movements beneath her as the monster suffocated. In moments, the silver glow of his eyes had dimmed in death.

She had killed an *IL-Bah*. Without a laser, without a partner or even a stun stick at her disposal, she had fought an *IL-Bah* and won.

Silk eased off the chair. Her body barely claimed the victory. Her breath came shallow beneath damaged ribs. Her wrist ached and her middle finger on one hand was nothing but a crooked throb.

Her shirt stuck to her in great damp patches. She knew it wasn't only from exertion. The shards of glass and razor wire had taken their toll. She was losing blood. Too much blood. There was nothing she could do but proceed.

Silk exited the faux beauty salon to edge her way to the next building. She would be weaker during the next confrontation. And the heavy taste of danger in the air told her there would be another.

He couldn't believe his eyes. A hidden ceiling camera had given him a hazy view of the proceedings, but there was no doubt that Silk had triumphed single-handedly over an *IL-Bah*. It was impossible, but the proof lay motionless on the screen.

He didn't despair. It wasn't in his nature. He focused on the positive. The sexy Justice Representative was injured and alone. He knew her. He knew her hot-headed temperament. She would become desperate and act foolishly, especially when she got a look at Davis Rule. Larkin could probably take her. He was glad; however, that his whole plan didn't rest on Larkin's shoulders.

Three *IL-Bah*. Harry had only seen three *IL-Bah* coming through the portal in New York. None from Las Vegas. Silk went quickly from building to building, increasing the speed of her search. His process wasn't perfect. His technology archaic. She knew she couldn't count on its accuracy. There may be more.

She was trying to cope with the surprise of it, trying to understand how William Kale tied in with the *IL-Bah*, when she finally came upon Davis Rule.

In the dim light of the room she entered she saw Rule slumped in a chair on the opposite side. It was obvious that only the ropes at his waist and his bound arms wrapped around the back of the chair held him in place. There was a pool of blood at his feet.

Silk couldn't stop the protest that rose up from her chest to push past her lips.

She didn't rush to his side. The metallic odor of blood wasn't the only odor in the room. She also smelled Larkin's heavy cologne.

"I can't believe you made it this far. That dude is a freakin' animal," Larkin said as he stepped from a darkened hallway at her right. His gun was trained on her chest.

"Was," Silk corrected. "Was a freakin' animal."

"Shit." Larkin gripped the gun with his other hand as well. He yelled at the ceiling over their heads. "You hear that, Kale? She killed the bastard. What do you think I'm supposed to do with her?"

"Distract her, of course, Mr. Larkin. Distract her."

The voice coming from a speaker set within the plastered walls was detached and fuzzy.

Silk didn't have more time than that to analyze it. A tremendous weight barreled into her, driving her body to the floor. Her knees skidded on carpet and she pressed her hands forward to keep her face from skidding there as well.

"Holy..." Larkin backed up several paces and then he turned and ran. It wasn't an indication that she had less to fear when he took his gun with him.

"Siilc Aman-shi, I have waited for my turn with you." The deep voice in her ear was not familiar, but as the weight lifted from her and she was lifted in the air by two huge hands around her wrists, her heart fell. This wasn't *IL-Bah* or FBI. The man that held her was seven feet tall. His arms were the size of small trees and his fists were as big as her head. He was an Enforcer. She couldn't understand it. She couldn't believe it. Enforcers, like JRs, were raised from infancy to uphold the law. Encountering one like this was impossible.

"Meet my secret weapon, Silk. He's been inactive for a while, drugged in a cargo crate, I'm sure you understand. You'll have to forgive him if he gets a little enthusiastic with you."

The man holding Silk shook her, using her arms like the strings of a marionette. She used the movement to shake off the shock that had paralyzed her. He was huge, but he wasn't bred to kill like the *IL-Bah*. He was a man. A human. And she would win this day.

His play brought her too close to his face. Silk used the proximity to bring the top of her head forward to slam against his nose. She heard the crunch and was rewarded by the sudden release of her arms.

Enforcers were used to guard Secure Holds for a reason. They were big, but they were not fast or particularly smart. They were intimidating guards, but were useless for much else. Silk was not trapped behind force-field bars. A guard couldn't stop her.

The giant covered his nose with his hands. Silk used his surprise to her advantage. She couldn't knock him off his feet, so she aimed at one huge knee. Both of her shoes connected with their target and she was rewarded again by a crunch as her flying kick busted his knee cap.

He swiped out with one club of a fist and Silk was sent backward to land in a skidding heap on her rear. The wall stopped her movement with a solid thwack. She bit her lip at the impact, but stood quickly fighting dizziness.

Rule hadn't moved.

The Enforcer did. He came for her, dragging his busted leg behind him. She knew she didn't have time to look for signs of life from the chair in the corner. She had to take out the Enforcer before the man behind the speaker decided to show his face.

Larkin's gun was in the hallway. He had dropped it after all. Silk rolled away from the wall and managed to grasp the weapon in her fingers just as the Enforcer grasped her by one ankle and lifted her in the air.

She pulled off five shots right in his stomach.

The man went down and Silk went down with him. For several long panicky moments, she thought she would be trapped beneath the body when the man behind the speaker arrived. She didn't want William Kale, if it was Kale, to find her helpless.

Finally, she was able to slip from beneath the giant carcass.

Even the firing of the gun hadn't brought Davis Rule to consciousness.

Silk limped toward the man in the chair. His curly hair was matted and wet across his forehead. The moisture wasn't sweat. His broad shoulders were slumped forward over a chest smeared with blood. With trembling fingers, Silk lifted Rule's face up. She almost dropped it again in horror. Cuts and contusions marred his handsome features. He was almost unrecognizable.

Forgetting Larkin, forgetting Kale, Silk dropped to her knees and pressed her cheek against Rule's chest. It took several panicked minutes for her to feel a shallow rise and fall. He was alive. She had to keep him that way.

Silk knew it was a long hike back to the fence. She knew she had lost blood and her injuries were no longer ignorable. She also knew that it didn't matter. Rule was in much worse shape and she was their only hope.

It took too long to undo the ropes. His wrists were destroyed by the tight bonds around them. He had struggled. He would have. He would have fought until they had taken all the fight from him.

Finally, he was free. He fell forward and she had to move quickly to catch him. He was lighter than the Enforcer had been, but just barely. She hoisted him over one shoulder and made for the door.

She had seen enough to know that should Larkin or Kale confront her before she made it out of the compound they would die for what they had done to her partner.

He rose quickly. The game was not over. It was far from over. But he wouldn't face even an injured Silk alone. He had seen her kill the *IL-Bah*. He still couldn't believe that she had killed the Enforcer as well. He had brought the guard with him from Secure Hold after his brain had been fried with a stunner. It had been amusing having the big man act like a large puppy, doing whatever he was told.

Now even that pleasure was taken from him. He tried to maintain his optimism. The night was not a total loss.

She would be hampered by Rule and it was entirely probable that her lover would die.

Once he had replenished his resources, he would find her again and then he would finish her for good.

Chapter Nineteen

Silk stopped beside the same building she had crouched near earlier in the night as she waited for darkness to fall. She lowered Rule gently to the ground.

The church steeple still called to her, but she couldn't heed that call. Rule needed more help than she could give him. He needed medical attention. She couldn't leave him here to investigate the church. In truth, she was in no shape to investigate anything.

She couldn't believe they had made it this far. Larkin must have kept running. She wondered where the agent would end up. He was obviously no further threat. Kale was the wild card. She wondered if she could expect him to swoop down and open fire while she tried to get Rule through the fence.

Silk almost welcomed the confrontation. Almost. She left Rule long enough to run to the fence and make a hole she hoped was big enough for Rule's body to slip through.

She used her hands to pull the fence up from the bottom. It only gave so much. She didn't want to have to search for a cutting implement. And she didn't want to head for the main gate. It would have to do.

Rule didn't protest when she pushed him through the dirt and under the fence. He was limp, a dead weight. The thought made her shudder. She took a moment to press her face close to his lips once they were on the other side.

She couldn't detect a breath because the night breeze was stronger than his breathing. She pushed one hand under his shirt, aching as she felt the moist injuries there. He was still warm and his heart still beat weakly under her fingers.

Taking a deep breath, Silk hoisted Rule back on her shoulders. She faced a hike of about a mile to reach the van. She only hoped Harry knew what to do once she was there.

Chapter Twenty

Rule was hooked to medical equipment she didn't recognize. One machine, called a respirator, helped him to breathe. Another monitored his heartbeat. Not for the first time since she'd come to this world, Silk longed for resources from home. A modern Med lab was what a man in Rule's condition needed. Still, Harry seemed confident. He had called many friends in the medical profession in a frenzy of what he labeled paybacks. She couldn't imagine what favors he had done for the people who responded. Or the risks they had taken to stabilize Rule and move him to a secluded mountain chalet. She knew the ambulance and equipment were borrowed.

She only hoped they knew what they were doing. She was out of her element. She had no training in the healing arts. She was uncomfortable in her role as companion to the unconscious man.

The frequent shifts in her seat and the agitated flexing of her fingers went unnoticed. Rule had not stirred. Even when they had carefully set his broken bones. Even when his breathing tube had been inserted. His form was motionless.

Silk's own breath was caught in her chest. This strange world was suddenly more off-kilter than before. Her image of Rule was set in her mind. Big, powerful and indomitable. An adversary so admired that he'd become almost a friend...a lover when he couldn't be that. It was wrong for him to be broken and helpless. Wrong for him to be hurt in this way because of her.

Silk spent the time running the night's events over and over again in her brain. Her analysis was disjointed, punctuated occasionally by unbidden notice of Rule's injuries. She wondered how William Kale had become involved with Ronin. The presence of the *IL-Bah* and the Enforcer at the compound could mean nothing else.

His cheeks are so puffy how will I even know if he tries to open his eyes.

She wondered why she had been allowed to leave with Rule.

The bandage on his chest is soaked through.

She wondered how she would fight the ever-widening band of enemies she faced.

Stitches. So many stitches.

Finally, it was Harry who rolled into the room to pull her away from Rule's side. She had not slept in over twenty-four hours. She had not bathed since the bloody fight with the *IL-Bah* and the Enforcer. She had been so focused on Rule that she hadn't even realized that much of the blood he had lost was dried on her clothes.

“You need a shower and sleep, Silk. It’s gonna be a while before we know anything. If looks could heal, he would be doing the tango right now. As it is, there’s nothin’ you can do here. And you’re scaring some of the nurses.”

Silk didn’t smile. Surely, Harry didn’t expect her to. He hustled her out of the room with a hand on her hip. It was a testament to his concern that he didn’t slide it around to cup her behind.

“Nothing I can do.”

“That’s right. You can’t do anything for him. You need to get some rest and let my friends do their work.”

Nothing?

Silk wasn’t so sure.

Silk Aman-shi wasn’t a nurse. She wasn’t a doctor or a med-lab scientist. She couldn’t hold Rule’s bandaged hands and offer him comfort. It wasn’t in her nature. She could do one thing. She could bring the man responsible to his knees.

Ronin D’Ja-nar had long been her primary obsession. Now Silk refocused her energy. Perhaps Kale would lead her to Ronin. Based on the presence of the Enforcer and the *IL-Bah*, that wasn’t an illogical assumption. But in the end, it didn’t matter. Now Kale came first. She couldn’t help Rule in a medical or even a nurturing way, but she could make certain that the same man wasn’t capable of hurting him again.

“Sweets, you can not storm FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., I mean, you’re awesome in action, but that would not be the smart thing to do.”

“You can use Rule’s credentials to get her past security, Harry.” Solstice Meadows was on her side. She had woken from a brief rest to find him and Piper Jo at the chalet. She didn’t know if having his support was a good thing. Piper was looking at her gray-haired friend as if he was on a rampage and Harry rolled his eyes.

“Just because you can do a thing doesn’t mean you should do a thing, Sol. This is serious. We aren’t talking commando here. We’re talkin’ government crackdown. We make the wrong move now and we’ll all be looking at four little white walls for the rest of our lives.”

“This is serious, Harry. And it’s what we’ve been leadin’ up to with all our little hobbies. We can’t back out now.”

“I do not want any of you to put yourself at further risk. Alter Rule’s credentials, and then I proceed alone.”

Solstice looked betrayed. He also slumped slightly in his chair as if the wind had been sucked from his sails. Piper thumped him on the back.

“Cheer up, Sol. Maybe they’ll send a team of Army Rangers to invade our little party here and you’ll see some action too.”

Her friend rolled his eyes, but he perked up a bit as if the suggestion wasn’t entirely unappealing.

“I’ll do it. But only if you promise to be discreet and careful.”

Silk stood beside Harry’s chair. She didn’t understand why Piper burst into laughter.

“Discreet? That’s a good one, Harry. Every blonde Amazon inch of her. Discreet.”

Piper continued to giggle. Silk smiled. She would alter her appearance. Kale would be caught by surprise. And, after dealing with him, she would continue on to Ronin.

She couldn’t undo what had been done to Miilos. She couldn’t undo what had been done to Rule. But she could do *something*. And that something was what she did best.

It took until evening to gather her supplies. It would be a four-hour drive to Washington, D.C. Silk spent a few moments by Davis Rule’s side. A chubby little nurse had told her that he had flinched when she changed his last IV. It was a good sign. He was a very strong man. The Enforcer had not been gentle or kind. It was amazing that Rule had lived.

“I am leaving you, Davis. There is nothing I can do for you here and I have to make sure that you stay safe so that you can heal. I’m not sure if you were conscious when they did this to you. I’m not sure if you know now that I was telling you the truth. If you had seen the Enforcer, you would know. I never lied to you. For some reason, I trusted you from the start. You are a good man.” Silk eased her hand out to brush damp curls from Rule’s forehead. The whisper feel of those dark strands against her fingers made her gut clench. She would never do this for him again. Should she survive her encounter with Kale, should she find a lead to Ronin, she would be leaving Earth and Rule very soon.

“You were a fine partner, Davis Rule. Any JR would have been proud to have you by their side.”

Silk leaned down to brush a kiss across the bit of skin exposed over one of Rule’s bandaged cheeks. Then she rose and left the room without a backward glance.

If she had looked back, she might have seen the flutter of eyelashes as Davis Rule opened his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-One

Silk wore a black wig and a nondescript gray business suit. The slacks were loose and frumpy. The jacket was oversized and easily hid the laser she had borrowed from Harry. Its familiar shape was pressed comfortably against the small of her back. The materials it was constructed of were too foreign to the building's weapon scanner to be detected. The flat shoes on her feet couldn't disguise her height, but at least they didn't add to it. She curled her shoulders down and hoped for the best.

With her attention trained onto a hand-held computer, she pretended to jot down notes with the stylus and used the deceptive business to avoid eye contact with the few people she passed.

It was evening and apparently not unusual to see a harried assistant of some sort bustling about when most others had gone home.

Rule's doctored credentials had gotten her this far. She would have to do the rest. She was lucky. Davis Rule worked in the part of the building with the lowest need for security measures. At least, someone high up thought so. They had no idea.

Silk traversed the length of a west-facing corridor. She knew where to find Kale's office. Harry was more resourceful than any human had a right to be. She just didn't know what she'd find when she got there.

Window coverings to her left allowed glimpses of waning sunlight to dapple the carpet under her feet as she made her way quickly and quietly to her destination. The office suite was deserted when she came to it. Shadowed cubicles were empty in silent clusters of maze-like walls awaiting the coming night.

Silk eased through this outer area. Briefly, she wondered which desk was Rule's. She couldn't picture the big man in any of the tiny work stations. He wasn't built for the office. The image of his injured face flashed in front of her eyes and she blinked against it. No time for the emotional response the image invoked.

A light was on in the main office that filled one far corner of the room. It was a selfish placement taking up more than half of the windows along the wall, leaving the underlings in cubicles to spend each day in half-light. She found it laughable that only the superior warranted light and walls.

All the time, she eased closer. From under the door, a light lit the floor in a lopsided rectangle of brightness. Silk froze as a shadow of movement crossed over this illuminated area. Someone had passed through the beam a lamp was casting, revealing their presence. They were either unafraid or unprepared. She couldn't guess which, but she hoped for the later.

Silk drew the Mahberg. The grip wasn't custom fitted to her hand, but it felt good there. Familiar.

The door opened before she could kick it down. So much for her hopes.

"I've been expecting you. Please, come in."

A middle-aged man stood outlined by the light. He was tall with broad sloping shoulders and a solid build. Something about the way he stood with his feet planted lightly on their heels and his hands barely resting on his hips caused Silk to pause. Did she know him?

He turned and the light fell fully on his face. The odd idea that he was familiar left her as his features were revealed. She had never seen him before, but he matched the description she had of William Kale.

"That suit is a bit much. I assure you the women who work here dress better than that."

He motioned her into the office and Silk saw no reason not to comply. For some reason, she was struck by the movement of his hands. Or rather, by the way he seemed to watch them move as if something about his own fingers fascinated him.

"You took longer than I expected. I'm surprised, Silk. Bedside vigil? That is not your style."

The way he said her name caused the fine hairs on the back of her neck to rise under the netting of her wig. So far he hadn't seemed to notice the laser in her hands. Silk used her pinky finger to key the charge. The slight whir of activation drew his attention away from his hands to hers.

"I'm surprised at that too. How many times have I heard you say that you prefer hand-to-hand?"

The whir of the weapon in her hand seemed to get louder until it filled Silk's ears. It almost blocked out the tone of his voice until only the words remained. The words, the inflection, the way he spoke if not the actual sound of his voice set off that dull throb of familiarity again. She fought the odd sensation that she somehow knew this man she'd never met, afraid that such a distraction might get her killed.

"I know you, Silk. You don't want to blast William Kale. You want to kick his ass. At least, you think it's his ass you want to kick."

"You aren't William Kale?"

The man matching Kale's description, standing in Kale's office smiled.

"Somehow I don't think that question means you've had the revelation it implies."

He moved to take off his blazer as he spoke, revealing a slight paunch. He tossed the coat onto the back of a nearby chair and began to roll up his sleeves. Silk flexed her fingers around the laser's grip.

The arms he revealed were strange to her, but the way he moved those arms were not. She swallowed and fought the dizziness of déjà vu. His movements were not those of a middle-aged man who was a management type. They were smooth, fluid and dangerous.

And, somehow, familiar.

He threw the first punch, knocking the laser to the floor in a move so fast it negated the middle-aged spread evident beneath the thin cotton of his crisp white shirt.

She dropped back slightly, bending her knees and meeting the next blow smoothly with a counter strike of her own. He met it with effortless ease. In fact, they practically danced for the next few moments as the fight turned automatic, both expecting the moves of the other. One-two-three. One-two-three. Silk almost heard the music in her head.

As she side stepped a kick she knew was coming as sure as she had known each and every move before it, she knocked into a small pedestal holding a vase of flowers.

The man who wasn't Kale stopped his attack as she froze to watch the flowers scatter all around their feet. She could have sworn she heard the impact of each and every blossom on the carpet in spite of the thud the vase made against the wall. Every fiber of her being was concentrated on the impossible presence of D'nison flowers in this place at this time.

"Call me sentimental, Siilc. I missed you."

She wasn't prepared for the sudden push that propelled her body up against the wall with an impact only slightly less hollow than the vase's. His form was strange to her. She'd never felt the slightly soft, but heavy chest that crushed her breasts or the hands that reached up to cup her face. So why was her blood singing through her veins as if it knew something she didn't?

"I missed your scent. I missed sparring with you. I missed this."

Before her numb mind and body could react, he pressed his lips to hers. And finally without a doubt, she knew. Miilos wasn't dead. He wasn't dead at all.

Her blood responded to the kiss. After all, they had been bred for each other, and for a long intoxicating second she was lost to everything but that elemental fact. His lips, his face were not shaped like those she had known and loved, but they were his nonetheless. She could taste the truth of it as his tongue slid along hers. Familiar. Intoxicating. Miilos.

For long seconds as her blood betrayed her reasoning, she almost forgot Davis Rule. Almost. But then, in the end, blood wasn't enough.

Silk brought both hands down in a sudden chopping movement on either side of Miilos' neck. He fell back gagging and choking and finally surprised by something she had done.

"Why?"

She should take him out while he was at a disadvantage, but she couldn't. She had to know. Her blood still sang, but the passion, the pull was being replaced with anger and betrayal. Her gut clenched around the nausea in her stomach as she tried to fathom the scope of her discovery.

"Don't you ever get sick of it, Siilc? Bred to this. Meant for that. I wanted to be my own man. I wanted to be free. Ronin gave me the chance."

"You only traded one form of service for another. Ronin doesn't give. He takes. He's using you."

"I've been used since the day I was born. So have you. We had no choice. Deciding to work with Ronin was a choice. One I made years ago."

Silk shuddered in place as if she was standing against a blast of arctic wind. Her skin was brittle and icy. Each word from Miilos' strange lips threatened to shatter her into nothing but crackling shards.

Her partner. Her life mate. Her love. It had all been a lie.

"So, I was the first Justice Representative who ever wanted something more. Ronin helped me disappear. It was painful. You don't breeze through getting your face blown off. It took months of surgery to construct this new face and body. And it isn't the one I wanted. You chose this for me."

Miilos rolled his shoulders as if straining against an ill-fitting suit.

"I chose?"

"You didn't fall apart the way other partners had."

It was true. No JR in history had survived the death of a partner. So, in "killing" himself and abandoning her, Miilos had made the decision to kill her too.

But she hadn't given up. She hadn't died.

"By the way, that wasn't so great for my ego. You should have wound up a sniveling basket case. Instead, you held up through a trial, and sentencing and relocation."

He stood straight and arched his neck to stretch it. The unfamiliar brown of his eyes didn't disguise his anger.

"It was embarrassing, but Ronin knew what to do. He knew you'd be sent to Earth. He knew about this place. It was just a matter of infiltrating and using these resources to our advantage."

"You killed William Kale and took his place."

"And now, I'm going to kill you and everyone who helped you. No one can know I'm still alive. They would hunt a rogue JR to the ends of this Earth and a thousand other worlds as well. I didn't go through hell for my freedom just to lose it because of you."

He looked too calm. Too controlled. He was still a man with secrets in spite of all he'd just revealed. Fear skittered unfamiliar cold fingers down Silk's spine. Where was Ronin? Where were the agents they had been using like mindless automatons?

Miilos enjoyed the look on her face. He grinned. The lips of his new mouth were stiffer than they should have been. It made the expression almost a grimace. Or maybe it was just the fact the William Kale hadn't been one for smiles.

"You're finally getting a sense of what you're up against. Ronin has his fingers on the pulse of the universe. There's nobody immune to that kind of power. Even your new champion."

Something in his eyes gave his emotion away.

"You're jealous."

"Maybe I was, but I've finally realized it's stupid to be jealous over a dead woman."

“You can’t kill me, Miilos.”

The weapon in his hand didn’t waver. A thick brow quirked over one of his borrowed eyes.

“You think not?”

“Oh, I don’t mean you can’t bring yourself to kill me. I mean, you can’t. You’ve already tried once and you didn’t succeed.”

“Yes, that’s true. But this time I plan to use the direct approach.”

The laser discharged once, twice, three times. Silk wasn’t surprised when he missed. Miilos had never been the best shot when it came to a moving target. She flipped back and over the large desk and sent it toward him as the zing of the laser flamed the opposite wall. The desk was solid wood. The force of it rammed into his surgically enhanced gut, knocking him backward onto the floor.

She jumped up onto the desk and over it, landing with her heel against Miilos’ windpipe.

“You can’t kill me, Silk,” he choked out as his larynx was painfully compressed.

She looked into the strange-familiar eyes of her former lover. She remembered the love and laughter they had shared for twenty years. She remembered the grief that had rocked her when she had seen him die. It had all been a lie. Worst of all, in spite of his evil betrayal, she knew she would grieve again.

“You’re already dead to me.”

His eyes widened. She saw him realize the truth. She saw him realize that she was going to kill him.

“Ronin—”

“Will be next.”

Silk leaned over to pick up Miilos’ laser.

And almost lost her hand when a blast from another source caused a crater in the floor where the laser had been.

“No one to watch your back?”

Silk turned toward the voice, knowing who she would find. Miilos hadn’t been gasping out a final confession. He’d been begging for help from his new master.

Ronin D’Ja-nar stood in the doorway. He was a small man, deceptively non-descript. Brown wavy hair and mild eyes. He wore a two-piece casual outfit called a jogging suit. The casual look was one he cultivated. You had to know him to fear him.

Silk was afraid.

“Your friends are all dead. Killing Miilos won’t bring them back.”

“She wasn’t going to kill me.”

“I think perhaps I have a better view of the expression in her eyes from this angle, my friend.”

Ronin motioned with the laser and Silk eased her foot off Miilos’ neck. She turned her body slowly and flexed her empty hands at her sides. Ronin’s eyes narrowed at the movement of her fingers.

Miilos got slowly to his feet.

There was no way out of the situation. Ronin knew how to use the weapon in his hands. Miilos would recover quickly. Her only option was suicidal, but she had to take it.

“He’s right. I was going to kill you.” Silk said it calmly, but Miilos still winced as if he’d been slapped. Ronin had been right about her intentions, but he might be wrong about one thing.

There might still be time.

If her former lover and partner had known her better, he might have read her new intentions in her eyes. Thankfully, he didn’t.

Silk took a searing laser blast in the hip as she dropped, rolled and came up with her own borrowed Mahberg from halfway across the room. Even borrowed, the familiar weapon seemed to jump into her grasping fingers. She discharged it twice. Once into Ronin and again at the window of the office. The laser wound was the least of her worries as the window glass erupted, showering down three stories to the landscaping below. It was the least of her worries, because Silk threw herself out the jagged opening and followed the glass down.

She didn’t have time to feel a shard of glass rip into her right side as she brushed against the sides of the broken window. She didn’t have time to worry about the laser fire that connected once more with one shoulder as she rolled to fall in the best way possible.

Thankfully, Kale’s office didn’t face the parking lot. Silk landed with her face to the sky, cushioned by a row of hedges that scratched and poked painfully into her skin in dozens of places, but still managed to save her life. She rolled off the ruined greenery and ran as if more than her life depended on it.

As if she might still have time to save the lives of others.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It took too long to get back. But even if she could have been there instantly, by the time she'd learned of their plans it would have been too late.

There was a lot of blood.

No bodies, but a lot of blood. She thought it might have been better if she could have seen the bodies. As it was, her mind kept trying to trick her. It kept trying to offer up the hope that this much blood didn't mean that all her friends were dead. It didn't mean that Davis was dead. She walked quietly from room to room, breathing in the metallic smell and forcing herself to face the truth.

They were all dead. Harry, Sol, Piper Jo...Davis Rule. Dead because of her.

By the looks of things, they had put up a fight. The bed where she had left Rule was overturned. It took a lot to overturn a hospital bed of that size. The equipment that had kept Rule alive was smashed. She wondered if he could breathe without it. Then she knew it didn't matter. There was blood on the bed. Blood on the floor. He didn't need the machine anymore.

She knew without being told that a cleanup crew would come and scour the place until it sparkled. She knew without a doubt that she had to make it to Las Vegas without being stopped.

Ronin couldn't be allowed to gain this kind of foothold on Earth. All his power and all his connections would be unstoppable if he actually had a base of operations. His lack of roots had been their saving grace for years. Ronin with an address was unthinkable.

Silk didn't touch the bed. She left the room. She pushed her emotions down until they only throbbed deep within her where they couldn't distract her from what had to be done.

After she reached Las Vegas, after she was able to warn the League about Ronin's presence and growing power on Earth, then she would grieve. For now, she pretended the tears slipping down her cheeks weren't there. She pretended her heart wasn't crying out for someone she'd only met a few days ago.

She pretended and she walked away.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Blue Diamond Maverick didn't compete in size, scope or grandeur with the newest casino hotels on the Las Vegas Strip. It didn't have to. Even Silk had seen the giant hat-tipping cowboy in her training vids. The BDM had an iconic flair that obviously still attracted thousands through its aging doors when the lights went down and the gambling heated up.

Of course, none of the gamblers, honeymooners or convention attendees knew that one of the original hotels on The Strip was also built on top of an underground cavern that held a portal to hundreds of different worlds.

Miilos was here.

The beat of her heart would have told her it was so even if deductive reasoning hadn't. She felt his presence, and her awareness was like the sting of a fresh wound now that she knew the truth.

He didn't love her.

He never had.

He had betrayed her and everything they had been bio-engineered to stand for.

She knew what she had to do.

She knew why she had to do it.

But knowing that evil must be brought to justice didn't stop her from feeling like a woman scorned out for revenge.

Davis Rule was dead.

She walked through the crowds of unsuspecting humans in an evening dress the shop attendant had called a *Jason Wu*, but while the sparkling material was whimsical and festive, her mood was not. She carried a light wrap in her hands to conceal the Mahberg, and she realized how closely she mirrored her burden.

Silk-wrapped death just waiting to happen.

One thought repeated in her mind with every hot throb of her heart, with every determined stride in her ridiculously delicate and impractical shoes. Somehow the thought propelled her forward even as it threatened to make her legs give way, too weak to go on.

She did want revenge on Miilos. But not because he had betrayed her. Her blood flowed hotly through her veins and her muscles were tense because Miilos had killed a good man, and he deserved to suffer for it.

She had only known Rule for a few days and most of that time he had thought she was deranged. Yet he had fought by her side as the best of partners would have. Her body could still recall his touch with perfect clarity.

Dead.

Because of Miilos.

Revenge then, but not because she had been scorned. Rule had not deserved to die at the hands of a man like Miilos—a traitor, a filthy fiend who put his needs and desires for wealth and power above everyone and everything in the universe.

If Miilos had been in his own unaltered body, she would have spotted him sooner. As it was she had to keep reminding herself to look for his older, paunchy disguise, so it took her a while to see him in plain sight at a nearby bar.

He was sipping a cocktail and, when her gaze swept back to him after almost passing him by, he raised his glass in a mock salute. Her gaze met an unfamiliar one over the frosted glass.

She walked toward him, squashing her disbelief beneath ugly reality. This hateful, arrogant killer was the man she had loved and trusted her entire life. The muscles around her heart clenched, reminding her of those long-ago needs and desires he had seemed to fulfill perfectly.

That she had been young with no reason to doubt or suspect didn't make her feel any better.

Silk had her weapon out and pressed to his side in one smooth fluid motion as she pretended to embrace him. He didn't flinch. He simply took another sip of his drink.

"You are neutralized, Miilos."

She longed to pull the trigger and dreaded having to all at the same time. The dread eased when her dead partner's only reply was a slow smile that arched his now unfamiliar lips.

"I am a respected FBI agent and you're a fugitive, dear one. I really don't think you want our personal drama played out in public."

"This isn't personal. This is business. Pure business," Silk insisted, pressing the Mahberg harder into the strangeness of his soft side.

He turned his head suddenly, bringing his face closer to hers. The wrong face, but it held an expression that was startlingly familiar. The dread returned, punching her in the chest. It stole her breath and turned her trigger finger numb.

Miilos.

He shifted his gaze from her eyes to her lips and back again. No longer arrogant. He looked as if he ached for her, lived for her, missed her with every cell of his being, altered or not.

Silk swallowed and tried to breathe. Miilos leaned closer and brushed his slightly open mouth across hers. Her lips knew him much sooner than her eyes had. Instinctively, they moved to participate, accepting the soft taste, the slight moisture of his tongue.

It was all a lie.

She knew it even before his smile returned, but she couldn't pull away.

What had begun as perfect biological symmetry had become true devotion on her part. She'd loved him, literally, with every fiber of her being. They had been designed for each other and she'd never questioned that, never fought it, never resisted.

But he had.

He had balked at the inevitability of their union even as she had embraced it. He had used her blind devotion. Used it, then thrown it away.

And still her lips accepted his kiss.

The numbness of her trigger finger spread up her arm and outward until her whole body seemed frozen. She couldn't react in time when he reached up quickly, faster than his new body should have been able to move, and took the gun from her hand.

Before she could blink, the weapon was pressed to her side.

The kiss was broken and the lie of his expression had morphed into truth. He gloried in being able to recall the hold he'd had over her. His cheeks were flushed. His lips moist. But it was his eyes that showed his true reaction to the kiss. Triumph gleamed there. Sadistic delight.

"Not personal? Siile, you wound me. How can you forget what we've meant to each other?" His voice had slipped into mockery, but it still whispered softly, too close to her lips, too intimate.

Even surrounded by the crowd and the continuous noise of the gaming tables and slot machines, the moment *was* personal.

Him.

Her.

Their love turned into a twisted ugly thing she no longer recognized.

"We're going to take this upstairs. Nice and quiet and slow," Miilos commanded.

Because she knew he wouldn't hesitate to turn the casino floor into a blood bath, she obeyed.

With one hand pressing the gun into her side and this other arm wrapped around her shoulders, they made their way to the nearest elevator. She couldn't resist...yet. A public fight would only endanger innocents and end with him being triumphantly reinforced and her in handcuffs.

Silk was no longer numb, but she went along with him as if she was. She would use his arrogance. Let him think his kiss had a lasting effect.

He had disarmed her with his lips, but by the time the elevator door opened in the penthouse suite her brain was as cold and calculating as his.

He walked her across the marbled floor and past luxurious furnishings. They moved through double glass doors that lead out onto a large balcony draped in a flowering vine that mocked the deadly moment with its beauty.

It was a romantic setting.

The city was twinkling gaily below. The night sky as dazzling in its own quieter way above. And somewhere out there light years away was the tri-cubicle they had shared.

Home.

Lost forever. Even the memory of it tainted.

Miilos hadn't spoken for many minutes. She could feel the tension in the arm he had draped over her bare shoulders and in his body pressed to her side. But it wasn't until he backed her up against the gracefully curved and far-too-delicate looking rails that ringed the balcony that she felt *his pleasure*.

Again, it was mockery. How often in the past had she been aroused by his heat when he was in fact only using desire to control her?

"You have been mine for as long as I can remember," Miilos murmured into her hair, too aroused by his apparent power over her to realize she was no longer his. Not anymore.

"You came so easily into my arms the day we gained our majority."

She recalled that warm, emotional day with perfect clarity. Like an earth woman's graduation day and wedding day all rolled into one. They had celebrated their independence with long hours of intimacy. They had explored each other's bodies and, she had thought, cemented their bond.

Not all JRs became lovers, but many did. Mated for life with their life-long partner.

And suddenly the contrast struck her.

She had not gone easily into Rule's arms. They had fought the chemistry that flared between them. He had been her enemy. An alien in an alien world. Their relationship hadn't been inevitable. They hadn't been designed for each other.

Yet they had been perfect together just the same.

Her true partner, Davis Rule, was dead. The ache in her heart for him went deeper than any she'd felt for the traitor who now pressed his face into the vulnerable curve of her neck.

"Maybe I'll let you live. I haven't found a human woman who can withstand my appetites," Miilos said, and revulsion shivered over her skin.

Before she could lash out and push him away, gun or no gun, a voice interrupted from the direction of the open doors.

"I'm gonna guess this isn't what it looks like."

Miilos jerked and every nerve ending in Silk's body jumped to tingling life.

A familiar voice.

A voice she hadn't realized was so dear to her until she thought she'd never hear it again.

Miilos turned to face the man who had interrupted his game.

Davis Rule.

No longer bloody and beaten and definitely not dead.

He stood in the doorway. His tall, strong body highlighted by the lights at his back. When he moved forward, Silk gasped because his face was still bruised and he moved with a limp. But then she realized it didn't matter. Not when his gaze shifted to take in the presence of the weapon in Miilos' hand and the expression on her face. A grim smile tilted his lips and his entire body went...ready. Ready to help her. Ready to trust her. Ready to be the partner she'd needed him to be all along.

"You're a fool," Miilos growled as he backed up to the railing so that he could keep the gun on Silk and Rule.

Rule's eyes looked from the laser to Silk. There wasn't time. It wasn't safe. But he allowed his gaze to track from her head to heels and back again. For the first time that evening, she was glad to be wearing shimmering fabric that hugged her curves. Their gazes met for a second, for only a second, but before his attention shifted back to the evil man at her side, she saw appreciation for her shine.

"I've had my moments of foolishness, it's true," Rule replied. There was humor in his voice...and regret. "This isn't one of them."

Miilos laughed and only someone intimately familiar with his moods could have heard the frustration in the sound.

"Such devotion," he mocked.

"There's only one fool on this balcony," Rule continued as if Miilos hadn't said a thing. Calm and steady as always.

The Mahberg came up then as Miilos prepared to fire, and Silk moved. She launched her foot like a missile, the kick exploding from her with the force and speed that only twenty-six years of training and perfect genes could attain.

Miilos hadn't known she wasn't in his power any more. He hadn't realized she was waiting for the perfect moment to act. He hadn't known her at all. Davis did. He had known she would disarm Miilos, and even though his reflexes couldn't hope to match hers even when he was operating at one hundred percent, Rule launched his body at the same time she launched her kick.

By the time his body slammed into Miilos, the laser was already discharged. The blast of deadly light went into the air and the weapon itself followed, up and out of Miilos' fingers.

Rule was still injured. Miilos was still a JR, born and bred to be a perfect warrior in every way. But Davis had righteous fury and that evened the odds.

Silk was going to go for the Mahberg as the men grappled against the rail, but her plan was interrupted by the shriek of sixty-year-old wrought iron giving way. She forgot the laser and hurried to the edge where only two hands assured her that one of the men hadn't already plummeted to his doom one hundred stories below.

But which one?

The night breeze caressed her face and stirred her hair as she looked down.

They were both alive.

The man who had probably intended for her to fall from this very balcony had a precarious hold on the faulty railing that even now moaned in protest against his weight. She could see Miilos struggle to tighten his grip as the balcony railing gave way another inch, then two.

Davis had fared much better. His hands were gripped onto the balcony floor. Fortunately, the men were too far apart for Miilos to attempt to break Rule's hold.

"Siilc, baby, you know I love you," Miilos called.

Rule didn't speak. He only worked to hold on, his knuckles whiter than the cement they strained to grip.

She couldn't save them both. Rule's fingers could give out any second and the iron Miilos held wouldn't remain attached for long.

"I'm your partner," Miilos shouted, trying to appeal to years of conditioning and training when he sensed he could no longer appeal to her heart.

Silk dropped to her knees to reach for Rule's arms. She grabbed him tight and his eyes locked onto hers. Not calm exactly, even Davis Rule couldn't be calm dangling one hundred stories above the street. But his gaze was steady and sure. His eyes held trust, a certainty that she would be there for him.

"You aren't my partner, Miilos. You never were," Silk said to the man about to die.

As she pulled Davis to safety, metal screeched and Miilos fell.

He didn't shout or cry out. Perhaps her choice had stunned him silent during his last moments of a life he'd always disdained.

With every ounce of strength she possessed, Silk pulled the big tall agent back onto the balcony and back from its edge to stand by her side.

But not for long.

Because he pulled her from his side and into his arms.

"I've got you," he murmured into her hair, and though she should be saying such words to him the reassurance felt right to her heart.

Miilos was dead. With a violence and finality no less horrifying because it was deserved.

She accepted Rule's embrace. In fact, she accepted it and returned it so tightly that he grunted because his body had yet to recover from the Enforcer's fists.

"You're alive," she whispered just before he moved to claim her lips with a fierceness that surprised her.

The kiss was deep and hot and unlike others they'd shared. It held the promise of many future kisses to come. When he finally pulled back from her lips, she was breathless and warmed. His solid presence chased away all the icy fear she'd felt when she thought he had died.

Silk held Davis Rule, marveling that chance had created such a man. No genetic manipulation. No scientific interference. It made him all the more precious to her.

“No, Davis, I’ve got you,” she promised, and she meant it.

The devotion she felt for her new partner was more intense than any she’d ever felt for Miilos, because it had been forged in the fire of conflict.

It wasn’t habit or conditioning.

It was necessity.

Her pairing with Davis was as natural and needed as the next breath she would draw into her lungs.

“Partners,” he murmured against her lips as she kissed him again.

And she knew he said it because, for her, the word meant love.

Epilogue

The soft, cool glow of the setting sun bathed her new tri-cubicle in pale blue light. It was the third sunset of the evening and Silk's favorite. Once the larger, brighter twin suns went down, the glass walls over the city went from darkly tinted to opaque. It was then that the stage was set for the prismatic show of the third sunset—a show that dazzled with its splendor—nightly fireworks more striking because of their silence.

The entire bustling city seemed to hold its breath in anticipation and then sigh in appreciation. The setting of Eros had become a time of meditation and reflection that bordered on religious ritual...and Miilos had almost succeeded in taking this precious moment away from her forever.

From them.

Behind her, Davis Rule worked out like he'd been using the invisible force fields that were her world's version of a home gym his whole life. Easily, efficiently, he strained against each setting of the gravity bands until he completed a sufficient round of repetitions. Then he spoke the command that would make him strain harder.

He had recovered.

Though she was enchanted by the setting sun, she spared many a surreptitious glance for her companion. The man who had become her partner in every way. No matter how often she saw him shirtless, she would never get used to his utterly random beauty. When she considered the odds of a man like Davis being born by chance with no scientific interference or manipulation, she was equal parts humbled and awestruck. Creation was mightier than she'd ever imagined. Being with Davis was in its own way as precious as the setting of the third sun.

If he sensed her watching, he didn't show it. He was focused on his workout. She'd learned more of his past. He'd always enjoyed pushing himself to top physical performance. That old habit seemed even more important to him now. With that thought, her cheeks grew warm.

He was an overachiever in all aspects of his life, including the fierce, volcanic intimacy they enjoyed.

"If you keep looking at me like that we're not going to be fit for company when he arrives."

As always, casual but not.

Davis hadn't missed her increasingly lingering glances or the flush on her skin.

"I love not knowing if you're going to kick my ass or ask me to dance," she teased, remembering.

“Not that you don’t kick my ass every time we spar, but now I just love looking forward to the next dance and the next,” Davis teased back.

He had paused, his muscled chest flexed and it was as naturally perfect as divine chance and sweat could make it. Silk swallowed and resisted the urge to cross the room and accept what his gleaming eyes offered. Harry would be here soon. Too soon to do the gleam or her tingling response to it justice.

This time when Davis pushed against the unseen gravity bands offering resistance, his gaze locked to hers. The workout no longer held his attention. Even after several months of being lovers, she could still be surprised breathless by the intense attraction between them. They hadn’t been engineered to be partners, but the connection between them was all consuming and complete. They were meant to be together all the way down to a cellular level.

The door chime made her blink and tear her gaze from Davis.

Soon. They would be alone soon...but not soon enough.

Silk walked to the front portal and keyed the control that retracted the glass into the wall. She could see Harry through it before it swooshed open, but even those buffered seconds didn’t help her recover from the initial shock of pleasure she always felt when she saw him standing tall and strong without his chair.

“I wanted to see you again before I left,” Harry began. He pulled Silk into a warm, strong hug just ever so slightly shy of sexy. Davis had abandoned his workout. He cleared his throat as he came up behind her, and Harry chuckled into her neck before releasing her and stepping away. “To see you both again before I left,” he amended, but the twinkle in his eyes said he’d enjoyed the hug more than he enjoyed the quick, firm handshake from Rule that followed.

“You could stay, Harry. After what they inadvertently put me through the Council is eager to make amends. There’s no limit to what they would offer us. You would make a good JR and the doctors could...”

Davis stiffened beside her, but Silk still reached up to touch Harry’s scarred face. He had accepted the spinal implant, but he had refused the surgery that would have given him a face even more perfect and handsome than the one he’d been born with.

“I’m not ready to forget, gorgeous. Not yet. Maybe one day. For right now, I’ll keep this face as a reminder of the job I need to finish back home.”

In spite of the bumpy flaws beneath her fingers, or maybe because of them, Harry’s eyes flashed, brilliant and warmly attractive when he smiled. Though there was a glint in them that said he wasn’t all flirtation and charm. He glanced at Davis before he reached up to take her hand and place a kiss in its palm. His eyes met hers and the scar tissue didn’t matter. He was a wicked handsome devil on the inside and it showed on the out. Scars or not. Davis or not. She would always remember that Harry Striker had believed her and helped her when others wouldn’t have.

Without breaking eye contact with her, Harry spoke to Davis.

“You do realize you’re one lucky sonofabitch?”

“Every impossible second of every impossible day, my friend.”

Harry laughed, and Silk remembered Davis and his words to Harry on that day not so long ago.

“Your passage is in twenty minutes, Striker. Don’t want to be late. You might end up jumping to some dimension where giant shrimp eat techno geeks for dinner,” Solstice Meadows strolled through the portal Silk had yet to close with Piper on his arm.

Both of them looked like younger, fresher versions of themselves. Piper was still the most wrinkled woman Silk had ever seen, but there was a glow to her skin and a spring to her step that Silk knew was only partly due to vitamin treatments.

And Sol’s haircut and shave was testament to his new interest in pleasing his companion as well.

“Your?” Harry asked.

“We figured we’d stay awhile,” Sol admitted, and his freshly shaved cheeks blossomed with color.

“What Sol is getting at is that you can’t beat Never-Never Land for a choice honeymoon location,” Piper clarified with a bold, brassy wink.

The room erupted with surprised laughter and congratulations. Davis even swept Piper up into a hug that had her blushing until Sol cleared his throat.

“They said we could stay as long as we’d like,” Sol explained, grinning broadly. He suddenly looked like a kid who’d been asked to move into the candy store.

Silk impulsively leaned to kiss his cheek. They had all braved great danger because of her and for her. She was happy this dream of Sol’s was coming true. He was finally getting the close encounter he’d always hoped for.

And Piper?

She was getting validation and a husband who looked at her with stars in his eyes.

Davis returned Piper to Sol’s side and came back to stand close to Silk. His arm came warmly around her shoulders as they spoke with friends who felt not only like allies, but like the family Silk had never had. She snuggled in close, not caring if she showed everyone how much she craved Davis’ touch. This sweet camaraderie had been a long time coming. She wouldn’t shy away from it now.

None of them mentioned Ronin D’Ja-Nar. A team of specially trained JRs were even now scouring Earth for his body. Until they found it, Silk would assume her laser blast hadn’t killed him. A JR had to stay ready for anything...even if that anything included someone returning from the dead. Miilos could never hurt her or anyone else again and Ronin had been defeated. That was enough for now.

Harry’s imminent departure made hurried goodbyes a necessity. Soon they had to rush more hugs and more laughter and the brazen former cop stole a kiss from Silk before Davis could stop him. Silk didn’t even try. Though she did keep her response to a minimum.

The tri-cubicle seemed even more peaceful when all their friends had gone.

Eros had sunk beyond the horizon and night hugged against the glass of their home, wrapping them in a private cocoon of darkness.

“You know, if he wasn’t headed for another dimension, I’d have to kick his ass,” Davis growled.

His hands were on his hips and the tight T-shirt he’d donned did nothing to hide the taut muscles proclaiming his tension.

“But tonight was made for dancing,” Silk returned. She changed the subject by sliding her body against his and twining her arms around his neck.

He stayed tense for another moment, but the tenor of his body changed. She could tell Striker was far from his mind when his chin tilted up and he closed his eyes.

“I will never get used to the feel of you against me,” he whispered to the ceiling above them. It almost seemed like a prayer of thanks to the universe that stretched out infinitely beyond that.

As her breasts were flattened softly against the firm round pecs of his chest, Silk understood. He hadn’t been made for her by a scientist’s hands and yet he had been made for her. Somehow, some way, they had been made for each other. With all their strengths and imperfections, they were somehow perfect only when they were together.

“There are times when I almost can’t breathe thinking about what would have happened if I had turned you in to...Miilos. He might have killed you and it would have been because of me.” Davis looked back down into her eyes.

Silk couldn’t bear the awful possibilities she saw in them. The what ifs that might have kept them apart. She had been a JR her whole life. She didn’t deal in religion or philosophy. She dealt in fist to jaw, cuff to wrist, ass in can.

But now that she had met Davis Rule she had to believe in something more, because she couldn’t accept that chance might have kept them apart.

She lifted her hands to frame the handsome, too-serious face of her soul mate.

“What makes you think you ever could have turned me in, Rule?”

It was her customary confidence, but it was also an acknowledgement of his feelings for her. Physically, he would have faced quite a challenge if he had tried. Emotionally, he hadn’t stood a chance.

Davis groaned, admitting everything with that one masculine capitulation as he fiercely claimed her lips. Silk opened for his tongue and they tasted deeply of each other—sweat, fear, hope and love.

They didn’t make it to the bed. The floor was a stretch. It seemed to take way too long to get there. Davis went down on his knees as if in supplication, but Silk followed quickly. She knelt facing him to show that she was saying her own prayers for forever.

Her breasts were peaked and her skin flushed and awash in chill bumps before he even pulled away her clothes. Her body felt the miracle of finding Rule even if her mind wouldn’t go there. When her clothes

were finally tossed aside, his hot mouth fell to her nipple and he worshiped there with the rough, insistent lave of his tongue.

She spread her legs for his shaking hand, and he found her slick and ready for his questing fingers. She cried out when his touch worshiped there too. Stroking almost reverently. Not teasing. They were both too aroused for teasing. But so careful and gentle that it made the throb he brought to her reach all the way to her heart.

Silk pulled and pushed and tore aside the clothes keeping her from his warm, salty skin. She found the faint hint of scars that traced over his flesh with her lips and teeth and tongue. Those fine white marks proclaimed his vulnerability, but she would never ask him to have them removed. Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. She had taken Miilos for granted. Their “love” had been preordained by chemicals and test tubes and lab coats.

Not this.

What she’d found with Davis was too precious to risk complacency.

He was rampant and ready when she freed him from his shorts. He scorched her fingers when she wrapped them around his shaft.

“Take me, Silk. Take me.”

“Yes, yes,” Silk soothed, but when she lowered herself down onto his penis she didn’t soothe. She rocked her hips and he thrust upward, crying out her name again and again.

Somehow their lovemaking went from slightly desperate to a pure celebration.

When her orgasm claimed her, she threw her head back and looked outside at the glitter of stars in the distance—a cool, infinite witness to their joining.

Davis tensed beneath her, and as the hot flood of his release filled her she collapsed down to the earthy sweetness of his arms. His was the only witness that mattered. Together, they were warm enough to hold chance and the universe at bay.

“I found you,” Silk managed to whisper against his moist chest.

And in the tight embrace they shared, they both found trust.

About the Author

To learn more about Barbara J. Hancock, please visit www.barbarajhancock.com or send an email to barbara@barbarajhancock.com.

Look for these titles by Barbara J. Hancock

Now Available:

Hunger
Enemy Mine

Love might stand a chance...if they can keep from killing each other.

Hunger

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Holly Spinnaker is a monster. Really. Fangs and all. Never mind the petite figure. Pay no attention to the once-bouncy blonde mane. When Jarvis Winters first encounters...*it*...he prepares to exterminate freak number one hundred thirty two without a flinch.

Mistake number one: following it back to its lair. Mistake number two: watching and listening to her...*it*...replay voice mail messages from loving, clueless parents again and again and again. Mistake number three: having an actual conversation with a bloodthirsty fiend.

“Make them see you as a person.” Holly remembers the advice from a self-defense class her mother made her take her freshmen year. She couldn’t save her own sister, who ended up a pile of ashes at her feet only one month ago. The night they both found out monsters were real. The night her sister embraced the change. And Holly began to fight it.

“*Make them see you as a person.*” Kind of hard when you aren’t even sure if you *are* a person anymore.

Warning: This title is not vampire-lite. There is blood. Sometimes sexy. Sometimes, well, not. There are fangs, fights and even a zombie or two. But most of all there’s yearning and burning and aching and angst... It is called Hunger after all.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Hunger:

The man sagged to the ground like every bone in his body had dissolved when the *girl* let him go. If she hadn’t been less than half the man’s size, Jarvis Winters might have been fooled. He might have thought drugs or alcohol had gotten the better of one of the partiers along Belmont Street. He might have thought a little groping in a back alley had ended with someone passing out.

Jarvis wasn’t fooled.

He’d had the dance club under surveillance for hours. Long enough to stiffen his shoulders and dim his sight. Still, when the waif exited, followed soon after by a gorilla in jeans, he had known. He’d seen this set up before. Little Miss Victim luring a big bad predator to his turn-about-is-fair-play demise. He wasn’t impressed. A killer was a killer. It didn’t matter who they chose to kill—or feed upon—as the case may be.

Winters wanted to wait until she moved on before opening the squeaky door of his ancient Ford Fairlane. It took longer than he expected. His hand was frozen on the door handle as she leaned back against the brick wall for a long moment. At more than a hundred yards away, he couldn’t see the expression on her face. He didn’t need to. He’d seen that satiated look countless times before. Her body

would be in an unresponsive swoon. Her face would be slack, way past satisfied. The kind of look every man dreamed his lover would have after a tumble in bed...except, of course, for the fangs.

Finally, she staggered around the corpse at her feet and made her way out of the alley and down the dark street. Too many busted streetlights made her tiny figure seem hunched and grotesque as it stumbled in and out of shadows. A fitting aura for a monster.

Jarvis tightened his fingers and wrenched the handle harder than even the stubborn forty-year-old mechanism warranted. The rusty shriek was followed by a thud as he headed after his prey. He hadn't been able to see her face, but he knew what it had looked like. Pure, drunken ecstasy. She would die happy.

The woman who was once Holly Spinnaker pulled her feet away from the unconscious man and shuddered against the warm zing arching through her flesh. She wasn't ready to let go, but dying had to be preferable to this mini-death, this loathing of the "life" she now led.

She wiped her hands on the hips of her jeans as she slid along the wall and away from the would-be rapist without so much as tapping him with the toe of her sneaker. The awkwardness of the maneuver caused one elbow to knock and drag against rough brick, but she didn't care. She was as tainted as she needed to be. His blood was *in* her for God's sake. She wouldn't touch him again.

She stumbled when she was finally in the clear. The blood had gone straight to her head like too many glasses of sparkling champagne on New Year's Eve. The memory of that cool, bubbly sweetness mocked her. She pushed it away, but she knew the analogy would stay with her. When she finally made it home and her bed spun beneath her, she would think of it. When she woke tomorrow night with a head-thumping, soul-splitting hangover, the sick analogy would be there to haunt her.

She didn't know she might not live to see tomorrow. She was too new. Too inexperienced. As she made her way across town, dizzy and weaving, she didn't notice a man following her. She didn't realize she'd been zeroed in on as prey for the second time that night.

The voice mail light was blinking when she finally managed to get the key in the lock and open the door to her loft. She walked by the phone, straight to the kitchen where she doused her hands with orange antibacterial dishwashing liquid and scrubbed her face and hair and arms and hands in a disinfecting frenzy. Suds-filled water splattered the floor and the countertop and dripped into her eyes.

She pushed her hair back and stood dripping and shivering and quaking in the dim shadows of a home that had seen happier times.

The light still blinked. It beckoned her and she moved away from the sink toward it. Habit, despair, longing—all propelled her forward. Her shoes left damp footprints all along the deep rose-colored carpet that was actually a pale shade of mauve when the sun gleamed through the bank of high windows above her. She hadn't seen that bright pastel hue in over a month.

With a cold, damp finger, she reached for the button. Even in the dark she found its worn rubber pad. Habit or, heaven forbid, her coordination and night vision were better, aided by the fresh blood in her veins.

A slightly breathless voice filled the room at high volume as it filled her heart with pain.

“Holly? You there? Pick up... Well, guess I didn’t catch you. Hope you have fun at the concert—”

“But not too much fun,” a different voice interrupted her mother’s, deep and male, full of humor and fatherly concern.

“John, stop it,” her mother protested with a laugh.

Holly could imagine the loving push Elizabeth Spinnaker would have given her husband. She could close her eyes and see the playful way her parents had always interacted with each other.

“Listen, Holly...call me tomorrow and tell me all about it.”

“And don’t let Jayne talk you into anything stupid.” Another interruption from her dad was followed by a less playful admonition from her mother. Then, the last words of the last normal message she would ever receive from her parents echoed through the dark empty room. “We’ll see you next week for Christmas.” That from her mother. “Be careful.” That from her father. And then, they were gone.

She didn’t replay the four following messages. She didn’t want to hear their concern as it grew into terror when they realized their only daughters had disappeared without a trace. Instead, she pressed the button to replay the normal message. Again and again and again. She knew it would wear out one night, but she stood shivering and compulsively torturing herself with one replay after another.

Jarvis listened from a dark corner. It wasn’t smart, but he listened. Better to have made the kill quickly after slipping through the unlocked window. Every one of them had been human at one time. It was the nature of the beast. You took that knowledge and you buried it or you couldn’t do the job. He should have attacked during her odd dishwashing-liquid ablutions. It would have been quick, easy and painless...for him anyway. Vampires didn’t go quick, easy or painless, but it was better to catch them by surprise. It saved a lot of wear and tear on his part.

He had watched, mesmerized by her frenzied washing. Then, he’d been caught off-guard by the sound of disembodied voices floating up from the answering machine. Her parents? For the whole long year from hell he’d managed to avoid empathy. Now it punched him right in the gut, leaving him nauseated and slightly out of breath.

She *was* a waif. That hadn’t been an act. He could finally see her in the greenish glow from the machine that held her transfixed. He could see the runway-model quality to her hollow cheeks and the bones of her delicate wrists. Less than half an hour ago she’d dropped a man who weighed a good fifty pounds more than *he* did. He stiffened as his brain gave his heart that much-needed reminder.

She *was* pitiful. And her compulsive washing and repetitive playing of the message on the machine made her *seem* desperately human. But she wasn’t. She was a monster. And she had to die.

Is he the hero of her childhood dreams...or the death of them—and her?

Prophesied

© 2008 Liz Craven

On the day of her birth, Lia fulfilled a prophecy that ended a 5,000-year war, and became a wife. But being the fulfillment of a sacred prophecy makes for a stifling childhood—not to mention a dangerous one. When an assassination attempt goes wrong, Lia takes the opportunity and runs from her destiny—as well as from her absent husband.

Talon isn't sure what to expect when he rescues his bride from a mining colony on a barren moon. What he doesn't anticipate is her lack of gratitude and her repeated escape attempts. Determined to convince his wife to accept her duties, Talon knows he also needs to keep her safe, even if he has to lock her up in his own quarters to do it.

As they get closer to their planet and Lia's coronation, the danger around them increases, and so does the tension between them. For their growing attraction to turn into something more, they need to stay alive and learn to trust each other—a tall order when Lia's experience in life has taught her that trusting people can get you killed.

Warning: Contains adult language, sexual content, and as always, reading anything by Liz Craven may be hazardous to your sanity.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Prophesied:

Lia's eyes, accustomed to the dark mines, burned under the harsh office light. Blinking the tears back, the face of the speaking soldier wavered briefly, before coming into focus.

Her heart stuttered, and she managed to keep her jaw from dropping. Just when she thought things couldn't get any worse—or any better, she wasn't sure which.

His face was leaner than she remembered, giving his cheekbones a sharp edge. He had lost the soft features of a young man. The roundness of his cheeks had faded, making his square jaw more pronounced and giving him a determined look. He regarded the rep with gray eyes, the color of melted xyreon ore when light struck it. Unlike the ore, however, his flinty eyes were ice cold. The word "ruthless" flitted across her mind and a shiver danced down her spine.

His body had been long and lanky when she had last seen him, but the man before her was not the awkward boy she once knew. His chest had filled out, making him easily three times her width. His upper torso tapered to a lean waist. Body armor hugged trim hips and strong legs. The red emblem of an elected planetary official gleamed on his shoulders.

He barely glanced at her, and the feeling of disappointment that swept over Lia surprised her. She hadn't wanted him to recognize her and had no business feeling hurt because she had gotten her wish.

As she studied him, he glanced at a soldier behind him and jerked his chin in her direction. A man with blond hair and the flush of youth still in his cheeks stepped towards her. He smiled at her—the first courtesy ever offered to her in the rep’s office—and extended his arm.

“This will only take a moment,” the young soldier assured her.

Staring at the device he was holding, Lia took a cautious step back. The rep still had a death grip on her arm—her fingers were going numb—so the step was small, but it was enough for the soldier to hesitate.

“What is that?” she demanded, relieved she sounded angry rather than panicked.

“It won’t hurt.” His tone was polite, if condescending, but he didn’t lower the device.

“What ‘won’t hurt’?” Lia snapped out.

The young man actually blushed. “It’s a simple DNA scan. It will take less than five seconds, and you won’t feel a thing.”

This time Lia wrenched her arm free from the rep as she leaped backwards. “Absolutely not.”

“I promise it won’t hurt,” the youth reassured her.

“I said no.”

Then *he* spoke, and he had the audacity to sound amused. “Madam, we are looking for someone. The DNA scan will help narrow our search by eliminating you. We will compensate you for your time.”

She snorted. Even if they gave her money, the rep would be the one “compensated” for her time. “I still refuse.”

“We must insist.”

Ignoring the furious glare of the rep, she stood her ground. “Under League privacy laws, a DNA scan cannot be compelled unless an individual is under arrest. Am I under arrest?”

He lifted an eyebrow. She resisted the urge to reach up and yank it back down.

“You are not under arrest—” he conceded.

“Then I am free to refuse the scan.”

“Neither are you in League territory,” he continued. He gestured towards the youth. “Caden.”

Lia’s stomach sank. They had her. League laws meant nothing on Tmesis. The only thing she could do was endure the scan with dignity.

The young soldier stepped forward, pointing the scanner at her.

Dignity be damned. With fury fueled by fear, Lia kicked out, knocking the scanner from the unsuspecting soldier’s hand. She spun and darted for the door.

She didn’t make it three meters, before slamming into another one of the soldiers who had circled around to block her path with inhuman speed. Her breathing hitched when she took in his glowing red eyes, wide-spread jaw, and sharp pointed teeth. An Inderian. A proud and fierce race of warriors steeped in tradition, blood feuds, and honor. If their inherent skills weren’t enough to inspire fear in those they met,

the rumors of ritual sacrifice and cannibalism were. They rarely left their home system, but those who did usually hired out as assassins.

Were the soldiers seeking her out to ensure her death?

The Inderian turned Lia to face the others, lifting her completely off her feet to do so, and she hated that her face was flushed. The impromptu flight embarrassed her. Where did she think she was going? There weren't a lot of hiding places on a barren moon. Especially when you needed pesky little luxuries like water. Fortunately, the dirt and grime smearing her face hid her blush. At least she hoped they did.

He stood in the same place, his arms crossed and that infuriating eyebrow still cocked, making no effort to hide his amusement.

Caden held the scanner again, his gaze flicking back and forth between Lia and his commander who met Lia's narrowed eyes for a brief moment before nodding.

Caden approached her cautiously, like drawing near a nest of vipers. Lia felt a crazy urge to laugh. The Inderian held her immobilized. She could barely turn her head, much less attack a trained soldier. She wasn't fooling herself. The only reason she'd succeeded in kicking him before was the element of surprise.

No miner in their right mind would attack a League soldier. Lia supposed that meant she was no longer in her right mind. Not that it mattered, seeing how they were probably going to kill her.

She had feared for her life for as long as she could remember and had half-expected to feel relief at finally facing death. She didn't. She was pissed-off, plain and simple. And under the anger, her heart ached that the one good thing she remembered from childhood—this cold and *amused* man—was an illusion.

An illusion that was probably going to kill her.

Caden pressed a button and a beam of orange light moved over her. The crucial procedure took mere seconds. The light disappeared, and Caden began inputting data into the scanner.

Scrapping together what little dignity she had left, Lia addressed the Inderian. "You can release me now."

A nod from their leader, and she found herself standing on her own two feet. The Inderian shifted behind her and she knew he prepared to catch her if she bolted. He needn't have bothered. With the scan completed, she felt oddly resigned and drained of energy. With her anger gone, the long day, the cave-in and her injury finally caught up with her. Not to mention the strain of the last five minutes. She wanted to sit down. Actually, she wanted to curl into fetal position. She did neither.

A pair of boots stepped into her field of vision and she looked up into the face of the man from her past.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" The brisk tone lacked warmth, but Lia sensed he was trying to be kind. Her anger had amused him. She wondered if her dejection bothered him.

She decided to answer his question honestly. "Yes, it was."

He blinked, and she realized she had surprised him. Instinctively, she knew very little surprised this man.

He inclined his head politely. "I apologize for the inconvenience." He hesitated before dropping his voice to prevent the rep from overhearing. "We only seek to find a missing person. The scan will be used to eliminate your DNA as a match for hers. Once done, you will be free to go. We will not be passing scan results on to authorities or storing them in any public database. Your privacy and secrets will remain intact."

He thought her a criminal afraid of being caught. She was about to surprise him again.

He turned away from her, dismissing her. "Caden, I believe we have taken up enough of this young lady's time. Record her as a non-match and reset the scanner for the next subject."

"I can't," Caden sounded nervous.

"You can't? The scanner is malfunctioning?"

"No, sir. I just ran and reran a diagnostic on it. I also ran the results four times," Caden rushed to assure him.

"Then what seems to be the problem?"

"There's no problem. It's just that..." He hesitated.

"That what?" the commander barked.

"I'm a match," Lia said wearily. "I'm your wife."

Risking everything for the one woman bold enough to betray him.

Enemy Mine

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Julia Rierdon attacks life with everything she's got, taking the missions no one else will touch. Refusing to slow down long enough to embrace anything or *anyone* else. When her plane goes down in the Smoky Mountains, being injured and alone with a dangerous shifter chained at her side is bad enough. Fighting her bone-deep desire is a challenge she could fail.

Ross Walker knew Julie was dangerous the minute she walked into his casino. She exactly matches the image of his destined mate imprinted on his dreams. One moment of distraction and he's on his way to prison—putting at risk the future of the Cherokee *Ani'Kutani*, an ancient clan of shape shifters.

He ought to make a break for freedom. Instead he stays to heal her wounds. Giving in to their wild, undeniable passion, Ross prays their mystical connection will help Julia see beyond what she's always believed about shifters and see the forever in his dreams.

Warning: This book contains a kick-ass heroine who has faced death and come out on the other side ready for anything and everything. It also contains a sexy cougar shape shifter who's man enough to give her more than she's bargained for...again and again.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Enemy Mine:

She was being *hunted*.

Knowing it and doing something about it were two very different things.

She had a banged-up knee that made standing painful and walking any faster than a hobble impossible. She had an empty stomach and the lightheadedness to prove it. So empty in fact, that if she had claws and fangs *she* might be stalking *him*.

As it was, clawless, fangless and getting-the-hell-out-of-here challenged, she was forced to put her back up against a tree and wait.

He was out there.

And he was angry.

The wreckage of their plane smoldered peripherally to the south. Smoldered even though her stomach told her it had been many hours since the crash. She'd only regained consciousness in the last half an hour.

And now this.

It was what she deserved for taking a non-military flight with a captured shapeshifter in tow, a wealthy powerful shifter in control of half the state. She should have waited for a military cargo plane and a fighter-plane escort.

Then again, she wasn't sure that anyone *deserved* to be chewed.

It was four days before the most ambitious raid ever planned against shifters. Now, because of her impatience, she was in the remote mountains of North Carolina with no help in sight and she was about to be savaged by a man she'd thought about sleeping with twenty-four hours ago.

Ross Walker.

He would have been incredibly handsome if he'd been a down-on-his-luck used-car salesman. As the head of a powerful shapeshifter clan, he was incredibly handsome *and* untouchable. Untouchable always seemed to push Julia Rierdon's buttons.

When he had stalked onto the plane, even though no man should be able to move with predatory grace in shackles and chains, she'd gone white-hot for long, long seconds. She didn't know if it was the challenge in his eyes or the muscles in his thighs, but she'd let herself look and look some more. The answering heat in his brown-eyed gaze should have made her blink and look away.

She didn't.

The end of the world as they had known it had made most of the remaining human population cautious. It had made Julia determined to prove she was alive.

One thing she should have known—never shoot come-hither glances at a shapeshifter—unless you want to be up against a wall very soon thereafter.

She didn't hit the galley wall *too* hard. Only hard enough to send tumblers tumbling and bags of peanuts flying. That quickly, she'd found herself with cool refrigerated metal drawers at her back and the hot hard body of an aroused shapeshifter all along her front.

Guess which had gotten the majority of her attention?

"Backup. Call for backup. The shifter's gone postal," a uniformed agent had shouted as he grabbed for Walker.

"We need a tazer up here, now!" another agent had shouted into the transmitter clipped to his ear as he too went for the man pinning her to the wall.

Walker ignored them.

His dark eyes had locked onto hers and he'd pressed even closer. It's not like she could cry jerk when she'd been checking out his thighs moments before, and she wouldn't cry mercy. No way, no how. Instead of crying anything at all, she'd tilted her chin and given him the dewy-eyed look that had gotten him into this trouble in the first place. She'd even thrown in the pouty lips for good measure. She was no longer wearing the low-cut sequined dress and the four-inch stilettos she'd worn into his Cherokee casino, but "the look" she could do in jeans and sneakers.

He'd gotten it.

He'd gotten that it was a challenge and not a come on. He'd understood she was tweaking him for falling for the oldest trick in the book. His full sexy mouth softened and tilted in an appreciative smirk.

But then, then he'd spoiled it all—her cheekiness and his humor—by pressing his lips to hers.

The first shock? It wasn't hard, bruising domination. The second? That it was seductive, soft and teasing. She was so taken off-guard she'd actually liked when a hint of moisture, just a hint of tongue, had brushed against her slightly open lips.

She might have kissed him back given one more second. She might have even sighed or whimpered because that slight hint of heated moisture was so not enough.

Thank God, she'd been saved from that humiliation by two more uniformed agents. All four big men were able to pull Walker back...but only because he'd been ready to step away.

"We're not finished," Walker had said to her calmly, even though four burly agents were handling him way less than calmly.

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