

COBBLESTONE PRESS PRESENTS



SHIFTERS

R.W. Shannon

Pink CASHMERE



Pink Cashmere

By

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Pink Cashmere

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ISBN: 978-1-60088-419-1

Cover Artist: Tuesday Dube'

Editor: Leanne Salter

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Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Dedication

To All My G.A.W's

Chapter One

How do I, a princess, end up living in a dark, stinky cage at a pet shelter?

I ask myself this question as I try to find a comfortable spot on the itchy towel given to me to sleep on, the gray cages all around me casting an eerie glow under the fluorescent lights.

I groan. I know it is daytime here on Earth, but the dim, dark corridor outside my cage makes it hard to tell. The one-eyed tabby across from me licks his paw and yawns. I roll my eyes. I have been trapped in this urine-scented cage for three days. There is no way in hell I am staying in this dump for a fourth. But how do I get out of here?

Think, Cashmere, think.

I listen to the cat below me hack up a fur ball, and I shutter.

I wish I could talk. When I open my mouth, the only sound that escapes is a faint meow. This sucks. I need to shift back into my human form but cannot. This cage is obviously too small, and they will not let me out no matter how much I bat my eyes at the guard. I just pray that it is not too late to shift back into my human form. I am afraid that I might have missed my window of opportunity and will be stuck in the body of a cat forever.

The squeaky wheel of a cart draws my attention. I raise my head. My door is yanked open, and before I can react, the guard tosses a bowl of kibble inside and slams the door shut. I sniff a stale nugget that has fallen over the side of the stainless steel bowl. I turn up my nose and push it

away with my paw. My stomach growls, but I would not eat this if it were the last thing on Earth. I listen to the others around me crunch on this crap as if it is the best meal they have ever tasted. Animals.

I have got to get out of here.

Laying my head on my chocolate-brown paw, I dream of my homeland. My planet's name is Nile, and a war rages on it now. Our all-female planet has been invaded by the all-male planet, Ngor. For over a hundred years, a faction of Ngorian's has been trying to take over our planet and enslave us. They were able to convince a few of our citizens to help them.

My father was King Edward of Ngor. During his thousand-year rule, he was successful in keeping the men away from our planet. When he fell in love with my mother, Queen Astoria, this caused dissent among his people. He was assassinated. Without my father's protection, Ngorians seeped onto my planet and tried to overthrow my mother.

Well, my mother, who has ruled Nile for over three hundred years, was not going to give up her throne without a fight. She battled the Ngorians valiantly, until her own assassination on the battlefield by one of her officers that had fallen in love with a Ngorian fighter.

In order to keep the same thing from happening to me, the elders decided that I needed to leave the planet. In the middle of the night, I was catapulted into the galaxy to hide on the planet Venus.

On Nile, I take the human form of a woman, but during space travel, I always shift into the form of a cat because it is less stressful on my body. Ngorian fighters learned of this plan and were able to track down my ship and attack as I traveled through the airspace of the planet Venus. I was able to steer my ship to Earth where I crash-landed.

According to the coordinates on the ship, I landed somewhere in Baltimore, Maryland. I have no idea where that is. Dazed, I stumbled out of my wrecked ship and wandered around the city, looking for a place to shift into my human self.

The buildings here are tall, and I could barely see the sky. I shivered from the cold, unused to frigid air because on Nile, it is always warm and sunny. We do not have any tall buildings, either, except for the

royal palace where I lived.

I had only been on Earth for a few hours when I was kidnapped and stuck in this cage. Apparently, the man I tried to stop to ask for help was an animal control officer.

I crawl to my water bowl and sip the tepid water. What I would not give for a hot bath, a nice meal, and a decent bed. I study my reflection on the side of the stainless steel bowl. My long, chocolate-brown fur could use a brushing. My pink collar spells out my name, Cashmere, in diamonds. It is a gift from my mother that my officers outfitted with a transmitter so they will be able to stay in contact.

When I think of my mother, my eyes fill with tears. I miss her so. She has only been gone for a few months, and I do not know what I am going to do without her, especially on this strange planet.

“What’s wrong with you?”

I look up to see two large eyes peering at me from beyond the wire mesh. I flick my tail, not pleased by the interruption. The guard has returned to collect my bowl. She shakes her head as she looks at the full contents.

“Too good for kibble?” she fusses. “You should be grateful. This might be your last meal.”

She sets the bowl on the squeaky cart and rolls away. Last meal? What does that mean? I rise and look out over the empty hallway. I notice that the cage diagonally from me is now empty. A grey and white cat, brought in the same time as me, used to live there. I never saw him leave.

Was this the fate that the guard meant? That I might “disappear” after today? *Crap! I have got to get out of here!*

My only hope is to get adopted. I groom myself to the best of my ability without the proper utensils, and wait. The first visitors were a family with four misbehaving kids. I was desperate, but not that desperate. Several more humans parade by my door, not one even looking my way. Even the one-eyed tabby across the aisle got adopted over me. It is almost closing time, and I give up hope. Turning my back to the door, I close my eyes. I am resigned to the fate of having escaped one assassination for another on Earth. I am about to drift off to sleep when I

hear...

"She's beautiful!"

My ears perk up. Slowly, I raise my head and look over my shoulder. A woman stands at the opening of the cage. She pokes a finger between the bars and touches my soft down. I purr.

"She's so soft."

I flop onto my back. In this position, I can get a better look at her. She is pretty. Young. Well, younger than my one hundred years at least. Blonde curls flow over her shoulders, and she has gorgeous, ecru skin. Dark hazel eyes stare at me from behind glasses. A man stands behind her, but all I can see is his arm.

"What do you think, Dante?"

"I don't know. You know I'm not a cat person."

At this, I get up and move closer to the bars. I can now see his broad chest covered in navy knit. His face is blocked from my view, so I focus on the woman. Purring, I rub myself against the bars, and she strokes my back.

"I think she likes me," she says in wonder.

"I think she does, too," Dante says, and then he sneezes. "I think I'm allergic."

"Oh, no," she says. "You can't be. You'll have to watch her while I'm in Japan."

"Can't you take it with you?"

"No," she says. "It will only be for a few days. A week tops."

I hear Dante sigh.

What luck! I press my face against the wire bars so I can get a look at him finally. He is magnificent. Tall. Broad-shouldered. His head is shaved, but he sports fur around his mouth. Already I am smitten.

Please talk me home, I mutter as a meow escapes my lips. Not only will I be out of this hellhole, but with Dante's help, I will be able to change back into my human form. Since so much time has passed, the only way I can change back now is with contact from a human male.

"It's your cat," he says with a shrug.

The woman squeals and hugs him. "Thank you, big brother!"

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Brother? This is getting even better.

She turns to my cage and wiggles her finger in front of my nose.
“Would you like to come live with me?”

Yes, I scream in my head. *Just get me out of here!*

She peers at my collar. “Cashmere. That’s a pretty name. Hello, Cashmere. My name is Dinah. This is my brother, Dante. Welcome to the family.”

The guard unlocks my cage and allows Dinah to hold me for a few minutes. I rub myself against her ample chest. Dante stands a few feet away, and I pull away from Dinah to try to get him to hold me.

“Can you hold her while I fill out the paperwork?” Dinah asks him.

Before Dante can extend his arms, a sneeze causes his body to convulse. “No, I can’t.”

I am thrust back into the cage by the guard. Dinah and Dante disappear. I sit on my towel and learn from the guard that I will have to wait until tomorrow before they can take me home. I put my head on my paw and dream of my new home. And my new life with Dante.

Chapter Two

Dinah's home is a spacious loft overlooking the Inner Harbor, finely decorated with trinkets from her travels from around the world. I love walking through the living room beneath the African masks that line the walls and the Asian vases standing in the glass-lined cases. Even her food is exotic; a mix of Indian and Thai vegetarian dishes that she whips up nightly on her return home from work as a professor of law.

It has been a month since my release from the pet shelter. I stand at the picture window, enjoying the warm sunrays that shine on my dark coat. It is winter here in this part of the world, and snow blankets the sidewalks but is slowly melting away. My stomach growls because I had not eaten since last night. I wander into the kitchen and feast on the brunch Dinah has left for me.

Tonight, she leaves for Japan. From what I understand, she will be gone for one week. Her boyfriend, Pat, surprised her with the trip to a place that she has always dreamed of visiting. Dante will be staying here, house- and cat-sitting, while she is away. Though Pat has scratched and rubbed my fur on numerous occasions, his touch does not cause my spine to tingle in the way needed for me to change into human form. I suspect, however, that Dante's touch will.

With my belly now full, I go into the bedroom and recline on the silk down comforter. Dinah was gracious to provide me with a zebra print bed to sleep on, which sits in the corner of the room next to the closet. However, I prefer to nap here while she is away. Her king-sized bed is

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much more cozy and more fitting for a princess.

Keys jingle in the lock, and my heart flutters. The front door opens, but I can smell Dante before he enters. He has a rich, earthy scent, full-bodied like a cup of steaming mint tea. I inhale but remain on the bed.

He looks at me as he walks into the bedroom.

I meow and wag my tail. *Touch me!* my mind screams. He sets his bags on the floor in front of the closet, and sneezes.

"I guess it's just you and me, kid," he says, then sneezes. "Damn allergy."

He quickly retreats from the room, and I follow him. He takes long, quick strides that move him across the room in a rapid rate, and I have to gallop to keep up. He retrieves a brown bottle from the icebox in the kitchen then sits on the tan leather sofa in the living room. I jump on the cushion and sit beside him. I meow and flick my tail at him. He looks at me, but his beautiful coffee eyes are red and glazed over. He sneezes. I don't want to, but I move to the end of the sofa.

I have seen him many times in the month that I have lived here. He visits his sister frequently, normally on weekends. Each time, the very sight of him takes my breath away. Today is no exception. I watch him sip the amber liquid from the bottle with full lips that I imagine to be very soft. His vanilla-hued skin glistens with a fine layer of sweat, and he has removed the faint mustache and beard line that had lined his magnificent lips. I recline a few feet away from him, longing to curl up in his inviting lap.

He catches me watching him, and I wag my tail. If only he could touch me without becoming ill, I could turn back into my female body. I decide to take a chance and crawl to his side. I rub my face against his muscular, denim-covered thigh. He sneezes.

"Damn it," he mumbles.

He turns on the giant electric box that hangs on the wall. Suddenly, a war breaks out on the screen. Men in purple clash with men dressed like bumblebees. I cock my head to the side and stare at the image. He glances at me, chuckling at me. I have never seen anything like this before. We do not have televisions, as Dante calls it, on Nile.

"That's the Ravens in purple. The home team," he says. "The other team is the Pittsburgh Steelers. We hate the Steelers. They are division rivals. It's football. Have you seen a game before?"

I shake my head. We do not engage in a game named football.

He laughs and slaps his forehead. "Listen to me, talking to a cat. I need a girl."

My ears perk up. Dante is single? I inch closer to him. If he would just touch me, just one finger, one long stroke down my back, I can change back and be this girl he speaks of. Instead, he sneezes. It knocks me off the sofa. I hop back on the cushions beside him and gaze into his eyes.

"You seem to understand what I'm saying," he says in wonder. "Do you?"

I rub myself against his forearm. *Yes, I think, I understand everything, perfectly.* I cannot deny that I am very attracted to him. I am excited to be spending the week with him. I cannot think of anyone else that I want to have touch me and turn me back into a princess.

He wiggles his fingers at me, in front of my eyes. He sneezes. "You are trying to kill me, aren't you?"

I move away from him to curl up in the black and tan printed armchair across from him. I watch the men in purple run to the end of the green field as the crowd, and Dante, cheers. It is something called a touchdown. Dante yells this as he dances around the room. My heart melts.

Closing my eyes, I yawn. At some point, I must have drifted off to sleep because when I awaken, the sun has set.

Dante is no longer seated on the couch. The home is quiet. I panic and jump from the soft cushion. Did he leave me? I search the apartment for him, tracking him by his earthy scent. I find him in front of a small computer in the second bedroom. He has another pressed to his ear. He has changed into a pair of striped pants. His chest is bare, and the rippled muscles of his abs glisten beneath the blue glow of the screen.

He speaks in hushed tones into the box next to his ear. I creep in and curl up next to his bare foot.

"Business is good, man," he is saying. "I have a few clients now."

Pause. "Yeah, that's what I like about being a graphic designer. I can do it without a boss-man, you know?" Pause. "House-sitting for little sis. That boyfriend of hers took her to Japan for the week." Long pause. Sneeze. He turns his gaze toward mine. Our eyes lock. I stare into his dark eyes, getting lost within his pupils.

"You hungry, Little Bit?"

I wag my tail. I am hungry, but not for food. What I would not give to slide my human form against his. If he will just touch me, my fantasy can become a reality.

"No, I was talking to the cat." Pause. Laughter. "I know, I know. I need to get laid. It's been six months since Gwen and I broke up." Long pause. "I'm not calling that tramp. She cheated on me, and I'm done with all that. You can't fool me twice." Pause. "Maybe I did love her, but once you mess around on me, that's it. I'm done. It's time for me to move on." Pause. "Yeah, I'm still thinking about heading back to Atlanta. I can do without all this snow, and I need to be as far away from Gwen as possible."

I meow. He glances at his watch, touches a button on the control board in front of him, and powers down the blue screen. "It's getting late. I gotta go. Yeah, I'll call you later. We'll hang out one night. Peace, man." Standing, he sets down the talking box and walks toward the kitchen. I jump in front of him, try to get him to pick me up. I twirl in circles, wave my tail.

He sneezes.

"Nice try," he says. "You know if I pick you up, I'll be dead." He sneezes again, his body trembles.

I turn my ears back and look down at the ground.

"Don't start," he says. "You women are all alike."

I meow. From the icebox, he pulls out a container and dumps the brown chunks of meat into my pink dinner bowl. I sniff the beef chunks. It is a dinner from one of those cans. Dinah and I have already established that I will not eat this crap. I wrinkle my nose and look up at him.

"That's all you're getting tonight," he says with a huff. "You're the most high maintenance cat I've ever seen." Sneezing, he shakes his head at

me and goes into the bedroom.

I follow him, abandoning my late dinner for now. After retrieving a book from his bag, he climbs into the bed. I clamber in beside him. I look over his shoulder at the colored pictures. I love how warm he feels.

"The X-Men," he tells me. "I always loved them. Wolverine is my favorite, but I love Storm. Ma is fine as hell." He glances at me. "But my all-time favorite character is the Green Lantern. I love him." He looks at me again. "That's why I'm a graphic designer. I loved to draw as a kid. I don't know why I'm telling all this to you." He looks at me thoughtfully. "You're easy to talk to, and there's something about you that I like. But you're a cat—" He sneezes. "—and I can't breathe around you."

I meow and curl up next to his thigh. He reaches for me. *This is it*, I think. I can barely contain my excitement. I can already feel him run his fingers through my silky down. I turn on to my back so that he can stroke my stomach. Before his hand can connect with my body, he sneezes violently. His body shakes. The force knocks me off of the bed. Enraged, I stand on the plush carpet and look up at him.

"Sorry, Little Bit," he says. He sneezes again as he turn off the light and sinks beneath the linens.

Damn it! Just when I thought he was the one. I turn on my heel and toss my nose up in the air as I head back to the kitchen.

Chapter three

It has been two days, and Dante still has not touched me. I stand beside him at the picture window, where we watch the snow fall over the harbor. If I were human, I would probably be in his arms, watching this “blizzard” from the comfort of bed. He sips his coffee. Salivating, I inhale the roasted scent, wishing that I could also sip it from a red mug, as he does.

How I still long to have those full lips pressed against mine. I have grown quite fond of him. Not just because he is my caretaker and my only hope of shifting back into human form, but because he is a very interesting male. He is funny and sensitive and sexy. It is rare to find such a combination on Nile. Since his stay, I have learned that Dante is single, he opened his freelance graphic design business only one year ago and it has become successful, he cooks, his favorite food is pasta with shrimp and vegetables, he is very neat and orderly, and his favorite color is green.

His friends visited last night, a jovial group of men. According to them, Dante was engaged to a gold-digger named Gwen, whom he met in college. She is the reason he moved to Baltimore from a place called Atlanta. She cheated on him with his boss at his former company, and that is why he left his place of employment.

Dante’s friends convinced him that he needed to get his mind off of things and took him away. He returned reeking of alcohol. He also had a few scraps of paper with names of women and numbers written on them in his pocket. I fumed. Yes, I was jealous. If anyone should have been out

at night with him, it should have been me. I tore up a few of the pages. I did not want to, but I missed him while he was away. All night, I sat by the front door and waited for his return.

I am saddened. It must be too late for me to change back. What if I never do? I will be forced to live the remainder of my days as a common house pet, never knowing the pleasure of having Dante's fingers slide against my flesh.

He looks down at me and walks away. I follow him into the second bedroom. I curl up against his bare feet while he works at his computer, creating magnificent, colorful images. I sigh. He must touch me today. If he does not, I might be trapped in this form forever. I do not mind being a cat. It is quite nice having someone wait on me hand and foot. Yet, I have not gotten used to using that box of wood chips that is my bathroom. And I could really use a long, hot, bubble bath.

Dante sneezes. He glances out of the small side window. The harbor is barely visible through the falling flakes of snow.

"Looks like we're gonna be snowed in," he says. "And that weather guy said we'd only get an inch. Yeah, right."

I flop onto my back. I twist and turn, attempting to rub my side against his big toe. He sneezes and moves his feet away from me. Undeterred, I stalk to the side of his chair and spring into his lap.

"Whoa," he exclaims. "You must really want some love, Little Bit."

Though he sneezes, I rub my face against his shoulder. The sweatshirt he wears is soft and scented like him. He sneezes. I press my paws into his chest and stretch upward on my hind legs. I cannot take it any longer. I have got to kiss him. Just once. I rub my face against his cheek. He sneezes. To my surprise, he does not push me away. Instead, he reaches up, and his fingers slide into my soft, mocha down. He scratches me behind my ear. I sink into his caress. I can only imagine how those strong fingers will feel against my bare skin.

He sneezes. "Ok," he says as he gently picks me up and sets me on the ground. "That's enough. I can't breathe."

Dante stands and walks from the room. He sneezes. A moment later, I hear the bathroom door slam. Then, water running. I wag my tail.

He felt so glorious. I gallop into the living room and stand in front of the window, hoping the change will happen and it is not too late. I concentrate on the falling snow. I feel my legs form underneath me. Then, my mocha hued torso. Arms. Shoulders. Neck. And finally my head with my long, curly, ebony hair. I stare at my nude form in the frosted glass and grin. I am still wearing my pink diamond collar, but it looks like one of those fashionable chokers the females here wear.

Finally. I am free.

"You hungry, Little Bit?" Dante asks as he walks around the corner.

"Famished," I say. My voice sounds strange. It is deep and husky. Most likely from the travel and not talking for all this time.

Dante stops in his tracks when he sees me. His mouth drops open, and his eyes widen. I take a step toward him. He takes a quick step back and almost falls over the ottoman. You would think he has not seen a naked woman before. Just having him in the same room as me causes my nipples to harden. He gazes at me. I can only imagine how horrid I look. I touch my hair, hoping to arrange the curls in to a presentable form.

"I am sorry about my appearance," I say as I stretch my arms above my head. Being crouched on all fours for such a long period of time has caused my muscles to stiffen. "I must shower..."

"Who are you?" he says. "How did you get in here?"

"I live here," I say.

"What? Wait..." He holds his hands in front of him.

"I will explain everything later." I move past him toward the bathroom. "I must borrow some of Dinah's clothing, then I can explain when I return."

"Stop!" he yells.

I stop. Slowly, I turn to face him. I fold my arms under my bare breasts. He looks at them then quickly looks away. From the way the material of his pants pool around his manhood, he is very aroused by my appearance. He grabs the soft fleece throw from the sofa and hands it to me. He waits while I wrap it around my body before he looks at me. That is one more thing I love about Dante. He is such a gentleman.

"First, I am going to call the police," he states, moving for what he

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says is a telephone. "Then you can explain to both of us, from jail, why you broke into my sister's apartment."

"I did not break in, Dante."

He stops dialing. "How do you know my name?"

"You told me."

"Oh," he says. "I see. You're one of them chicken-headed stalkers I met at the club. Look, ma, I ain't interested, so please put your clothes on and ..."

"Chicken?" I frown, placing a hand on my hip. "I am not a chicken. I am a princess. Well, I was in the form of a feline, but..."

"Princess? Feline? What are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about?"

We stare at each other. The only sound in the room is the wind blowing against the window. I brush my hair from my eyes and notice that he is no longer sneezing. I lick my lips. I suppose this is a lot to take in, and I have not really given him an explanation. I just wanted to clean up and wash the pet shelter smell from my hair before he touches me again.

"Look," he says calmly. "Just tell me who you are at least."

I sit in my favorite armchair. I wait for Dante to take a seat on the sofa before I begin. "My name is Cashmere. I am princess of a planet called Nile. It is a few million miles south of Saturn. My mother died. I was sent to hide here, on Earth, while there is a civil war on my planet."

Standing, I move to the window. I can feel his gaze on my back, waiting for me to continue.

"Royalty on my planet has the ability to shape shift into felines. I shifted in order to lessen the affects of space travel on my human form. My spaceship landed a few blocks from here, and I was kidnapped by an animal control officer and ended up in the shelter..."

"...Where Dinah adopted you," he finishes for me. "So, you're the cat?"

Slowly, I turn to face him and nod. "I couldn't change back without the stimulation of a human male. So, I had to wait until you—"

"Is that why you kept jumping into my lap?"

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"Yes," I say softly. "You are no longer sneezing."

He stops to ponder this. "Yeah. I guess I'm not."

"But, Pat..."

I shake my head to stop his sentence. "He couldn't help. I was never, um, stimulated by him."

"Oh."

Dante looks over my shoulder at the snow. "Well, I guess you can't really go anywhere in this weather. We'll have to wait until it stops. I'll get you something to put on. I'll make some lunch. Then I have a lot more questions for you, Cashmere."

I watch Dante exit the room, and my heart flutters. I move from the window and follow the path to the bathroom. I am so happy that I no longer have to use that box in the corner.

Chapter Four

Dante sets a sandwich made from tuna in front of me. I love tuna. I am relaxed from the hot shower where I used Dinah's lavender bath gel and shampoo. I smell heavenly. He found a white T-shirt and gray flannel pants for me to put on from his sister's closet. We sit at the glass dining room table, and I take a bite of my sandwich. It is very good. Full of tuna, celery, and pickles.

"So..." He clears his throat. "You can turn yourself into a cat?"

I laugh. "Yes."

"All the time? I mean, can you change back now?"

"I could, but I don't want to risk it so soon."

He nods and takes a bite of his lunch. "You need male, uh, stimulation to change into a cat?"

"No. Legend has it that my people were a part of a harem on Ngor. The queen was very jealous. In order for the girls to get to the king, they were given the ability to shift into cats. The queen loved cats. After she fell asleep, the king could change the feline back to female form by stroking her. One day, the queen found out and banished us to the planet Nile."

"That makes sense." He sips his drink from the amber bottle. "What is it like there on Nile?"

"It is beautiful. The grass is green. Everyone is friendly. It is peaceful. At least it was, before the war."

He stares at me, his eyes searching my face for something I cannot name. I wipe my mouth with the cloth napkin.

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"Do I have something on my face?"

"No," he says. "It's your eyes. When you were a cat, I always thought there was something in them, you know? Like some kind of mystery."

I smile. We finish our meals in comfortable silence. After cleaning the dishes, we retreat to the living room. I sit beside him on the sofa as he repeatedly presses the buttons on the remote. The screen changes images, and I study Dante's profile. He has the most regal nose. I love how his hairless head glistens with moisture. I long to curl up at his side as I did when I was still in feline form.

He licks his lips. I lick mine.

"Has it really been six months since you have been intimate with a woman?" I ask.

He almost drops the remote. "How did you know?"

"You mentioned it when you were talking on the telephone the other evening."

"Oh. Yeah."

"Why?" I ask as I inch closer to him. "You are a very handsome and desirable male."

He chuckles. "It's not that. I could get it if I wanted to. I'm waiting for the right woman."

"That is so noble."

His grin is a bit sheepish. "Well, it's not easy."

I stroke his muscular thigh. "I'm sure you will find her soon."

He looks down at my hand then up at me, his eyes once again searching mine. I am hopeful that he, too, can feel the electricity between us. The air that separates us is practically on fire. I continue to stroke his thigh and am surprised when he does not remove my hand.

"How about you? Do you have a prince on Nile?"

I shake my head. "No. It has been quite a while for me also."

"Why?"

"I have not found anyone on my planet that is desirable to me. That I am attracted too both mentally and physically."

He nods. "I understand."

We watch the television in comfortable silence. Maybe I should leave now before Dinah returns. I turn to look at Dante. I catch him looking at me. I cannot make myself stand in order to leave. I would rather be right here with Dante than anywhere else.

“What are you going to do now?” he asks. “Are you just going to continue living as a cat?”

“I was just having that conversation with myself,” I confess. “I am not sure. My plan was to hide on Venus until the war was over. Now that I am here on Earth and have met so many wonderful people, it will be a difficult decision.” I stand and make my way to the window, searching the frozen silver water of the harbor for answers. Finding none, I exhale and turn to look at Dante. “Please do not mention this to Dinah.”

He chuckles. “Believe me, I won’t. I wouldn’t know what to say to her if I did.”

I turn away to watch the winter storm and still my racing heart. I cannot get involved with this man, despite my attraction to him. I feel Dante move behind me. His warm hands rest on my shoulders. When he touches me, I close my eyes. I am a liar. I could not erase my feelings for him if I tried. He encircles my waist with his arms, his breath moist on the back of my neck. I search the darkening water. If I could, I would stay in his arms forever, yet I know that will not be possible.

His gesture gives me hope. Allows me to think that he feels the same way as I. That he can feel the natural heat simmering between us. I can feel his heart beat through my back and claim mine.

“How long do these things last?” I ask, gesturing to the falling white flakes.

“Could be a few minutes to a few days.”

I gasp. “Days?”

“It has been known to happen, but it is starting to stop again. I don’t think it will be too bad. I can show you around Baltimore tomorrow.”

“I would like that.”

Turning to face him, I put my hand on his chest. The muscle is solid yet soft. I know I could get lost in his arms. Just as I can get lost in his

eyes. I look up into them, stand on my toes, press my lips against his. Just as I imagined. His mouth is delicious. Kissing him is like falling into a pile of fluffy pillows.

To my surprise, he kisses me back. I circle his neck with my arms, and he pulls me close to him. His tongue entwines with mine. I shiver. I am not sure if it is from the cold stream of air that seeps from the window or how amazing he feels in my arms.

His fingertips dance on the sides of my torso. I moan. He kisses it away, carries it in his mouth as he moves to explore my throat where it escapes once more. I clutch the back of his head. His skin is so smooth and soft. His lips find mine again.

"Dante," I moan. I want him so badly. My nipples strain against the rough material of the T-shirt. His hand searches my torso for a place to rest. I hang onto him as the kiss deepens. I do not want to let go of him, but I know that I must. Maybe just a little longer. His lips are amazing. He is amazing. Is it possible to fall in love with someone after only a few days? Every brush of his lips against mine tells me that it is.

A tinny bell sounds from across the room. Dante reluctantly pulls himself out of my embrace and goes to answer the telephone. I take the moment to wipe the tears from my eyes.

"Don't move," he tells me.

How could I? I am rooted in place. I hug myself, trying to keep his warmth wrapped around my body. He speaks in low, hushed tones to the person on the other end of the telephone. I cock my head, trying to pick up the conversation, but he hangs up before I can. Dante's shoulders slump.

"What is it?" I ask, though I am afraid of the answer.

"That was Dinah. She's at the airport. She'll be here in less than an hour."

Chapter Five

Dinah scoops me up into her arms as soon as she breezes through the front door. I lay my head on her chest as she showers my face with kisses.

My lips still tingling from the kiss with Dante, I had reluctantly shifted back into my feline form. We both thought Dinah would not understand returning home to a female person in her living room and her pet missing. I just hope that I will be able to shift out of it once she leaves. If she does leave.

While I am happy to see her, her return could not have happened at a more inopportune time. I glance at Dante over her shoulder. He looks at me, then looks away. I cannot read the expression in his eyes.

"I missed you," she murmurs into my fur.

I purr and allow her to continue to kiss me and scratch me on my belly. Her lover, Pat, stands behind her in the doorway, chatting with Dante. He is a short yet muscular man with wiry black hair and piercing dark eyes. He is from Japan, I overheard Dinah say to her friend. An engineer of electronics. When she finally puts me down, I scurry to Dante's side. He sneezes and moves slightly away from me.

"Why are you guys back so early?" he asks.

Dinah glances adoringly at Pat, then holds out her hand. A sparkling ring rests on her finger. She beams. Her eyes mist. "I'm engaged!" she yells. "I couldn't wait to get back and tell everyone!"

"Congratulations," Dante says between sneezes as he shakes Pat's

hand then hugs his sister.

“Thank you,” Pat says.

“I have got to call Mom,” she squeals and runs into the bedroom.

“Wanna drink?” Dante asks Pat.

The new fiancé nods as Dante heads to the bar in the corner and pulls out a bottle of champagne. I pad my way across the hardwood floor and sneak into the bedroom where I jump on the bed as Dinah recounts for her mother the proposal. I climb into her lap. Her fingers caress my back. It is not the same as when Dante did it.

“Mom, we’ve been together for two years now.” Pause. “I’ll bring him down to meet you soon, probably over Christmas.” Pause. “As soon as the weather breaks, we’re going to drive down to Virginia to tell his parents.” Pause. “Yeah, we need to work on Dante, but I think he had a girl in here.”

At this, I sit up and listen closely.

“I went to the bathroom before I called you. My good shower gel was open and sitting on the sink.” Pause. “I doubt Dante uses lavender shower gel...”

Damn. I knew I should have used the bottle that was already half empty, but I loved how the lavender gel smelled. It reminded me of home.

“When he’s ready, Mom,” Dinah says. “Dante will find the woman of his dreams. He still hasn’t gotten over what Gwen did to him.”

A part of me wants that to be true. I want Dante to be happy when I return home, but I also want him to be happy with me. Only me. Leaving is going to be so difficult. I have grown to love both Dante and Dinah. Even Pat has grown on me, though I have spent limited time with him. I glance down at her finger to see what type of ring Pat has given her.

“Yes,” Dinah is telling her mother. “It’s a diamond. It belonged to his grandmother. He loved it and saved it until he met me, then he had it set in a new band.” Pause. “I know.” Pause. “He is so romantic.”

I cannot listen to this any longer. I scamper from Dinah’s lap and run into the living room. The men sit on the sofa, watching sports on the television. I jump on Dante’s leg. He sneezes. He motions for me to go away.

Pat chuckles. "She likes you."

"I know," Dante replies. "I like her too, but this ain't a good time."

Again, he sneezes. I frown. What happened? It is almost as if we never kissed. I can feel the distance already growing between us. It is just as well. The moment has passed, though the air between us still sizzles with possibilities.

"Pat," Dinah calls from the bedroom. "Come here, honey. Mom wants to talk to you."

Pat rises. He stops to pat me on my head before going into the bedroom. I look at Dante. He avoids my eyes. He sneezes then stands and moves to the second bedroom. I follow him. Sneezing, he turns on the computer. When he sits in the chair behind the desk, I jump onto the bed.

"No," he says in a low tone. "It is too risky for you to change back now."

I know he is right. I yawn and glance out the window. Night is beginning to creep across the harbor. The streetlights that surround it click on, illuminating the dark sky with an eerie glow. When I look at Dante, he is looking at me. I wish I had the gift of telepathy and could read his mind or send him my thoughts. However, I can read the message in his eyes. The unreleased desire is still in them. I wonder how far we would have gotten if Dinah had not returned home.

Soon, the sound of Dinah and Pat's lovemaking fills the room. Dante clears his throat and turns on the small box next to the computer. Music flows from it. A slow, sensual groove that highlights the noise instead of masking it. I shiver. Desire for him runs through my veins. He turns up the volume and glances at me. I want him so badly I am willing to risk getting caught by his sister. Yet, I know, for both of our sakes, that it cannot happen. I turn from him and exit the room.

Chapter Six

It is late when I finally awaken from my nap. The scent of dinner fills my nostrils and makes my stomach growl. I know from my internal clock that dinner must have been served hours ago. I pad into the kitchen anyway. My bowl is filled with vegetables and brown rice. I eat and wash it down with a few laps of water. I tiptoe into Dinah's bedroom. She and Pat lay in the bed, sleep claiming both of them. Pat is snoring. I glance at Dinah's finger. The moonlight reflects off of the diamond.

A part of me wishes that I were the one getting married. It is not something that I dreamed of as a child. Besides, who will marry a woman that can change into a cat? Surely not Dante. He is allergic to me. I shake my head. Why am I torturing myself with these thoughts?

With a sigh, I turn and stalk into the second bedroom. Dante is still sitting in front of the computer. When he sees me enter, he stands and shuts the door behind me. I hear the lock click. He sits on the bed, motioning for me to join him. I jump onto the springy mattress. Sneezing, he caresses my fur with gentle, long strokes. I purr. My body forms in his strong arms. Our lips meet.

His warm palm finds my bare breast. His fingertips brush against my nipples. They stiffen under his light caress. I moan. He feasts on my bottom lip like a starved man. It has been six months, I remember. His length strains against my thigh. *Oh, how I need this man inside of me!*

Dante pulls away to stare down at me. The moonlight reflects off of his skin like a halo. He is only a few inches away from me, but I already

miss him. Tears gather in my eyes as I stare into his, searching for some unnamed future. My heart melts. I know this is the man I have been searching the galaxy for.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I got carried away.”

“Don’t be,” I answer. “I want you.”

He kisses me. “I want you, too.”

My heart leaps. “I thought...”

He places his index finger over my lips. “I want you, Cashmere. I can’t deny it.”

He removes his finger and stares down at me. In his eyes, I see everything that I could not find in the men on Nile.

“When you were a cat, there was something about you. I felt the desire for you, even though the allergy prevented me from touching you.”

“But...”

“Shhh.” He kisses my jaw, then my neck. “Tell me to stop, and I will.”

A lump forms in my throat. I am giddy and nervous and scared all at once. Tell him to stop? Never. Not when his soft lips feel so lovely against my collarbone. Or when he twirls my nipple underneath his index finger and coaxes it to the surface.

“We have to be quiet,” he cautions in a whisper against my ear.

“I know, but I have never felt like this before.”

“Neither have I, Little Bit.”

I bite my lip. He slowly bends down and removes it from my teeth with his. His name tumbles from my lips as his warm hands caress my bare breasts. My lips once again become his. His fingers travel over my stomach, kneading the smooth muscle as he works his way down to the thicket of hair between my legs. My thighs part. He inserts his finger into my core. I shudder. His slow, deliberate touch is making me delirious. Purring, I arch my back off the bed. The charms on my collar jingle.

“Dante,” I gasp.

“Shhh.”

My eyes slide closed as he suckles at my neck. Slowly he swirls his finger around my clit. My thighs tremble. He kisses a moist path down my

throat to my breast where he takes my rigid nipple in his mouth. My fingers clutch his broad, tanned shoulders. My hips move in the rhythm his finger provides. I climax. He quickly, deeply kisses me to swallow my screams. Instead of being sated, I want more.

I reach down and stroke his penis through his pants as our lips continue to dance. He springs alive in the palm of my hand, just as I spring alive in his. I hook my thumb in his waistband and free him. He moans against my lips. Gently, I caress him, running my fingers up and down his hardening length. Each caress showing him how much I want him, need him, inside of me. He leaves my side to shake off his pajamas and retrieves a condom from the nightstand. I stare up at him as he sheathes himself. He stares back at me. The moonlight bathes his glistening skin in amber light. He is so handsome, I almost weep.

“You are beautiful,” he whispers. “My Nubian princess.”

His body covers mine. He enters me with such gentle force that my back once again arches. I pant, trying to inhale his earthly scent into my soul. My hair fills his hands. He whispers my name into my ear. I have never heard a sound so glorious. My hands flow down his slick spine to his hips, and I hold on to them, both wanting and needing him deeper inside of me. He obliges my unspoken request. I can only hold on to him as another climax claims my body.

Dante covers my mouth with his hand. I look into his eyes. A tear rolls down my cheek. I can feel that I am in the arms of greatness. That I am in the arms of my soul mate. I shiver. I grip his waist tight with my thighs. His breath is hot and sweet on my forehead. My hands once against curl around his shoulders as his thrust become harder and deeper.

“Cashmere,” he moans.

“Shhh.”

It is my turn to claim his cry of ecstasy. I press my lips against his as his orgasm flows into me. He shudders in my arms. A burst of air escapes his lungs as he comes, and then he collapses on top of me. I stroke his shoulders as he rests his forehead against mine. After a moment, he rolls onto his back, taking me with him. He massages my neck and back as he catches his breath.

Pink Cashmere by R.W. Shannon

"That was amazing," I whisper.

"Yeah."

I shiver, my body tingling from the contact with his. We kiss, our tongue entwining in a familiar and welcomed dance. Moisture once again pools in between my thighs, and I cup his cheek. Is it too soon to say that I love him? How can I leave behind something, someone, so amazing?

Breathless from the kiss, I rest my head on his shoulder. I realize that words are not needed at this moment. I can feel his desire in the way his fingers caress the skin over my spine.

"We should do that again," I whisper.

"Give me a minute, Cashmere, and we will."

Chapter Seven

When the sun rises, I awaken in Dante's arms. His embrace is tight around my waist, as if he is afraid that I will not be here when he wakes up. I lie still, reveling in the warmth his body provides. I feel his chest rise and fall against my back, a lullaby like rhythm that is almost lulling me back to sleep. My eyes flutter. With a groan, I open them fully. I peek over my shoulder. He snores softly into my neck, but over that I can hear the water running in the bathroom, along with giggling. I assume Dinah and Pat are showering together. At this thought, I sit up. His sister cannot see me like this!

I slowly extract myself from Dante's side, careful not to wake him. I stand beside the bed and watch him sleep. He looks so peaceful. A seraph sleeping on a cloud. I touch his cheek. Grinning, he turns onto his other side, away from me. I almost climb back into the soft linen to snuggle next to him but instead tiptoe to the door. I open it slightly and peer into the empty hallway.

Fluidly, I shift back into my feline form and stalk toward the bathroom. The door is ajar. I enter the damp room. The air is scented with the lavender gel, and I am thankful the shower has frosted glass. I can make out the shapes of the happy couple, but I cannot see them clearly. I look around the large bathroom. The engagement ring sits in a glass dish on the vanity. I scamper over to it.

"I think Dante snuck a girl in here last night," Dinah is saying.

I stop to listen.

“Why do you think that?”

“I heard moaning coming from his room, and his door was locked. He never locks his door.”

My eyes widen. I did not think I was that loud. No matter. I wiggle my tail and jump onto the toilet seat. It is a short, quick hop to the vanity. I hover over the ring, almost salivating. It is the most exquisite piece of jewelry I have ever seen.

“Well,” Pat says. “He’s a big boy.”

“I know. I just wonder who she is.”

“I’m sure she’s great. Here, wash my back.”

Of course, I am great. I turn my attention back to the ring. The diamond is set high on the platinum band and is surrounded by white diamonds. I look at the ring closely. It is clear. No imperfections. My eyes mist. I sniff, then sneeze.

“Hey!” Dinah exclaims as she wraps a fluffy blue towel around her figure. “That is not a chew toy.”

It is then that I realize the ring is still in my mouth. I spit it out as she scoops me up and clutches me to her bosom. She scratches me under my chin.

“She’s probably hungry,” Pat says, wrapping a towel around his waist.

“You’re right,” Dinah says. “Come on, sweetie. Let’s get some breakfast.”

“Hurry,” Pat calls after her. “I want to get on the road before it starts to snow again.”

Dinah carries me into the kitchen. I meow as she fixes me a meal of tuna and rice. As I dine, she pads back into the bedroom to get dressed. Dante walks into the kitchen. A gray shirt and pants cover his body. I flick my tail at him but continue eating. Though sneezing, he picks me up and buries his face in my back. I purr.

“I missed you this morning,” he whispers.

I rub my body against his chin. His eyes turn red. He wheezes. I leap from his arms as Dinah returns to the kitchen, this time fully dressed in a pink top and black slacks. She leans against the counter, watching her

brother.

Dante turns away from me and retrieves a mug from the cabinet.
“What?”

“So, who is she?”

“Who?” He sneezes.

“The girl in your room? I heard you...”

Dante almost drops his mug. I giggle as he still fumbles with it while walking to the coffee machine.

“Someone I just met.”

“Really? Do tell.”

He pauses as he pours coffee into his mug. *Yes, I think, do tell.* He sits at the round table and sips his coffee. I stand behind Dinah, watching the amused expression on his face.

“She’s cool. I met her online.”

“Is she still here?” Dinah asks looking around the kitchen. “I didn’t hear her leave.”

“She left early this morning,” he says.

“It sounds like you really like her.”

“I do,” Dante says looking me in the eye.

“But...?”

“It’s complicated,” he says, blowing on his brew. “She’s not from here. She lives out of...state.”

“So?” Dinah asks as she takes a seat next to her brother and reaches for his hand. “I’m sure it will work out.”

He shrugs but remains silent. Tired of being a quiet observer, I walk to Dinah. I rub myself against her pant leg. She picks me up and sets me in her lap. Dante shakes his head.

“This isn’t about Gwen, is it?”

He stares into his coffee as if it holds the answer.

“You have to get over her. All women are not going to abandon you like she did.”

“And Stephanie...” he mumbles. “Look, I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Fine.” Dinah looks at me. “I wish I could take Cashmere with us to

Virginia, but I don't think she'll like the ride. Plus, Pat's mother has three cats."

Dante nods then sneezes. "Yeah. You better leave her here with me."

"I missed her when we were in Japan."

"Are you moving in with Pat?"

"I don't know." She exhales and sets me on the floor.

I hiss my displeasure.

"We've talked about it, but I still don't know."

I turn and walk into the living room to stand in my favorite spot next to the window. Leaving Dinah will be a lot harder than I anticipated. I did not realize the impact I have her. I am a part of her family, even as a simple housecat.

Pat walks into the kitchen to collect Dinah. They both give me a final scratch before departing. Dante sneezes. He sweeps me up into his arms, and I feel lightheaded. He carries me to the sofa. He kisses my fur. I meow. In his arms, I shift into human form. Our lips meet. His hands roam my bare torso, searching for areas that were left unexplored last night. He fingers the collar at my neck.

"Do you have to wear this all the time?"

I touch the silk and diamond band around my neck. I had forgotten that I was wearing it. "I can take it off," I say, reaching behind my neck to undo the clasp.

"No," He says removing my hands. "It's sexy as hell."

He kisses me. Before we can go any further, the front door is flung open. We jump up from the couch as Dinah and Pat enter. I do not have time to shift or hide. Dante pulls his sweatshirt over his head, and I gasp at the sight of the creamy sinew of his back, but quickly gather myself and hold the shirt he tosses me in front of my body. There was no time to put it on.

"I knew I forgot—" Dinah's words halt in the middle of her sentence when she sees me.

They stare at me. I curl a strand of hair behind my ear. Dante clears his throat.

Pink Cashmere by R.W. Shannon

"This is Cashmere," he says, still breathless. "The woman I told you about. This is my sister, Dinah."

"It's nice to meet you," Dinah says, shaking my hand.

"Hello," is all I can manage to say.

"I have a cat named Cashmere." She looks around the living room. "Where is she?"

Dante and I look at each other.

"Anyway," Dinah says. "This is my fiancé, Pat."

Pat shakes my hand.

"Congratulations," I say.

"Thank you." Dinah eyes me from head to toe. I glance at Dante. He shrugs.

"Well, how did you get here so fast?" Dinah asks. "We would have past you on the elevator."

"I...uh..."

"She has a friend that lives next door," Dante says quickly.

"Oh. Okay."

"Dinah," Pat says, warmly smiling at me. "We have to get going."

"I just forgot my cell phone." Dinah dashes into the bedroom and returns with it just a rapidly. "Can't leave home without one now a days."

She and Pat stare at me, then at Dante. I shift from foot to foot. Dante folds his arms over his chest, as if daring his sister to say something.

"Well, I guess we'll be going," Dinah says. "Nice to meet you, Cashmere."

"It was nice to meet you, too."

Dante rushes to the front door and locks it after them.

"Wow," I say, collapsing on the sofa. "That was close."

"It made me remember the reason you're here," he says.

I nod, unable to look at him. I don't want him to see the tears in my eyes.

He sits beside me on the sofa and gently cups my cheek in the palm of his hand. "Cashmere..."

He is one hundred percent male, but right now, his voice is as soft

as an angel's song. I turn to look at him, sure that every emotion I feel is blazing in my eyes. I unclench my fist. The sweatshirt falls to my lap, revealing my breasts. He kisses my shoulder, my neck, my jaw. I exhale as he claims my earlobe between his teeth and gently nibbles on the sensitive skin.

I turn toward him. We kiss, our tongues once again entwined in dance. His palm settles on my right breast, and he gently caresses the fullness. I moan as his thumb draws circles around the erect skin. He releases my lips to take the bud in his mouth. He suckles. A shiver flows from the base of my skull down my spine. I arch my back. He takes his time, flicking his tongue against my nipple before taking it in his warm mouth again.

Gasping, I run my fingers over his scalp. He groans as he slowly turns his attention to my other nipple. I inhale sharply. Moisture pools between my thighs. My clit feels like it is going to burst. He senses my need and parts my thighs. Soon, his thumb traces my sensitive bud. I lean back on my elbows and open my legs wider. His fingers move in and out of my soaked core. His lips pull urgently at my nipple. Before I can react, the climax claims me.

"Dante," I moan.

He releases my nipple and claims my mouth with such passion that I once again climax. I have had lovers on Nile, yet no man has been able to love me as completely with only one finger as Dante has. He has already, in such a short time, ruined me for other men. How will I ever be able to leave him? The thought brings tears to my eyes.

While his fingers continue to thrust against my opening, he kisses a path between my breasts and down my torso. He moves between my thighs, hooking one over each shoulder. Trembling in anticipation, I close my eyes as his hot breath washes over my bud. He gently lifts my hips and pulls me closer to him.

"You smell so good," he whispers inside of me. "Like a field of lavender."

I am not prepared for the first flick of his tongue. Or the second. The third causes my back to arch. My fingers dig into his soft scalp. Even

if Dinah came back right now, I would not want him to stop. His soft yet hard muscle drifts over the slick pebble.

“Dante...” I purr.

As much as I do not want him to stop, I also want—no, *need*—him inside of me. He ignores me and continues to lap at my pussy like a cat with a bowl of milk. Another climax ripples through my valley and settles on the tip of his tongue.

I look down at his head buried between my thighs. With a trembling fingertip, I trace the blue veins that travel across his creamy white skin. I wonder how a combination of our skin will look on our daughter. I close my eyes. *Why am I torturing myself with such thoughts?* It can never be.

On Nile, I never thought I would fall in love. I had always been a free spirit, even for a queen’s only daughter. Before this moment, being a wife and having children never crossed my mind. Yet, Dante has changed my view of the subject in a short time. I am, after all, over a hundred years old. Could I still have a child? Will she be able to shift as I can? When Dante takes my engorged bud between his lips and suckle, I realize none of that matters right now.

He kisses his way back up my body. His lips find mine. My sweet essence fills my nostrils and dances over my tongue. He scoops me up into his arms and carries me to the bedroom where we make love as the snowstorm once again rages outside.

Chapter Eight

“So tell me about yourself?” Dante says as his fingers entwine with mine over my shoulder.

We lie in a sandalwood scented bubble bath. Lit candles line the vanity. Freshly poured champagne fizzes in the glasses on the ledge of the tub. He feeds me strawberries that we found in the icebox and kisses my neck. I close my eyes. This must be what heaven feels like.

“What do you want to know?”

“What was your life like on Nile? I bet you were spoiled.”

“I am a princess.”

He chuckles, and his soft lips vibrate against my temple where he plants a kiss.

“Before the war,” I say on a sigh. “I helped plan the royal parties and did ribbon cuttings, official visits, that type of thing.”

“What will you do here on Earth?”

I pause, trying to gather my thoughts. Since my capture, I did not have time to think about this question. On Venus, I would not have to do anything, but Earth was a strange place. One’s value is placed on the type of employment they held. The more glamorous the job, the higher one’s value within the society. It is different on Nile. One’s value is based on personality.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I have not thought about it.”

“You know, they were going to euthanize you if Dinah didn’t adopt you.”

"I know," I whisper.

His lips brush my temple, as if trying to kiss away the thought of me dying.

"Why are your people fighting?"

I explain to him the ongoing battle that simmered on Ngor and has boiled over onto our planet. I tell him how the Ngorians are trying to take over our planet and turn our citizens into sex slaves. He listens carefully. His embrace tightens around my torso as if trying to protect me from the bubbles.

"It was good, then, that your people thought to get you out."

I swallow the lump that has formed in my throat. When tears spill down my cheeks, he wipes them away with the pad of his thumb. I am scared. I am a stranger in this strange land. I do not know what I am going to do. Can I continue to live my life as a cat? What about Dante?

"I'm sorry..."

"No," I say, patting his hand. "No need to be sorry."

"You miss your home?"

I nod, though his question slipped from his lips rhetorically. He clutches me to his chest. I pelt it with tears. I do miss my home. So much has happened that I never had time to mourn the death of my mother or my homeland. Dante gently rocks me in the tepid water. He releases me briefly to turn on the hot spigot in order to warm it. It feels so good to be in his arms. He understands me. He accepts me.

Is this what unconditional love feels like?

I turn to face him as he reaches to turn off the water. Steam rises as I kiss him with as much passion as I can, hoping that he can feel how much I love him in the touch of my lips to his. I cup his smooth cheek. Water and bubbles slosh over the side of the tub like a waterfall. I cling to him, my life preserver.

"I love you," slips from my lips before I can stop them.

Dante pulls away from me. He brushes a stray curl from my eyes and stares into them. I am hoping that he can see the truth in mine. That I am in love with him. That I have been since the moment I saw him at the pet shelter. I have shielded my heart from this emotion long enough.

Like the steam that surrounds us, I rise from the bath and pull him to his feet. I then kiss my way down his body, over his muscular chest. I pause to flick my tongue over his rigid berry nipples. I follow the trail of hair down his abdomen to his pelvis. I look up at him as I sink to my knees in the bubbles.

“Don’t...” he whispers. “I...”

It is too late to stop. I already hold his manhood in the palm of my hand. My lips surround the tip. I run my moist tongue up the length of his shaft. His hands sink into my curls and grip the top of my head. He stiffens in my mouth. I trace every ridge and vein with the tip of my tongue. I want him to feel my desire, my feelings for him in every crevice.

Dante moans. I cup the base of his shaft in the palm of my hand as I once again lick the length of him. His grip in my hair tightens. I look up at him to see his complexion turn a deep shade of rose. He inhales sharply. I close my eyes and drink in his sandalwood scent.

“Cashmere... Stop...”

I open my eyes. He grips my shoulders and pulls me to his feet. We kiss as he sits on the edge of the tub. He grabs the condom package that we brought into the bathroom with us and quickly covers his solid member with it. I turn my back to him, and he grasps my hips and thrust into my moist core.

Water sloshes over the porcelain ridge in rhythm to our thrusts. I lean back against his strong chest, and he showers my neck with kisses. I think I feel my collar vibrate, however it might have been from my own trembling.

I moan as he pushes deeper inside me. My voice reverbs off of the slate hued tile walls. My knee accidentally knocks over the bottle of champagne. I giggle. My soul has never felt so alive. He cups my breasts and gently squeezes them. I begin to climax.

“Dante...”

“Dante, you in there?” Dinah calls from the other side of the door.

We quickly separate. More water spills onto the tile floor. I leap from the tub and rapidly shift into cat form. I perch on the seat of the commode as Dante wraps a fluffy blue towel around his waist. Dinah

pounds on the door and again calls his name. He looks at me as he walks toward the door.

“You good?” he whispers.

I nod, though I am far from okay. Dinah has the worst timing in the world. Dante sneezes as he opens the door.

“Hey, sis.”

Dinah peers around him, looking at the waterlogged floor, the spilled champagne, and me. She turns her attention back to Dante. “I thought I heard a female in here.”

“Naw,” Dante says. “That was just me singing.”

She frowns and moves around his arm that is trying to prevent her entry. “Sure...”

She picks me up and strokes my back. My skin still quivers from my encounter with her brother.

“What are you guys doing back so soon?”

“We didn’t want to stay too long,” she says. “The roads are pretty bad.”

She looks at the two half-full glasses of champagne, the spilled bottle on the floor, then at the lit candles. “I didn’t think you’d still be here,” she says. “I thought you’d left.”

“Like you said,” he replies, rubbing his neck, “the roads are bad. I thought I’d wait until tomorrow.”

Pat appears in the doorway. He nods at Dante. “We brought Italian from the place on the corner, if you’re hungry.”

“Ok,” Dante says, clearly uncomfortable. He sneezes.

Dinah continues to inspect the room. Pat reaches around her shoulder and digs his fingers into my fur. I purr. His fingers send a tingling sensation up my spine because I’m still on edge from my unsated pleasure with Dante. *Oh no!* I can feel myself wanting to shift. Panicked, I glance at Dante. I can sense him tense as he watches Pat leisurely stroke my chocolate fur.

Dante sneezes and looks away. “Um, can I finish my bath without an audience?”

Dinah moves toward the door with me in her arms. “Since when do

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you take bubble baths?"

Dante shrugs. "I had the place to myself. Why not?" He sneezes and drops his towel.

They gasp at the sight of his nude body and half erect penis. I squirm in her arms. I can feel my legs beginning to form. Jumping from Dinah's arms, I roar and run for the spare bedroom.

They laugh.

"I guess Cashmere has never seen a naked man before," I hear Pat quip.

I crawl under the bed and take deep sips of air to stop myself from shifting. I close my eyes. My heart beats rapidly from the close call. My collar vibrates. I must figure out what I am going to do. And soon.

Chapter Nine

"I was going to punch him," Dante says as he reaches across the console of the vehicle to take my hand in his.

The weather has broken long enough for us to take a jaunt around the city of Baltimore. Dinah has decided to spend the day with Pat and a few of their friends. After that, she will stay at Pat's home in a place called Towson. This allowed me to escape with Dante. He took me shopping at the largest indoor vendor stand I have ever seen. I was able to purchase some clothing and a pink suitcase to put everything in. I look down at my brand new outfit; a pink cashmere coat covers my white sweater and jeans.

We are on our way to Dante's home in Owings Mills, a suburb of Baltimore. I glance at him, sensing that he was jealous of Pat touching me. It warmed my heart to know that he did have deep feelings for me.

"He didn't know," I say as I turn to gaze out of the window.

"I just don't want anyone touching you but me."

My smile widens.

The streets are still covered with a heavy layer of snow. Baltimore is a beautiful city, with an eclectic mix of old and new architecture. Dante promised to talk me on a tour of the museums. There is much to do here, and I could get used to living here. I settle into my seat and squeeze his strong hand. "I don't want anyone to touch me but you, either."

"You didn't have to enjoy it," he mumbles.

"I could not help it. I was in my feline form. All pets love to be

scratched, and I was still excited from when we were..."

"I know, but still..."

I turn to see him grin. When we stop at a traffic light, he leans over and kisses me squarely on the lips. I purr. He pulls away from me to continue on the road to his home. When Pat stroked me last night, I realized that this will present its own set of challenges. If I choose to remain with Dinah in cat form, whenever her fiancé touches me after an encounter with Dante, I might shift. Under the circumstances, I did a pretty good job of maintaining control, but what if I cannot?

We drive the remainder of the journey in silence. Music plays through the speakers above my head. Dante mentions that the song's performer, Elvis Presley, is one of his favorites. I close my eyes and allow the melodic harmony to wash over me. It reminds me of my home.

I open my eyes and look out over the naked trees, suddenly homesick. I have been away many times, yet never this long. A wave of fear washes over me. What am I to do here? What if my relationship with Dante does not work out? Will I be stuck here on Earth for the rest of my life? Since my mother's death, I am no longer just a princess. I am a queen with a court and a planet to oversee.

We turn onto a winding driveway, and he releases my hand in order to steer the vehicle through the slippery area. We pass several immaculate houses before pulling into the driveway of a quaint, split-level brick home. Dante presses a button above his head and the wide, red door rises on its own. He drives the vehicle inside and presses the button again to close the door.

"Well," he says, "here we are."

"This is nice," I say, looking around the small area.

He chuckles. "This is just the garage. Wait until you see the inside."

He opens his door and climbs out. He helps me out of my seat before collecting the suitcase and shopping bags from the rear portion of the vehicle. After unlocking the door, we step into the spacious but moderately sized kitchen with stainless steel appliances and wood floors. He sets the packages next to the door, and then he takes my hand to give me a tour of the living, dining, and family rooms. Next, we go upstairs to

view the two small sleeping rooms, his office, and finally, his master chambers before returning to the living room.

Here, he helps me take off my coat and hangs it in the closet. I look around the beautifully decorated room that is a mix of his favorite colors, green and tan. He watches me take in my surroundings. While it is not as big as my palace on Nile, I could see myself living here.

"It's a beautiful home," I say in awe.

"Thank you. Dinah decorated most of it. As you know, she's an amateur interior designer. I, being the big brother that I am, allowed her to test her skills on my place."

I walk toward him and kiss him. "That was sweet of you."

"Are you hungry?" he asks. "We only had that pretzel at the mall."

"I'm famished," I whisper as he kisses me.

After returning to the kitchen to inventory the contents of the icebox, Dante orders a style of cuisine called Chinese. We settle in the family room and watch a delightful romantic movie on the television which, Dante says with pride, is a fifty-two-inch plasma. The sun has already set, but it is once again beginning to snow. Nibbling on a delicious treat called an egg roll, I recline in his arms as he nibbles my cheek.

"Tell me about yourself," I ask him.

"What do you want to know?"

His breath is moist and warm against my ear, causing me to giggle. I pause to drink the rest of my wine. He takes the empty glass from my hand and sets it on the wooden coffee table.

"I do not know a lot about you," I confess. "Tell me how old are you?"

"I'm thirty-six. You?"

"On Earth, I am twenty-five. On Nile, I am over one hundred."

"Wow," He leans back to study my face. "You don't look that old."

I roll my eyes. "Do you like living in Baltimore?"

"Yes and no. Like anywhere, it has its good and bad days."

"I heard you say on telephone that you may move. Is that still true?"

He pauses to look into my eyes. I can feel the hair stand up on my

arms; my nipples harden.

“At that time, I didn’t have a reason to stay here. My fiancée at the time left me for my boss. I actually bought this house for her. Every time I walked through the door, I was reminded by her betrayal...”

The pain in his voice hurts my heart. This Gwen was very unintelligent to allow a man like Dante slip through her fingers. I could never, and would never, betray him like that. Tears form in my eyes just at the mere thought of breaking his heart.

“What about now?” I ask. “Do you have a reason to stay now?”

Dante grabs my shoulders and turns me to face him. He kisses me with so much passion I see stars. His kiss tastes like the sweet and sour sauce from the shrimp.

“I must confess,” he says, “that I didn’t have any hope of ever being able to trust another woman this soon. Yeah, I dated some, but I never gave them my heart. I was still afraid of the abandonment. To love someone that intensely, only to have them leave.”

He pauses to wipe away a tear that slides down my cheek. “That was before I met you. Whenever I look into your eyes, I see so much trust and love that it restores my faith in that emotion, but it also scares the hell out of me because I never felt like this about any woman. Not even Gwen.”

I cup his cheek in my palm. “I promise you that I will not leave you.”

“You’ll have to go back to your planet...”

I shake my head. “Not for eons. Dante, I don’t know what the future holds for us, or for me. I know that I love you and I want to build a life with you, whether we are here or on Nile.”

His passionate kiss leaves me breathless. Yes, I do love this man. I could never leave him. My body trembles with need for him. My collar vibrates against my neck.

Abandoning the food, Dante picks me up and carries me upstairs to his chambers.

As we make our way to the bed, he quickly undresses me, and I him. We recline on the soft mattress. He covers my nude body with kisses.

Moisture collects between my thighs. The only thing I need right now is him inside of me. Sensing this, he pulls a condom from the nightstand. I take it from him and cover his erection with it.

Unable to delay our union any longer, I straddle his hips and slide my slick walls over him. He pulls me downward and thrusts slowly but urgently against me as his lips find my nipple.

“My Nubian princess,” he whispers against my swollen tip. “This time, we will not be interrupted.”

I arch my back as he dives into me. Currents of electricity flow through my veins. I clutch his shoulders and whisper his name like a sacred song. This man is my king. After tonight, I will not be able to go back to being an ordinary house cat. The only acceptable role for me now is as his wife. How I explain this to Dinah will be explored tomorrow. All that matters right now is the sensation between my thighs.

His thrusts against my opening quicken.

“Dante,” I gasp. “I love you.”

“I love you, Cashmere.”

I have never heard more glorious words. My lips brush against his wiry, blond eyebrows. I kiss his nose then find his lips. His hands grip my hips as he turns me onto my back. I part my thighs to allow his deeper access. The bed vibrates. My collar vibrates. I can only hold onto his shoulders as an orgasm ripples through my body.

Sweat dips from his cheeks and baptizes my forehead. My body quakes under the tender force that he drives against me. His kiss makes me dizzy. My name tumbles from his lips. I feel him tense in my arms then explode inside of me. After one final thrust, he collapses to his elbows then rolls onto his back, taking me with him. I gladly follow.

A few hours later, I am jolted awake by my shaking collar. I spring from Dante’s side and walk into the hallway. In the solitude, I can hear Akila telling me to come home. The war is over. She says she had been trying to get a hold of me for days. They need me on Nile to declare the formal end to the conflict and sign the appropriate treaties. A ship is coming for me tomorrow morning.

I sink to the beige carpet and weep. What will I do? I promised

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Dante that I will not leave his side. I knew this day would come, but I had secretly hoped that it would not. This is going to break his heart. I cannot ignore the demands of my home, but neither can I deny the yearning in my heart.

Chapter Ten

The rising sun finds me in the hallway. I perch at the top of the stairway after having wandered the halls all night. I could not go to bed. I could not lie next to Dante knowing that I have to return to Nile. When the pain of having to leave became too great, I shifted into cat form. I thought this shift would help lessen the pain my heart feels.

I was wrong.

The pink collar still beeps at me from a short distance away. In my distress, I tried to bury it in one of Dante's potted ferns, but I can still hear Akila's voice calling me back home. The chamber door behind me creaks open. I do not turn when I hear Dante's soft footsteps against the carpet.

"What are you doing?" he asks before a sneeze overtakes him. "What's wrong?"

I don't answer him. I can't. Instead, I lay flat on my belly, then flop onto my side. He sneezes as he nears me. He sits beside me on the stair but does not touch me.

"I missed you last night," he says softly. "I woke up a few times and you were gone. Why did you shift back?"

Sneezing, he moves to stroke my fur. I hiss at him and move away. Running back into the room, I scurry under the bed. The scent of our union still lingers in the air. I put my head on my paws and moan. I cannot do this. I cannot break his heart.

"Cashmere," he calls as he enters the room. "Come talk to me."

Sneezing, he kneels at the foot of the bed and lifts up the emerald

green bed linens. He peers at me through the darkness.

Just go away, I think. He does not. He reaches for me. On reflex, I reach out my paw and accidentally scratch him on the back of his hand.

“Damn it!” he yells as he retracts his hand.

“What is wrong with you, Little Bit? Come out and talk to me.”

I growl. I hope my charade will make it easier to tell him I have to leave him. Maybe if I make him angry, he will be the one to leave me.

He exhales and shifts to sit, then lays down on his back, still looking at me in the darkness. “I’m not leaving until you talk to me. Whatever it is, we can work it out.”

I crawl out from under the bed, run into the hallway, and dig out my collar from the plant’s soil. Returning, I place it at his feet, then slip back under the bed. The transmitter beeps. Akila’s voice flows over the airwaves and repeats the message that has been playing in my head all night.

Without a word, he stands. He sneezes and moves about the room as he covers his magnificent nude body with clothing. Tears spring to my eyes as I cover them with my paws. I sniff and howl. Why is this happening now? Things were going so well. I cannot delay my return, for my citizens’ sakes. I must sign the treaty. If I postpone my return to duties, the Ngorians might take it as a sign that I do not want to end the war, and they will continue to slaughter my people.

Dante stops moving around, but I have not heard him leave. I creep from under the bed. He sits in a chair next to the window, watching the snow fall. I walk toward him and stand by his leg. He does not acknowledge me. He sneezes, wipes his nose with the back of his hand, and sends his gaze out of the window.

I leap onto his lap. His eyes are red and puffy. With effort, he lifts his hand and scratches my fur. I twirl in circles under his strong touch. Soon, my human form returns. I kiss him passionately on his lips, hoping that he can feel my torn heart and my desire not to return but know that I must.

“We both knew this might happen,” he finally says, more for himself than for me, I think.

"I did not think it would be this soon," I whisper.

Unable to look him in his eyes, I bury my face in his chest. I cover his soft green sweater with tears. He strokes my back and brushes his lips against my forehead.

"I don't want to go," I say.

"You have to."

"Come with me," I plead. "You will like it on Nile."

"I don't think that's a good idea, and I don't like to fly. What am I going to do on a spaceship?"

"It is no different than riding in your vehicle."

He chuckles. "You make it sound so simple."

"It is."

"I can't."

"Why?"

The collar beeps. Akila tells me where the ship will land in a few hours. I cover Dante's face with kisses, trying to tattoo the taste of his skin on my memory. I strip him of his sweater. He stands and removes the rest of his clothing. We tumble onto the bed.

"Say it," I gasp as he enters me with such force that it takes my breath away. "Tell me to stay, and I will."

Dante stops moving to look into my tear-swollen eyes. "I can't do that," he breathes before starting again.

"Then I will return for you," I say, moving my hips to match his furious pace. "When I am finished with my duties, I will return to Earth."

He shakes his head. His thrusts become erratic and urgent. His beautiful creamy skin turns a deep shade of crimson at his shoulders. This is where I press my lips.

"They need you, my Nubian princess."

"But I need *you*," I moan.

My back arches off of the mattress; my breasts press against his chest. I claw at his back. Can he feel how much I love him? How much I need him? That without him, I will surely die? My body begs him to say the words. If he would just tell me to stay, it is done. In my mind, this is a temporary separation. I will go to Nile, handle my business as queen, then

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return to Earth and spend the rest of my days with Dante.

Yet, as his hot breath scorches my breast, I feel this is his good-bye. He grunts.

This is not good-bye, I plead with my eyes. He will not look at me. Stares at an unknown spot above my head. Though our bodies are still joined, he has already put distance between us. I hang onto him as spasms claim his torso. He orgasms. I feel his seed flow into me like a tidal wave.

“I love you,” I repeat as he rolls off of me.

Panting, he does not reach for me. Instead, he stands and walks into the bathroom. The door slams. I hear water running. He returns later, a towel is wrapped around his waist. His skin glistens from the steam. I am where he left me, lying in a heap in the middle of the bed.

“Dante...”

He walks to his closet and pauses. “You better get ready,” he says, his voice almost inaudible over my pounding heart. “We don’t have much time.”

I watch his retreating back as he moves into the closet and closes the door behind him. Reluctantly, I rise from the bed. Tears blur my vision as I shower and dress. I pick up my collar. Instead of putting it on, I put it on Dante’s pillow. I open the closet door to tell him I am ready, but I do not see him. I search the rest of the home, but do not find him.

He waits for me in his vehicle in the garage. The whirling wind blows the snow against the windowpane, and I shiver as I make my way to the car. He barely waits for me to close the door before he puts the car into gear.

I am at a loss for words. How do I reassure him that I will come back for him? The ride into downtown is silent and somber.

I turn to reach for his hand. He pulls it away as if I will bite him.

Chapter Eleven

I clutch Dante's elbow as we stroll into a town he calls Fells Point. It is a quaint area with ancient buildings and brick-lined streets. The air is scented with fresh-baked bread from the bakery nearby. The snow crunches under my feet. Under other circumstances, this would be a romantic walk through the city, but I am on my way to meet the ship and return home.

We near the seafood restaurant where Akila says the ship will meet me. It is bitter cold. The falling snow sticks to my eyelashes. As we turn the corner to enter the alley behind it, I notice that Dante is very silent. He still has not spoken to me except to say that we have arrived at the meeting point. His posture is rigid beneath my touch.

Dante tells me that he will make something up to tell Dinah. I close my eyes. I was so worried about Dante's heart, I completely forgot about Dinah's.

"What does it look like?" he asks.

"That," I whisper.

A part of me was hoping it would not show up. Instead, a large replica of an Earth snowplow sat before us. The markings on the side show the eagle and water crest of Nile. It is decorated in the royal colors of gold and purple. My heart breaks. The side door rises. The dark cockpit is awash with light, revealing the electronic consoles. Walidah, my secretary of war, bows when she sees me, as does Haqikah, who will pilot the craft.

"Queen Cashmere. It is an honor to accompany you. We are ready

to depart for Nile." She glances at Dante as she takes my suitcase. "Will he be joining us?"

I turn to him. "Will you?"

He shakes his head. The women back away, obviously sensing the tension between us. I clutch Dante's arm. He pulls away from me.

"Let me know when you are ready, my Queen," Haqikah says as they return to the ship and close the door.

"Look," Dante says when we are alone, his voice quivering. "It's been fun, it's been real, but I'm just going to walk away now... Right now."

"I—"

Dante places the pad of his index finger over my lips. "Don't say anything... I can't... I mean... It's only been a few days. You can't fall in love with someone that quickly. And you always knew you'd be going back to Nile, so..."

I look up at him, but he refuses to meet my gaze and sends his to the brick wall behind me. I burrow into his arms, not caring that he needed space to let me go, because I refuse to let him go. To my surprise, he does not push me away. I have learned that one can fall in love in such a short period of time. My tears wet the front of his jacket. He sniffs, softly kisses the top of my head, and withdraws from me. Still refusing to look at me, he turns in silence and walks out of the alley.

Alone, I stay rooted in place for what feels like an eternity. I search the space where he once stood, hoping that he will return, yet I know in my heart that he will not.

The cockpit door opens. "Ready?" Walidah asks softly, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I nod. I strip in the alley and shift into cat form as I walk up the ramp. I hope, once again, the shift will help ease my torn heart, but it does not.

Chapter Twelve

Six months later...

I recline on the purple velvet chaise next to the window and breathe in the lavender-scented air and the sweet smell of the rainstorm that has just swept through the area. The aroma reminds me of Dante.

I sigh. Since I returned to Nile, everything reminds me of Dante. The stars on the ceiling above my bed. The shape of the biscuits the servants bring me for breakfast. The melody the court musicians play in an attempt to entertain me.

I close my eyes. I have tried to forget him. However, his face slips into my dreams. Sometimes I can still feel his phantom touch on my bare back. The way his warm chest felt against my cheek. A tear escapes from my eyes. I thought time and space would help me to forget him, but it has not.

Though I had promised to return to Earth, my duties here have not allowed me the luxury. While the war is indeed over, there is much to be done. Construction on buildings damaged during battle must be performed. Relations with other planets strained in the conflict must be restored.

I stare at the plate of fruit set before me by a servant. I cannot eat. I miss him so, but I am sure that he has moved on.

"Why are you so blue?" Akila asks as she walks into the room. "It is a beautiful day. The nymphs will be having a tea and scone party in the

garden shortly. Then there is the Venus Ball tonight.”

Cringing, I shake my head. I really cannot stomach spending a few hours with eternally happy nymphs or wear a fake smile all evening as I greet the gods of the solar system. I would rather stay in my chambers and sulk. The exact same thing I have done every night since my return. I wonder what Dante is doing. Has he found a new lover? I shudder at the thought of someone else kissing his luscious lips, sliding his hard body against—

“You still miss him?” she asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

“I do,” I whisper, my voice not working properly to say more.

She sits next to me and takes my hand in hers. I have known Akila since birth. Our mothers were best friends. Akila knows me better than anyone. I cannot hide my distress from her, though I tried when I first returned. She saw through it right away.

“Maybe you should go back.”

“Right,” I retort. I have thought of returning to Earth since the ship landed on Nile six months ago. It is too late now. Too much time has passed. I am sure he has moved on. I must, too. Somehow. My heart shatters at the thought. A servant sets a fresh carafe of coffee before me. The aroma reminds me of him.

“He is still in your thoughts,” Akila says, “and in your heart. You must return to Earth and claim him.”

“How? I am the queen here on Nile. I cannot just pick up and move to Earth.”

“I don’t mean forever. Go long enough to bring him back here. Things are stable enough around her for you to take a trip. You can handle some duties from Earth for a while. They have fax machines there, right?”

“No,” I say, pulling my hand from hers so she cannot feel me tremble. “We discussed this already, Akila. I told you that he refuses to come.”

“Maybe he has changed his mind.”

I glance at her and shake my head. Dante is a proud, stubborn, beautiful man. He would not have changed his mind so easily. Standing, I pace the spacious chambers. The rain begins again. I look up at the

lavender sky and remember witnessing my first snowfall in Dante's arms.

"You still love him," Akila says gently. "It is all over your face. It is in your eyes. You need to return and speak with him. Even if it is just to gain closure."

For months, I have thought about contacting Dante for that very reason. I even had my security team track down his telephone number so that I might call him. I always changed my mind after the first few numbers were dial for fear that another female will answer the phone. My heart could not withstand something like that.

"I have a life here," I say sadly. "He has a life there."

"Does he? From what you have told me, he can be persuaded to come here."

"And give up his family? I could never ask that of him."

"No," She says quietly. "Not give them up. He could visit them. Just as any long-distance lover does on Earth."

"We are not talking about an earthbound relationship, Akila."

"I understand that." She rises from the chaise and stands before me. "But don't you think he misses you as you have missed him?"

I open my mouth to answer but close it. I really did not have a reply. Dare I dream that Dante misses me as I miss him? No, I tell myself as I move away from Akila. That cannot be true.

"It will not work," I whisper, more to myself than to her.

"It can, if you try."

I pace the area around the marble table, the hem of my purple robe brushing against the marble floor. The servants scramble to get out of my way. I close my eyes, remembering Dante's fingertips on my skin, and my cheeks warm with a blush.

"What would he do here?"

"The same thing he did on Earth."

I frown at her. Could it really be that simple? Maybe it could. My heart races. I feel dizzy.

Grinning, Akila watches me from the window. "You asked him to come with you. You told him you would go back for him. Don't you think enough time has passed?"

“Well, I...” My eyes mist. I promised him that I would not leave him, and I did. I promised him that I would come back to Earth for him, and I did not. He is pushing me away, I realize, because I am the one that is hurting him more than I love him. I remember how he told me of the other women in his life. How he would get close to one only to have them leave him. I, too, did this to him. Our relationship was special. I could feel it with every crevice in my soul. We were destined to be together. I knew that he felt it, too.

Akila places a hand on my quivering shoulder. “From what you described, Dante is a proud and honorable man. He has been hurt and disappointed a lot by women. He needs a concrete reason to uproot his life to come here, and by you proving that you are a woman of your word will do a lot to melt his heart.”

“But what if he rejects me?”

“What if he does not? You will never know if you do not try. Do you want to spend the rest of your days wondering *what if?* Besides, there is the matter of replacing Dinah’s missing pet.”

With that, she turns and exits my chambers, leaving so many unanswered questions and thoughts behind. I bite my nails, a nervous habit left over from childhood. My mind turns with plans that I must make. Plus, where am I going to get a cat that looks like me?

Chapter Twelve

My stomach churns as I stand outside of Dinah's front door. I am afraid to knock. Both afraid that no one will be there and that someone is. What does one say after being gone for half an Earth year? I begin to panic. What if Dinah does not reside here anymore?

The new Cashmere meows in my arms. I shush her. Cashmere is a Nile citizen of royal decent who was permanently trapped in feline form due to an illness. She volunteered to take my place in Dinah's home as service for her queen. Bless her. Luckily, she also has my long, chocolate-brown fur and hazel eyes. We have even outfitted her with a replica of my former pink collar.

I take several deep breaths. I cannot raise my hand and knock on the door. Cashmere stares up at me. I stroke her back. My will fades. This is too hard. Maybe it is better for my heart to not know. Just as I am about to turn from the door, it is flung open. Dinah stares at me open-mouthed. She rushes into the hall and throws her arms around me.

"Cashmere!" She exclaims. "You found Cashmere!"

"Yes," I say. "I came to return her."

She looks up at me with a bright smile that warms my heart.

"Dante said she ran away. I never thought I would see her again."

"I found her some time ago. She seemed to have followed me home, and as you know, I live far away..." This sounds false even to my ears, yet this is the story I rehearsed on the trip from Nile. I have never been a competent liar. Dinah looks at me quizzically then takes the

purring Cashmere from my arms.

"Come in," she says, stepping to the side so that I may enter her home.

"Thank you." I walk into the living room. It is just as inviting as I remembered. Sunlight flows through the floor to ceiling windows of the loft, bathing everything in soft golden hues. However, the floor is littered with cardboard boxes and paper that pops when stepped on.

"I missed you," Dinah murmurs as she buries her face in Cashmere's soft down. Cashmere wags her tail.

"Are you leaving?" I blurt out, panicking that Dante has already moved away also.

"Yes," she says. "Pat and I were married last month. We bought a house in Hunt Valley."

I nod. She sets Cashmere on the floor. The cat stretches then leaps onto the chair that was also my favorite.

"Would you like something to drink?" Dinah asks, moving toward the kitchen. "I can make some coffee, or I have iced tea."

"How is Dante?" I say, interrupting her hospitality.

She stops. I had hoped that my question would have been taken as polite conversation, but judging by the expression Dinah gives me, she sees right through it.

"He is on his way to Georgia right now."

"Right now?" I panic. "Why?"

She shakes her head. "That is not my place to say."

I pace to the window. I wonder how much Dinah knows about my relationship with Dante. Akia and I studied an atlas of Earth before I left. I know where Maryland is now, and I know my way around Baltimore, but Georgia? Where the hell is that? My heart skips. Silently, Dinah watches me. Is it truly too late? I came all this way. I must at least attempt to contact him one last time.

"Where can I find him?" I finally ask.

"I really shouldn't be telling you anything," she says, moving some boxes from the sofa to sit down. I sit next to her.

"Please. I need to find him."

She looks at me. Her steely gaze searches mine. She is being the protective sister, and I understand that. If I had a sibling, I would be protective of them as well. I love Dante. I do not want to lose him. A tear escapes my eye and rolls down my cheek.

Dinah takes my hand in hers. "You love him?"

I can only nod.

"I could tell that he was developing feelings for you. He moped around here for days after you left. He sold his house. He says that he is moving to be closer to our parents, but I don't think that's true."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a confession," she says.

I swallow the lump in my throat and wait for her to continue. This is it, I think. This is the moment where she tells me that he has moved on and that I am wasting my time.

"He told me everything."

My heart flutters. "Everything?"

"I know who you really are."

"What?"

She smiles warmly. "He showed up at my house drunk one evening, babbling about some alien cat he fell in love with. How she promised to take him home with her, but didn't."

My heart sinks.

Dinah squeezes my hand as tears stream down my cheeks. "He told me that you were the cat I adopted from the shelter. How he hated cats but fell in love with one..."

I gasp.

"He said," Dinah continues, "that the only reason he stayed in Baltimore this long was to meet you. That he realized that you were the one he was waiting for the day he saw you standing, naked, at the window after you shifted."

I begin to weep. Dinah puts her arm around my shoulder and strokes my back. He really did love me. I knew I felt the current pass through him into me. I had hoped that he could feel me transfer it back to him.

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"I wanted him to come with me," I admit to her. "I wanted to come back so many times, but I was afraid that he has already moved on."

She shakes her head. "He never did. He dated, but he has never been with anyone but you. He was waiting for you to return, but when you didn't, he assumed you also had moved on and gave up."

"I have to find him," I plead to her. "Please, help me."

Dinah hugs me. Her embrace is warm and loving. She will make an awesome sister to me and an amazing owner for Cashmere.

"Come on," she says, grabbing her coat and keys. "You should still be able to catch him. He's afraid to fly, so he's taking the bus."

"The bus?" I ask scurrying after her.

"You'll see. I'm using his SUV to move."

As we move toward the door, she hesitates.

"I hope this'll work out," she says. "I like you, Cashmere. I think you're just what he needs."

I smile though I am dying on the inside. I just hope that I am not too late.

Chapter Thirteen

The Greyhound Station is even worse than the pet shelter. A few men whistle at me as I make my way through the crowd gathered around the front doors. The scent of fried meat and tobacco enters my nose. I carefully step over bags and people sitting in the middle of the aisle. The woman behind the counter mumbles into a microphone, announcing the next bus to Atlantic City is boarding. Looking around, I see Dante standing by the doors in the back. He is the first in line as if he is very eager to board the bus and leave town. His face tells me otherwise.

Quickly, I straighten my teal blouse and hope that my appearance is acceptable. I glance behind me. Dinah argues with a man dressed in a blue uniform. Apparently, she will not be able to wait there as she promised. She stomps to the driver's side of her vehicle and leaves. I turn my attention back to Dante. The ground around him is littered with duffle bags. He is reading an X-men comic book.

As if sensing my presence, he looks up at me as I climb over the luggage from the other passengers to get to him. A few groan and shout their displeasure at having to move it out of my way. I am a queen, after all. Dante's eyes widen as he watches me approach him. He looks away, attempting to remove the shocked expression on his face.

"I am glad I caught you," I say.

"How did you find me?" he asks with a mixture of wonderment and trepidation.

"Your sister."

“Oh,” he says, folding the comic and shoving it into his back pocket.

Silently, we stare at each other. The air between us crackles and sparks. He is even more handsome than I remembered. The mustache and goatee line his lips once again. His broad chest is covered with a black knit sweater. He looks absolutely delicious. He watches me. I part my lips to speak, but nothing comes out. What does one say to the man you love, after so much time apart has passed?

Instead, I wrap my arms around his waist and kiss him, hoping the passionate kiss I press into his lips says everything that I cannot. That I missed him. That I love him. That I am sorry it took me so long to return. That I never intended to leave his side for so long.

To my surprise, he kisses me back, but then just as quickly pulls away from me. The people behind him in line whistle.

“It’s too late,” he says when he regains his voice.

I press my fingers against his soft, smooth lips. “It is my turn to talk. The last six months have been miserable without. I want you with me on Nile.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not that simple.”

I put my hand on his chest. I can feel his heart beat rapidly against my palm.

“It is that simple,” I say. “I love you, Dante. I loved you from the beginning. I am sorry it took me so long to return. It was not that I was unsure about you or us, it was because I was not sure about how you felt about me.”

I wrap my arms around his waist and put my head on his shoulder. “I am not going to leave you,” I say. “I know that is how you have been hurt in the past. I am not your past. I am your future and you are my destiny. I did not come all this way to leave empty handed. I will not move you to Nile to abandon you. I need you, Dante. I love you. Marry me.”

His eyes widen in surprise. Tears spill from my eyes. It was not in my plans to propose to him, but the moment felt right. He stares into my eyes. I can see him struggle with the decision to follow his heart, my heart,

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or do that which is easiest. The announcement is made that the bus to Atlanta will be boarding in five minutes. The travelers around us cause chaos, gathering children and luggage. I continue to kiss Dante as if they do not exist.

He pulls away from me. "I can't just pick up and move."

"Why not? You already are."

"This is different than moving across state lines," he says. "It's not that simple."

"It is that simple, if you love me."

He pauses. His lips part to reply, but not finding the right words, he closes them. I can feel his fear. I am scared too. Scared to return to Nile without him. Scared to live anywhere else without him.

"Then I will go with you," I decide. "I will give up my kingdom, my title. I will live here on Earth with you."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You are not." I take his strong hand in mine. "I would rather be anywhere with you than somewhere without you."

"You'll find someone else," he says bitterly. He removes his hand and picks up his duffle bags. "So will I."

"I could," I say, fighting tears. "But I don't want to. I want you. And only you."

Dante stops walking toward the door but does not turn to face me. The people in the line for New York murmur how he is being stupid and as fine as I am, they would move to Timbuktu. I watch his back expand and contract beneath his black sweater.

"I won't hurt you," I whisper.

Slowly, he turns to look at me. The announcement for the last call to board the bus to Atlanta is made.

"You coming, buddy?" the driver asks him.

Dante's eyes search mine. *Say no, my eyes plead. Stay with me.*

"Yeah," He whispers.

My heart sinks as he gives the driver his ticket and boards the bus. I burst into tears. Did I really expect him to leave the only world that he has ever known to move to a planet next to Saturn? Even for me? I bury my

face in my hands. I feel two arms circle my waist. I lean into Dinah's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, hon," she says softly. "At least you tried. The boy has always been as stubborn as a mule."

She strokes my back as I cry. I will literally die without him. Without Dante, there is no point in finding a new mate. He was my soul mate. The only man I could truly envision spending my life with.

"We have to go," she says softly. "I better move the car before I get another ticket. You can stay with me for as long as you need to, okay?"

All I can do is nod. Numbly, I follow Dinah out of the station to her car. I press the transmitter on my bracelet to let Walidah know that I will be ready to return to Nile in a few hours. The officer is indeed writing Dinah another ticket. She leaves my side briefly to argue with him again. I hug myself and wipe away the tears that fall rapidly from my eyes.

"So, ya'll got Internet where you live, Little Bit?"

I turn and find myself in Dante's arms. He kisses me on my nose. From his front pocket, he extracts my collar and clasps it around my neck.

"The only way I will go to Nile with you, is if you marry me."

I answer his question with a kiss.

Chapter Fourteen

Six months later...

It turns out that we do have the Internet on Nile. I never knew this, and I am the queen. We had to contact a few of the scientists from Ngor to come to Nile and hook it up for Dante. His business is flourishing. Not only is he still able to create magnificent works of art for people on Earth, he is doing it for Nile and our neighboring planets. He created the programs and invitations for Dinah's wedding. He also created a successful comic book called *Pink Cashmere*, which tells our story in graphically designed blocks that one can purchase over the internet.

We just returned from our first trip to Earth. We went back to Atlanta to meet his parents, Edna and Horace. They are lovely people. We only told them that we live out of the area, not out of space. He thinks that they will "freak out" if we told his family where we really live. That is fine with me. Dante and I were married in a small ceremony on Nile, but we will have a much larger celebration on Earth next year.

Cashmere is loving her new home with Dinah and Pat, who welcomed a baby boy into their family a few months ago. We also visited the happy family in Baltimore on our return trip.

Although I did not have to, I shifted back into feline form during the trip. This excited Dante. It also brought back his allergy. This time, however, we found a doctor who is an expert with cat allergies. He prescribed medication for Dante that seems to be working.

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I recline on the chaise lounge next to the window. It is raining, and I love the sound the rain makes against the marble cobblestone patio. Dante kisses me. I kiss him back. My arms find the familiar place to rest on the back of his neck. I inhale his musky scent mixed with the scent of lavender that flows through the window and makes me dizzy. His hands caress my bare back.

"You're right," he says. "It is beautiful here."

I nod. "It is even better now that you are here."

He kisses me again. His fingers draw circles around my belly button. I almost weep as I think about the life Dante and I created that is growing inside of me. The future Queen of Nile.

"Boy or girl?"

"Girl," I whisper. "Most definitely a girl."

He kisses my neck. I close my eyes. This man is indeed my destiny. Naked, I tremble in his arms as his finger part my thighs. He climbs on top of me. I kiss his shoulder as he enters my slick valley.

"We have to think of a name," I gasp.

"We have plenty of time for that," he whispers against my breast as he takes my nipple between his lips.

"Yes, it can wait until..." I pause to climax in his arms. I stare up into his sparkling eyes. He kisses me as our hearts beat in rhythm. Now *this* is how I envisioned spending my life.

The End

Author Bio

R.W. Shannon has been a writer for as long as she can remember. It is fitting that besides writing, her profession is as a librarian. After surviving five years in the desert, she is moving back to the East Coast. She is hard at work on her next project and can be reached at whatangelsdesire@yahoo.com until her Web site is completed.