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## THE DARKLY STRANGER

### Chapter 1

Over the years the outgoing, daring parts of me were smothered, crushed and stamped down so slowly and consistently I hardly noticed they were dying. What was left was an introverted mouse forced more and more to the fore. But during the last two months something changed, something radical. I started to have weird, vivid dreams—nightmares—in the shower.

They were eerily realistic imaginings that shouldn't bother me in the least. Except I was afraid they might be coming true.

Drafts that had never bothered me before whistled through my old turn-of-the-century farmhouse. I planned to do renovations, room by room, but most of that never happened. Only one room got the complete overhaul.

The bathroom.

Oh, I had been so gung ho when I finally got enough together to buy this place. It didn't matter that it had been a mess. There had been a small bedroom next to the old bathroom. I busted out the wall between the two rooms, merged together all that decadent space, reveling as I converted it. The end result was a spa bathroom fit for a king, queen, or an entire royal guard. Perhaps if I had been precognitive I would have seen the need for bathing quarters large enough for a small army.

I did most of the work myself. I sank a lot of money—hell, all of my available money—on converting that bathroom into something where all my troubles could be washed away. I knew the heated floors, the special wide rainforest shower nozzles, the six separate shower heads, the fancy beige tile, and the imported Italian marble were ridiculous luxuries. It didn't matter. As I got quieter and quieter and spent more and more time at home, I needed one place where I could unwind.

So the rest of the house looked its years, but I had a beautiful rejuvenation chamber I so badly needed.

My name is Donna Arelli. I look like a librarian, or a kindergarten teacher, which makes sense because I used to be both. In my twenties I occasionally went out and played up the naughty librarian stereotype; things changed a lot since I started working at home. First I bought this house out in the middle of nowhere. Then I stopped having to go into town for work. Eventually as I began ordering more and more things online, and the few friends I had got married, or promoted, or moved away, and I got tired of the bar scene...well...staying in leads to more staying in. Because it sort of happens subtly, you don't realize how big a shift has happened.

I'm not going out anywhere anymore. Now I teach eighth and ninth grade to needy, socially

maladapted teenagers online.

So I really need that spa bathroom.

The day before yesterday had been a particularly tough one. Finally, I was standing under the shower, letting all that wonderful water cascade over me. I leaned my head back against the tile of the side wall and closed my eyes. Then I found myself with my arms bent in front of me, forcing my breasts up, and my wrists pushed together as if they were tied and bound.

I blinked and looked down at my flushed chest, aroused nipples, and invisibly trussed-up arms. I'd pictured a lush forest, and people staring at me, and fingers brushing my midsection. I shook my head to clear it. It was like I lost a few seconds there.

I squeezed a dollop of strawberry-scented shampoo into my hand and had it halfway up to my hair when I saw something dart by in the hall.

Something large.

!!!!!!!!!!

I was not alone.

I frantically wiped water and steam off the inside of the shower's glass doors.

There was nothing there.

I must have imagined it. I MUST have imagined it.

I kept my eyes on the door as I blindly groped to turn the water off. My ragged breathing sounded loud against a new, hard silence. I snagged a towel and wrapped it around me. I clutched the towel shut right over my racing heart. The nap of the towel felt rougher, the steam more sinister, the thunder of my blood pumping so fast and hot, a deep contrast to the rapidly cooling skin not covered by the towel.

The bathroom door was only open a few inches, just how I like it to let some steam out but keep most of it in. Of course I didn't see anything. There was no way I could have seen anything.

I pushed the door open slowly. I flinched, jumping slightly as it groaned a drawn-out creak.

No one there.

I remembered a literature professor in college asking us what the scariest sound was. A scream? A scratch at the door? Breaking glass?

'No,' he said. 'It's a toilet flushing in your house, when you absolutely know you are supposed to be alone.'

I suppressed a shudder.

The dreaminess of the shower had totally left me, and my skin was icy where goosebumps sprang up. The adrenaline had shot through my system, leaving me shaky. I took a deep breath and tried to think. There had been no noise, no rustle. What had I seen? I hadn't seen anything. In fact, it was more like I'd seen nothing; it was a break in the light. But what could move with no sound?

I avoided my shower for three days. After all, if I didn't leave the house, who'd care if I got grimy? When I finally decided I needed to get clean, I skirted the shower at first, opting for the separate Jacuzzi bath. I brought a book in with me but couldn't get into the story. I added a jasmine bubble bath and stayed in until I felt terrific. But when I stood up a film of jasmine yuck was stuck to me from the chest down.

I stared at the shower.

I loved that shower.

"This is silly," I said to myself firmly. So I got in. When I closed my eyes I remembered all the dreams I'd been having for the last two months. Me, begging strange, dark-scaled men to touch me. Me, as a man, with a pretty, petite blonde, licking her until she screamed. Me, in a wild, Amazon-like forest, tied up and naked, while people rubbed me all over with leaves. That one was the most vivid.

There was a fire at my feet, like I was being burned at the stake. I heard the fire crackling. My body looked perfect in the dream, like a Playboy bunny centerfold but better, lit by the firelight below, emphasizing my curves.

There were men and women, touching me everywhere, torturing me with their teasing. Firelight revealed and concealed them. They had very different motives, expressions. Every detail was so.... tantalizing.

I soaped up quickly. I should write this all down.

I hopped out and towed off to the weird feeling of being... watched. There was something about the dream that was... real.

I had to write this down. But I didn't want anyone to read these sordid, overwhelming, twisted fantasy trips of mine. EVER. I didn't want anyone to read it by accident. I didn't want to put this on my computer and have one of my students reverse hack into my stuff and find out what might amount to—almost—porn.

I should go old school. Write it down by hand.

But I didn't want some handyman to see a stray piece of paper, or a friend who might come over, or a lover if I ever got one ever again, to open up a notebook and be surprised that Donna was so... whacko.

But boy, did I want to write this stuff down because these shower visions just kept getting hotter, more twisted, and much weirder.

As my students would say, my mind was getting too full without a brain dump. I needed somewhere safe to write it down.

So I started looking for journals. Locked journals. But strangely enough most locked journals are made for ten year old girls and lock with these little square jokes you could unlock with a pen, bobby pin, or even a fingernail.

That would never do.

Finally I found a journal online that would work. It was a hand-made old parchment tome really, with a huge bronze metal band around it and a combination and key lock. The leather was deep red. It cost a hundred and thirty-five bucks. I did a double take when I saw the price. I winced. But yeah, this was the one. I needed it. This was no ordinary journal. This was an epic place to write down magic, sexy, feels potential real adventures.

I called it The Grimoire.

I couldn't wait for it to arrive.

Days passed, still no delivery. One week, nothing. Two weeks, still nothing. Every day after I finished teaching all my delinquents and e-filing my notes I paced back and forth in my living room waiting for the delivery truck to bring The Grimoire—and hopefully my sanity—to me. As I paced I started thinking about how the intensity of the dreams had been escalating over the past two months. I stopped pacing suddenly. That wasn't the only thing that increased. So had the occasional feeling that some benevolent presence was looking out for me. The sense that all my desires and also my discontentment were slowly, ever so subtly, ramping up.

I tried to think of when I first felt it. I wore a hole in the rug pacing while I thought back. Not a month or two or three months ago. Longer. I cast my mind back. I kept looking back, searching. Finally it hit me. It was seven months ago—the night of the huge storm. Crackling lightning and booming thunder sounded like it would rent the world apart. The storm had been building all day like a giant fireball thrown into a volcano, and then at sunset it broke, dropping torrential buckets of rain drenching everything in prisms of the rainbow.

Then, with a loud sizzle and pop, the power went out.

That was Halloween night.

The next day the dreams started. It was just that they were so mild, I never thought to distinguish them from the creative wanting of my lonely mind until I looked at it all now in context with the perspective of hindsight.

Something changed the night.

Where, oh where was my journal?

It was into the third week, almost the fourth, before it arrived. It was bigger than my computer. Literally.

I couldn't wait to get it to my desk. I plunked it down, and it made a satisfying 'thunk'. I opened the stiff, thick cover. The first page was covered gold leaf and had one word in huge, bold old English letters.

'Beware.'

I began writing, and it was like I couldn't stop. I was a fountain of words, copying down dictation from memories that had come to me when I was naked, wet, and soap-slicked. The ink scratched across the pages, and I got wet in my core thinking of men dominating men, strange shadows battling for sexual spoils, virgins hoping to be captured, glimpses of skin, whispers of moans, a princess running away with a loved one, and strange dreams of blood and need.

"There!" I slammed the book closed and I let out a huge exhale and a long, satisfied sigh. It was three a.m., and I'd spent hours releasing a dark side I didn't know I had. I spun the lock on the combination part of The Grimoire and turned the key in the lock. I rummaged through my gift-wrap drawer and found a red velvet ribbon to put the key on and tied it into a necklace to wear around my neck.

I felt more tired and complete than I had in a long time. I slid in between the cool, fresh sheets on my bed and curled up on my side. I tucked the tiny key between my breasts.

"You'll have pleasant dreams from now on. No more of this nonsense," I whispered to myself.

I slept well, woke up refreshed, and felt like life was good. I talked to myself as I watered the plants in my big backyard facing the forest. I cursed as the refrigerator handle came loose. I hummed sappy tunes from Fats Waller to Over the Rainbow, grateful for sunlight filtering in through the windows and the feeling that all was right with the world.

Although I still wondered, somewhere in the back of my mind, about that flash of shadow.

I had my students do multiple exercises of creative writing. Despite their grumbling, I gave them more homework than I usually do. I was looking forward to correcting their work. I wanted to keep busy.

While there were no more strange, inexplicable motions glimpsed out of the corner of my eye, I couldn't help the occasional feeling I was being watched.

The house seemed more magical, more mysterious, as I wrote more and more in The Grimoire. The shower fantasies stopped, so my entries in The Grim turned more into a journal. Entry upon entry described a good life of a solitary woman with doubts. 'Maybe I should have gotten a PhD and taught in a city instead of living by myself so far out from civilization.' And 'What made me think lots of land in the middle of nowhere in a farmhouse that seemed so quaint with its copper pipes, distressed wood, and peeling paint was a good idea?'

It was almost the end of the school year. Soon this bunch of cyber miscreants would be gone, and I would be free for the summer before being lassoed back in to guide and advise another batch.

My students chomped at the bit to be free, anticipating sweet days of lounging on beaches. So too I felt a restlessness, the constant edge of feeling that something new, fast and bright sped toward me; it might be right around the corner. It was like a silent, large clock counting down... but counting down to what?

Just like anything else, it's when you don't think about something that it creeps up on you.

Sunday was a scorcher, but I decided that was the day I absolutely had to weed, mow, and re-plant.

So when I got in the shower it was with a sweaty face, dirt under my fingernails, and an aching back. I turned on all six shower heads, let the water cascade over me, and closed my eyes as I swept the hair back off my face and neck.

Oh God, the water felt so good.

I kept my eyes closed when I leaned the back of my head against the tile. I still had my eyes closed when I bent forward letting the warm water do its magic on my shoulders and lower back. I was making soft 'aaahhh,' sounds to myself when the hair on the back of my neck raised and the skin there prickled to gooseflesh.

I snapped open my eyes and jerked upright.

Something stared at me from the other side of the glass.

Something big, black, and completely foreign. And not black as in African or African American. Black, as in the absence of color, black.

I wiped water frantically from the inside of the glass. Its whole body seemed thin, elongated. The forehead was distorted somehow.

Desperately I batted water out of the way away as new beads formed and clung. The droplets obscured my view, as if reacting to my trapped, panicked response. The thing was still during these long seconds as I was all thundering heartbeats and frantic hands. Then I realized I could slide the door out of the way and with a violent push I shoved the glass door open.

The creature ran away in flash of speed but left me with one thought.

*Was that a tail?*

I closed the shower door, as if that thin layer of glass offered some flimsy protection from what I'd seen, or my shattered emotions. I bent over, my hands on my knees, while the room spun, and I decided, very firmly, that I would not hyperventilate.

Certainly not a tail.

What was that Sherlock said about impossible and improbable?

That creature was carrying something, right? Must have been something... maybe, a rope? It was just a shadow. Not a tail, surely not.

Flashes of high school came back to me. On the blackboard in clear letters I saw the words 'Occam's Razor'.

Then flashes of college and grad school lectures wheeled by, as if my mind was flipping through its inner catalog on super speed and pulling up all possibly relevant facts, theories, bits of knowledge, and throwing them up at me in a super stew of words and pictures. Parallel universes, unknown newly-discovered species, homo sapiens divergent DNA theories, and then literature, specifically, Dante's inferno.

The water abruptly turned cold. It was like the icy spray reflected my inner chill. I turned the water off. I stood for a second longer as I pictured my lips turning blue, which is what would happen if I stayed in there forever.

Even though I was clean, I felt clammy. Suddenly, it was very important to be quiet. I held my breath, pursed my lips. Bit back my fear. Absolutely silently, I very, very slowly stepped out.

I flashed back to Comparative Religions 101. And psychology. Abnormal psych. Schizophrenia, mental hallucinations, breaks in reality.

My teeth chattered as I scrubbed the rough towel over my body. I didn't want to run it over my hair or face for fear of covering my eyes and missing something.

"Get a grip," I whispered to myself as I quickly finished drying off.

I thought of many past classes, including Drawing 101. Except what would I draw, a blur?

I didn't even put on a robe. I went right to The Grim. I had to write this down.

It didn't sound probable, or logical, or realistic when I wrote it.

It sounded insane.

I closed The Grim and spun the lock. Turned the key. Hung my head.

Denial is not a river in Egypt.

I know what I saw.

That night I was raw, restless, wanting. I tossed and turned, getting tangled up in the sheets. My hands ran south and north, trying to soothe imaginary aches.

On Monday I gave the children the day off from cyber school. I wanted, needed, to ponder my mystery person, creature, whatever-it-was. I spent the day pacing, thinking, wondering.

If I were going to be honest with myself, I had felt a sort of weird difference, an almost presence, a change of energy in and around the house for two months, so it probably lived here, at least part-time.

That thing was living in my house. My mind rebelled, as if it crashed against a brick wall at super speed and both crumpled and had some kickback. What? *That thing was living in my house?*

I didn't know whether to be horrified or elated.

It was very late at night when I came to the conclusion the most likely place for an unofficial visitor to invite himself to, sight unseen, was the attic. I put on a robe and went in the hall to stare at the pull-down attic access. It was trap-door-like slab in the ceiling with a small brass hook hanging down from it.

It wasn't even an attic really; it was more of a crawl space. It was very hard to get to because it was above the highest area in the farmhouse; it was a major inconvenience to get up to the hook. I went up into the attic once when I was inspecting every nook and cranny of the house before buying the place, and once when I shoved a few old things I'd never need up there the week after I moved in. I hadn't been up there since.

I stood in my bare feet on the concrete floor I had never gotten around to finishing and looked up at the ceiling. I'd have to drag out my little ladder and then I still probably couldn't reach it. I chewed the inside of my cheek. Was this a good idea?

It took a few minutes to find where I had stored my ladder. It was shorter and flimsier than I remembered, more of a step-stool really. I dragged it under the faint line in the ceiling that outlined the door. Who thought it would be a good idea to put a small, ornate brass-colored pull-down hook on those trap doors? The entire construction was a stupid idea. Even from below I could see the door was stuck. I jumped up a couple of frustrating times just barely touching the bottom of the hook. Precarious but determined, I jumped higher. It took another two tries before I got a good enough grip on the old hook to give it a good, hard yank. Then door hung on, stubbornly motionless for a second, creaking.

Boom.

The top half of the rickety wooden stairs unfolded. I had to duck or they would have landed on me. Dust rained down. I sneezed and coughed.

There was also another reason I didn't go up there. It was hard to open the second half of the ladder and even harder, almost impossible, to put it back up.

But with some wrestling, swearing, and bargaining, I unfolded that old ladder and gingerly climbed up. The climb was higher than I remembered. I flicked the light switch at the top. No light. Fine, at least for the first few feet there would be some ambient light from the hall. I peeked my head up. No floors. Oh, right. The crawl space was evenly spaced wood beams with chewed up fluffy pink insulation in between. The attic was about four feet tall so I had to crawl.

In for a penny, in for a pound.

I started out slowly. It took effort, and like a kid in elementary school, for a second I was sticking my tongue up and out with the intense concentration. It was hard going, carefully placing each hand, knee, and curled-under toes on the beams.

I was about halfway to the water heater when I stopped, a vision of what I must look like springing to my mind. I was bent forward like a wary cat, just wearing my old, gray cotton robe. It was belted tightly at my waist but gaping open revealing a wide swath of my breasts with the key swinging in between them. The bottom edges of the robe had parted and were riding up, giving a clear glimpse all the way up to my thigh. My expression must have been tentative and unsure. I sure felt unsure. I was headed toward an even darker area.

If this were a movie the increasingly eerie music would be cresting to a crescendo in the background, and I'd be sitting at the edge of my seat, torn between biting my nails and wanting to throw popcorn at the movie screen.

Then I thought I saw something in the very corner of the attic. Two bright green slits! Yikes.

I turned around and ran, in a half crouch, as fast as I could, jumping from beam to beam. Then a few things happened, so quickly it was almost as if they were happening at once. First, I realized what I saw was part of the pattern in a Tiffany-like lamp I'd stashed long ago behind an old heater, reflecting off the key.

I turned around to look at it and my foot and robe caught. I fell through the empty hole where the fold-up stairs had been. Time slowed down in that 'oh shit' sort of way. My body plummeted down at a terrible neck and head first angle. I realized there was no way to twist around; I was heading for the concrete at literally break-neck speed, and there was nothing I could do.

It was the kind of fall that could kill me.

I closed my eyes and prepared for impact.

Thwhosh.

What?

I was about a foot off the ground, held securely in the creature's embrace.

I stared into bright yellow, red, and orange-striped eyes. The creature was crouched low, and I was cradled against its chest, wrapped safely in its arms. It had saved my life.

I put my hand on my heart to keep it from beating out of my chest.

I saw a dreamlike sparkling blue line connecting me to the creature. Its eyes dilated, and I heard a voice in my head that wasn't my own; it was strange and deep.

'I need more. There has got to be more.'

I opened my mouth to scream, and it quickly covered my mouth with one hand. My intake of breath was captured in its palm.

Before I could even make sense of the weird, snake-like texture, it stood me up, and turned me. The move was so fast, I spun, almost catching a whisper of fingers tracing the edge of cotton. There was a whoosh, and the ladder was folded up and closed. Another whoosh, and it was gone.

I'd never been so scared in all my life.

Or so turned on.

\*

I relived that moment a million times over. In all my dreams nothing was as wild as that one moment of truth. It lasted about four seconds, but it was more exciting, more stimulating, and more mind-bogglingly hot than all the years of my life put together.

I never doubted what I saw. I doubted what I heard in my head. Where did it come from? The creature? If so, what did having the creature nearby mean?

I knew what I wanted it to mean.

There were no more nightmares—in the shower or otherwise. There also was no feeling of being watched.

I spent a lot of time pacing my hallway wondering where the thing had come from. Somehow everything I knew was in question. Was that really telepathy or...? I mean, maybe I imagined it. Could it talk? Did it have some other way to communicate? Was it dangerous? Was it hiding somewhere on my property?

When it would it return? The house was completely quiet. Weeks passed and many questions became one burning question. How could I get it to come back?

While the weird dreams stopped, my desires didn't. I formed a plan. It seemed the creature only came when the shower was running or when I was in danger of being hurt.

I bought a sexy, white satin robe. I went into the bathroom and turned the water on full blast. It took a second to gather my nerve. I fortified myself with a deep breath. I knocked over my bathroom shelves and everything on them with as loud a crash as I could manage. I lay down on the floor on my side and artfully arranged the slit in the bottom of the robe, showing a revealing section of leg. I pulled a few locks of hair over my face and waited. I worked as hard as I could to calm my rapid breathing, and I waited.

I heard the whoosh of movement. I felt a gentle touch on my foot. I struggled not to move as I felt a wonderful, very subtle energy pour through me. Goosebumps sprung up on my skin as the creature quickly palpitated every bone in my feet with that strange pebbly skin. It reminded me of when I pet an iguana and the iguana rubbed back against me with happiness.

The creature moved on to my ankles. It spent quite a bit of time on my ankles.

I wasn't sure what it was doing and then it occurred to me. It was checking for injuries.

Its hand slid up to my hip. Four fingers squeezed my hip in three places. It touched my forehead; its fingers were cool. It ghosted one hand over my breast to my heart and rested its palm there for a few moments.

It tucked one lock of hair behind my ear.

Then whoosh, it was gone.

Well hell. So much for that.

I propped myself up. I wasn't sure if it saw through my ruse or if it decided that I was healthy enough to take care of myself.

I sighed, got up, disrobed, and adjusted the water temperature and got in the shower. I told myself that the ploy had been dumb, a total failure. Maybe it thought I was clumsy or manipulative. Who knows? I picked up my favorite soap and lathered it in my hands vigorously, letting the smell of jasmine soothe me.

I washed my face, and when I opened my eyes, there was something standing outside the shower stall.

I opened the sliding glass. The steam rushed out and a million thoughts raced into my mind. When you picture a fortune teller saying 'A tall, dark stranger will enter your life' I don't think they mean this much stranger.

The water continued to pour down on me, splashing whatever the creature was that was staring at me a little bit too.

"Can you understand English?" I asked.

Very slight nod.

"Can you speak?"

Also slight nod.

"Are you a male?"

Large nod. One corner of his mouth turned up in a smirk. His tail came up in a big graceful motion from behind him until it was face height and waved as if saying 'hello, this should make that obvious'.

I said the next thing that came to my mind, "Would you like to come in?"

His eyes widened, and his pupils dilated to almost twice their size.

I extended one hand out to him, palm up. "Come on in, the water's fine."

He stepped in, and we stared at each other.

I still had the bar of soap in my right hand and I massaged it in my palm, lathering it up one-handedly.

I guess I expected we'd continue to stare at each other while I finished bathing but he grabbed me and turned me around, yanking me to him, my back to his front. He put his lips near my ear, and the first words he spoke shook me to my core.

"Where I come from, if a female asks a male into running water, then she is proposing a life union of marriage."

I sucked in a breath and stiffened. His grip around me tightened. His voice got deeper until it was almost sub-aural. "And if a male steps in with her that means he accepts."

Oh shit.

Very sharp teeth grazed up my ear, and I shivered in the warm water.

On the other hand, maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

Something slithered around my calf and shin. Oh my God, was that his tail?

The soap fell from my hand.

He said something, his voice low and grumbly. I couldn't understand it.

"If that's not what you meant, I won't hold you to the agreement," he said and there was a pause. He teeth scratched my neck. "This time."

His hand stroked my side and my core blossomed, warm and hot. He caressed up and down one side, from shoulder to hip, grazing more and more of my breast each time. My head lolled back against him.

I was having trouble breathing. I had to open my mouth and pant.

"I will immobilize you, paralyze you, enter you, join with you."

What? Huh?

The tail wrapped a few times around my thigh and slid up, firm and quick, locking me even further into place. He wrenched my head around, stared at me. I blinked, unnaturally aware of the water pounding around us, and my chest heaving up and down as I struggled with the opposing twins of rampant desire and cautious, halting logic.

He was so strange up close. Yet, somehow so familiar. I stared at those weird yellow, red, and orange-striped eyes, and I was so hungry for him but content to just stare. I wondered if that's what he meant by immobilize. Tranced out with desire.

He touched his lips to mine, and gently rubbed them side to side. It was not so much a kiss as a sensual brush of the lips.

I wanted so much more. I nodded.

Then he kissed me, stroking his tongue into my mouth, brutal and hot. I had a panicked thought; there was something different about his tongue. Was it... forked? Then I couldn't think at all because he was running that talented tongue around mine.

Then he was touching me, *there*, matching the in and out caresses of his tongue to down below. Holy shit, was he doing that with the tip of his TAIL?

No. No, definitely not. That was one of his fingers, gently caressing. Definitely. Absolutely. But the huge shot of adrenaline that spiked into my heart just wondering where his tail was and what it could do just upped my heady cocktail of lust into the stratosphere.

I'd never be able to write about this. How would I ever describe it? Warm and gooey and burning hot and cool and scary and safe and new and old and—

He broke off the kiss and I gasped for breath. I smacked my hand flat against the tile to brace myself. The water beat down on us, like a sudden spring shower downpour, echoing the triple time

of my heart and magnifying the surreal sensations that had made the incredible leap from my dreams to actually happening.

I was just about to tell him he was an amazing kisser when he placed tiny, soft kisses down the side of my neck and any words I had dissolved into soft sighs and gasps of breath before they got voiced. He continued to work his way down and it was like he was imparting love with each light butterfly kiss gift. His tongue licked the tiniest of strokes, slowly further down, and then he sucked one of my nipples into his mouth and rolled the other. He pushed his tail into me... wait...the tail! Whoa! It somehow hit the perfect spot and then...holy hell...expanded outwards!

I trembled, right on the precipice. He withdrew. I was shaking, stunned with the barrage of emotions and physical sensations that were so intense and had come on so quickly. I had sensed him for months and been thinking of him for weeks, but now that he was here my heart was filling up and spilling over, as if warm nectar was pouring out of me and joining the water of the shower.

I wanted to hold back, protect myself against the fear of the unknown and the overwhelm of the sensations, and the barrage of pleasure, the absolute gluttony excess of it, but I was defenseless against the shakes that overtook me from the onslaught of pleasure.

He moved me so we were facing each other completely, lifted me up and, BAM, slammed me against the tile, pinning me to wall with his hips, his erection huge between us. He pulled my legs up around his waist. He opened his mouth wide, wider than humanly possible, to reveal two sets of upper fangs, the outer set descending like knives and dripping.

Shit.

He tilted his head to the side and lunged that mouth at me. He bit down hard, his fangs piercing my flesh. I felt a quick, sharp burn for a split second where his teeth sank in, just barely breaking the surface.

My body stiffened. I couldn't move. Literally. The only thing I could move were my eyes.

Venom.

I'm going to immobilize you.

Prey.

The fangs felt like blades coming out. He looked at me and smiled. He opened that wide, wide jaw again. Was it double hinged? Then outer fangs had retracted and the inner fangs lengthened.

I could hear him think directly into my brain.

*'The toxin is a tonic.'*

He bit the other side of my neck.

Nothing.

Then I flew apart. I came so hard I thought my entire body exploded. It was the biggest rush I ever experienced. My core gushed. He pushed into me in one hard thrust. It was a good thing I was paralyzed because my body wanted to buck against him hard. He pulled out and stroked back in and huge flowing rings of light, red, orange, yellow, blue, crashed into me one after another.

I came again.

And again.

Not a tonic. An aphrodisiac. Times a thousand.

And then some.

The paralyzing venom wore off and every cell tingled and danced. I tightened my legs around him and ground my hips into him with each stroke.

He put his forehead to mine. I could hear his thoughts. *'Yes. More. Mine.'*

I felt him shoot up into me.

*'Join with me, mate.'*

Huh?

Then I felt his soul merge into mine, and mine into his. Flying together, dancing. Burning. A lush, hot, blaze. I was glad for the water. He increased his speed and the inferno inside me exploded to thermonuclear.

*'Join. Start.'*

What did he think we were doing now?

The colors turned into a tsunami. A barrage.

*'Now!'*

It was untamed. I was still needy, yet satisfied.

*'Mine. Join. Create.'*

What did he want?

I came again. And again. And again. Then the multiples rolled over me again and again, and I couldn't get them to stop. I contracted around him and opened my mouth in a silent scream. Blinding lights made me close my eyes.

I shook so hard, I wished I were paralyzed again.

Then I passed out.

\*

## Chapter 2

I woke as if from a decade of sleep. Like an apple, bobbing to the surface of water, suddenly breaking through one viscosity and into another. I was lying in my bed. I didn't remember going to bed. I blinked. I turned my head. My creature was on his side staring at me.

Oh yeah. Now I remember.

"You wake," he said.

"Mmn-hmn, I wake," I said.

He slowly reached one dark finger and caressed it down my sternum, and my body arched up to meet him. My eyes closed slightly, and I purred.

"So good," I murmured.

He smiled. I took his hand in mine and studied it. Three long fingers, all almost equal in length, one more finger, slightly on the side, basically a thumb. The fingers had wider pads at the end and webbing in between. Reminded me of a frog. I caressed the back of his hand and found the texture of his skin identical to my own. I frowned. Wasn't his skin pebbly before?

"You fell asleep in the middle of our joining. Is this normal for your kind?"

Fell asleep? Nuh-uh. Blacked out.

He looked at me waiting for an answer.

"Maybe, if the sex is really, really good," I said.

He smiled wide. No fangs that I could see. Hhm.

"I wanted to wait until you awoke before I left," he said and jumped off the bed in one smooth motion.

“What?” I reached after him. I was tangled in the sheets, but he stopped when he saw I was lurching almost off the bed trying to grab him. He came back to me and settled into my arms.

“I go to register our union and to petition your move to the other side,” he said.

“What, huh, what?”

He had said his statement in the most logical voice. We both furrowed our brows at each other. His confusion seemed to stem from the fact I wasn't on the same page as he was. My confusion was that I was about a hundred steps behind him.

“Surely you don't want to stay here when you can live in my world? I can only survive here for hours at a time. You do not wish to live with me?”

I took a deep breath. What did I really have here after all? A Skype job to misfits who were mandated to classes they didn't want. A house that cost more in utilities than my mortgage payments.

“I wish to live with you,” I said.

He got up to go again.

“Wait!”

He sat back down on the side of the bed.

“Don't go yet.”

He brushed his lips against mine. I had a powerful flashback of our souls merging together.

I gestured to my own mouth and jaw, and then I pointed at the lower half of his face. He opened his mouth slightly, and I glimpsed both sets of fangs. What had seemed so alien in the shower didn't seem quite as strange now. Were smaller now? I leaned in to get a closer look and he moved so that he nuzzled his way down my jaw and I let my eyes flutter partially closed. ‘Oh, what talented teeth you have. All the better to eat you out with, my dear.’

He scraped his teeth and fangs lightly up my neck, barely scratching, not breaking the skin, but creating a wonderful rasping sensation. He pulled away just a little bit to look at me.

I put my hand on his jaw and gestured for him to open. He did. The fangs completely retracted.

“Amazing,” I said.

He shrugged.

“Do females have fangs?”

“One pair.”

I wondered which ones.

“I don't even know your name,” I said.

He made a facial expression that I interpreted to mean that names weren't as important to them as they were to us. He said a very long, low word that I assumed was his name. I shook my head. There was no way I'd ever be able to get that.

He said it again.

I frowned.

He said it again, much slower. His neck expanded a little when he said it. There was no way I'd ever be able to say it. Damn.

“Tah-ah-nan,” he said.

He'd shortened it. Must be a nickname. I repeated it. He made a face like, close enough.

“Taaaahn.” I said. He smiled at that. Lover's pet name. I liked it; it had aaahh in the middle. Still it seemed a mouth full. “Tan,” I said.

He smiled again. It was okay with him; he didn't care.

"Donna," I said while I put my hand on my chest.

"Donna," he repeated, taking my hand away and putting his lips there. Obviously he had no problem saying my name. Although it appeared he decided to give me a pet name of his own. "Da'a."

He stood up to go.

"Wait!"

"What?" Now he looked impatient. I had so many questions; I wasn't sure what to ask.

"When I first thought I saw you, you looked...wispy?"

He frowned. He didn't understand the word.

"Like smoke," I said.

He walked in front of my blue accent wall, and his skin color changed to blue.

"Whoa!" I said.

He smiled.

Then when he moved away his edges seemed to blur. The smoke effect. That was much more freaky.

"Nature's magic, protective," he said.

Tan kissed me on the cheek and then, whoosh, he was gone.

Amazing speed, another of nature's protective bonuses.

Then I thought of another question. When would he be back?

Everything with him seemed so right, I hadn't questioned it. I got up, got dressed, made myself scrambled eggs for breakfast. I wondered about the change in his skin texture. Did he do that to please me?

I went to The Grim to write down the whole experience. Although I couldn't quite find the words. How do you explain your souls actually flying and merging together, and then coming back into you stronger than before?

I wrote for about an hour. Tan still wasn't back. I walked around my house, idly cleaning up and putting away things, and I wondered if moving in with someone, to another what, world, dimension, what? Wasn't crazy. Yep, it was crazy. But I had been so lonely. And face it, there was nowhere in this world I was going to get sex like that.

Still, it seemed weird that I was so attached. I was usually pretty cautious when it came to dating.

And what about love?

This was the thought I was thinking when he came back, all smiles. How many teeth did he have?

"The elders have listened to my plea for your cross-over," he said. "I will go back in a few hours to hear their decision."

"Good, ah Tan, I have a question." He came to me and kissed a sweet peck on my lips, then kissed down my cheek, my jaw.

"Yes, *marret*."

I assumed that was an endearment for girlfriend from the way he said it.

"Ah..." The kisses were a little distracting. I tried to put my thoughts into words. "Do you emit some sort of pheromone?"

He stopped kissing me to look puzzled. He didn't understand the word.

"Did you"—I made a gesture with my hand—"put out a chemical to make me attracted to you?"

"Of course."

"I mean... ah, do you put out a chemical that makes me want you, like binds me to you."

He raised one shoulder in a move that said to me 'well that should be obvious'.

"Yes."

"I...."

I could see his expression change. The male instinct of wariness where he knew he might be in trouble.

"Da'a." He traced one finger down my cheek, and the texture of his finger was pebbly again. "Surely the males of your species try to attract the females."

I gave up. "Yeah, we have all kinds of attraction. You didn't do anything wrong. I was just wondering, because I like you so much. Want you so much."

He smiled wide. "Then perhaps we should go in the water again now. We have a little time before I need to find out, before we have to get back."

I licked my lips. "What if I pass out again?"

It took him a second to decipher the phrase 'pass out'. He smiled. "Then I guess that means I did well, and I will carry you over sleeping."

It sounded good to me.

\*

### Chapter 3

I spun around my room, euphoria and overwhelm making me dizzy. I was sure he'd get permission, which meant, oh, oh, oh, I was going to live with Tan!

I should pack a bag. Right. Pack a bag. I pulled a big duffel out from the back of my closet. I started putting bras, underwear, and socks on the bed. Jeez. I didn't know how much to bring. He said I could come back didn't he? I mean, how easy was it to "cross over"?

I decided on five days worth of clothes. I got a little hung up on toiletries.

"Yeah, Donna, I don't think you need a hair dryer where you're going," I said to myself when I noticed what I was holding. "Who knows if they even have electricity?"

Some of my euphoria broke. What the hell was I doing? Still, I decided to over pack on the toiletry products side, bringing my favorites of everything from shampoo and conditioner to shaving cream and blush. I rarely wore make-up at home, I couldn't picture wearing it somewhere else, but what the hell. Maybe it would make me feel stronger, knowing I had it.

All and all it took me about a half an hour to pack. I packed a few books, and I packed my computer, even though I didn't know if I'd have a rechargeable power source, and of course, I packed The Grim.

Then I was done, and I started pacing. The longer he took to return, the more insecure I got. It was nuts, going off to who knows where with someone I barely knew. I paced up and down my hallway, having two sides of myself talking to each other, my instincts feeling like going away with Tan was the right thing to do, and my logical part of the brain reiterating over and over again that normal people don't just pair up and drop everything and move in together.

I became more and more of a nervous wreck.

Tan got back and whooshed next to me and scooped me up in his arms.

"Hello, marret," he said.

Immediately I felt different, like a switch had been flipped. I had to go with him, I didn't want to spend one minute without him.

He kissed my neck, finding sweet spots behind my ear and near my shoulder. He raked fangs lightly over my neck skin.

I arched into him, and my chest flooded with a deliciously warm, happy feeling.

I remembered the pheromone thing. Something about having him near made me forget everything but him, want only him, need him. I could tell it was chemical, but I didn't care; it felt divine. Like everything was right in the world.

I thought about the human "love chemicals" PEA and oxytocin. Yeah, I was getting plenty of those all right, but this intense attraction I was feeling to him wasn't that. It was something else. But it had to be okay to let myself go under its sway, because I didn't feel like I had much of a choice to do anything else.

And it felt so good.

"The Elders approved your living permission, and our temporary union, also approved." Tan pulled my arm. "Let's go."

I pulled away from him, got my suitcase and duffle bag from the bedroom, and came back.

"What's that?"

"My stuff," I said.

He looked confused.

"Well, I need my clothes and stuff," I said, and gestured down at myself.

Tan shrugged.

He took my arm again, holding me firmly just above the elbow. We went out through the back door.

I locked up, resisted the urge to triple check everything. We walked across my backyard, and into the woods behind.

We walked for a few minutes, and it seemed quite a long ways, with me carrying both my suitcase and my duffle bag. I was just about to ask Tan to help me when we came to a small clearing, maybe a quarter of an acre across and a few feet wide. We crossed the clearing, and on the other side we stopped next to the tree.

Tan gestured with his hand. "Door portal," he said. Except there was nothing out of the ordinary there.

Tan put his right hand to his left wrist and took something out of his wrist! No, that wasn't possible, was it? Maybe he was wearing some kind of bracelet that was the color of his wrist skin and he had taken the thing out of that? No. I leaned in closer to try and get a good look at what he removed from his wrist. It looked like a piece of jewelry, a sharp, silver arrowhead. He held it up in front of him. For a brief second, I got a better look at it. It was more like a triangular knife, with some curvy places near the tip.

Tan stabbed the pointy tip into the air in front of him, face level, and sliced down. Two halves of scenery separated as if opened by a zipper.

"Holy shit," I said, and stepped back.

Tan stuck his fingers in the small gap and pulled it open. It was almost as if the woods were a curtain and he pulled it back a bit.

"Hurry," he said, reaching his hand out to me.

I blinked. Tan whooshed to me, picked me up, including the suitcase and the duffle, and walked us through. He put me down, turned around, ran the knife down the open edge and it closed, as if he was zipping it up. He put the knife back in his wrist. Yeah, that was definitely IN his wrist.

I looked up at where we had come through. Perfect forest. I was afraid to look around. Instead, I focused on his wrist.

"How do you do that?"

"How do I do what?"

I made the motion he did when he slipped the knife, or key, or whatever it was under his skin.

"We have two layers of outer skin," he said. He simply pulled apart his skin, as if there were a small cut there. The knife was resting on top of another black pebbly layer identical to the top layer. He took the knife out. "We can carry things in between the two layers." Tan put the knife back in and his skin closed up over it. "That leaves our hands free."

"Do that again," I asked.

He did. It was fascinating.

"Do you carry anything else like that?"

Tan opened his other wrist. I bent down to look, he'd revealed a series of tiny darts. He closed it up. He opened a small place on his chest. I leaned closer. There was a very small, colorful oval. What was it? Oh. A tiny painting of two people.

"Your parents?"

"Yes."

Okay. So the skin thing was weird, but kangaroos and other marsupials carried babies in a pouch. We pierced ourselves, and carried lockets, and keys, and knives in our pockets, so I guess it was just something to get used to.

"Marret," he said softly.

"Mmn?"

"Are you ready to see my world?"

Hell no.

"Yes."

He firmly squeezed my shoulders and turned me around. My first thought was that if the world from Avatar was even more colorful, it wouldn't be that far off. Tan pointed up. There were two suns, and four moons, one in partial eclipse.

"Come," he said, and took my arm again.

Nothing looked familiar. I guessed it looked a little like what I thought the Amazon rain forest would look like, except huge. Then a flock of about a hundred butterflies flew by. They were beautiful, but also somehow reassuring. We had the same butterflies.

"Where are we?" I asked.

He said a word, it sounded like "Boo-month." I repeated it. He laughed.

"Close enough."

Then I saw a few houses, most of them looked like very large huts really. I stared at them, but didn't have time to look in-depth because Tan pulled me along. We went through an archway of trees and vines, to an extremely large dirt field. At one end part of it was slightly sectioned off into a sort of center courtyard I guess. Tan kept pulling me in that direction and then we were staring at five, very serious-looking beings on thrones of various sizes.

The Elders. I didn't need Tan to tell me that. He pushed me forward a little. I looked at all five people. They pretty much all looked like Tan, except one had skin that was a dark chocolate brown, and one had skin that was a very dark purple. I didn't know if they were male or female.

The one in the middle said something to Tan, in a language I couldn't begin to understand. It had lots of rolling r's, and flemy ch sounds, and what sounded like cricket chirps. They went back and forth for a minute until I caught one word I did know from Tan, as he gestured toward me.

"Donna."

I did a little curtsy. God damn it, Tan should have prepared me for this.

"Hello, child." A very deep voice. Once I knew he was a male, I was able to see the tail behind him; I hadn't thought to look for it before.

"Hello," I said.

"Tan has asked for your stay, and we have agreed."

I nodded.

"Until you become a citizen, you are our guest. If you hurt another, or kill an animal, or show violence in any way, you will be banished, and Tan will be punished. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said.

"We do not violent here," he said.

"I promise."

"You are not to disturb the way."

I looked at Tan. He nodded.

I nodded.

Tan told me the names of each Elder, which were so difficult I try to repeat them or worry whether I'd remember them. Tan said something that sounded in tone like a thank you. We both bowed, and then left.

"Come," Tan said. He took my arm.

He took me to what I thought might be the equivalent of a main town square. A lot of beings were staring at me.

"I did not think this through," I whispered to myself.

"Do not worry," Tan said. We stopped in front of a large hut. "This is my house."

I looked at it. It seemed to be made out of small trees and some kind of large green and purple leaves that were the size of cars.

Tan opened the door, and we went inside. The first thing I noticed was the waterfall. It was a shallow blue and green rock wall and well with a perfect cascade of water over it. Then I looked around the open space. A large red pallet lay to the right, which I assumed was his bed. A hearth and maybe a separate room or closet to the left. I looked up. The entire roof was like a skylight.

I pointed up.

"Those leaves are from the *Tetrasaurast* plant," Tan said.

That roof is made of leaves? It looked like one big pane of smooth glass.

"They change color slightly with the weather."

"Oh," I said.

Tan moved my suitcase and duffle bag near the bed and ran his hands over my shoulders, my sides, my breasts. He kissed my neck, nuzzling his fangs against me. "I want you to..." He didn't say anything more for a minute, pausing to tweak my nipple. "Be comfortable here. Even though we are not complete, I can sense your discomfort."

Not complete?

"Will stroking you make you more comfortable?"

*I don't know, but it will certainly distract me.*

"Yes," I said.

He looked at the waterfall. I remembered our shower at my house. Was the waterfall wall his

shower? Then Tan looked at the bed. But instead he led me over to a chair I hadn't noticed.

"Marret," he said softly. "Thank you."

Tan sat down, and pulled me down onto his lap, straddling him. He fit my core tightly into his growing erection, and smiled the wicked smile of sexy ownership, possession, and anticipation, that is apparently universal to all males, no matter the species. He nuzzled my neck.

"Da'a," he said softly. "My beauty."

Tan kissed my neck, behind my ear, over my collarbones. He ran his hands over the sides of my breasts. Tan licked his top lip and then smiled with a truly devious expression. He held up one hand, and with a sharp, wthoowhupt sound, teeny tiny bristle spikes burst out of the pads of his fingertips. He slowly brought that prickly fingertip toward me, and touched and rolled my nipple through my shirt. I arched into him with a moan-like scream. It felt fantastic.

"You like that, marret?" he whispered in my ear in a low, husky tone.

I ground against him.

He sucked my other nipple into his mouth. Even through the cotton I could feel the heat, the out-of-this world tongue. I let my head drop back. I felt more than saw the lights between us. He increased the pressure a little, and I came.

Tan laughed. That pleased, contented laugh of a man who knows he satisfied his woman. Apparently that's universal too.

Tan stood me up, and quickly stripped me of my shirt, bra, shoes, pants, and underwear. He stroked himself a few times while staring at me with those amazing foreign eyes, pulling me further under his spell with the most incredibly intense gaze. Then he grabbed me by the hips and lowered me onto him.

"So. Good," I said.

Tan had no problem maneuvering my weight up and down, kissing me until I was wild for another release, making me feel close to him with whatever alien chemical and light show was his way. His tail snaked in between us and found that perfect spot. I came, and then came again when he did.

I slumped onto his shoulder.

"Amazing, Tan. Incredible. Mind blowing."

"Now you are relaxed and happy."

"Yes, Tan. Relaxed and happy."

He disentangled us and helped me get dressed.

"You are okay to visit?"

It took me a minute to decipher this one. Maybe he wanted to visit someone or to have a guest over?

"Yeah. I'm okay."

He took my hand and led me out of his house, past more of the amazing jungle landscape, and to another house similar to his own. Tan didn't knock. He just said his name, the whole long complicated syllables of it, and waited.

A few seconds later a male opened the door. Very similar to Tan, but with a slight dark-purple tint to his skin. He saw me, and his eyes opened wide.

He stuck his hand out, in the handshake gesture, and I automatically reached out to shake it.

"Hi, I'm John. Come in." His English was perfect. Weirdly so. And did he just say his name was... John?

There were three very human children in his hut. They had light mocha skin and dark blondish curly hair.

"My mate, Donna," Tan said.

"These are my boys, Peter, Josh, and the baby is T.M. Boys, come say hello."

The two boys who looked to me to be about seven and nine came and stood in front of John and me and said hi. They had the same strange multicolor eyes as John.

"Hi," the baby said, freaking me out.

"Ah, hi everyone."

"Your mate is not home," Tan said in a half-question, half-statement way.

"No, she's down by the river. But I called her when I saw your"—he paused here—"wife, and she will be here in a minute."

Wife? Yikes.

It was all taking me a minute to process. He called her? The perfect English. The kids.

"How long have you been here?" John asked me.

"About two minutes," I said.

He laughed. "Would you like something to eat? You must be hungry."

My stomach growled in response, and John laughed again. After the amazing sex session with Tan I was hungry, I just hadn't realized it until John said something.

"How is it your name is John?" I asked.

"That's my human name. My Bumonth name is..." and then he said a word that began with a Ja sound and had even more clicks and complicated sounds than Tan's name.

"John it is," I said.

"All the boys have Bumonth names too."

"Got it."

The door opened. "Hey honey, what—whoa."

"This is my wife, Marie," John said.

"Whoa. Again," Marie said. "Hi." She came and shook my hand. She stared at me for a minute. She seemed even more surprised than John. "Tan. Holy shit."

Tan shrugged.

The baby pointed at me and said, "Human."

"That's right, sweetheart," Marie said. "Human."

"How many of us are here?" I asked.

"In the village, just me, and now you. On the planet, maybe five or six hundred."

I did a double take. A triple take really, as I used my fingers to count my brain's problems processing. First, she called it a planet. I didn't know what it was, I guess I was thinking of it as some magical pocket. Calling it a planet was weird. Second, just her. Third, five or six hundred? What?

I blinked.

"How long have you been here?" Marie asked.

"I just got here."

"Well, I'm sure you have lots of questions. It's overwhelming. But you'll get used to it."

I doubt it.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Twenty-five years."

What? She looked about thirty-five.

John stepped into what I guess was another room, and came out with packets of ...something. He went to a wall and pulled down a tabletop.

"Crato," John said, pointing at the packets of food. "You'll like this."

I came over and looked at what he had. They were about the size of a deck of cards, wrapped in some sort of light green leaf, and tied with a thin vine. I touched one. It was cold.

"You probably won't like the outer leaf," Marie said. She untied her packet, peeled the leaf off the top part and took a bite. I looked at the one she was eating. The inside looked like packed mashed potatoes.

Tan and John each took one and so did I. I unwrapped mine, and bit into it. "Wow, it's really good," I said.

Both Tan and John smiled.

"It tastes kind of like..." I tried to think.

"Mangos, potatoes, tapioca, and spinach all wrapped together?" Marie asked.

"Yeah, that's it. But it's delicious."

"It comes from the manioc root, on Earth. That's why they go there. Grows under mushrooms. Not only do Bumonths love it, over the years they've developed to where they need it to survive."

I blinked as I tried to process this.

"Your yard is rich in root," Tan said.

I felt like my brain was far behind the conversation. I ate the rest of the crato. "I hate to eat and run, but I'm overwhelmed, and tired, and a little... I don't know. I'd love to talk to you more. Can I come back later?"

"Sure, anytime," Marie said. "Don't eat the pahota-click-rrrr. It's poisonous to humans. And don't eat the pah-rrrah stew. It has it in it."

I looked at Tan. He nodded.

"Thank you," Tan said. "I will watch for this."

Okee-dokey.

We left. People stared at us as we walked back to Tan's house. We were inside his house about two seconds when we heard someone say their name outside. Tan said something that I assumed was come in. The door opened. Creature. Totally black like Tan. Slight breasts, no tail. She was carrying something.

"The females don't speak English," Tan whispered to me.

Does this mean all the males do?

The woman, because it was too much trouble to think of them as just female or creature, I had to think of them in nouns used for people, went over to a wall and pulled down a tabletop. She put down what she was carrying on the table. Removed a leaf from the top. It smelled great. Food. I looked at it. Two shades of orange, and a little bit of grey. Looked like a casserole in a leaf bowl.

Tan was talking. I assumed he was thanking her. She smiled at me. Bowed and left.

I went over to smell the casserole. "This smells great," I said.

"Jeeka is a very good cook," Tan said. Finally, a name I could pronounce. "You will weave with her."

Okay-dokey. Right. Whatever you say, Tan. Although I'm thinking my weaving skills are going to be

lacking.

Someone else announced themselves at the door. Another woman. More food. A few minutes passed. Another woman at the door. More food. A guy. Food. Two more women. Food.

This is great, it's a welcome wagon, and I won't have to cook.

"I guess it's okay that I'm here," I said.

Tan looked confused. "Yes. You have permission to be here. You are here now."

I wanted to lie down and take a nap, but someone else announced themselves at the door. More food. Jeez, where were we going to put all this stuff? All and all, I figured it was about fifteen people who came by. When the last person left there was no more room on the table for food.

I eyed the bed.

"You would like to lie down?" Tan asked me.

"Yeah."

"I will lie with you."

"That would be great."

Tan motioned for me to lie down, then he followed me and snuggled me into him. I was too amazed to really sleep soundly but too overwhelmed not to check out a little bit. I drifted, thinking about the amazing sex we had. I gloried in Tan's warm body, and how great it felt to be near him. After a while, I drifted deeper into a light sleep.

\*

I must have slept through the night. Maybe my subconscious worked some things out, because when I woke I felt better, more able to handle things. Tan's body was tangled over mine.

"You wake."

"Yes, I wake."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

I looked over at the table. It was up. The food was gone.

Tan hopped up. Whoosh. Into another room. Back with the casserole. It was cold. He handed me a curved leaf. I'm guessing this was a spoon. He had one as well. We ate from the same bowl.

"What is this?" I asked.

I couldn't make out the first word, but the second word was definitely roots.

It was delicious. After I had eaten a little, Tan took the bowl away and brought out something else. It was a little moss-colored treat, about the size and shape of a stack of three or four quarters. Tasted like mango.

"Are you okay to visit?" he asked.

"I'm okay to visit."

I followed him across the town square. Not so many people stared this time. He announced himself outside a hut.

The door opened. A man who looked exactly like Tan answered.

"Donna," Tan said. "My son, Taah-rrr."

Son? What?

Taah-rrr nodded his head at me. I blinked. Somehow the thought of Tan having children never occurred to me. The weirder thought was that meant he had had a wife. I was hoping this was past tense. I looked at Tan. Surely that was past tense.

Taah-rr stepped back, and we walked in. "You are gladly here," he said.

I was pretty sure he meant 'I'm glad you're here'.

Taah-rr offered us more of the same little moss-colored treat we had just had for breakfast, and Tan and I each had one.

I looked back and forth between Taah-rr and Tan, scrutinizing to see if I could find any physical differences. I couldn't. Maybe there were some that they could see, but to me identical twins couldn't possibly look more similar. It was a little freaky.

Taah-rr and Tan spoke to each other for a minute in their language. It sounded even stranger to me now as I concentrated and could hear how many sounds we didn't have in English at all. They embraced in a full body hug and held it for a minute. Then we left.

"Is your first wife still alive? Your first mate?"

"No. She died a long, long time ago."

"Oh."

How long ago is long ago? What was she like? I had a hundred questions but I didn't ask anything. It took me a minute to realize we weren't walking back to Tan's house, but to John and Marie's. Tan announced himself at the door, adding my name to the end of his.

One of the boys, Peter, opened the door. "Hello."

"Hi," I said.

Marie came out carrying a large basket. "Hey, I was just going down to the river. Want to come?"

"Sure," I said.

Tan nuzzled my neck and then went inside.

Marie waved goodbye to her family and turned and looked at me. Sure, okay, whatever you are up for I'm up for, right? She and I walked past huge purple leaves and reddish trees.

"I have so many questions, I'm not even sure where to start."

"Yeah, I hear you."

"You called this a planet."

"Yes."

"Care to explain that?"

"Hey, I was an accountant. Quantum physics wasn't my thing. But as near as I can understand it, from what John says is that Bumonth exists in a alternate gravitational field bubble that is attached to Earth like so." She put both her palms together. "It's a parallel planet stuck to Earth because of a vacuum that a worm hole created during or right after the big bang."

Oookay then. "Yeah. Whatever you said."

Marie chuckled. "I'm not sure the physics of it matters so much. The guys go back for the root. They all carry the openers. You can't go back by yourself, but you can go back with one of them, as often as you like. I used to go back once a month or so before I had kids. Now not so much."

I was silent for a minute taking this in.

"Everyone goes back for roots?"

"Just the males."

“Hhm.”

“What else do you want to know?”

“What’s with the chemical thing?”

She laughed. “The ba’ah’grah’had?”

“Um, yeah, what you said.”

“It’s how they attract one person and then keep track of that person.”

“Wait, what?”

“You didn’t know?”

“Know what?”

“Oh boy.”

“What?” I asked. I stopped short and stared at her. I knew I didn’t know what the hell I’d gotten into, but now I expected I got a whole lot more than I bargained for. “What do you mean, keep track of?”

“The ba’ah’grah’had. Once a male sees someone he’s attracted to, even from afar, even just once, that feels right to him...Bam. The ba’ah’grah’had. It’s a deep release of chemicals that specially alters to best fit the recipient. Makes them not just want the male, but also be able to communicate telepathically and empathically with the guy. And, more importantly, that same chemical feeds back to them to give them a constant fix on where you are, emotionally and physically.”

I blinked.

“So Tan knows where I am, as well as how I am?”

“To the most minute inch. Yeah.”

“Whoa. Not too super creepy.”

We resumed walking.

“It’s a natural defense for them,” Marie said. “If something bad or dangerous happened to you, Tan would be there in a few seconds. If you had a bad feeling while you were here for example, it would be less than a few seconds. A lot less considering we’re in easy walking distance from my house, and they can run up to forty miles an hour when stressed.”

I frowned.

“It’s good news for us. It means if you ever, ever need him, Tan will be there. And emotionally, if you are happy, he’ll share that with you. If you are upset, you don’t need to try to find the words for why. He’ll understand it, because he’ll feel it. That will give him a better ability to fix it. And trust me, there’s not much they can’t fix.”

“Huh.”

“Humans are pretty simple with our types of discontentment. We basically want more attention, more love, more recognition, more food, more praise, more ability to be needed, the kind of stuff that is simple to give if the communication is there.”

We reached the river. Marie put her basket on the bank and reached her hand deep in the clear water and pulled out something that looked like a plum, except it was a slightly glowing magenta color.

“Help me gather some of these?”

We ended up lying down on the edge of the bank in order to plunge our arms in deep to pick the fruit.

“Any other questions?”

“What do you know about Tan’s first wife?”

Marie was silent for a minute. "Nothing. He must have had a mate before, because I know Taah-rrr is his son. But he hasn't been with anyone for as long as I've been here. That's twenty-five years. He didn't have a mourning branch on his door when I got here, and they keep those up for ten years, so..."

I let that sink in. "Wait, he's been a widower for thirty-five years?"

"At least."

"Fuck. How old is he?"

I didn't expect her to answer.

"I don't know exactly, you'd have to ask him, but he's a childhood friend of John's so... about a hundred."

I scowled. I was beginning to feel like maybe she was just messing with me. It must have shown on my face.

She put her hands up in a pose of surrender. "That's almost like middle age for them."

"So, I'm in love with a telepathic, centenarian, frog-man speed racer?"

Marie laughed. "Yeah, I guess that about covers it. Except you forgot to add an adjective for mind-blowing, consistent sex."

"Okay," I said. "A telepathic, centenarian, exuberant orgasm-inducing, frog-man speed racer."

Her basket was full. We started walking back.

"Yeah, Donna, that about covers it."

"This is going to be one hell of a ride."

\*

## Chapter 4

I woke up to something that smelled like eggs, toast, and burning butter. Tan had made breakfast for me. He was looking at me like I was the only woman in the world, and he had some serious lust going on, and knew that he and I could make it happen.

I could get used to this.

"Marret," he said, and his voice was low and the word was long and drawn out with the promise of sex. "Let me feed you." Then he thought at me a picture of me on his lap, and him placing each morsel of delicate food on my tongue, and I could tell for him that it was a ritual that had more meaning than I currently comprehended.

"I'm totally game," I said.

His eyebrows furrowed for a minute. "That is a yes?"

"Oh yeah. That's a yes."

As sensual as it was in the image he sent me, the reality was more so. It was a hundred times more so. I felt the texture of his skin under my thighs, and he was giving off a smell that was like deep lush forests combined with Christmas.

Except sexy as hell.

It was a long, slow breakfast. Followed by a long detailed shower in the waterfall, that let me know, without a shadow of a doubt, that as mind-blowing as I thought our mambos had been until now, with each time he knew me he could make it even better.

Wow!

I could definitely get used to this.

After we got dressed Tan suggested a walk. He took me deep into the forests, through plants with huge leaves and riotous blue and purple flowers. The foliage was so dense it was like walking through a tightly packed crowd of plants, where each one caressed me as I walked by.

Everything was so good, so amazingly perfect, that I got the feeling the other shoe was going to drop. My stomach did.

Tan turned around abruptly.

“What? What is it, marret?”

I didn't want to tell him that it was so good I couldn't accept it. I didn't want to tell him a lick of fear travelled down my spine, warning me that the unknown should sometimes never be known.

Instead of answering him I forced myself to dispel my fears. I smiled at him. “It's all good.”

His jaw sucked inward, as if he tasted something sour. He wasn't sure to believe what I said, or what he thought he had felt coming from me. I forced myself to think good thoughts. Tinkerbelle, interplanetary travel, sex.

I smiled again.

He narrowed his eyes. Apparently that thing where a guy asks a woman what's wrong and she says nothing so he can't do anything about it is universal too.

Tan turned around, and we resumed walking.

We came to a clearing that looked over a huge canyon and twisted cliffs laced with veins of copper and gold. Tan stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. We stared at the curvy lines of the rock. The metal winked in the sunlight.

The two suns gave off a subtle light rather than a harsh one, and as we watched one of

As he held me I thought about the nature of love. I didn't realize how lonely I'd been the moons went partially in front of a sun, creating a bluish light that highlighted us in its shaft. until I crossed over and I saw how the community was so strong here and how content I was sharing a home with Tan. I wasn't sure if everyone here considered me officially Tan's wife, but I definitely didn't think of him as a husband. I didn't have a category for him. The word boyfriend seemed too shallow and well, Earthly. Would the strange overlay of chemicals that Tan put out lose some of its overwhelming pull, and if it did would I have to then see if I was the type of person who could really commit to someone who was so different from me, even if he treated me amazingly well?

Tan kissed my ear, and I forgot what I was thinking about. Wait, had he read my thoughts? I twisted slightly and looked over my shoulder at him. No. He didn't know what I was thinking, but he might have known what I was feeling. Again.

He distracted me, and infused me with the feeling that wafted out of him. Even though I'd never felt it before, I knew that warm feeling coming out of him was love.

The moon that had eclipsed the sun had passed completely by it; the extra light beat down on us, and the air got hotter. The plants behind us perked up and waved in a breeze.

“Let's go home, marret,” Tan said.

I nodded, and we strolled back toward the village hand-in-hand.

We just got back to the edge of the dirt clearing in the middle of the village when four huge fireballs, each bigger than a cannonball, rained down over us. I was still staring up, shocked, looking at the strange, scary barrage, when Tan picked me up, cradled me to his chest, and ran.

Marie said he could run forty miles per hour when stressed, but I was sure this was faster. He raced through the village dodging not only the horror raining down from the sky, but smaller vertical blasts, some kind of flaming arrows maybe, and small whizzing projectiles that reminded me of bullets.

Within seconds he had passed his house and was on the other side of the village. I caught sight of a huge, humanoid being, maybe eleven feet tall and five feet wide at the shoulders. It wearing dark green-blue armor, and had what looked like an Uzi up to its face and was blowing fireballs out of it.

What the...?

Tan ran faster.

My heart throbbed, like a weapon in and of itself, beating a fast bump-bum-bum rhythm in my chest. A droplet of sweat ran down my back. I could smell my own fear.

In less than a minute we were at the entrance of a small, dark cave, about four feet wide. Tan set me down, and gently pushed me inside. When I looked back at him, he was moving a large boulder in front of the entrance.

'Stay,' he thought at me.

The boulder blocked the entrance completely and plunged the cave into mostly darkness. A thin gap between the top of the rock and the cave entrance let in a tiny sliver of light and a faint breeze.

I heard a whoosh and knew Tan was gone.

As my eyes adjusted I could see that the cave was about eight feet wide and twelve feet deep. Wait, no, deeper than that maybe. It looked like it narrowed and went even deeper, but I couldn't tell in the almost non-existent light. The ceiling was covered with small, sparkling stalactites, reminding me of beige, white, and light-green shining teeth. They were so pretty, I stared at them, and I could see a few were much larger, almost as big as my arm, and although I guessed they were made of a lot of materials, some of it harder than anything we had on Earth, they looked like a combination of pink quartz and diamonds.

What was going on? My fear for my own safety quickly turned to worry about Tan. What was he doing out there?

Someone pushed the boulder out of the way, and light poured in.

"Tan!" I said, hoping.

It wasn't him. It was John. He was carrying Marie cradled to his chest. She was holding the baby. John walked further in and crouched down, and the two older boys climbed off his back.

John kissed her. The press of lips looked hard and fierce. He zoomed out. He pushed the boulder back in front of the entrance, and we were shrouded in darkness once more.

"Marie," I said, but shock was making me dumb. I didn't know what questions to ask first, or even how to formulate what questions to ask. She made a kind of subtle clearing of her throat noise that I assumed meant don't say anything scary in front of the kids.

We could hear the battle outside. More of the fights were coming closer to the cave. The sound of whooshing fire, explosions, pops, and screams was even scarier in the dark.

"Mommy," the baby said.

"Marie," I said at the same time.

Marie gathered her sons around her and held them close. "Daddy will be fine," she said. She looked at me. "Tan will be fine."

More screams. He would not be fine.

Apparently war is universal too.

"What are they?" I asked Marie.

"They're called Zorkuts. The last attack was just before I got here. In a way that's why I met John. The Zorkuts destroy all the root and the Bumonthians need it to survive."

She looked like she was about to say more but she shut up abruptly. I got the feeling I wouldn't get any more information out of her while her kids were awake. An explosion landed so close it rattled the cave. The baby started crying, and Marie shushed him.

I was a pinball of adrenaline. Fear was a tornado smashing against my insides. I forced myself to calm down, more for the sake of Marie's children than for myself.

Marie fed her kids a small treat, something wrapped in a dark brown leaf. In a few minutes they were asleep. She smiled at me in the dim light.

"I keep those in case of emergencies. They're called dum-foo. They have a natural sedative. My kids are really sensitive to it; it always knocks them out."

There was a scream, more of a shriek really, the cry of the wounded. I could tell immediately it was one of us. Funny how quickly 'they' had become 'us'.

"That's Jeeka," Marie said, her face contorting. "She's my best friend here."

"The good cook."

"Yeah."

I looked at the boulder blocking the cave entrance. We were completely locked in. We were probably safe but also totally helpless.

We heard another scream, deeper this time. I looked at Marie. She shook her head.

"Not John. Not Tan."

I put my hands over my face and rubbed my eyes. "We have to do something."

"There's nothing we can do. The best thing we can do is stay safe so they don't have to worry about us."

"There must be something. Tell me about these Zorkuts. What's their problem? Why did they attack? What are they fighting about?"

"The same thing all men fight about. Land. Resources."

"You're going to have to be more specific than that," I said.

Marie sighed, a high note of frustration, and the sound echoed in the darkness. She was silent for a few seconds, and I wasn't sure she was going to answer.

"From what I understand, many hundreds of years ago, maybe even thousands of years ago, the Zorkuts and Bumonths were friends. They lived together in the same villages. The two continents were one big content, two plates together side by side separated by a river."

Marie paused. She looked at her boys sleeping peacefully.

"What happened? What changed?" I asked, making sure to keep my voice low.

"It was a long time ago. There was a Zorkut princess, and she was betrothed. She was supposed to become the third or fourth wife of a very old, very mean Zorkut King on the far side of the planet. There was a Bumonth boy who worked in the castle and the princess fell in love with him, maybe as much out of necessity as because of his kindness. She asked him to take her away and help hide her."

Oh shit.

The little sliver of light that was coming in from the top of boulder darkened, as if suddenly the sky was filled with clouds or dust.

Marie continued to tell the story, although from the way she started I could tell how it would end.

"They were found out, and the boy's family tried to save them but in the end the princess, the boy, the boy's family, and most of his village was slaughtered. The Bumonths set an explosion in the river that caused the fault line between the continents widen, which probably seemed prudent at the time, but it caused the plates to separate completely into two continents. Eventually both sides made a truce that kept all the Zorkuts on one side and the Bumonths on the other. The Bumonths ended up with less land but more fertile soil."

"So every once in a while something pushes too far at the tension," I said getting pretty clear idea, "Then the it Zorkuts forget about the truce and plan an attack."

“Because the Zorkuts are bigger, and they have much better technology, it usually ends up being a slaughter.”

“We have to do something,” I said.

“I beg to differ. It would drive our spouses crazy, and distract them, and therefore endanger their lives. Not only would that, we can’t do anything. We are trapped in here until someone comes and lets us out.”

We heard another, amazingly loud, rat-tat-tat of explosions, followed by a low moan, the wail of the dying. Then there was the high keen on the scream that must’ve come from the beloved of the fallen.

“This is just the way things are. It’s the way things have been for centuries. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Like hell,” I said.

I spent the last few years essentially alone in my house. I had become quieter and meeker until a field mouse had more courage than I did. For a second my hands shook and sweat poured down my forehead. God, if something happened to Tan. I had never been in love. Truthfully, I’ve never even been close to being in love. Whatever it was I was in the brink of being now I wasn’t about to let it go because I was used to staying inside. I wanted love, and I was going to fight for it. Nothing was going to stop me. Not a boulder, not Marie’s resigned pessimism, and certainly not these fuckers who were blowing up my town. Hell no.

“Okay, the first thing we need to do is get out here.”

An explosion sounded, amazingly close, and the smell of smoke, spent ammunition, and burning flesh surged into the cave.

“Step one,” I mumbled to myself. “Move that rock.”

“That boulder must weigh five hundred pounds,” Marie said.

“I don’t think so. If it were that heavy Tan and John wouldn’t be able to move it. They might have super speed, but they don’t have super strength.”

I looked around the cave. Now that my eyes adjusted to the dim light I can see a little more. The cave was a lot longer and deeper than I had realized. About thirty feet into the cave the stalactites that hung from the ceiling like beautiful amber crystals were even sharper, and they were dripping down almost clear sparkling tears. Just a little further than where the big stalactites started there are two or three poles that looked a little like blue bamboo, a pile of spears, a few long wooden planks, and a thick post. I grabbed the post, hefted it a few times to get a feel for the weight and balance, put it over my shoulder like a baseball bat. I jiggled and bounced it a little while picturing a really hard swing with good follow-through. I stepped up to a stalactite that I judged to be thin enough to break but solid enough to be of use. I took a deep breath, hauled the post back even further, and let loose the hardest swing of my life with all my might.

The stalactite broke with a sharp, clean crack followed by a glass breaking like tinkle of nearby rock chips scattering down. The sound echoed in the chamber. I spit out a particle of crystal dust. The piece broke rather cleanly, flat in some places and round in others. It was about a foot and a half long, looked sturdy as hell, and came to a vicious sharp point. I tucked to the crystal shard under my arm and I quickly picked up a couple of the spears and the longest of the wood planks. I carried them onto the front of the cave; by the time I got there the plank was dragging on the ground.

I had woken the two older boys.

“Mom?” the oldest one asked. The middle boy said the same thing the Bumonths’ language. I could hear the doubt and confusion voices.

Marie cursed under her breath.

There were more explosions followed by more screams. There was also a new sound. The raging crackle of a huge wall of fire.

I held the crystal dagger like a pickaxe and began chopping away at the top of the boulder on the left side. Marie’s children ran to her.

Luckily the boulder was softer than the dagger. The big boulder began to flake a little bit right away, but it was slow going.

“At that rate you’ll dig a hole large enough for us to crawl out through by the time the battle is over.”

I gave three more vicious chops.

“I don’t have to carve a hole big enough for us to wriggle out through.”

I shoved two spears into the hole, and used them to prop up the board exactly where I wanted it. I pushed my back to the wall, and used my makeshift lever to shimmy up until I was in position. With both my knees bent almost to my chest, and the bottom of my feet flat on the board, I pushed with all my might. The boulder rocked a little and then rocked right back into place. A waft of smoke came in, and billowed around me as if it was targeted right to go up my nose and cause a coughing fit. When it passed, I squinted my eyes, focused my strength on my torso and into my thighs, and with a huge rebel yell and a surge of adrenaline I pushed hard enough to move a small little building. The boulder rolled away slightly leaving a gap between the cave wall and the edge of the rock that was about a foot and quarter wide.

“Bingo. Hello leverage, thank you college physics class.”

“Yeah, brilliant,” Marie said, and the tinge of sarcasm was clear in her voice. “Now what?” She gave a very quiet snort, but I heard it. “Are you going to go out there with no weapons, no speed, no plan?”

I looked out the gap. As much as I imagined the horror from the sounds and smells, the view was worse.

“Absolutely not,” I said. “Now you have a decision to make, Marie. You can help me go out there and be the deciding factor that kicks ass, or you can stay here and bitch about how we were helpless when the people you’ve lived with for twenty-five years, *our* people, get picked off like ants under a magnifying glass.”

“What do you have in mind?” Marie asked and I could hear the change in her voice.

Truthfully, when I broke off the crystal, and chopped a way to make the hole, and use leverage to push the boulder out of the way, I was working one step at a time. I hadn’t had any plan.

Now that I began to think about it, as juxtaposition to Marie’s resistance and my years of passivity, the plan began to take shape.

“Marie, water is a very spiritual thing here. They don’t conserve it, so I assume them have a lot of it.”

She nodded.

“Where does it come from? Do they pump it all up from the river?”

“No. They’ve got multiple large tanks, uphill of the village, in case there ever is a drought, which there hasn’t been as long as I’ve lived here. They’ve also got rain barrels in the same area, as well as smaller ones in the back of their houses. Their main energy source comes from water actually. Everything comes from what they call the grand. It’s another bigger river near the tanks, and on it they have a huge working dam.”

I looked out at the Zorkuts on the battlefield with their big heavy armor. “The Bumonths as good a swimmers as they are runners?”

“Better.”

“There’s our plan.” I ducked further into the cave as another round of smaller explosions came close to the exit.

“We’ve got to get to that dam. If we can—”

“I get it.”

“Marie, I’d give you the option of staying here with your kids, but I can’t find the dam without you. So I’m begging you.”

She turned to her oldest boy. "Sweetheart, I need you to take care of your brothers."

"I can help."

"I'm sure you could." They both looked at the baby. "But I need you here."

He stood up taller, pushed his shoulders back and nodded.

Marie turned to me. "Let's go."

I looked out the gap.

"We're heading that way?" I asked and pointed.

Marie nodded.

I waited until there seemed to be a slight break in the barrage of destruction, and said, "Now!"

We both sprinted out across the edge of the village and toward the tree line.

I thought my spending so much time sitting at the computer would have made me sluggish, but spikes of need and desperation helped me put on an impressive burst of speed. Nowhere near what Bumonths could do, but I felt like I was running with the wind, faster than I thought possible.

We made it across the town square, past the entrance into the forest, and Marie took a second to look back. I tugged at her arm. We started running again and made it past what I thought of as the boundaries of the village.

We were pushing a lot of plants out of the way as we went, but we were still going fast. I ignored the occasional branch that Marie pushed out of the way that snapped back to whap me in the face. The forest thinned out a little, the ground and plants changed slightly; there was a dip, and the ground became rocky.

"We're almost there; it's only about a mile from here," she said.

The ground began to rise up on a sharp incline. My breaths puffed out loudly like a struggling freight train. A sharp stitch of pain lanced through my side, a result of not being able to suck up enough oxygen to match the pace I was going. The incline of the hill was getting to me.

Just as I was beginning to think that I would need to take a break for a minute to catch my breath I heard the roar of rushing water. Marie ran even faster. There was no way to keep up but I kept her in my sight.

Then we were there. The dam was huge.

"All right," I said looking around. "There's got to be a...release valve or something."

Marie pointed to small door on the other side of the river. She didn't say anything else; she just sprinted across a walkway on top of the dam.

Aargh. I hate heights. I really hate heights. I hate heights like Indiana Jones hates snakes. Why did the controls have to be on the other side of the dam? The walkway, suspended just above the immensely tall dam, was about two feet wide, and some of it was organic green grate.

Really. I have to be the hero? What was I thinking?

I ran after her. She'd already disappeared through the weathered door.

"Huh," I said. Staring at the same control board Marie was staring at. "They're huge toggles." I guess I had been suspecting a large wheel that we would need to turn, the kind that I'd seen in movies that people turned to open valves or to get in and out of hatches on submarines and spaceships.

"John gave me a tour this place when I first got here. I think if I remember correctly, each switch corresponds to a wall section of the dam, and when you throw the switch the wall lifts."

"Sounds great to me," I said. I grabbed the handle and tried to pull it up. It didn't budge. "Help me."

Marie put her hands next to mine and we pulled upwards. This switch creaked and moved about a

half inch, and then another inch, but it wasn't not enough.

"We can't pull it," I said. "We've got to get underneath and push."

We both bent down, and on the count of three, with a huge thrust we pushed up.

The toggle flipped. The sound of rushing water was deafening. The roar of water had been loud before, when only a small controlled bit was coming through a small slit in the top of one panel. As soon as we threw that first switch it was like a crowd of a thousand people growling at a rock concert.

We moved on to the next big switch and then repeated the same routine four more times.

We left the control room and the gushing water was splashing up so hard it was soaking the walkway.

"That's just fabulous," I said.

"We got to go now!" I couldn't hear her over the roar of the water.

"What?" I asked.

"Now!" She screamed. "We got to go now before the water gains even more force and takes out the walkway."

She didn't wait to see if I could hear her. She turned and ran across to the other side.

My heart seized up and bobbed up into my throat as if it were going to try to break loose. For a split second I froze, my fear of heights gripping me. If I didn't go now there was no way I would get back to the other side. There was no way I was going to let Tan die alone. There was no way I was going to let Tan die. Fear, you can go fuck yourself.

I hurried after Marie, going as fast as I dared, bracing myself against the force of the splash. I gotten almost all the way over when my feet slipped and I fell smack on my chest and plummeted over the edge. At the very last minute I grabbed the edge of the walkway. For one harrowing moment I dangled over what seemed like a hundred foot drop.

Then Marie was above me. She grabbed my forearms in a tight grip and then hauled me up.

She held and practically dragged me the last few steps of the way. I was still hyperventilating after we got onto solid ground. I looked at the dirt underneath my feet and want to kiss it.

"Do you think we still need to open the tanks?" I yelled.

"Yeah. I think so," she said. "It will help direct the water flow toward the battlefield."

Luckily the tanks opened with just a pull rope. We opened all the tanks and, despite my attempt to stand behind them when I pulled the ropes, I found myself swamped in waist deep water. It took less than a second pick up speed. I was yanked off my feet. I had to grab the post of a tank after being tossed down the deluge from one to another.

"We've got build some kind of raft!" I yelled.

Maria was holding on to a tree a few feet away from me. She shook her head. First I thought she was disagreeing with me but then I realized she was shaking her head to show she couldn't hear me.

"Raft!" I yelled again.

I guess it would've been nice if I thought of that earlier.

Marie scrunched up her face as if she was thinking hard. She pointed something downriver. I couldn't tell exactly what she was pointing at. She nodded me, one firm nod, and then she let go. I had a second to decide whether to let go and follow her lead or risk having her be carried out of sight. I voted for letting go. As soon as I loosened my hands my head plunged underwater, and it rushed into my mouth and up my nose.

I managed to right myself and get my head above water for a minute before I was sucked under again. My clothes and shoes dragged me down. Within seconds it felt like I had cement blocks tied me, determined to see that I drowned before I could be of any help.

I struggled to get my shoes off, stuttering every time I got a mouthful of water. My pants were so waterlogged and heavy, but it seemed like they would be a lot harder to get off than my top, so I decided to try to tackle that first. I was halfway in the process of pulling my shirt over my head, when I spotted Marie. She was clinging to a pink tree. I had to let my shirt drop back into place and take two strong strokes to get me into line with where she was before I almost blew past her.

Once I grabbed onto the tree Marie gestured up, indicating the whole tree but I didn't know what she meant. She took out a small knife from some kind of hidden side pocket. Where did that come from? It's not like she had two layers of skin to hide things. She began hacking away at the tree just below where we were hanging onto it. What the hell was she doing? If she cut all the way through the tree we'd be swept down river again.

The tree broke free and we were whooshed away with the current.

The tree floated. It was so buoyant it was almost like it was pushing upward.

Huh.

Marie straddled the tree. Just as I was beginning to grasp our new situation she targeted another tree, and grabbed on hard as we were about to soar past it. She repeated the process with the knife.

Marie was grabbing on to the tree stub with one hand, and slowly working her way toward the top of the tree with the other.

Unfortunately, this meant pushing the main part of the tree away from her. Of course I was holding on to that part. Marie continued to push the bulk of the tree further into the middle of the river, the fastest rushing section.

Which meant I was getting tossed around faster.

Oh, that so didn't make me happy.

A violent surge of water blocked my vision of her for a second. When the waves of water moved and I could see her again, she had used the thinner, vine-like parts from the top of the tree to lash two trees together.

Two for two.

I had to admit having a little bit bigger flotation device was reassuring.

She let us be carried away again. The speed was amazing.

Marie found another tree and started hacking it off at about the water line again. This time because I knew exactly what she was doing, I was able to walk hand over hand closer to her and I was a little calmer when I ended up in a slightly faster current.

With the three trees lashed together, we climbed on top of our makeshift raft and had a ride in style. Bonus. The river gained even more speed, and we rushed toward the village to see what damage we had wrought. I took a moment to say a quick prayer.

The way back was so much faster than the way out to the dam. The water volume and pressure increased. I began to picture what I might find when we got back to the village, and I pictured an epic flood, with waters rising over the top of the buildings by forty feet.

"We've got to get back there!" I yelled, pointing up river toward the dam.

"What?" Marie yelled.

"We have to get back to the dam!" I yelled louder.

I can see when what I was thinking hit her. We already let loose enough water to flood the village. If too much more water kept pouring in, there wouldn't be a village. It would've been wiped out like the stories from Noah's time in the Bible.

"There's no way we can get back upstream," Marie said loudly.

We both focused on the fast, pounding rush of water. We could paddle all day and all day and all we would do is manage to stay in the same place.

I looked up. The tops of the trees were relatively close together and far above the fray.

"Can we climb up and jump our way back?" I asked.

She grabbed onto a large, dark purple tree and pulled our makeshift raft tight against it as she contemplated the question.

"Yes, I think so. How good a climber and jumper are you?" she asked.

*Not good*, I thought but I didn't say anything right away. My curvy body always felt too heavy for my frame and, while I'd never actually told anyone because I hated to admit it even to myself, there was that afraid of heights thing.

She saw my expression said, "I'll go back myself. Now that the switches are loosened one person will be enough to flip them. You go back to the village and help our husbands and make sure nothing bad happens to my kids."

Without waiting for answer, she let go of the raft and began climbing up the purple tree. I was swept back into the flow of the current before I could decide to agree with her plan or not. I watched her scramble up the tree like the most agile of monkeys and leap from one tree to the next. Within seconds the water rushed me around the bend and she was out of sight.

The torrent of water picked up speed. It was going impossibly fast. I tried to think of a plan, an idea what to do next, but holding onto the raft was taking all my strength and logical thinking was just as far away as my old, beautiful farmhouse on Earth.

The river barreled down a hill. I closed my eyes for a second to protect them from the barrage of water that was splashing up, and when I open them, the land leveled out. I wanted to cry. Was Tan alive? Marie's family? Oh shit, Marie! How was she going to get back across the dam to shut off the water if the walkway was washed out? I prayed that the walkway held, or she'd find a way, or... then I didn't have any more time to think about it because the water soared through the last few feet of forest, and dumped me out into the huge lake that used to be our village.

I took stock of the battleground before me. The water had put out all fires. The Bumonths were zipping from one small skirmish to another, working together, to take the slobby, barely mobile Zorkuts down. It was obvious that the water had made a huge difference; it turned the tide of the war. Now the Bumonths were winning.

I narrowly missed a Zorkut wildly swinging a heavy broadsword and shield. I paddled furiously with my hands across the way until I came to the large boulder that blocked the cave where Marie's sons were. The gap between the boulder and cave wall seemed a little smaller, but I thought it would be just big enough for me to squeeze through.

The raft rushed away as soon as I let go of it. I grabbed on to the side of the boulder and took another minute to look around. Many of the houses were black from smoke. Some houses were only rubble. Branches of different colors floated in the water. The Bumonths were still fighting the Zorkuts, but now it was frequently two on one, and none of the explosions I heard before I left.

I squeezed myself into the crack between the boulder and the cave wall, and while my breasts smushed against me, and flattened considerably, I struggled. I tried to make myself as small as possible. I pushed and shoved and wiggled. I still couldn't get all the way through.

"Hey, help me out," I called.

I couldn't see the boys, but I knew they must be in there. "Peter! Hey. Help."

Peter came running to the front of the cave. He tried to hide a smile when he saw me stuck, somewhat like Winnie the Pooh, who had gotten stuck in the hole of a tree, half in half out. Peter gave the boulder a shove and I fell in.

I looked into the cave and saw the middle boy, what was his name? Josh? Carrying the baby toward me.

"Where's my mom?" he asked.

"She's closing off the water at the dam. She'll be back soon. Are you all okay?"

Peter nodded. "The water was a big help. You must be very smart. Now that you're back, are you going to help us win?"

I wasn't feeling very smart but I said, "We'll think of something."

We all stared out at the slice of the battlefield we could see through the opening.

There was another awful scream. "That's Quizclocknnah. He's my uncle," Peter said. The sad mourning tone in his voice hurt my heart.

The baby started to cry.

Unbidden, the Grimoire popped into my head. I remembered the first page with its ornate, old English looking writing, 'Beware'. Is this what it meant?

The writing made me think of centuries old battles, and a saying that was probably just as old. 'Cut off the head of the snake...' I struggled to remember the rest of the quote, although I immediately remembered the meaning. "Cut off the head of the snake and the rest of the body is just a rope," I whispered.

"Huh?" one of the boys asked from behind me. "What does that mean?"

"It means if you kill the leader the rest of the army falls apart." I pulled Peter closer to the entrance. "Peter, who looks like the leader to you?"

We both saw him the same time. He was standing on top of one of the houses, shouting orders. This helmet had bright red pieces of metal on both sides, and his armor had dark purple pieces over the shoulders.

"Him," Peterson pointed.

"I think so too." I paused for minute. "Okay, I have an idea." I looked at Peter. "I need your help."

"I want to help too," Josh said.

"No," I said as firmly as I could. "You need to stay here and take care of the baby."

"I don't need anybody to take care of me," the baby said. I didn't think I would ever get over a small baby talking. Freaky. Two sets of teeth, tails, skin that opens to reveal storage, floating pink trees sure. Okay. Talking babies. No. That's where I draw the line.

"Besides, I need you to wait for your mother."

Josh nodded; I turned my attention to Peter. "Okay," I said, and leaned in closer towards him. "This is the plan."

I whispered in his ear and when I was done, he smiled.

He nodded, and for a second he sounded just like any American boy when he said, "Let's do it."

Peter gathered up the spears and the plank of wood. We said a quick goodbye to the other two boys. I reminded Peter that I wasn't going to be nearly as fast as he was. He nodded again, and almost quicker than I could blink he was out of the cave and swimming toward the Zorkut leader.

The water was draining from the field pretty quickly. For me it was right below chest level. I stayed as far away from the battles I could. It was hard going; the water seemed thicker than I expected and I pushed through, half swimming and half walking. I kept behind houses and huts whenever possible. I tried to make myself invisible by blending with plants, chimneys and large outdoor stoves, anything I could.

A little more water drained, and that made it easier for me. I caught a quick glance of Peter, defiantly looking up at the Zorkut general, who was still standing on top of the same house surveying the war. If the leader saw Peter, he ignored him. Peter threw the first spear. Peter waited a second, threw another, and the Zorkut looked down at him and growled but gave him no more attention as if he were an annoying insect. Peter's third spear hit the giant Zorkut square in the chest.

The giant Zorkut looked away until Peter started yelling insults at him saying he was a coward leaving his troops to get slaughtered while he stood safe out of the way like someone with no honor.

I crawled up the back of the house, but the side was slicker than I had expected and I kept slipping, struggling and scrambling. I fell back down and floated to side. Peter threw another spear and barely missed as the general easily stepped out of the way. Peter threw his last spear, and the Zorkut caught it easily. He turned it around and aimed it Peter.

Damn. Hurry. I pulled myself up on top of a barrel on the side of the house, climbed up, digging my nails in hard. I hoped against hoped Peter was distracting him enough for me to get close without us both getting killed.

"You're barely worth my—"

The Zorkut didn't get to finish his sentence because I plunged the large crystal into the back of his neck into a small space between his helmet and his torso armor. The diamond-hard stalactite went most of the way through him and got stuck. With a huge primal scream and a violent surge of strength I pushed the shard all the way through. A wet gurgling sound cut his sentence in half. His body went stiff as a board and his knees buckled slightly but he didn't fall. I sawed the crystal in and out although it was lodged in so tightly for a few seconds it barely moved. My heartbeat was thundering in my ears. I yanked my makeshift dagger out. I placed my foot in the middle of his back and with a huge shove and hard kick I sent him hurling off the roof.

"Everyone!" I yelled, before I remembered that many of the people below me didn't speak English. "Peter," I called, "Come up here. I need your help."

Peter anchored the plank of wood in the mud, placed one end on the lip of the roof, and proved he was just as fast as his father as he ran up the beam until he was at my side.

"I need you to translate for me," I said.

Peter nodded solemnly.

"Everyone," I said. I looked down and saw everyone had stopped fighting and were staring at me. "There has been enough fighting. This is over." I waited for Peter to translate. I wasn't sure if they would listen to me, but I had to try.

"We can't have war over something that happened generations ago. These two groups were friends. No matter the planet, people are always better together."

I looked around and saw Tan. He was leaning against a house not too far away.

"We have all lost love ones today. Mothers, brothers, sons, daughters. And why? For what? For nothing. Never again. We haven't just damaged ourselves, our plants, our homes, traveled far, and expended precious resources..." I paused. "We've let go of our goodness, our hope."

I had to pause as a surge of anger pulsed through me.

"This was a waste! It was wrong!" I thought of how meek I had been. To hell with that. I was not going to be mild now. "I have slain the biggest and the strongest of you. Your leader. So I am leader now." I pounded my chest and then gestured wide. "And you are going to listen to me!" My voice got louder and louder and as Peter translated for me, his voice too got louder, and he mimicked my inflection.

"No one leaves here today until we come to an agreement of peace. Until we make a promise, a contract that will last for generations, a contract of logic and heart and honor that says that we will work together. Right now we are going to make a clear and absolute commitment that we will not fight each other or ourselves for any reason, under any circumstances. We will mark this day. We will remember the tragedy in this day forever because we will have learned from it. We will agree and swear to never do it again."

I looked over to the front of the cave and saw Marie standing next to John.

"That's it," I said softly to Peter.

He ran down the plank and was at his parents' side in an instant. I looked around to see how everyone on the ground had taken what I'd said. No one had their weapons up. Many of the Zorkuts had taken off their helmets, and I could see that most of the faces were dark green, although they were changing to a lighter color as I watched.

I didn't have anything else to say. I looked at Tan again and realized he was hurt. I couldn't hurry down the way Peter had. I decided to climb down the side of the house instead of trying to walk the plank.

By the time I got to the cave John, Marie, Tan, Tan, Peter, and two of the Elders were there. Tan had a major wound in his thigh and what looked like a superficial slice in his side. John had a nasty looking burn on his left shoulder. The Elders appeared unhurt.

The head Elder said something to me in native language, and I managed to pick out the words grateful, thank you, and blessed. He said something else and looked at Tan to translate.

“He said he would be honored to...lead over your feast to become one of us and celebrate your love for me and for all of us, and your family to me permanently.”

Tan took my hand and brought my fingers to his mouth and kissed each one.

“Would you like that, marret, my love?”

“Sounds like the best thing ever,” I said. “Besides, it will give me something to write in my journal about.”

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