



Spill Coffee Collective

NOTEBOOKS, INK AND SPILT COFFEE

The Spilt Coffee Collective



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Dedicated to the lovely and immeasurably patient staff at Queens Park Cafe, Ipswich, who keep us fed and in caffeine and milkshakes while we toil away on our corner of the cafe. We are forever grateful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clarissa Morgan

Clarissa Morgan is an up and coming Australian romance author that grew up on a steady diet of 1980's bodice rippers. These days she writes modern day love stories with irresistibly flawed heroes and sassy heroines – much like herself.

When she's not reading or writing steamy romances, you can find her lounging on the veranda with a steamy cup of coffee, her staffy, and her flock of chickens supervising.



UNCLOAKED

Elan dragged himself home, exhausted after another long, boring day in a life filled with long, boring days. The evening would be even less exciting; he would probably crash out until his mid-morning class the next day even though it was only eight-thirty.

I come. The words echoed in his mind, and not for the first time. He'd thought he heard the words earlier, but told himself he'd overheard a whispered conversation. This time he was in the open, there was no mistaking that he heard it. *Can sleep deprivation make you crazy?*

His sleep had been decidedly shitty recently. Bizarre dreams intruded during the night and he often woke exhausted, but despite that he had trudged to work. He'd been off sick...again, but didn't bother going to the doctor because they never found anything wrong. A virus, they always said, but if that was the case he'd had a virus most of his life. He needed this job at the campus library to get by while he finished his degree even if it kicked his ass, and the last thing he needed was to lose his damn mind. Elan resolved to get a good nights' sleep--even if it meant taking something; surely that would help.

As he approached his apartment, a rustle in the shrubbery near the door made him pause. A cat slipped out and stared at him and uttered a delicate, chirpy meow. He did a double-take, because for a split second the shadows cast by her ears resembled horns.

"Hello there," he said, kneeling to stroke her back. He wasn't sure why he was certain of the cats' gender, but he was. She wore no collar, but appeared well taken care of, so she must have an owner somewhere. "Are you hungry? How about you stay with me tonight and we'll try to find

your humans tomorrow?" He said, opening the door. Without hesitation, the cat sauntered into his apartment and bounded up onto the couch. Elan chuckled. "Make yourself right at home." He opened a tin of salmon, which was the only thing remotely suitable in his cupboard, and scooped it onto a plate. Her daintily pointed ears perked up, and her nose twitched, as he sat the food on the coffee table in front of her. "Go ahead. I'll get you some proper food tomorrow if you're still here." She leapt onto the table, dipping her head toward him slightly.

Elan threw the tablet back, popping open a beer to wash it down, and flopped on the couch, taking the spot the cat had vacated in favor of the tinned fish. *What an odd cat, she almost seemed to be thanking me.*

Surely, he was imagining that. As if on cue, she looked at him with a long, unblinking gaze. Her eyes were the most unusual color he had ever seen on a feline. They were nearly turquoise, but with flecks of gold around the large pupils. Striking...and slightly reminiscent of his own, except his were green. The cat returned to her meal and made quick work of finishing it off, before fastidiously licking her paws and cleaning her face.

"What's your name kitten? I can't very well call you cat until we find your people, now can I? How about Emry?" Elan asked, perplexed at the unusual name that suddenly popped into his head, not to mention the fact that he was asking questions to a cat.

The cat seemed to think that was just fine, and hopped across to the sofa and deposited herself on the cushion directly next to him. Instinctively, he patted her, scratching her behind the ears. She purred and lazily closed her eyes. Elan found himself doing the same, and within minutes he had fallen asleep.

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He opened his eyes with a start. The room was darkened but he sensed someone was there with him. He was vaguely aware of his body, now stretched along the length of the couch. Sitting perched on the arm of the couch, faintly illuminated from the window, was a woman. *I'm dreaming.* Her hair was short and appeared almost silver, nobody had hair that color. She smiled as he sat up.

"Yes, you are dreaming," she said. Her voice was soft like velvet, and

sounded mildly amused. Elan immediately noticed her striking eyes; there was a vague familiarity that he couldn't place.

"Am I? Then who are you?" He asked. He didn't feel like he was really asleep, and it was quite unsettling.

"We'll get to that," she said, her tone mischievous. He moved to touch her arm, just to see for sure if he was dreaming, but she pulled away, saying, "No, not yet. You mustn't touch me here until the bond is agreed."

Elan was confused. *What bond?* This was one fucked up dream. "Okay, so who's dream is this then, mine...or yours?" He wondered why he wasn't waking up, but he wasn't sure he wanted to. He squinted trying to make out her features but couldn't, only the shine of her hair and those exotic eyes were discernible, glowing in the scant light from the moon.

"That is a very good question. I'm impressed that you came to it so quickly. This is my dream, it's a special place that I've invited you."

"Um...this is my apartment? It's not really special." Her laughter rang out like the tinkling of bells. A sudden feeling of contentment washed over him at the sound.

"Oh, my dear Elan. Your body is in your apartment, but your mind is soaring with mine. I wanted to meet you. To know you. Just to talk. I need to share some things with you, but that can come later. When you wake, I will be able to talk to you without coming here. Do not be alarmed." With that, she began to fade away, her glowing eyes the last things to vanish.

"Wait!" He called, but she was gone. *Typical. Can't even get a girl in my dreams.*

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"Elan, it's time to wake." He was surprised to hear the distinctly female voice. He stirred, rubbing his eyes as he sat up.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm awake," he muttered. "Wait, who's there? His eyes flew open and looked frantically around the room. He checked his phone in case he'd butt dialed someone in his sleep, but it was off.

"It's only me. How do you feel?"

He was pretty sure he was going crazy. "Me who? And I'm hearing voices, so I feel crazy. Even worse, I'm *answering* voices." He dropped his head into his hands and gripped a handful of his unruly dark hair. He looked up and spotted the cat, perched on the arm of the sofa. Exactly

where she had been in his dream. His eyes widened. "No. Cats can *not* talk."

He could have sworn the cat sighed as she stretched and delicately stepped onto the cushion, walking toward him. She settled on his lap and purred.

"You are not crazy Elan, and I am not just any cat. I have a story to tell you."

"Sure. I'm not crazy at all, there's only a telepathic talking cat on my lap."

"Place your finger on the white patch between my eyes. It will make this easier," she said. Or didn't say; she appeared to be speaking directly into his thoughts. He was shocked to find himself doing exactly as she instructed, and the second his finger touched her fur he relaxed. The odd sense of contentment returned. He found himself stroking her fur down her back and she purred in response.

"If you aren't just a cat, what exactly are you?" He knew he should find it bizarre to be having a two-way conversation with a cat, but for some reason he didn't. "I...I don't know what to call you? Is Emry okay?"

"Of course. Where do you think you got it from? My full name would be difficult for you to pronounce, but Emry is the essence of it."

His phone chimed a reminder at that moment. "Shit, I'm supposed to be taking an exam in thirty minutes!"

"Go. This will wait. I don't wish to overwhelm you, we will have a very long time to talk." He was fairly sure he heard humor in her voice.

He scratched her under the chin, then threw his jacket and shoes on, and tamed his sleep crazy hair back into a ponytail as he bolted out the door.

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Elan walked across the quad toward his class he wondered if he had lost his mind. He was grateful for the time to process what was going on, because it made no sense at all.

It was weird that he wasn't more freaked out by the whole thing. Realizing he only had five minutes to be in his classroom before the door locked for the duration of the exam, he bolted across the remaining hundred yards. He made it with time to spare.

As he fell into his seat in the lecture hall a thought occurred to him. He should *not* have been able to run that distance, much less do it without practically passing out. The proctor deposited the exam booklet on his desk and he tried to put this craziness out of his head and focus.

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Elan ran the entire two miles home, just to see if he could. He was breathing hard when he arrived, but hadn't needed his inhaler. Previously he'd have collapsed before he got down the street. Emry was sitting in the window when he approached the door.

"Welcome home." Her soft voice entered his mind. "I see you are feeling much better than when we met."

He closed the door after entering. "Yes, I am...and I need an explanation for that, because it's impossible. What are you? And what did you do to me?"

"The story is...complicated." Emry approached him, settling on his lap before continuing.

Images began appearing in his mind, vivid and crisp, as if he were there himself. Firelight bounced off the ancient stone walls of a courtyard. Men stood encircling him with arms raised; their faces showed deep concentration and there was a sudden flash and an inhuman wail as the vision went dark.

In hushed tones, she told of her imprisonment in the body he held in his lap, of over a thousand years of wandering and waiting. He sat, digesting the unbelievable tale he had just experienced. He had questions, but wasn't sure he was ready to hear the answers.

"The men were wizards, the most powerful of their time. Their goal was to protect us from being hunted to extinction. Once a suitably innocuous form had been decided upon, the spell mingled our DNA with theirs, temporarily cloaking us in this form...undetectable and safely hidden. It wasn't meant to be for so long, but over time the wizards became corrupted as they realised our DNA also meant our magic. I felt the last of them die and thought hope was lost. Until one of their descendants was born with a mutation that expressed those genes, the genes to complete us. *You*."

She gazed at him, into him, with those turquoise eyes and he gasped as

recognition flooded his mind. He had seen those eyes before. She slowly blinked her eyes at him.

"What ARE you?" he blurted out. *Rude much, Elan?* He almost laughed aloud at the fact that he was contemplating manners while conversing with a talking cat.

"I am many things, depending on the moment. May I sit with you? This is easier when I touch you at this point." Elan made space for her on his lap and she settled compactly onto him. "Close your eyes and I will show you." As his eyelids closed, her voice accompanied the shimmering vision that began to coalesce in his minds' eye. "Know that you need never fear me, no matter how...different...I appear."

The scene of a mountain formed in his mind. The trees swayed, buffeted by wind from above, and his breathe left him as he watched the unbelievable scene unfold. It--no, *she*--was gleaming silvery grey. He watched as the dragon spread her wings; their iridescent skin stretched and glimmering in the sun.

There was a familiar curve to the gracefully curved horns where ears would be. And there, between her gold flecked turquoise eyes, was a shining white diamond shaped spot that matched the one he was touching on her comparatively tiny, feline head.

"That...is you?" He had trouble finding words and his mouth hung open as he tried, and failed, to form a coherent sentence. "Magnificent." The word felt inadequate to him, but he could *feel* her reaction. The purr was not just a purr, he knew now it was the vibration of her very being. "Does it hurt you, to go from this...to that?"

He felt like an idiot, dancing around the words as if that made the situation any less insane.

"Never." He could hear the smile in her voice. "Magic is not painful, it is part of me. But I will never again be able to change on my own, the curse can be abated, but never completely removed. I will always require the touch of someone else to complete my DNA to make it possible. Just like *you* required the touch of someone else to activate the latent genes responsible for healing your mystery illness."

The magnitude of everything she had just told him was staggering and he had no idea what to do with the revelations. Elan stared at the diminutive feline in his lap, trying to reconcile her appearance with the larger beast from the vision.

She snorted, as if insulted, and he became acutely aware that she could obviously hear his thoughts.

"Yes, I can. In my defence though, you *do* think rather loudly. It's hard not to." He burst out laughing at the absurdity of this whole situation.

"Em, you're going to have to cut me some slack." His laughter was manic to the point of tears. "In less than twenty-four hours I have met a talking cat, had a sudden--near miraculous--recovery, learned that dragons are indeed real, *and* that I apparently have dragon DNA," he said as he wiped his face and attempted to recover, "I didn't mean to offend, but it's all just a little bit much! I don't have much to compare to, but you're a stunning dragon." He stumbled over the last word as it passed his lips. She nuzzled her face against his hand in a gesture that felt surprisingly intimate. He assumed that meant he was forgiven. "You need me to change your form?"

Her answer came in the form of a barely perceptible nod.

Elan ran his hand through his hair and closed his eyes. "This is a lot to get my head around, and I'm still not entirely sure I haven't gone crazy." Her laughter erupted in his mind and he followed suit. "So, does this make us like siblings?" he asked.

"Absolutely *not*!" The distaste in her near shouted thought was obvious. "We will be very different to siblings...if you choose to accept the bond." Her tone softened. "It is a lot to take in, and I know it seems sudden. But I've waited an eternity for you. Close your eyes, come talk with me."

Elan did as she asked. He felt a tugging sensation and opened his eyes to find himself in that strange, hazy, not quite real, version of his apartment from his dream.

A gentle touch on his arm sent a tingle through him, and he jolted into awareness. His breath caught in his throat as he looked at her, able to see her clearly for the first time. She was beautiful.

Her faintly silver hair fell across the fair skin of her face. She slowly opened her eyes and Elan was sure his heart would stop when they reached his. The hint of a smile on her lips sent a warm rush through his entire body. His hand boldly reached for hers with a sureness he'd never felt before.

"Are you certain?" she asked tentatively. His pulse raced as he nodded, unsure whether any sound would come if he opened his mouth.

A tingling raced through him as the bond settled into his bones; he

could feel her presence taking up residence in his mind. Feelings of elation coursed through his veins, although he couldn't tell if they were his own, or hers.

"A kiss seals the bond." She leaned toward him but his single raised finger stopped her. Elan saw the look of worry cross her face briefly.

"I've got this," he said. He tipped her chin up, he brushed his lips softly against hers, almost afraid she wouldn't be real.

They both gasped as their lips touched, and a charged spark surged through both of them. Elan drew her into him, tasting her slightly parted lips as he savoured the warmth of her mouth. He groaned as her hands crept into his hair and he knew she could feel his heart pounding as the kiss ended. They separated, both breathless and with matching grins spreading across their faces.

"Do you feel it? The bond is made," Emry said with wonder in her voice.

"I sorta gathered," he replied with a chuckle, and squeezed her tightly. All Elan knew was he had never felt more alive. He'd figure the rest out later.

But...she had been right; he would *never* think of her as a sibling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fee The Writer Bee

Fee Bee is a Queensland writer who decided as a child that she wanted to be a storyteller.

Despite learning problems, struggling to keep up in school and discouragement from her teachers she was stubborn enough to pursue her dreams. Always resourceful, Fee has found numerous ways to tell her stories, spending her childhood drawing, play-acting and using the same cassette over and over to record the stories that she couldn't yet write down.

Her love of storytelling endured through her struggles and she has honed her craft, proving that with a lot of passion and a little determination you can overcome any hurdle.

Fee now spends most of her free time writing or talking about writing. You can find her over on her youtube channel: Fee The Writer Bee.

www.youtube.com/channel/UCOofhHtiogjFX79-O9Tuk8A



STAGNANT

I opened my eyes in surprise. Had I been asleep? That should have been impossible. When our minds were uploaded to our artificial bodies, we were told that it was impossible to dream. In the six hundred years since our bodies were placed into stasis and our minds uploaded, I had never dreamed until now.

"Aud, Aud, you awake? Come on, please wake up," I could hear someone saying over and over. I knew that voice. Where did I know that voice from? It didn't sound right.

I opened my eyes to see a man standing over me. That was not right. I had already opened my eyes only moments ago. I didn't remember closing them again. The room looked different this time; perhaps I had still been dreaming?

"George?" In the flesh, for the first time in six hundred years. Was I back in my organic body as well? Was that why I had been sleeping and dreaming? I couldn't remember what I had been dreaming about. It had already faded into blackness like so many dreams I'd had before I was uploaded.

"Thank goodness, I didn't think I was going to get you turned back on," George said.

His voice sounded different because it was his proper voice. Not the synthesised recording of his voice. We had spent hours recording our own voices for our artificial bodies. It was supposed to be a form of familiarity for us all. While it sounded close to how we all sounded before, it was never quite right. It had been an annoyance at first. I had grown used to it over the years.

This was not right. We were all supposed to wake up at the same time. The download to our original bodies took less operational power than uploading our minds to our organic bodies. George wasn't the one that was supposed to be waking any of us. His fiancé Jen Pattersen was. Maybe he was assisting her? It would make sense for him to assist his fiancé.

I sat up feeling sluggish. I had never felt sluggish like this before. There was one time I had accidentally drained my battery when this had still been new to all of us, but even then I hadn't felt this terrible.

George was so thin and pale. Malnourished. I couldn't see Doctor Pattersen anywhere. She was the only one that still went by their last name out of the entire crew. Captain David was the only other person to still use their title. Not one person on the crew shared the same first name. An intentional decision when we were selected. Some of the married couples shared the same last name.

"George, why am I here? Where is Doctor Pattersen? Is everyone okay?" I asked without giving him a chance to answer.

George didn't respond right away when I did stop speaking. He turned from me as if to compose himself. That was a worry. He always answered everyone right away. He was one of the most helpful people in the crew. Even when he didn't know an answer, he would tell you he didn't know right away and then direct you to the person who was most likely to know.

"George, what happened?"

"There was a power surge. The entire ship went offline. When I woke up, I was back in my own body. I was all alone, it was dark. Not even the emergency lights worked. The only light was from a sun we were near. If we didn't have oxygen already running in this section, I would have suffocated right away. If we were not near a sun, I would probably still be stumbling around in the dark. You're the first one I have been able to get back online."

All my joints were stiff, and I was in need of a proper service. I ignored the alerts telling me to stay put until I was serviced and walked to the stasis pods. I wished I hadn't moved when I saw the state of it: our Captain David was well and truly gone. His body in a state of decomposition I had only ever seen from roadkill. I knew he had to smell horrid despite having no sense of smell in this body. I didn't know how

George was putting up with the stench. For that to be the first thing he smelt in six hundred years, it was some sort of nightmare.

The rest of the pods were online. I stopped in front of my own. I hated looking at my own body. I had avoided this room since I had been uploaded, while others of the crew looked over their own body regularly. I looked like I was asleep. No decomposition at all. The relief of seeing my own body in good shape was short-lived; my vitals were all zero.

"Am I dead?" I asked the question and hoped my assumption was wrong.

"I'm sorry, Aud, I got the stasis pods back online as fast as possible. The only two I couldn't get back online were David's and my own. I was too slow. You and several others were already gone."

"I'm dead." I couldn't believe it. This had to be a nightmare. This had to be my first dream in my artificial body. I was supposed to survive the journey. We were all supposed to survive the journey. That was the point of the artificial bodies in the first place, to ensure our survival. I was supposed to be a crop farmer and cook when we settled our new planet. I was going to be a mother and have a large family despite not being in a relationship with any of the crew. One of the conditions of the mission was to have children when we arrived to help with the population of the new planet. We were the first of many ships on the way to the planet. This could not be another thing that I failed to achieve in life.

"Yes and no. Your physical body may be dead, your memory is not. It's the opposite for Jen," George walked over to the pod of Doctor Pattersen, his fiancé for the past six hundred years. "Her body is still alive, her memory is gone. Why didn't we just get married on Earth with our family and friends before we left? Why did we decide we had to be the first to get married when we arrived? Why her and not me?"

I knew Doctor Pattersen would have wanted George to survive over herself. That was the type of person she was. She always put everyone else's needs before her own.

"George, is there anyone other than yourself that is fully alive? Both mind and body?"

"No. The only other minds that are intact other than yourself are Maddie, Sam and Martin, and their bodies are dead."

"Why did you choose me over those three?" The other three were all scientists. The majority of the crew were scientists. I was only chosen for

gene diversity and because I could grow plants easily and cook. "I am the most useless person in the entire crew. I didn't even finish high school."

"You're not useless. You are the only one capable of getting the plants out of storage and getting them to grow well. I am not going back into stasis. I'm going to live out my time on the ship."

I had a purpose. I was going to be helpful to George. I had to prove that his faith in me was correct. I could grow plants in this environment, in almost any environment. I had grown plants in space during our training for the mission. I could grow them here on the ship. He was right, I could do this, and I would do this.

"If you don't go into stasis, you will die," I said to George.

"I know that. I know that I will never see our destination. I am never going back into an artificial body ever again. I am going to live out the rest of my days on the ship. I am going to grow old on this ship. I will not go into stasis." He was growing hysterical at the thought of going back into stasis.

"I may be able to grow food on a space ship but not that fast. You're not going to get a chance to grow old if you don't go into stasis." I said, trying to calm him, but nothing was working.

"I'm not going into stasis. I am never going into stasis again. You're supposed to help me. Telling me to go into stasis is not helping me."

While he was distracted with his lecture on why he couldn't ever go into stasis, I pulled my body out of stasis and shoved George into my stasis chamber. He was unable to get out of my grip. He froze with fear plastered over his face. I hoped that I wasn't hurting him. I didn't know my own strength in this body.

"I'm sorry, George, I'll get you out of stasis when I have the means for you to survive," I said to my now frozen friend.

I looked at my body, hoping to see a sign of life. Hoping that George was wrong, but there was nothing. I was indeed dead. I wouldn't allow myself to rot there on the floor. I placed my body in George's stasis pod. Covering the panels of myself and the Captain so I didn't have to look every single time I came in here. I had avoided this place before, not wanting to see my friends and co-workers who looked dead. Now I had to check to make sure George and the rest of the living crew didn't die. I had to keep the stasis pods of the crew who were still alive functioning.


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I thought I knew what loneliness was. I had been alone all my life since I struggled to make friends. It was how I got into gardening in the first place. Because I had no friends my own age as a child, I would spend that time with my grandparents. My grandfather was always out in the garden. He taught me the foundations of gardening, and I didn't feel alone when surrounded by plants. My grandmother taught me how to cook with the vegetables that grandpa and I grew. I spent most of my time with my grandparents while my parents were away working.

I thought I knew loneliness when I signed up for this mission and said goodbye to the few friends I had made. I had felt alone ever since both my grandparents had passed. I thought I was lonely when I gave up my plants to go on this mission. I didn't feel like I fit in with the rest of the crew even though they were always nice and did include me in everything. I didn't have any tasks I needed to accomplish while travelling and just assisted everyone as requested. My real work was not supposed to start until we landed and started colonising our new home.

Here I stood entirely alone for the first time in my entire life. Most of the crew were dead. All organic bodies still in stasis. All artificial bodies lying around in different parts of the ship. I wanted to get to work right away on the garden that would maintain George's life. I needed to work out how to do that without sacrificing everyone else's life.

I couldn't get the image of Captain David out of my head in such a disgraceful state. He spoke to me extensively before he approved me for the crew. He was a kind and gentle man who reminded me so much of my grandfather. I walked back into the stasis chamber, I had to clean up his pod, I had to clean him up. I had to make sure the entire crew were presentable even in death. I had to find something better to block the Captain and my own body from view. Eventually, those who were still alive would be woken up in some form, and I didn't want them to see him as George and I had seen him. I wanted everyone to remember him as the man he had been.

If I was busy at work, I could forget how lonely I was. I felt useful for the first time since I joined the crew. I was still going to do my best even though there was no one here to watch me. We were going to live through this. I would grow food for George, and after he had recovered, he would

wake up the rest of the crew.

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George was still screaming when I got him out of stasis. It took several moments for him to realise he was no longer frozen in time. "You decided not to put me in?" He asked after he calmed himself down.

"I already put you in stasis for thirty years. That is how long it took to get the garden established, and food stocked up in storage and for me to learn how to cook with my artificial body."

"How? My stasis pod doesn't work," he said.

"I know."

"Then who's stasis pod did you use? How could you just do that to another crew and let them rot away like David did."

"It's my pod. I placed my body in your former pod," I said.

I had spent too many hours standing over my pod when all the work had been taken care of. Something I had once avoided I had started doing daily. I never removed the sheet covering the stasis pod. I stood there all the same. Slowly I started doing the same with every single other pod. Getting to know the crew more in this state of non-existence than in the hundreds of years we had spent together. I read their crew files. I found their robotic files. I looked over their memories that had been uploaded to see how corrupt they all were. Some days I felt guilty for invading their privacy. Other days I felt like they needed to be remembered in some form and that they would vanish into nothing if I didn't do something to remember them.

George pulled the sheet. I turned away before I could see what I looked like now. I didn't want to know what I looked like after being dead for three decades. There was silence for well over half an hour before I heard movement. George had placed the sheet blocking my body from view once again.

"I can't believe you did that for me," he said quietly. "There was a chance I was wrong." He'd been crying, crying for me. It was hard to accept that someone could mourn for me even though I was still here in some form.

"You weren't wrong. I checked after you were in stasis. I am sorry for that George, I shouldn't have pushed you in like that. I was worried you

were going to die before agreeing to go in yourself. It was wrong of me. I shouldn't have taken that choice away from you."

I found his arms around me. He was hugging me. The first hug I had had in hundreds of years. None of us hugged in our robotic form because we couldn't feel it. Or if anyone else did hug, it was in private. I couldn't even remember the last time I had been hugged before I took on this artificial body. The last memorable hug had been from my grandfather before he'd passed away. I wondered if my spirit was with my grandparents now. Though a digital part of me had been left behind, I was dead.

I took George into the meeting room. I had set up dinner for him and a place to sleep. We didn't really have anywhere on the ship since we didn't need to sleep. Our charging ports would not make suitable beds. We were meant to have homes established on our new planet before we returned to our organic bodies. We were meant to have homes set up for the people on the ships that were to follow us. We never did get confirmation if the following missions had been approved.

"Where did this come from?" George asked.

"I got it out of storage. It was meant for when we arrive."

The meeting room was the most appropriate place for living quarters since it was the only recreational area on the ship.

"You need to eat and get proper rest. Stasis isn't rest," I said.

I hoped that he would be able to stomach what I made. I hoped that I was right in getting him out of stasis. It had been so long since I had last cooked. I didn't realise how much I missed it until I started cooking again. I wasted so much food learning how to cook in this body. It didn't go to true waste since I was able to compost what I destroyed.

His stomach rumbled, and he sat down to eat. All too soon, everything was gone from his bowl. "I normally don't like soup, but that was the best one I have ever had. I didn't realise how much I missed food until just now."

"I was worried I lost my touch. It's been so long, and it's more difficult to cook with robotic hands. Not being able to taste while I am cooking also takes some getting used to." Gardening had been difficult as well, so many new techniques had been learnt, which would come in useful if our original mission still went ahead.

George didn't argue and took the blanket off the bed I'd made up,

sitting in the seat that looked directly out the window.

He looked at his hands as if he didn't believe they were his. "There is so much about living that I didn't miss while I was robotic. There is so much I didn't miss that I can't believe I didn't miss this. What I always missed the most was dreaming. I hope for good dreams. I doubt it after losing everyone. I hope I haven't forgotten how to dream after so long."

Even though it had been thirty years for me, it had only been days, possibly weeks for him. George never did tell me how long he was awake for by himself before he got me online. I am not sure if he even knew.

I sat there watching him sleep. I knew I should leave, but I didn't want to be alone ever again. I was frightened that if I left him that he wouldn't be real. The window he was leaning against was the very same window that the entire crew had been sitting and standing around when we had left Earth. We all watched it grow smaller until it vanished from view. It was gone forever now. It felt only fitting that there was nothing out that window now, not even any distant stars. Just the blackness of space.

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George didn't make any comment about the fact I hadn't moved since he fell to sleep. "Morning Aud, so where have you set up this garden?" He asked.

I was nervous to show him my garden. I was worried that I had destroyed an essential section of the ship. He didn't mention anything about the section being important. He walked around touching everything, breathing in deeply. "The air is so much fresher in here than the rest of the ship. Everywhere else is stagnant. I'm surprised that we even have oxygen considering we were meant to make this entire trip as artificial."

"It's a safety feature. Same with the lights so that you don't all suffer from vitamin D deficiencies." I said. "The biggest worry I have is water. I've used a lot up for the gardens. This area is closed off to the rest of the ship." The ship had several sections that were closed off; this area was not unique.

"I need to check the rest of the ship," he said as he headed toward the exit.

"You need to rest more. You have to recover." I wished that I hadn't

reminded him the rest of the ship existed. He probably would have stayed in the garden for longer and got more rest.

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George didn't give himself a chance to recover. He checked the ship from top to bottom for days on end with very little rest in between before he started working on waking up the rest of the crew.

"I can't believe it! The Captain's memory is intact. I thought he was dead dead," George said with excitement. "I don't know if I should wake him. I don't want him to see his body. It was bad enough having to see him like that."

"I cleaned him up. He is far more presentable than when you saw him last."

George removed the sheet; I didn't look away like I had done with my own body. The Captain I could look at even though I could not look at myself in that state.

"Thank you, Aud. I should have thought of that myself. I shouldn't have let you see him like that."

"You didn't have time. Your priority was survival. You were close to death when I placed you in stasis."

George's health had improved a lot since I had got him out of stasis. While he was still thin, he no longer looked malnourished.

"Should I even be bringing back a dead person? I shouldn't have brought you back."

"I don't regret you bringing me back, and I am sure it's the same for Captain David. You cannot spend the rest of your life alone which you will if you refuse to bring back the dead. So far the only memories we have that are intact are all dead. He knows more about our mission than anyone else, and he's a good person, a good friend. If he wants to be turned off, then we upload Martin next and ask him if he wants to remain turned on, and if he doesn't, then we try and get two operational bodies and upload Sam and Maddie at the same time."

Sam and Maddie were one of the many married couples on the ship. They were just as close now as they were when we'd all met. It was only fair to bring them both back together. Something I wouldn't consider doing for all the married couples on the ship since some of them could no

longer stand the sight of one another.

"Sounds like a plan," George said. "I'm sure that Cap will agree with your order of resurrections."

I didn't like that word even though it was what we were doing in a sense, resurrecting the dead in artificial bodies.

"Can you bring Cap's body in?" George asked as he got the Captain's memories ready for upload.

I nodded. I had collected all of the bodies and placed the entire crew onto their charging ports during my time alone. There had been damage done to most of the artificial bodies when the power had surged. George had to check them all one at a time. It was a field that was far over my head, and I had purposely left them alone. They were easily damaged by someone who didn't know what they were doing.

I handed George tools as he needed them and watched as he connected Captain David up to the computer that housed his memory. I had never seen this process before. Never thought I would get to see it for myself. Even though I was living in an artificial body, it was still hard to believe that this was possible in the first place.

George was a lot calmer than he was when he woke me up. He didn't say anything; neither of us said anything as the Captain sat up.

"George, Audrey." He greeted us both. Recognising me instantly even though all our artificial bodies all looked the same and I hadn't said anything. "Whatever happened must not be good since you're standing before me in the flesh George and you have my stasis chamber covered up."

"The ship blacked out," George explained everything that happened from the moment he woke up until just now. "You're dead, David. I'm sorry. If you want to be turned off, I understand."

"I'd like to see myself," David said. "Can't believe I am dead if I don't see it for myself."

Captain David looked at his body for only a moment before he removed the sheet covering my stasis pod before I could look away. I saw my decayed body for the first time and couldn't look away even though I didn't want to see myself like that. He put the cover back in place and then moved on, examining the entire crew for himself. He stopped in front of Doctor Pattersen. "I thought you would have woken up Jen."

"I tried. She wouldn't wake up without her memory. Her memory is

corrupt. Most of the crew is corrupt. It is easier to list the people that have intact memories since it is so short," George said.

"I will not be turned off. If one of my crew can live knowing they are dead, then I can do the same. Audrey, thank you for your hard work. I knew I was right in taking a gamble on you joining our crew. None of us would be here without you. You kept George alive and helped bring me back. Our mission objective has changed to saving our crew, finding out why the blackout happened and attempting contact with the ships that follow after us to prevent this from happening to anyone else. I don't know if we were just in the wrong place at the wrong time or if this is a naturally occurring phenomenon for the area.

"George, I would like you to keep working on waking up the crew. Audrey, I would like you to show me this garden I have heard so much about."

"Yes, sir," George and I both said at the same time.

By the end of that day, George had Maddie, Sam and Martin online. They had been updated about the current state of everything and had chosen to remain online. By the end of the week, I once again felt useless since they were more knowledgeable than I was, and George didn't need my help in the pod room with more experienced crew members now assisting.

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I looked out the window in my garden as the ship sat stationary for the first time since we had left Earth. I didn't realise that the ship had been off course for the past thirty years. If George had known, he didn't mention that to me. Martin was sending communications out, trying to contact the ships that were supposed to follow after us.

"Aud, what are you doing in here by yourself?" I was asked by Maddie.

"I should have stopped the ship. We're doing all this backtracking because of me. We could have helped the other ships that followed us." I said.

"Only the Captain and a few of the officers have the authorisation to stop the ship or change our course. You wouldn't have been able to do that even if you had tried. I can't even do that. I'm not just saying that to make you feel better. Martin, Sam and Captain David have been working

on repairs to the ship. It will be quicker than thirty years backtracking. The engine was damaged, nothing you or George could have fixed. When they get the engine running smoothly, it will probably be closer to two years then thirty to backtrack," Maddie said.

I did feel better hearing that there was nothing I could have done. I am glad that we started waking our friends even if they were physically dead. There was a chance more of the crew were alive. If I kept doing this alone, it would have taken thousands of years longer than scheduled or possibly not at all to complete the mission.

"This is really pretty. Pity I will never get to enjoy it. I would have loved to eat these grapes. They look delicious. Do you ever get used to knowing you are dead?"

"I haven't yet. I keep hoping this is a bad dream."

"George is about to introduce a few more people to this bad dream. We've been able to fix the corrupted memories of some friends. We can only do them in small batches. Trying to run more than six at a time just takes up too many resources. We're never going to arrive at our destination with the ship in this state if we don't revive more to this dream."

"What do we do now?"

"Don't know in the long run. That's for Captain David to decide. In the short term, you keep working on building up our food reserve because we are not going to leave everyone in stasis for eternity."

"There is still an issue with water in the long term."

"I'll volunteer my husband to help you. Sam comes from a long line of crop farmers and worked on the farm until he started working full time. He would go home to help his parents. He might know some methods of conserving water and still yielding a crop. He was the black sheep for choosing this mission instead of staying on the land and taking over the family farm. If I could turn back time, I would take that life as a farmer's wife, surrounded by the ones we love."

Everyone had something they would change. I knew Martin only took this mission because he couldn't afford the medical treatment for one of his children. He often spoke about how he wished he found another way after we'd lost contact with Earth.

"Would you accept this mission knowing what you do now?" Maddie asked.



I didn't answer right away. I tried to imagine what my life would have been like. I probably would have stayed in the same home I had always known. Nothing would have changed for me. I would have died without any real friendships. The friends I had made over the past six hundred years were important to me, and I didn't want to erase those, even if I always felt distant from most of them.

"Yes," I answered after some thought. "I have more now than when I was alive. There are things I miss, like dreaming. I wish I was still alive. I won't change anything."

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George was looking happy for the first time since he'd woken up. Captain David had called a meeting. The entire crew awoken so far were standing in the meeting room with George's lone bed pushed up against the wall. It felt empty with so many of the crew still missing.

Captain David addressed us all. "We have been on the edge of the power blackout anomaly for the past ten years, and it is indeed permanent. For our entire journey, we have been sending messages to the ships that were supposed to follow. Because of the backtracking and our time stationary, we should be within range of other ships, and yet we are still not getting any communications. The mission was either cancelled, or the following ships ran into issues long before now. This has led me to believe that we are on our own."

The people in our life now were the only other people that would ever be in our lives. That was something that I always knew was a possibility but was still hard to come to terms with.

George still had a grin plastered on his face despite the news that no more ships were coming after us.

"We have been scanning for other viable planets, and we have three options. Return to Earth, continue with our mission, or head to one of the other planets whose crew left ahead of our own. We are halfway between Earth and our mission planet. Both options will take approximately six hundred years. The other viable planets will add four hundred years minimum to our mission. I will give you all time to think about those options." Captain David paused, allowing for everything to sink in before he continued talking. "George has some news to share about how the

current recovery of memory has been going.”

George stood up. When the Captain was seated he started talking. “Before now, everyone I have been able to bring back has been fully dead. There is half a dozen fully dead crew that I have not been able to bring back. I am sad to announce that I am unable to bring back the remainder of the deceased. Their memory is too corrupted for anything viable. When the power surge happened, the emergency protocols started to upload everyone back to their living bodies. Some of the crew fully died before the protocol had started for their bodies and their digital memories were fully intact. Some of those bodies were fully uploaded and then died, which is why I have very little to nothing to recover. The rest of you were partly downloaded when you died. I have discovered the living crew's memories are fully downloaded to their bodies, which is why none are awake right now. I do not know why none of them woke up before I engaged stasis. Doctor Pattersen has been uploaded from her living body and downloaded into her artificial body. She is currently examining the health of everyone in stasis before we proceed with waking them or uploading them into their artificial bodies.”

I hugged George. “That is excellent news.” The first hug I had initiated. It felt right even though I could not feel it. It explained why he was so happy despite the news about the other ships not following as they should be.

“If your loved ones or close friends wake up, I will call you into the stasis room,” Captain David said. “From now on, the stasis room is off-limits to everyone except Doctor Pattersen, George and Audrey.

“Me?” I pointed to myself. Why was I included? I wasn’t a doctor or a scientist.

“You’ve been in there every single day checking on everyone’s condition for over thirty years. I’d like you to continue and report any changes to Doctor Pattersen and myself. You’re more familiar with the stasis room than anyone else on the ship,” Captain David said.

There had been some changes to the stasis pods since more people had been woken up. As different systems were brought back online, they occasionally drew more power away from the stasis pods.

“I will continue to do so, sir,” I answered.

The meeting was dismissed with the Captain telling us to think about what we all wanted from our future.

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Doctor Pattersen examined the crew one at a time. Asking me about who I believe were the most stable to most critical. She used my list with slight modifications for her revival order. Some were put back into stasis after an examination because their reported health was different then the stasis pod readings, and they required more one on one care. Even the most stable person was in poor shape. I felt out of my league with my responses and observations.

Doctor Pattersen would get the crew member back to healthy, then Captain David would interview them, giving them a choice about whether they would remain in stasis as is or return to their artificial body. All stasis pods were examined and maintained while they were empty. When a fault was found that required extensive repairs, the person was swapped with a deceased crew member who had a fully working stasis pod.

No one was given the option that George had taken, yet a few had refused to return to stasis in any form. Those few people were never forced to return to stasis. The food and sleeping situation could handle the small number that had refused.

All the living crew loved my garden and my cooking. The garden became the recreational area for the living. I loved seeing other people enjoy it; it was why I had worked in the food industry in the first place. I loved seeing others enjoy what I love.

"Audrey, could you teach me how to garden." One of the scientists named Amanda asked me. She had been the first one to refuse to go into stasis following the examinations. "If there is another power surge during my lifetime, we need to be able to eat. I have to know how this entire area works. The next time we might not be able to get everyone back. If there are children born, I would love this to be the area they learn and play. Everywhere else is so sterile, and I didn't see that until I was me again. Children are probably a bad idea. I still want them despite not being on the planet yet. Our mission has changed already. Why not change it again? There is no one from Earth to stop us."

"My concern is water and long term sustainability. This ship was not designed to live in. I don't want to go against Captain David."

That seemed to fire her up even more. "I will find a way to create or find

water. As long as there are not too many children born, they can always take over the stasis pods for the ones of us that never went back in and the dead, if that is what they choose." Amanda said.

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"We are going ahead with our original mission," Captain David announced to the entire crew. "I am sorry to the few of you that wanted to return to Earth. As for those of you that wish to reconnect with the other colonies, I will not rule that out entirely, as the situation may change again. The other possibility is you could continue on after our colony is established."

Very few people wanted to return to Earth. It would be too different and no longer the planet we left. Even though I missed Earth, I missed the Earth that I knew, and we would never get that back.

I was pulled aside by Doctor Pattersen after we were dismissed. I had noticed that she and George hadn't been spending any time together since she'd been awakened. I wanted to ask about that but also didn't want to pry. He spent most of his free time in the garden or with Sam and Martin. They had been close before the accident but had become closer in the time it had just been our small group. We all spent a lot more time together. We had been alone together for so long. It was nice having friends. I felt like I had two groups of close friends now because of the situation.

"I will be bringing the dead crew out of stasis now," Doctor Pattersen said. "I will give them a full examination before putting them back into stasis. Aud, do you want to be around for this?"

"Yes, Doctor Pattersen, I am happy to assist and make sure they are presentable before being returned to stasis," I replied.

"Thank you, Aud. Not many people can stomach this type of work, even in artificial form."

George was one of those people that could not stomach the medical work. He'd always ask me how Doctor Pattersen was whenever I was tending the garden. Maybe that is why he was staying away from her.

"Call me Jen, we are friends after all."

I wanted to hug her. I was elated at being asked to call her by her first name. For her to consider me a friend.

"Thank you, Jen," I said.

"I know you worry about George and I." She brought up exactly what I had been wondering about. "I am struggling to watch my life partner grow old without me. He is struggling because I plan to stay in my artificial form and see our original mission through. I am going to request to go offline until George passes away."

"Are you sure that is what you want? Have you really talked this over with him?"

"Our relationship was on life support long before we accepted this mission. It is hard to move on from someone that you've been in a relationship with for well over a decade and engaged to for eight of the years and still want a friendship with. We became comfortable with our life. Us putting off getting married until we arrived was just an excuse not to change anything. We kept things as they were for six hundred years. We would have kept things that way for another six hundred if the mission had continued smoothly."

"George said his biggest regret was not marrying you before you left Earth when we believed you to be mentally dead."

"I regret that as well. I regret not keeping our engagement short. I would still be making the same choice even if we were married."

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We found that several of the people were still alive despite their stasis pods reporting them as dead. Seeing that had me wondering if I had made a mistake on my own body when I removed myself from stasis.

"You didn't make a mistake," Jen said as if reading my thoughts. "The examination table reads vitals when a person is placed on the table. I went back through the records from when you attended to the Captains body and your own."

"We had these people out when we were fixing their pods. How was it not picked up then?"

"If their pod only needed a minor repair or no repair, I didn't place them onto the examination table. The stasis pods need more repairs since the results are wrong. I will report that to the Captain after we're done."

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I sat with George in front of Jen's pod. She looked more lifelike than when we believed her mind to be gone. She had gone through with going into stasis after the entire crew were attended to. She was not the only medical doctor on board. One of the crew that hadn't returned to stasis was a doctor and would look after the living crew. Jen was only to be revived in an emergency or after George had passed away.

"It's been fifteen years since I woke up. I am so much older than her now. It just wouldn't be the same even if she did return to her physical body today."

"Are you going to date again?"

"I don't know. I'll just take everything a day at a time. I just wish she would have stayed out of stasis long enough to see Amanda's baby. We signed an agreement saying that we would have children when we arrived, but we never wanted any children. I keep wondering what if. She said that she is still going to have my baby when the colony is viable. I've asked her to name them after you if we have a daughter. You're a good friend Aud, and I'm only alive because of you. I just wish that I could see the other end."

"You will," I said and shoved him into the stasis pod next to Jen, activating it before he could protest. He was face down in the stasis pod. It was not how anyone was supposed to go into stasis, but it worked.

"Captain, Jen and George are both in stasis," I reported.

"George actually agreed to go back into stasis?" Captain David asked me.

"He did not. I know that he will regret it if he doesn't see this mission through. I suggest we don't transfer Doctor Pattersen unless she is needed. George, I will not transfer at all. That is a promise I would like to keep even if I did break the one about not putting him into stasis. I won't be doing that to anyone else, sir. He was my friend back when we were both training, unlike the rest of the living crew."

"I will tell them that George changed his mind about stasis when Jen went in," Captain David said. "If you do that to anyone else, I will take you offline."

"Understood, sir."

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On the Captains orders, I woke Jen in her living body and not the artificial one despite everyone else still being artificial. We had arrived on our new planet over one hundred years ago. It had taken longer to set up than any of us would have liked, and we were still a few years away from returning the living back to organic bodies. It turned out the ship wouldn't be leaving again. It started breaking down as soon as we entered the atmosphere and was unlikely to ever fly again.

I had covered George's pod as I had done for everyone that had passed away during the journey. I didn't want her to know what I had done just yet.

I filled her in on the children born on the ship and all of the deaths. "There is no one left. A few chose to go into stasis and be uploaded. They were scared to go outside when they arrived since everything they knew was on this ship."

"We've arrived? Can I see?" Jen asked.

I took her to my garden to show her how it had changed over the years before taking her outside.

"I start most of my plants in the ship before planting them out here. We have a better survival rate from the plants. It's not a long term solution, but it's a start. No one knows how long the colony will even last without the gene diversity we were expecting from the follow up ships. We still haven't made contact with anyone, not even the other colonies from the nearby planets."

"I wish George was here to see this with me," Jen sobbed. "You never did tell me how he died. Did he move on? Did he have any children? Did his children go into stasis? Did he tell them about me?"

"I may have forced George into stasis against his will after I placed you into stasis," I told her. I didn't feel guilty about that either since she clearly still wanted him by her side. "He wants to be closer in age with you again. I don't know if you want to live without him for the next fifteen years or if he should be uploaded. He was against that choice, and I will not do that to him myself."

"I would be glad to upload him again. We are no longer travelling and the unknown was his real problem with being uploaded." Jen said. "Then I will start reviving the rest of the crew. From what I see, you're established enough for us all to survive already."

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"Aud, how could you? You uploaded me. You promised me you wouldn't," George said with his digital voice I hadn't heard in six hundred years. It felt odd hearing his artificial voice again, even though he only had his natural voice for a short decade.

"I was the one that uploaded you," Jen said. "I am going to catch up with you in age, and we are then going to grow old and die together, and we sort out our issues in the meantime."

"You're going to remain on the ship with me?"

"You are going to remain on the planet with me, and I am grateful that Audrey chose to leave us both in stasis for the remainder of our journey and the decades of setting up the colony."

George hugged me despite neither of us being able to feel anything. "Thank you Aud. You prevented me from making the worse decision of my life."

"I know you will make the most of it." I said. "It is time to live again, even those of us who are dead. We have been stagnant for too long."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jade Mitchell is a professional multitasker, who is never happier than when discussing the world of storytelling, whether it be her own published novel (*Extinguish*), one of the many ideas bouncing around her mind, or her favourite story of the week.

Always with her mind on faraway worlds, Jade began writing between studies of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Trigonometry*, and—encouraged by her teachers (amidst plaintiff cries to put away her stories and focus on classwork)—went on to complete a Bachelor of Creative Industries at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Jade is fascinated by people, especially ordinary people in extraordinary situations; so much so that she has not only created fantastical characters but, with the help of her partner, two tiny humans of her own. Now she juggles raising two rambunctious toddlers, working the “day” job in a busy office, building a publishing business, and of course, working on her first love: writing. Sometimes she writes novels, sometimes poetry and sometimes even wedding vows. Mostly though she writes about people.

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THE WITCH DEMON CHRONICLES

Part 1: The Price

The morning was dusky. The faint smell of freshly-turned earth wafted in wisps on the misty air. All was quiet, the sounds of dawn muffled by the silence of the rising sun.

She appeared, as she expected, at a crossroads. The air shimmered as she stepped through at the convergence of the rough dirt roads. They stretched into the distance away from her, disappearing into the north, south, east and west. The ground at her feet was undisturbed except at the very centre of the intersection, where a small mound indicated a disturbance in the soil where something had been recently buried.

The boy completed the picture. He stood on the other side of the mound, feet bare and toes curling in the dirt as he stared at her. His moss-coloured eyes shone, but burning deeper within their depths was a faint glow. A glow that only those with the power to see souls could perceive.

A power she possessed.

It was the same scene she had seen a thousand times before. Except it was also different.

She took a moment to glance around. The fresh morning light—the glow of the sun peaking over the horizon—was foreign to her. It had been so long since she had witnessed a sunrise. Hers was the time of darkness and starless nights.

These morning hours, the soft spray of sunlight alighting on the morning dew, were the hours of angels. Just breathing sent short bursts of numbness through her, reminding her that she was a creature not meant for daylight hours.

She returned her attention to the boy.

He wilted away from her, chestnut hair falling around his face, green eyes wide and almost startled. Too innocent, yet far too knowing to have summoned her.

‘Your eyes are red,’ he said, whispered, breathed.

His gaze was transfixed on her face. They stood for a moment. The human and the demon; each waiting for the other to move first. Each curious. Each, just a little bit afraid.

She blinked and he shook himself, as if she had been holding him in place—though she knew she had yet to possess that power.

‘That means you’re her, ain’t you?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

He shifted his weight, dropping his gaze back down to the ground, at the mound in the middle of the road. The one he had buried a part of himself in—likely a lock of hair or some precious keepsake.

When he looked up at her again, his eyes were a darker. Mosslike and shadowed, yet still shining with the brightness of an innocent.

She suppressed a shiver. She had never dealt with a child before. Even teenagers were touched by the violence of the world. Tainted.

This one, however, was not. He was pure. It shone from him. From his eyes and his hair and his very pores. It sent a crawling feeling along her spine and the question of how he had come to summon her emblazoned on her mind.

She took another look around the crossroads, searching for another source of the summoning, searching for some other party, some protector or controller of this boy.

There was no one. Only the child, pure and innocent and still staring at her. It sent another chill through her.

She folded her arms and said, ‘What can I do for you?’

He swallowed and gave a little cough, as if clearing his throat, ‘Can you fix people?’

‘Fix people?’

He nodded. ‘My sister, she’s... she’s sick. Can you fix her?’ His eyes were hopeful, bright, and he added in a rush, ‘I can pay!’

‘Really?’ she asked, raising an eyebrow.

He nodded again, ‘Yes. You need a kiss, right? I can do that.’

She couldn’t help the smirk that twitched at the corners of her mouth.

‘Something like that,’ she said.

He hesitated, regaining that wide-eyed expression that was like nails on a chalkboard to her soul. She flexed her fingers, attempting to rid them of the numbness that was beginning to seep into their tips.

‘It’s not a kiss?’ he asked, worry pitching his voice higher. ‘She said all I had to give you was a kiss. I don’t got nothing else.’

Uncrossing her arms, she crouched down in front of him, eyebrows drawn. Here was her answer.

‘She?’

‘My sister,’ he explained, feet kicking at the soft dirt at his feet, eyes cast away from her face at her sudden nearness, ‘she’s sick. She said you can help her get better and all I gotta do is give you a kiss.’

She rested her elbows on her knees, feet sinking into the dirt. ‘She sent you?’

The boy nodded, eyes flicking up to hers and away again.

‘She told you how to find me?’

He nodded again.

She stood up, ‘What’s your name, kid?’

‘Morgan,’ he said, ‘What’s your name?’

She hesitated, her voice catching in her throat. ‘Didn’t your sister tell you?’ she asked.

He shook his head emphatically. ‘She just said I’d know you ‘cause of your red eyes,’ he paused and tilted his head to the side.

She hesitated before answering with a wry smile, ‘My name is Morgana.’

He blinked. ‘That’s like my name!’ he said, voice hitching high.

‘You don’t say?’

At her tone, he paused to look at her, leaning a little closer than she would have liked. She shifted backwards, having trouble focusing on his eyes and the subsequent shine of his soul.

She stood up and took another look around. With a little more focus than she had used before, she searched for the path the boy had used. Behind him to the west she saw a flicker of blue, the dim light of an adult soul. She had not seen it in the glow of innocence that shone from the boy, but now it was obvious to her. The sickly outline of the blue soul, the flickering darkness of whatever illness was slowly consuming it.

Yes, that soul was one that would have no qualms coming out to the crossroads to bargain for life.

Morgana frowned at the house in the distance. 'How old are you?'

'I'm nine,' said Morgan. 'How old are you?'

She glanced at him, smirking again. 'I'm very old.'

The boy tilted his head to the side, frowning as he looked her over. 'You don't look very old.'

She laughed and turned to him fully. She tried to spot some sort of darkness in the shine. Some sign that he was already tainted. He stared back at her, swaying slightly, hands moving unconsciously with the motion of the wind.

Morgana took a deep breath in. It had been so long since she had even seen a child so pure as this boy. This child with her namesake.

He would make a great addition to the King's ranks. The brightest souls often turned the darkest, and she would be greatly rewarded for stealing such a prize from *above*. Yet the thought of carrying him...

She sighed. 'I can fix your sister,' she said.

His face turned brilliant and the shine from him brightened so much that she had to look away, 'Really?' he asked.

'Quite easily.'

'Like magic?'

The question gave her pause. Her past reared its distorted face in her mind, reminding her of all the reasons she stood there before the boy, rather than in another place. A place where the presence of a soul like his would not burn her.

Morgana tilted her head. 'In another life, perhaps,' she said softly. 'What I do is more of an exchange.'

'Exchange?'

'I can grant you this... wish—,' she said.

'Like a genie!' he exclaimed, interrupting her.

She raised her eyebrows, 'Something like that,' she said again, 'But my wishes aren't free.'

Morgan flushed and looked back down at the ground, 'Oh, the kiss?'

'No,' she said, 'The kiss is how I give you the wish.'

The boy frowned, 'So... how do I pay you?'

She crouched down in front of him again. 'You give me your soul.'

He froze, eyes wide, sunlight gleaming off his hair and silence filling the fields around them. It was still, quiet, all animals having hidden from her presence, from her darkness.

The boy stood in that silence, caught in it, as her words slowly registered with him.

‘My-My soul?’

The brightness of him, and her closeness to it, made it hard for her to focus on him. His purity was raw and bold. Dangerous to her own darkness. Her hands tingled from it, alternating between numbness and a slow, creeping burn. It was her punishment, for daring to be so close to a creature such as Morgan.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘If you accept my deal, then your sister will be healed and you will have just ten years of life. And then I get your soul.’

His breath hitched. He swayed closer to her, and though his light itched through her, she stayed where she was.

‘T-Ten years?’ he said, eyes large and breath short.

Morgana nodded. It was the set price she gave all her customers. Non-negotiable.

He was silent. His feet shifted in the dirt. His hands clenched at the hem of his shirt. His head tilted, eyes drifting back the way he had come, back toward the house in the distance, and the soul that lived within it.

‘But you’ll fix her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will...will I die? Without it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will it hurt?’ His voice cracked on the last word, hitching in that way that precluded tears.

Morgana whispered, ‘Yes.’

He swallowed again. Hard. His gaze became unfocused as he turned back to her. Green bore into red. The child and the demon.

‘Ten years,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll be...’

She filled in the end of his sentence, ‘Nineteen.’

He looked up her, eyes glistening, and in that moment, she caught a greater glimpse of him.

His sister had known more than she had told him when she sent him on this errand. She had known the cost, and had not told him—had in fact, lied to him. He knew that now.

And yet...and yet she was all he had in the world. No parents or other living relatives to rely on. No one else to protect him.

Morgana saw this, saw it in the stark white of his soul. It scoured her,

burned into her mind, and she knew his choice.

‘Okay,’ he whispered.

She didn’t ask if he was sure, didn’t check that he understood what he was asking for, what it would cost him. Nor did Morgana tell him what future awaited his sister’s soul for sending him to make her deal.

‘Have you ever been kissed before, Morgan?’

He scrunched his nose. ‘No,’ he said, ‘That’s gross stuff grown ups do.’

She laughed.

‘You might want to try it before you’re too grown up, or you won’t get a chance,’ she answered.

He frowned at her, but she ignored it, leaning forward to kiss his forehead.

The contact stung and she pulled away quickly, glad she had not touched his lips.

He looked up at her, eyes once again wide, impossibly so. She was so close she could see the flecks of yellow and lighter green in his eyes.

‘Did it hurt?’ he whispered, his breath ghosting over her face.

Morgana swallowed, ‘Ten years,’ she said. ‘Ten years and I’ll be back.’

He started to nod, but before he had even swung his head back up she was gone, leaving the boy standing alone at the crossroads while her own soul burned.

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She *was* back for him, ten years to the day; despite the scars his touch had left on her own shackled soul. They still burned, from time to time, and though her King had rewarded her greatly, even offered her a higher position among his ranks, she did not feel the usual thrill upon collecting a soul.

He was waiting for her when she arrived.

Her hounds strained at her heels as she walked, salivating and snarling at each other, confused as to why they were being held back and taking it out on each other. She flashed them a look and they quelled.

As she entered the room the boy looked up at her. Though he was no longer a boy.

His eyes alighted on her, still so bright, and she felt that shiver from so long ago creep back through her. Back through the tips of her fingers and

her lips, where she sometimes still felt the burn of his soul. It had left stains on her. Pure stains that streaked through the darkness.

‘You’re here,’ he said.

His voice was soft and calm. As before it was all the same. Except, as before, it was also different. He was not like the others. He did not run or plead or beg for another deal, for another ten years, another five, another one. *Just one.*

Instead he sat and greeted her.

‘Hello Morgana.’

She stilled her hounds with a wave and said, ‘Hello Morgan.’

He smiled at her and stood from the bed where he had been sitting cross-legged.

‘How is your sister?’ she asked, having not seen any sign of the soul she had healed.

He smiled, ‘She’s well,’ he said, ‘No more cancer, thanks to you. I said goodbye to her this morning.’

Her eyebrows shot up, ‘Goodbye?’

Morgan nodded, ‘Of course. I had to explain what was going to happen to me,’ he said. ‘But she already knew.’

It did not appear to bother him, his sister’s abuse of his soul, and she once again wondered if he truly comprehended the deal he had made.

‘You know, you never explained how it works,’ he said, ‘How you could just... take the cancer away. I’ve always wondered.’

She raised an eyebrow and smirked, ‘Like magic.’

He grinned at her, not the grin of those Morgana typically conversed with, but the good natured grin of a delighted child.

‘Perhaps you’ll find out,’ she added.

The reminder of his imminent death did little to diminish his smile and he leaned back against the bed frame to say, ‘Well. Let’s get this done then.’

He looked toward her hounds expectantly, and she knew that he had done his homework, that he knew how this was supposed to end. Instead, she closed the distance between them, so that she could once again see the flecks of gold in his eyes.

She kissed him.

His lips were hot against her own, searing at her own charred soul, tearing at the white streaks that already marred her.

He had taken her advice in regards to kisses.

She breathed in, sucking out his soul until the brightness left his eyes and instead filled her.

Her pain was her penance. His lack of pain, for the moment at least, her futile gift.

He was meant to suffer for his deal. That was the rule of the exchange. That was what the hounds were for. It was their job. Her job. To let them rip through the physical of this world and tear into the fragile soul beneath.

This time though, this time the soul was too bright.

The price too high.

## *Part 2: Everything*

The first girl Morgan had ever kissed had been two years older than him. He was nine and a half and small for his age, but that hadn't stopped him from grasping her shoulders, reaching up on his tip toes, and planting a big, clumsy kiss straight on her lips.

They were full lips. Big and quick to smile. But that hadn't been why he kissed them. In truth, he hadn't even really liked the girl they belonged to. She had shrieked at him so fiercely he hadn't ever dared kiss her again.

Yet, she had been his first. Not because he liked her, not even because he'd really wanted to, but because a demon had once told him to try.

Ten years. Ten years before that very same demon would come to claim his soul. She had told him to practice kissing. To *'try it before you're too grown up.'* It was a warning. He wasn't going to grow up. He would never reach adulthood. He knew that. Had accepted it, even.

So, he took her advice. He tried. He practiced. He became renowned for it. The little boy who kissed girls. Just once. Once per girl. That was enough. He found that every kiss was unique. Some felt nice. Some felt sloppy. Some just plain awkward. Most were just okay.

Even as he grew, the more kisses he gave, the more kisses he took—the more experience gained—the results rarely varied. They were okay. Not bad. Not great. Just okay.

The older he got, however, the closer he came to the end of those ten short years, the more he wondered what it would be like to kiss *her*. Her lips which had been a soft pink, quirking up in a curious smile as she stared at him out of impossibly red eyes. Eyes that had bored through him, had seen right to his very soul.

When he wasn't thinking about kissing, he was thinking about *her*.

He knew he shouldn't have. Knew that wasting his precious, limited time was ungrateful—stupid, even. There were others who would have given anything just to have the time he'd had. Others who would have given their souls—like he had.

A soul for a kiss.

Well, in truth it was more than a kiss. She—the demon (*Morgana*, his brain whispered)—had given life back to his sister. To the only person in the world he had to love him. Without her, he would have been alone and homeless, scavenging in the scraps of others who barely even knew he existed.

Instead, he led a full—if somewhat short—life.

His focus was fractured. In his lessons, he bounced around between poor skills and endless talent, depending on what captured his interests. He studied animals, built intricate machines, kissed girls—and boys. It wasn't for him. But then, none of them had been for him.

He wondered if she ever thought of him?

He certainly thought of her. Of those red eyes that followed his dreams. The girl who was a demon, with hair that glowed like fire in the morning sun. She stood waiting for him when his eyes closed, standing barefoot in the dirt of the crossroad with the spring fields glowing golden behind her.

He counted the days until he would see her again. Until she would come to claim his soul with a kiss. A kiss that he hoped wouldn't be clumsy.

He found that clumsy kisses weren't so much because one had never kissed before, but more because of a lack of compatibility. Sometimes there was just no way for two people to mesh. That was okay. For every person that didn't mesh, there was one that would.

He wondered, for ten years, if he would mesh with her? Until one day the ten years was up and there was no more time left to wonder. There was only time to say goodbye. Goodbye to his sister, goodbye to his possessions—all of which had been neatly packed up and given away or donated to those in need (those he would have become had *she* not saved his sister); goodbye to the world he was about to leave behind.

She stepped through the door of his room as if stepping straight out of his memories. She was unchanged, untarnished by the years, as vibrant and beautiful as he remembered her.

'You're here,' he said. 'Hello Morgana.'

'Hello Morgan.'

Her voice was both soft and smooth, yet with a faint husky undertone. As if she didn't speak often. As if she'd waited these ten years to speak only to him.

She closed the distance between them, her presence engulfing him, making his breathing quicken and his pulse race. She stared at him, red into green, and then, before he had a chance to brace himself, pressed those pale pink lips against his.

It wasn't what he had imagined. It wasn't awkward. It wasn't clumsy. It wasn't even okay.

This kiss...this kiss was fire. It was heat. It was light. It was *everything*.

Her lips were dry and surprisingly cracked, chaffing against his with a fierceness that was at once rough and gentle. She was a contradiction. Her hair of fire, her eyes of blood, her hounds of hell—her touch, so soft and gentle.

She pulled back the faintest bit, so that their lips just barely touched. He opened his eyes, staring at her in wide wonder.

A kiss to end all kisses. A kiss to end his life.

Without a thought he pressed into her, closing his eyes even as he felt the beginning of something *wrong* pulling at the core of him. His soul. Crying out a warning. A warning he ignored. He knew the price he had to pay for dealing with a demon. He knew there was no fighting it. No taking it back.

So instead he succumbed. Gave in. Relinquished control.

Instead he focused on this last kiss. So much better than his first.

His kiss with a demon.

No...his kiss with a demon...who was once a girl. A girl like him. Full of curiosity and wonder. Full of fire. Full of light.

In this last kiss, he saw her for what she really was. Beneath the darkness. Beneath the demon. She was a girl.

A girl that was, for this one moment, his.

### *Part 3: Without You*

Three hundred games of chess. Three hundred bargains. Three hundred deals with the devil. Or rather, with Angels. Yet of all those games, Morgana's side had only ever truly won three times.

Oh sure, there had been numerous draws. Numerous truces formed over small, inconsequential matters. A soul returned here, an Earthquake allowed there. But *true* victories? The kind of victory that would please a king? Only three. And after each victory, a new Angel to take the loser's place. A new angel for Morgana to watch. To study. To defeat in the endless battle for control.

Morgana held back a scoff. Control won through a chess game? It was absurd. If not for the burning nature of each kiss surrendered to her, she might have laughed.

How had she gotten here?

Oh she'd thought this title lofty. The highest honour. A sign of *trust* from the King. Making deals with angels for him? Stealing away small victories, one insignificant game of chess at a time? Locking herself in this empty void. The room between worlds. Sequestering herself to *Limbo* just to make *Him* notice her.

After all, what was a King without a Queen? Without *her*?

More to the point, what would happen to her should she lose his favour? Things had been simpler before she had risen through the ranks, before she'd come to learn what true power was, before she'd garnered *His* notice; before her dealmaking had left the sanctuary of the crossroads.

She sighed and brushed away thoughts of the crossroads, instead eyeing the chess board before her with weary boredom and wary



anticipation, counting down the number of moves and attempting to focus on the matter at hand. Not nights spent on lonely crossroads, trading deals for souls. Thoughts like those only ever ended the same way her time there did. With pain, and light, and souls too pure for the depths of hell.

She clenched her jaw and toyed with her knight, not really seeing it, thinking instead of moss green eyes and crooked smiles and scars of light traced across the remnants of her soul.

Opposite her, the Angel (she'd already forgotten his name) drummed his fingers impatiently along the countertop. The shadow of his wings fell across the wall behind, and though she couldn't see them—shrouded from her sight as they were—she could almost make out the ruffled nature of them as he shifted in his seat. Something about his expression irked her. Though she'd not had many occasions to meet Angel's there was something *off* about this one, something almost...

The Angel blew out a breath of air, eyes widening as he stared at the board.

She quirked an eyebrow, tilting her head. 'Why so impatient?' she asked, her tone flippant as she decided on her move.

An entirely too human expression flashed across his face. Exasperation. Irritation. Helplessness. And something else. Something familiar and taunting and terrifying.

His eyes darted upwards to stare at the ceiling above. 'Just...waiting for you to notice,' he muttered, in a voice almost too low for her to hear, to the sky.

'What am I supposed to be noticing?'

Surprised, his gaze dropped back down to her. He was young.

That was the first thing that had surprised her when he'd stepped into the room. Far younger than any of the others.

Oh they all looked the same. Ageless and perfect. Yet he was different. There was something in his face. Something pure and graceless and eager in those eyes that were too green and too much like someone she had once known that showed how young he really was.

Curiosity had twanged deep in her gut and yet, despite it all, despite the rumours of a new baby angel, she hadn't been able to really focus on him. Those eyes, those damn green eyes that were at once so similar and so different had kept her from focusing too hard on him.

She should be relishing this chance to pull one over on the angels. To take this little, inexperienced creature they had foolishly pitted against her and show him what true power really looked like.

Except...there was something entirely *off* about him. He didn't act how angels were supposed to act, didn't *react* the way angels were supposed to react.

Like now, with his stupid surprise. The unguarded bemusement clouding his features. 'God, you're dense.'

She stared at him, fingers frozen on the little marble statue in her hand.

Never, in over 700 years since her creation, had she heard an angel curse—let alone take the Lord's name in vain.

With a sigh of his own, puffed out in pent up frustration, he pushed up out of his seat—the seat he was never supposed to leave—and turned away to pace.

Pacing. He was *pac*ing. Back and forth along the (limited) length of the room, throwing her nervous, exasperated little glances before turning and starting all over again.

What the hell?

She left her piece where it was and let her palms rest on the sides of the table, watching him, reaching for the power that pooled at the base of her spine. Mistrust seeped through her, making her skin prickle. What was he up to?

His gaze flicked to her again, so green (like grass in the cool morning dew) and she had to shake away the sudden feeling of *Deja Vu*. Who was he? *What* was he? More to the point, what was he up to?

She let tendrils of power seep out of the tight ball of control she had been keeping it in, and shadows crept through the small, annoyingly bright room. A reminder of her presence. Of their purpose. Of her status.

She was called Queen for a reason. And she would not be ignored.

He paused, regarding her with those blasted green eyes—so bright and open and blazing with emotion—and a sharp volt of unease sparked up her spine.

She forced herself to relax, lounging back in her seat and regarding him with a cool, unperturbed expression, as if his actions were completely beneath her notice.

How long had she been making these deals? How many games of pointless chess, each side trying to out manoeuvre the other as the endless

negotiations between Heaven and Hell raged on. Games instead of battles. Deals instead of bloodshed. She was the key. The only demon who could withstand the toll, to pay the price of making deals with angels. No one else could last as she did. Not demon, and not angel. She alone was capable of withstanding pure light of angels.

Until this one.

Unlike the others—who disdained to even look at her unless absolutely necessary—he had kept up an almost constant chatter. Always asking questions. Enquiring after her.

‘Hello Morgana,’ he had said that first day, an easy smile slipping onto that almost-familiar face. ‘How are you today?’

Distrust had surged through her. ‘Ready to devour angels,’ she had said, determined to put him off guard, to overthrow whatever manipulation they had planned.

But nothing had come of it. Nothing except more questions.

*‘Did you train your hell hounds? What do they look like?’*

*‘What’s your favourite time of year on Earth? What’s it like there?’*

*‘You were a crossroads demon before this, weren’t you? What was the most interesting deal you made?’*

*‘I heard a rumour that they call you a witch. Does that mean you were human, once?’*

*‘Does it hurt, making deals? It’s just, sometimes, you look like it hurts.’*

She couldn’t understand him, not during his tirade of pointless small talk, and not now, with him staring across the room at her as if she were the answer to all that was wrong with the world.

‘You don’t see it do you?’

She hid a shiver and clenched her hands around the edge of the table. ‘What exactly am I supposed to be seeing?’

He laughed, though not unkindly.

‘For someone so adept at knowing what people want,’ he said, his lips quirking up in wry exasperation. ‘you have a terrible grasp of emotion.’

‘I have a perfect grasp of emotion, certainly more so than any *angel*.’

‘And yet,’ he sighed. ‘you remain completely clueless as to *my* feelings.’

‘Angels don’t have feelings,’ she said reflexively, eyeing him shrewdly and wondering again what new game they were trying to play.

‘And yet here we are,’ he muttered, dropping those bright eyes down and away, a faint flush of red creeping up his neck.

She blinked, frowning at him in confusion. He was *embarrassed*?

His gaze flicked back to her. Green into red. Light into dark. Her fingers tingled, numb where the scars of light marked her soul. She clenched her hands and released them and still he watched her.

‘How can you not see?’ he whispered, almost imploringly. He laughed. ‘*They* do. They keep telling me I’m too emotional. Keep training me and *guiding* me and drilling me in what I’m supposed to do in here, how I’m supposed to win, how I’m supposed to... but it doesn’t matter. It *doesn’t matter*. Because every time I’m step in here and see you, it’s like... like I’m on *fire*, and it all comes rushing back. Do you really not see it? Do really not know how far in love with you I’ve fallen?’

For a moment the words were lost amongst the tirade. Overwhelmed by the irritation surging through her at his childish rant. Then the world turned on its axis.

Everything froze. All responses, all words, lodged in her throat. Her thoughts screeched to a halt, jamming into a ten car pile up in her mind. Love? *Love*?

She straightened, jostling the table, but still could say nothing. *Do* nothing. Except gape at him.

Two of the chess pieces toppled over, clattering onto the smooth wooden tabletop. The sound reverberated through her and an instant later anger erupted.

Rising to her feet she snapped, ‘You...angels don’t feel love!’ Yet, despite her tone—despite the suspicion that made her words sharp and her expression distrustful—something stirred in her chest.

A faint *thump...thump...* as her ancient, unbeating heart responded to the sincere, fond exasperation in those frustratingly bright and terrifyingly green (moss green) angel eyes.

‘I know,’ he said, soft and accepting and despairing. ‘I know.’

He stepped back up to the table. Hesitant and nervous and oh so young. So *innocent*. Memories beckoned to her, surging unbidden to the forefront of her mind, but she brushed them away. Tingles crept up her fingertips, tickling up the old wounds there. Wounds of light she had tried to cover up with darkness, never quite succeeding.

Those scars had made her both weak and strong. Weak enough to change the way she made her deals. To change how she bargained. Strong enough to make deals with angels. To bear their burning presence. To kiss

them. To inflict a pain of her own upon them. Her own darkness—mottled though it was—carved a path through each angel she touched, causing them as much pain as they did her. More.

After all, wasn't that the point of her being there? She could withstand what even the Dark Angel himself could not. Though, as her fingers turned numb, she wondered if she'd overestimated her strength.

He stepped closer, edging around the table, those damned green eyes beseeching, his breath wafting over her face. Sweet and smelling faintly of coffee.

Angels didn't drink coffee.

'Angels don't feel love,' she repeated, trying to hang onto her anger, to the suspicion that came so naturally when in the presence of all other angels. 'They can't. It's impossible.'

'They've tried to take it away,' he muttered, all his attention riveted on her, catching her in place, disallowing her to move, to even breathe. 'They took away everything else. My life, my memories, my humanity. Everything. Everything except you. I remember you. Standing at a crossroads, in the middle of a field, to make a deal with a boy.'

*Thump, thump...thump, THUMP.* She sucked in a sharp breath, her throat tight and dry and her mind exploding into thought. Into memories. Memories that had been locked away. That *she* had locked away. Memories that knocked constantly on her consciousness. Memories of how she'd gained the scars of light riddling her soul. No...no it *couldn't* be...could it?

Those eyes. Those damn, moss green eyes.

'I remember waiting. Ten years. Ten years for a kiss. I practiced. Just like you told me to. But it was nothing like waiting for you. It was nothing like kissing you. You...you are *everything*. Everything I ever waited for.'

She wanted to speak. Her hands clenched at the table behind her, her fingers digging into the soft underside of wood. She *wanted* to say something. To call him a liar. To call him a trickster. To tell him to take his games back to those filthy angels and tell them that she was a Queen—the Queen—and she would not be fooled by their schemes. She *invented* these games.

Instead, when she opened her mouth to speak, all that came out was a name. 'Morgan,' she whispered.

A faint smile lifted his lips. 'So you finally noticed,' he murmured,

leaning forward, his lips brushing against hers as he spoke. 'Hello Morgana.'

'You can't be...' she kept her gaze fixed on his, disbelieving and a little afraid. 'You can't...'

*Thump, thump. Thump, thump.*

How? How was he here? Why wasn't he in *hell*? She had put him there herself. She had presented his soul, bright and searing, to Him. It was the whole reason she was here. Apparently, it was the reason *he* was, as well.

She stared at him, at the impossibility of him, and yet she couldn't deny it. Now that she was focused, now that she was really *looking* at him, she could see it. See it in the crooked smile and the calmness of his soul. His soul. So familiar, so aching.

No wonder he had set her skin on fire.

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm here to see you. To be with you. I want to... can I kiss you?'

She wanted to laugh. He was standing so close to her she could feel his lips ghost past her own, not quite touching, but near enough to burn. To sear. To blaze across her soul.

Since the moment he'd stepped through that door into this room between worlds she had been growing accustomed to his burn. Each angel was different. Each fire that filled them unique, burning away the darkness no matter how hard she fought against them.

His particular fire burned hotter than any other she had encountered. Yet...yet she had been able to endure it. It hadn't *burned* so much as it had smouldered. Filling her with a heat that...wasn't quite unpleasant. As if it was a familiar burn. As if she had spent her entire existence preparing her soul for his touch.

She had thought it was because he was new. A fresh baby angel with no concept of the gravity his presence put on others. In a way she had been right; but she had also been so unaccountably wrong. It was because he was *Morgan* that he burned so bright. Because he was *Morgan* that she—and she alone—could bear the weight of his nearness. Because of the scars his touch had already left upon her. Changing her.

'Morgana,' he whispered, and a shiver crept along her spine at the sound of her name, at the hoarse, almost desperate, way he spoke it. 'Can I...?'

Why? Why? *Why?* 'Yes.'

Each deal she had made had brought her closer to this. Each kiss she had been foolish enough to think she had stolen—smug even, at what she had thought was a victory—had led her to this moment. Each one working at the old, bright wounds in her soul. Stretching them longer, carving them deeper, building on the brightness within her.

Heaven and earth, did he even realise what he was doing to her?

His lips were fire. His soul burning alongside the scattered darkness of her own. Yet she didn't pull away. Couldn't. He had entrapped her. Snared her in her own trap.

He *loved* her? She wanted to laugh at the absurdity. Scream at it. Curse everyone and everything involved in subjecting her to this torment. To a kiss that burned hotter than the depths of hell—a kiss she could no more shy away from than deny her own existence.

It *was* him. Morgan.

She melted under his kiss. Giving in to him. Giving way to the smouldering burn that was emblazoning into an inferno.

He was all light. Bright, engulfing, all consuming, pure light and she threw herself into the kiss, returning it with every ounce of darkness she could muster up from her bruised and aching soul.

He staggered back, his hands rising to catch at her. For a moment she thought he would push her away. To realise who and *what* he was kissing. Even if he *could* feel love. Even if he alone, of all the angels, was capable of such intensity, he had to realise that she—engulfed in centuries of sin—was the wrong choice.

A strange mewling sound seeped out of him. A sound of pain, of pleasure, of *longing*. Such a longing that it sent a sharp pang of fear straight through her.

She pulled away, gasping, her hand flying up to her mouth to touch her swollen lips, staring at him with eyes that felt too large.

Morgan took two steps back. His legs hit the chair he wasn't meant to leave and he collapsed into it, looking lost. His chest rose and fell in sharp movements, his green eyes stunned and dazed.

'That was...' he paused, catching his breath. 'It hurt.'

His voice was filled with surprise, and he stared down at his hands as if only seeing them for the first time.

Aftershocks. Pain ricocheted up her spine, echoing along the scars of her soul. She took a deep breath, refusing to let him see how much she

burned just for that one, forbidden kiss. She swallowed hard against the pain.

'This... we can't. We can't do this,' she said, when she thought her voice would remain steady enough. 'It's impossible. You...me...we're incompatible.'

A strange laugh welled up inside him, bursting out and petering off before it even really started. 'You call *that* incompatible?'

'You said it hurt,' she said, crossing her arms.

'Sure,' he said, lips quirking up into that infuriating smile of his (how had she not recognised that smile?). 'But so does not kissing you.'

She rolled her eyes. He reached out a hand to catch her wrist and tugged at her. She wanted to resist him. To remain where she was. To stay firm. Be the Queen.

Instead, her arms went loose, and she stood before him. Unprotected and exposed. He looked up at her and meeting his gaze was like staring into the sun. A sun that broiled and burned. A sun that gave life.

'It's forbidden,' she said. 'They'll have our heads for this.'

His gaze fell away from her. 'I know,' he said, his brows creasing into an unusually severe frown.

'If they kill me, I'll be reborn. They'll just remake me into what I am. But you...you're an angel. It'll be worse for you.'

'I'm not afraid,' he said, and pulled his gaze up from the floor, a little frown of defiance etched across his angel perfect face.

'You should be. You won't die. You can't. But you can be destroyed. They'll take away everything that makes you *you*.'

'They already tried that,' he said, stubborn as any demon. 'It didn't work.' She opened her mouth to argue, but he cut her off. 'And even if they did, even if it worked, it's worth it. To be with you.'

She shook her head, helpless. 'You're insane. This...' she gestured between them. 'This can never work. You're an angel. I'm a demon. You're not even meant to *be* here. I mean, we haven't even gotten to you escaping, the fact that you're now an *angel*? You'll be hunted for all eternity. *We* will be hunted. There will never be peace.'

A crooked smile softened the intensity of his expression. Green eyes resettled on her, pure and unafraid. Content even.

'I can live with that,' he said, 'if means you'll come with me.'

She stared at him in disbelief. He really *was* insane. That he could be so



calm at the notion of being chased for all eternity by Heaven and Hell, just to be with *her* of all people, could be nothing other than complete insanity.

‘I can live with running,’ he continued, his voice soft, filled with a faint delight that gnawed at the steadily increasing beat of her heart, ‘If I’m with you, I can live with anything. I love you, Morgana. No matter how much they take from me, they can’t take that. I love you. Until the stars are dust. Until every sun burns out into oblivion. I love you.’ He took her hand, sliding his thumb across her knuckles, his touch soft, and warm, and kind. ‘They’ve tried to teach me so much, but the one thing I know for certain, is that I can’t live without you.’

She swallowed, her throat dry, unable to find any words to respond to him. After all, what does one say to a declaration like that?

## *Part 4: Hell and Heaven; Two Sides of the Same Coin*

Of all the tortures he'd had to endure in hell, time was the worst.

Not the pain or the torments or the endless screams. Those he had expected. Those he had prepared himself for.

Instead it was time.

Time that dragged into eternity, the minutes seeming like hours while simultaneously passing hours in mere seconds. The days and nights swirled around each other in a mix of time and space that didn't make sense to his human mind.

Not that there was much human left about him.

~~~

You are no longer what you were.

They say this with a smile, sunlight warm and bright behind them as they gaze down at him with the fondness of a love parent. Except he had never had parents.

~~~

They strip his humanity away during the long eternity of seconds that made up his days. Leaving him in pieces, to regather himself however he could in that dank, cold, lonely place. Sometimes he didn't bother.

He didn't feel quite so alone when he was rendered into so

many parts.

~~~

You are no longer alone.

Yet the loneliness creeps in. Unbidden and unwanted. An ache deep within him that tells him something isn't right. Something... something is *missing*. Someone is missing.

He feels it in everything. In the crisp morning air, in the vibrant oranges and reds of sunrise and sunset, in the shocking crimson flowers that bloom by his bedroom window. Someone out there is calling to him, and he wants to find her.

~~~

They tried to break him. Tried to fill him with a darkness that soaked him through, weighed him down, made him feel like he was drowning in a thick, gagging rottenness that filled his noise and clogged his senses. They were destroying him. Bit by bit, they were tearing away the pieces that made him all that he had been and all he would have become. The things that made him... Morgan.

~~~

Your name is Ezenhym.

He frowns up at the soft clouds above, pure and white against a summer blue background.

Ezenhym?

Yes.

He follows the path behind them, trailing slow in the morning light, brushing his hands against soft budding petals and feeling... at odds.

It is always bright here, bright and brilliant, no matter the time of day or night; the skys are clear and rays of moonlight and sunlight glittered off the iridescent wings in a perpetual rainbow of *colour*. A splash of red catches his eye and he pauses,

a memory--whose memory? His? How does he have memories?--of red eyes staring into his soul, a soft kiss pressed against his forehead and he blinks.

Enzenhym, are you well?

He doesn't know. But the ache within him--the loneliness--intensifies. He is not well. He is incomplete.

~~~

He pieces himself back together just in time for night to fall. If the days are loud and endless, the nights are silent and cold. Empty. Void of anything. He longs for sleep, but it rarely comes. He is exhausted and spent and ready to collapse, but the nights drag out, cold and shivering and alone.

Until, just as the sun is set to rise, his breath evens out, his heartbeat slows, and his mind succumbs to rest. Just a few minutes. Just a few moments to recoup his breath. But it is enough.

Enough to feed his soul. To remove the taint of darkness that threatens his existence. To remind him of why he is here. Of who brought him here.

Morgana.

~~~

You are special Enzenhym. We have such high hopes of you. You must listen to us. You must obey.

They train him. Teach him. Show him how to behave. What to say. What to do. They tell him what to want and he listens
At first.

But time is a fickle beast, and soon, it catches up to him and he begins to realise the truth.

He is not free here. He was never free. He had merely traded one prison for another.

~~~

Time is the enemy. He loses sense of it. Of the days and nights. Of the past and the present. Of reality and dreams.

She is there, in his dreams.

He knows she isn't real. Just a figment of his mind. Still he clings to her. Of all that he experiences in this hellscape, she is the thing that keeps him sane. Even as the darkness claws at him, even as the light sears him. Burns him through. Remakes him again and again and again.

Time is an endless loop, and his new life begins before he realises the old one has ended.

Still, she remains the only thing he is sure of.

~~~

She is a demon. She is a witch. She is very dangerous. Do you understand? You must be very careful. Do not underestimate her. You alone can become her undoing.

Her name is Morgana.

~~~

They remade him. Erased him. Erased everything he had ever been. Made him new. Made him whole. Made him *more*.

He knew better, though. Something was missing. He had felt it, deep within, even before he had seen her. She had only made him realise just how much he had wanted to find her. Just how much he had needed to.

They hadn't realised then, when they'd sent him into Limbo to try his hand at unravelling the Witch Queen. They hadn't made the connections.

But he had.

The minute he stepped into that room and saw her, all those carefully laid plans, all the preparation and the information—who she was, what she was, how dangerous she was—it all slipped away.

Something ignited within him and the emptiness, the aching loneliness that they had tried to fill with light and lies and promises of glory and power, it all vanished.

Here, here was something that he wanted.

'I love you,' he said. 'Until the stars are dust. Until every star burns into

oblivion. I love you.'

'I...' she stared at him with impossibly red eyes, and the moment between her words seemed to stretch into an eternity. Hope filled him. Hope that he had found the one thing he had longed for his entire life. All three of them, in Heaven and Hell and Earth. All of them so different, yet exactly the same. He had longed for her, and there she was, finally before him again.

Yet time remained the enemy.

'I'm sorry,' she says, and her voice is soft and despairing, her eyes bright with tears as she shattered every hope his heart held. 'I'm sorry I... I can't.'

And just like that, his world tumbled into pieces once more.

## *Part 5: Lost*

Morgana's head pounded with the constant noise of battle. Swords and axes and arrows clattered against shield or tore through flesh and still the worst of it all was the sheer volume of noise. She missed the quiet. The midnights spent in solitude and the dusky silence of a morning just risen, days spent on crossroads, with nary a soul in sight. Sometimes, she even missed chess.

She grit her teeth, forcing away the memories, steeling her resolve and pushing her way through the throng of bodies, some demonic, and some angelic. Chess. Ha! Years wasted to keep the peace, and here they were, right back where they started, each side trying to destroy the other on the eternal battlefield.

Nothing ever changed.

And yet...

An arrow grazed a flock of angels in the grey sky above her. She heard the whistle, felt the call of the weapon she had helped create and glanced up just in time to see the flock part, dodging out of the way. Projectiles were nothing to angels after all, who moved with agile grace in the sky. Like winged, nightmarish warriors from above.

As they scattered, though, one wayward angel dipped below the rest. His formation was sloppy, his wings not quite fast enough to escape.

A momentary silence fell around her as all the demons below froze, drawn by the spray of something golden splattering out from where the arrow struck. Wings collapsed, and the angel went down in a flurry of feathers and golden blood.

The silence, the shock, the surprise, reigned for but a second before the

jeers and shouts of victory erupted around her.

Morgana couldn't breathe. She stared at the fallen angel struggling back to his feet. An angel that was too new. Too familiar.

No. No. Why would he be there? Why would they bring him there? There was only one reason that arrows aim had struck true. One reason the angel didn't move in sync with the others. His movements and style as unrefined as a fresh new warrior.

He'd never been in battle before.

How could he? When he was a fresh baby angel. The only new angel created in over a thousand years.

In a flash, demons surged forward, each as eager to be the first to capture the fallen angel as the next and Morgana, almost overwhelmed by the sudden clamour, lashed out.

Oh she might have been demoted, but there was more than reason she had been queen. Black tendrils of magic seeped through the crowd, lashing out at those that dared to step into her bath as she made her way forward.

Slowly, they noticed her and though contempt warred with eagerness across most their faces, they quelled in her presence, shrinking away from her as she allowed her magic to pour forth, unrestrained.

The air thickened and even the angels paused in their approach, wary of her. She was the demon who could withstand the light of angels, the Queen of the Crossroads, the Witch Demon.

It gave her a moment to breath. To take stock and compose her thoughts and make a plan. She wanted to laugh. Felt it bubble up within her, mirthless and somewhat hysterical.

How had it all gone so wrong?

'Morgana,' said a cruel, almost lilting voice as she stepped past the edge of the crowd. 'I caught you a little beast. Care to do the honours?'

She flicked her gaze sideways, keeping her expression cool and disinterested.

Azareth, tall and inhuman—like most demons borne of Lilith—tilted his horned head toward her, black eyes gleaming with the pleasure of battle. He held out the long scythe they'd spent centuries forging for this precise moment.

The moment they would kill an angel.

*Thump, thump... Thump, thump.*



She took the blade, ignoring the flicker of disappointment and burning hatred in Azareth's gaze. For the briefest moment he held fast to the handle, not quite willing to relinquish his hold on it. She didn't blame him. A task such as this was a task to be envied. To kill an angel? What greater achievement could there be?

For that achievement to be fulfilled by a demon that had once been a human?

*Thump thump, thump thump.*

Well... no wonder they hated her.

She gave the blade a brief twirl. In part to test the weight of it in her hands, but also to turn back the crowd. The scythe was long and dangerous, sending the demons scattering back.

Her magic still seeped across the ground, a reminder of her power, of the *reason* she had been chosen to become a demon. The reason she had risen through the ranks. The reason she had been favoured by *Him*.

But that was before things had changed. Before *she* had changed. And now, she wasn't sure her reputation would be enough to hold them back.

*Thump thump thump thump.*

The blade dipped down toward the ground. She turned her head, staring at the fallen angel, still clumsily trying to get to his feet. In a moment, the other angels would join him. They would try their luck against her dark magic to try and rescue him. To save him. How could they not? He—like her—was unique. They couldn't risk losing him.

But then, neither could she.

The blade hit the ground. It scraped through the mixture of mud and blood (blood black and golden, demon and angelic) and the sound echoed across the mud-strewn battlefield, sending shivers of discomfort up her spine as she stalked toward the fresh spattering of blood on this broken battlefield between worlds. The theatrics of it almost made her smile.

Until she stopped before the fallen angel.

'Morgana,' he gasped, green eyes flickering up to her.

'Don't speak,' she said.

She wanted to reach out to him. To touch him. To tell him he would heal, that his wounds would recover. He still had time. Angels weren't so fragile as to let a simple arrow bring them down. Yet she held herself still. Her touch would be of little comfort to him now.

The crowd behind her grew impatient.

'Morgana?' asked Azareth in a deceptively mild voice. 'Enjoying the view, are you?'

She flexed her magic and turned, raising the blade from the ground to point at the scurrying creatures creeping after her. Magic and blood, multicoloured and poisonous, dripped from the blade.

She raised her chin. 'Back off.'

Stunned silence.

'Morgana,' Azareth's tone was curious, his gaze narrowed. 'What're you doing?'

*Thumpthumpthump.*

She lifted her chin, hardening her traitorous heart into silence as she glowered back at the crowd of demons with all the powers she commanded.

How had she let it go so wrong?

'Morgana?' the voice at her back was pained and yet hopeful, and her jaw clenched.

Why hadn't she gone with him before?

She ignored him and glowered back at the demons around her. They were beneath her. Weak and snivelling, not content with their lowly positions but too cowed to do anything about it. Not like her. No, she had kicked and clawed her way up the ranks. She had *earned* her place. Earned the right to take what she wanted.

Well. Now she knew what it was that she wanted to take.

She mustered her resolve and made her voice firm and commanding. Queenlike, some might say.

'Not this one.'

'Excuse me?'

'This one is the human,' she said, as if talking to someone too stupid to understand. 'The one they *chose*. The one they *changed*. The one they *stole* from us. If we kill him, we'll never know why. We'll never *how*. He's valuable alive.'

Azareth's black eyes shifted between her and Morgan, studying them. Studying her. Her skin crawled. She felt the old wounds of light itch as he looked her over and she wondered if he could sense her weaknesses. She raised an eyebrow, looking down her nose at him as if disgusted by his lack of comprehension and foresight. Which, she was actually.

'She...has a point. The King may want...'

'Shut up,' Azareth said, his tone lazy and yet brooking no disobedience.

Behind her, one of the angels from above finally grew a spine and dropped to the ground. She heard the thud as the slight and yet heavy angel hit the mud. Heard the squelch as they knelt. She made sure to keep her magic at bay. Present, but waiting. Showing them that she was aware that they were there, but giving them leave to take Morgan.

'I'm fine,' Morgan gasped. 'I...Morgana?'

Azareth's expression shifted, and Morgana squashed down on the reflex to wince. What in Heaven was taking them so long? Couldn't he just shut up and go?

Azareth's shoved both his hands into his pockets. Unlike the lower level demons, he had no need for armour, his power shielded him like a cloak. 'I'm at a loss,' he said, shrugging his shoulders and staring at her with an incomprehensible expression. 'In 700 years I don't think I've ever seen an expression quite like the one on your face right now. Are you *afraid*, Morgana?'

'Come,' whispered the angel-rescuer at her back. 'Gabriel has called a retreat.'

'Wait,' Morgan coughed, and Morgana heard the ache in his voice. Heard the spittle of golden blood that welled up from some deeper wound. 'What...what're you doing? Morgana?'

'Get out of here,' she hissed, half turning her head but not taking her eyes off Azareth.

'But...'

'Now!'

'It's a pity,' said Azareth. 'We had such high hopes of you.'

She prepared for him to fling himself into the fray. To summon another weapon and attack. She was ready. She was strong. She *knew* she could take him.

Unfortunately for her, so did he.

'Sabriel!' he called.

In the split second it took for Morgana to realise what was happening, for the whistle of a dagger flying through the air to reach her ears, terror engulfed her. Terror unlike anything else she had experienced. Not since becoming a demon. Not since 700 hundred years ago, when she had been nothing but a mere mortal human. A little witch. A lonely girl.

For a split second she froze. The darkness warred with the scars of light.

If she stayed where she was, if she let Sabriel's dagger pass, then she'd be saved. After all, so far she hadn't done anything that couldn't be explained by a will to serve *Him*. This angel was valuable, of that she had no doubt. She could let the dagger pass, let it strike him, go back to making crossroad deals and be free. Free of angels and their burning presence. Free to do whatever she wanted, to *be* whoever she wanted to be. Free, and alone.

She spun, dropping the scythe and diving for the two angels behind her. For her angel. For the boy whose soul she had taken. Morgana's gaze met Morgana's. Moss green eyes widened in realisation and horror.

'No.'

The impact hit her harder than the pain. She staggered, her feet slipping in the mud.

'No! No! Let me go! Morgana! Let—Morgana!'

'Morgan! Stop, we have to go!'

Cold seeped into Morgana. It touched her lips first. Where her soul was brightest. *Cleanest*. Pure. Pure from kissing angels. From kissing *him*.

It seeped along the old scars along her soul. Wounds of light that still ached in the presence of angels. In the presence of Morgan. First cold. Then numb. She was surprised by how much of her senses were dissipating into nothingness and she knew, as it crept first along every patch of purity that had worked its way through her soul, that they'd really done it. They had made a weapon that could kill angels.

She gasped, her knees buckling, the scythe slipping from her hands.

Arms wrapped around her, capturing her before she fell. She felt his own injury, felt the warm blood seeping into his clothes and onto her. He slipped and the two of them crashed into the ground, their fall broken only by the wrecked ruin of Morgan's wings.

'Morgana, Morgana. Please, no, God. No, you're okay. You're okay. Help her! Stop standing there and help her!'

'That's not possible.'

Morgana recognised the voice, but it took her mind a moment too long to place it. Azareth. Standing over them with that infuriatingly curious expression.

'What do you mean? You're demons. That's what you do isn't it? You bring people back! You fix them!'

'For a price.'

The numbness receded just enough for her to feel the panic return. 'Don't...' she gasped.

'Fine!' Morgan said his voice harsh and choked and desperate, his arms, lean and strong and warm, tightening around her. 'I'll pay your stupid price. Just fix her. *Please.*'

Objections rose from the other angels. There were more of them now and Morgana could feel the hatred in the air thickening, like lightning before a storm. The battle wasn't over yet.

'Morgan,' her voice was faint. 'You have to go... before... before they start fighting again.'

He didn't listen. He was staring up. At Azareth.

Her vision blurred. 'Morgan.' She couldn't see his face, but she knew the expression that would be there. Could hear the anguish in his voice as he spoke.

'I'll give you my soul,' he said, sobs underlying the careless tone of the words he choked out. 'That's what you want, right? Take it, just...just take it...just...save her...please...'

'He means it,' said someone in the distance, surprised by the sudden realisation.

'Of course he does,' said Azareth. 'Look at him. He's in love with her.'

'Morgan,' she shifted, blinking hard and trying to refocus on his face. To see those eyes, green and passionate and *warm*. 'Please....don't. You...'

He looked back down at her, blinking furiously, tears splashing down into the bloody mud. Red and gold swirling together in splattering patterns. 'I'll find you. I promise. I'll find you. I'll always find you.'

'I'll be waiting...'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible either,' said Azareth, and Morgana cursed him, hating him for not letting Morgan have this final gift of hers. 'That dagger was meant for one of you. It is a weapon we've been working on for centuries. A weapon to kill angels. She will perish here. Her body will turn to vapour and her soul will be trapped in the ether. Trapped in a void. A world apart from worlds.'

Devastation. Terror. 'Wh...what?' A tightening of hands around her arms. Clawing, clinging.

'She will no longer exist in this world. Ever. There will be no resurrection. No reincarnation. She is bound for another place. A lonely existence in a barren place not fit for life. As much I as would delight in

taking your soul, this is deal I cannot grant.'

Water dripped onto Morgana's face, and for a moment—one delirious moment—she thought it was raining.

His head was bowed, leaned over her, staring at her with incomprehensible denial. Tears splashed down onto her face.

He was crying for her. She wanted to laugh. Who'd have thought an angel would cry for her? A girl who became a witch who became a demon. She'd been making mistakes her entire life, but finally it seemed that she'd done something right.

For how else would someone as pure and beautiful as Morgan shed tears for her?

'Morgan...' she whispered. 'Morgan, I...I love you.'

His shoulders shook. 'I love you.'

'Until every sun burns out into oblivion...Right?'

'Yes,' he sobbed. 'Until oblivion.'

The numbness closed in and the aches, the slow burn that rattled through every sliver and crack in the darkness of her soul, burned out. She sighed. Something that might have resembled contentedness eased into her in place of the pain.

Here, dying in the arms of an angel, she finally felt...happy.

## *Part 6: Found*

The morning was dusky. The faint smell of freshly turned earth wafted in wisps on the morning mist. All was quiet. The sounds of morning muffled by the silence of the rising sun.

Except... the sounds of morning were not muffled, but *missing*.

Where was the bird song? Where was the whisper of wind through the tress? *Where were the trees?*

There was nothing. Nothing around him except the desolate, rocky landscape stretching endlessly into the grey horizon. In every direction there was nothing. No clouds, no trees, no mountains.

He turned in a circle, despair trying to bring down, making his knees weak as tears welled in his gaze. Was it for nothing? Had he been wrong? Had he risked everything to end up alone after all. in a world apart from all other worlds. A desolate lonely prison for the only angel to ever have died. The only angel to have been killed. A prison meant for him and him alone.

He stared up at the grey sky and wanted to scream.

Except, he had never been one to accept defeat.

There was nothing for it. He would search this planet. He would know every inch of it's surface before he ever succumbed to miserable defeat.

He scrubbed his hands over his face, slapped his cheeks and straightened his shoulders. He cast his gaze, bright and green in a landscape of grey, and searched the horizon, trying to find anything to make one direction more appealing than the other.

He paused, frowning into the distance. It was dark smudge on the horizon, no more than his fingernail. He took a steady breath, his heart

fluttering in his chest. Okay. A smudge was better than nothing.

With hope wedged in his throat, he took a deep breath of determination and—with nothing else to call his attention—he set his gaze upon the distant mountain and began to walk.

~~~

The climb was steeper than it looked from the bottom. He had walked for hours with no change. No shifting sun, no darkening or lightening of the sky. The higher he climbed, the more he expected to see a peak of orange leaking over the horizon and yet none came. No bright orange glow to light up the greyness of the world. Just the continual grey half-light of dawn without the rising sun to follow.

He panted, pausing every now and again to fill his lungs with surprisingly crisp air before continuing up the endless slope.

Rocks slipped and tumbled around him. It was a treacherous climb and he fell twice. His palms stung, the stones tearing through his skin, leaving his hands splotchy and red.

Still, he didn't stop. The higher he went, the closer he got, the more he felt the need to accomplish his goal. To do *something* other than just exist in the grey world.

Near the top something changed. He paused, his face dusted in grit and sweat, and tried to even out his laboured breathing, trying to figure out what was different in his cold, empty world.

Wind. For the first time since he'd died he could feel the wind.

A cool, soft breeze ghosted across his face and his green eyes closed in relief. He tilted his face toward the sky, relishing in the sweetness the wind carried across his skin.

He breathed in, tasting all the scents the wind brought with it to tantalise him. The smell of freshly turned earth.

His eyes flew open, wide and green, like moss covered stones. A sense of urgency rushed through him and he was running. Scrambling up the rocky hillside. Stones tumbled. A small avalanche begun below him. He slipped and fell and crawled. Staggered to his feet again.

The crest of the hilltop vanished before him and he stumbled over the sudden ditch, tumbling to his knees.

Panting, he tried to catch his breath.

Movement caught his eye, and he lifted his head.

Colour. Greens and blues and the clearest of water trickling through a rocky riverbed and on its edge, kneeling by the water and staring at him with startled amber eyes, was a girl.

She stood, surging to her feet and then freezing in place, still staring at him with those wide, impossibly fire-like eyes.

Something uncurled within him. He'd almost given in. Almost allowed the doubt and despair to catch hold of his heart. Yet here he was, in a lonely world constructed just for him, and him alone, and still she stood before him. Just like he knew she would.

'Morgan,' his name was a ghost of a whisper on her lips.

Pushing himself to his feet, he stood straight, a faint smile curling at the corners of his lips. A dimple formed in one cheek as the purest of joy chased away all the pain and aches in his body.

'I told you I'd find you,' he said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Louisa Duval works in secondary education and is a podcaster as well as a former journalist, freelance writer, and marketing professional. Louisa lives between the city and thirty-five acres of serenity in the Granite Belt region of Queensland, with her family and a fat cattle dog-Keplie cross. She loves to drink local wine and support the local rural fire brigade, some of whom inspired her to start writing romance.

Louisa is one of the 2021 Sweet Treats short story anthology finalists with Romance Writers of Australia, and in 2020, Louisa made the top ten for the Emerald Award for emerging authors.

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Want to read more?

Get Louisa's free novella about a female firefighter, a Canadian hockey player and a koala called Betty, *Memories of Ash* by subscribing to her newsletter.

Louisa's first novel, *Whisky and Sunshine*, is available on Amazon, featuring an Aussie accountant and a grumpy CEO of a Scottish distillery.

Check out Louisa's winning short story in 'Sweet Treats – Chocolate 2021 Romance Writers of Australia Short Story Anthology' and discover fourteen other authors.

Scan below to get more of Louisa's words in your TBR pile!



LOVE AND GHOSTS

*PREVIOUSLY published with Springfield Writers Group for their 'Tribute'
anthology, 2021 as 'Love and Stolen Kisses'*

The month leading up to Halloween had been nuts. My phone hadn't stopped ringing and now was no exception.

"Matty," my business partner panted as I answered. "There's a dead cat in the pub's cellar!"

"Well, hello Charlie. I'm well, my mum is doing great, and my brother moved back home yesterday."

The biggest day of the year for ghost stories was today: Halloween.

On top of our filming schedule, Mum had broken her ankle almost four weeks ago while out feeding the cows. Stepped in a rabbit hole and broke the joint in two places. I'd dropped everything to head to our family's chocolate shop and farm on the edge of the national park just outside of Ballydoon.

Somehow, in the craziness of running Mum's shop while helping her around the house, each week I travelled three hours down the highway to Queensland University. I taught fifteen hours of tutorials over two days and sat in on two lectures while I couch-surfed overnight at Charlie's flat to then drive back home after the last tutorial and make batches of white chocolate spider web truffles late into the night for the Halloween demand.

The dark circles under my eyes made me look ghoulish. At least I looked on brand with my spooky YouTube channel.

"Did you get me your mum's pyramid truffles?" Charlie asked with a reverent whisper. "And jaffa balls?"

"Yes, I did. Because I'm thoughtful like that."

"Oooss! So, your mum's good, bro is good. Focus, Matty: dead cat. It's

going to be all over the news tonight. The archaeologist looking after the dig is ... crap."

"Who's crap?"

"It's Jess." The phone went silent.

My heartrate ramped up. Jessica Knight; historian, almost-archaeologist, lecturer and technically my boss. Jessica Knight, the woman who'd slept with me and then ran.

My mind instantly went back a month ago to the Faculty Ball, before broken ankles, chocolate molds and broken hearts. Sneaking into a hotel storage room with Jess, drinking champagne and having the best sex of my life.

I swallowed hard. "She's here? In Ballydoon?"

"Yeah, the faculty email says she arrived yesterday to inspect a very significant historical find in The Town and Country Pub. Now media want a piece of the dead puss. Where are you? The shop?"

I exhaled as I turned to face the pub, clutching the strap of my backpack.

"I'm in the heart of the thriving metropolis of Ballydoon. You caught me on my way to the cemetery to get some stills and do a teaser for tonight."

"Look, I know you don't want to—"

"I'll do it," I said, my voice rough. "I've been tutoring for Jess since the ball and it's been fine. I'm fine. Completely fine."

Too many fines.

"Get your butt to the pub now." Paper rustled and Charlie's office chair squeaked. "Media rang asking for an interview with The Spectre Inspector about the Ballydoon Bandit and the dead cat, and I said yes. Matty, this cat will be great for our views. We'll finally get a sponsor for our channel."

"Got to be a better name than Dead Cat." I plodded towards the pub. "Why is Jess digging up a dead cat in my pub?"

"I'm not talking about some moggy who snuck in under the flagstones back in eighteen hundred and whatever. This cat was deliberately killed and placed with coins and a small bottle to ward off witchcraft."

I stopped.

The metallic grind of Charlie's ancient office chair was the only sound on the phone.

"Witchcraft? Is this like the East Anglian tradition of interring a cat

when laying the foundation of a building?"

"Yep! Bottle might be a witch bottle, too. And you just don't find this sort of thing often in Queensland, or in Australia for that matter. And the cellar has been a tomb for one hundred and seventy years for spiders, rats and one moggy. Think cobwebs, dust everywhere. Ghost central. And then there's the stories about the bushranger who died in the pub fire."

Witch bottle. This find will be huge for Jess.

"Everyone here knows about the Ballydoon Bandit. We even did a unit on them in primary school. What's a bushranger got to do with the cat?"

"Absolutely nothing. It's perfect for a video as the dead cat still in the floor where they laid it to rest before building the pub. Are you arguing this is somehow not as good as going to yet another cemetery on Halloween?"

"I'm not, I swear." I sighed again, picking up my pace. "You're right. This conversation is above my paygrade. I'm on my way."

"Oh shit, there's one more thing."

I groaned, pulling up outside the pub's entrance. "What is it?"

Charlie swore.

"Jan-Andrew just posted on Facebook and Instagram that he's in Ballydoon for an amazing ghost story, complete with a selfie in front of the pub."

I swore and spun around, searching the footpath and the street for any sign of our ghost hunting copycat who was poaching our audience.

"I'm right in front of the pub. I can't see him."

"What if he's trying to out-scoop us?" Charlie wailed. "He might already be inside."

I hung up. I had to find Jess and the mummified moggy first.

Mummified Moggy ... not bad.

And now, Jan-Andrew, the Ghost Host. Our competitor, self-proclaimed fashionista, PhD qualified pompous git.

Jan-Andrew was always reminding me he'd researched the Ballydoon Bandit as his PhD topic. Of all of the bushrangers in all of the pubs in Australia, he picked my hometown. He also reminded me I had a Doctorate to his PhD, knowing full well I exited my PhD studies due to no scholarship and needing to pay my bills and eat every day.

But my YouTube channel, The Spectre Inspector, had steadily grown since launching in my second year of my undergraduate degree. In seven

years since I'd launched, ads on our channel brought in enough money that I could afford to pay Charlie part-time to help me continue to build our audience and making the videos I'd loved to tell.

And right now, I'd rather meet the ghost of the Ballydoon Bandit than let Jan-Andrew Henderson take this story from me.

Actually that would make great content to meet the bushranger's ghost.

I pushed through the front door of the pub with a sigh.

Not one local was propped up at the bar with a schooner of beer. Unusual for 3.16 pm on a Sunday.

I stopped. The bar was not empty. A cat watched me from the counter.

Its markings were distinctive: it was black, save for a patch of white hair on its chest and white on its cheeks and nose, the latter the shape of a cock and balls.

My shoulders shook, barely able to contain my laughter.

The cat literally had a dick on its face.

It stared at me, unblinking and unfazed.

"Can I help you?"

I jumped, spinning around to face the far side of the public bar to find John Carpenter, pub owner, eyeing me.

"Oh, I'm here for ... Jessica Knight." My voice squeaked like a teenager, as if I was asking the father of my crush if I could speak to his daughter. *Bloody hell.* "I mean, a media conference about a dead cat in the cellar."

John strode across the room and shook my hand.

"Matty Cavanagh," he said. "Heard you're a ghostbuster."

"No, no." I laughed. "I tell ghost stories on our channel, The Spectre Inspector. No ectoplasm or Sigourney Weaver, I'm afraid."

John just frowned.

I cleared my throat. "Strictly speaking I'm a historian and tutor at the university. We don't get our hands dirty like archaeologists."

John was not amused, much like his cat friend, Dickface McWhiskers.

"How's Glenys doing? I haven't seen your mother in a bit."

"Yeah, um, Mum's doing well."

"Heard Josh has moved back."

Josh had bought the family farm and chocolate shop off Mum, allowing her to finally retire.

"Ah, yeah. I spent yesterday unloading boxes from the removal trucks to help him move in. Looking forward to him taking over chocolate

making. My skills are average at best in the kitchen.”

“You did good, dropping everything to help your mother,” he said.

I sniffed, unable to respond to his observation for the sudden pulse of emotion causing my throat to seize up.

John waved for me to get behind the bar. “Good to have Josh home, too. So, you’re involved with young Jess?”

“I wouldn’t say involved, exactly.” I stumbled over my feet. “It was a one-time thing and she ghosted me right after—”

John stopped and stared again, unblinking. Just like McWhiskers. Did the cat take after him or was John mimicking the cat?

“I meant,” he emphasised his words. “Are you colleagues with Miss Knight? She said she was with the university, too.”

“Oh! Yes, I’m her tutor for two of her subjects at university.”

My cheeks burned. Just what I needed before I was about to do a piece to camera: a bright red face and confessing my botched attempts at romance with John Carpenter.

“I’m here to record videos about ghost stories and any reported paranormal activity for Halloween. This dig is of interest to our channel as the mummified cat suggests protection against witchcraft.”

“The young lady didn’t mention witchcraft,” John’s eyebrows shot up. “Or that the cat was mummified.”

“Not every day a mummified cat turns up in your cellar.”

“Didn’t even know I had a cellar until two days ago. You remember the Turner kids from school?”

Looking after Mum for the past three weeks before Josh moved back home meant I hadn’t got out much to see the locals but I remembered all of the Turner siblings.

“Yeah, course I do. Josh was in the same grade as Stacey Turner. Ran into her at the general store last week.”

“Well, Stacey’s an interior designer these days. Hired her to redecorate the public bar. Found a manhole-type trapdoor when we ripped up the lino. Been pandemonium ever since.”

John paused behind the bar. I looked around for the black and white moggy. Nothing. Not even a hair on the bar where it had been sitting.

“Do you have any reported sightings of cats?”

“What?” John asked, as he bent over the square hole in the floor.

“Like, sightings of cats in the pub, like apparitions or even howling?”

"Nothing ghostly about a cat in heat and there's always one of those around from time to time." He shrugged. "Looks like Jess is out of the cellar. Probably dealing with the press."

John straightened. "You with the other fella who has an internet show?"

"Tall guy, well dressed, wears sunglasses inside?"

"That's him."

"Absolutely not."

"Good." Mr Carpenter held my gaze for several seconds, and then added, "he's a wanker."

I spluttered a laugh, but John continued in a low voice. "Speaking of wankers, journos are all in the dining room. Local TV news and ABC radio, too. Bit of a big deal, this dead cat."

I followed him to the hallway and into the dining room, and immediately saw Jess in her dig clothes; work pants, steel-capped boots, a flannel shirt and beanie with a pom-pom on top. For the Faculty Ball, she'd worn a stunning red dress that hugged her every curve, with her long brown hair gathered in waves, cascading down her back.

Jess was just as stunning in dusty work pants and flannel as evening wear.

"Should've known you'd turn up," a masculine voice said to my right.

I glared at Jan-Andrew, still wearing his sunglasses inside, and a pork pie hat.

"What are you doing in my hood for Halloween?"

"Now, now," Jan-Andrew tutted. "I'm sure we can all share a bushranger. I also volunteered to help Jess with the press."

I bristled. "Jess has done heaps of interviews before. She's a pro."

"I'm paying tribute to her." My archnemesi in a pork-pie hat shrugged. "She's done well here at this dig site."

His condescension made me curl my hands into fists.

I exhaled on the count of three and loosened my fingers as a journalist with a dazzling white smile caught my eye and grinned.

"The Spectre Inspector! Great show five weeks ago with the haunted house in Brisbane. Widows throwing themselves off the roof in grief, my god!" He extended his hand to me. "Terry Schultz, local news."

I shook his hand as Terry called out, "Jess, darling! Let's get you set up here with the ghost hunters—"

"Paranormal history specialist," I muttered as Terry ushered Jess over

to us.

She looked up and met my eyes. I saw a flash of hunger, then hurt, then she shuttered her features into a neutral expression. Jess Knight: Ice Queen.

She'd looked at me like I'd hurt her. How was that even possible? I was the dumpee, she was the dumper. She was the one who'd left me high and dry after we'd had the hottest sex of our lives. Or at least, it was for me.

I swallowed down the bile rising up my throat, and steeled myself and faced to the camera, flashing my best charming grin. Jess Knight, and Jan-Andrew, were not ruining this for me, Charlie, or our audience.

"Live cross in three minutes," one of the crew called out. Terry preened himself in a hand mirror while Jan-Andrew moved away talking on his phone.

Jess shifted on her feet, adjusting a small earthenware bottle in her gloved hands.

"Jess," I said in a low voice.

"Matt." She cleared her throat. "Mr Cavanagh."

"Congratulations on the dig. If this bottle is indeed a witch bottle, you've identified a momentous find. I mean it, well done."

"Thank you." She glanced sharply my way, shocked by my compliment, and then held up the bottle. Even over the crew's chatter, I could hear something rattle inside.

"We haven't opened it yet. Terry wants to do a live opening of the bottle tonight. If there are pins or nails, that would be amazing."

"Pins to catch a witch?"

"Yes, but it could also be nothing but dust and desiccated cork broken off from the stopper."

A waitress appeared with glasses of water on a tray, with her hip cocked to the side and ample cleavage on show.

"Want some water before your interviews?" She narrowed her eyes my way as I took a glass, and then smiled. "Oh my god, Matty Cavanagh. I remember you from high school."

I snapped my fingers in recognition and smiled. "Hey, Ash Wilde! Great to see you again."

"Another waitress?" Jess grumbled, shooting daggers my way. "Can't help yourself, can you?"

I lowered my glass, confused. But Ash spoke before I could question

Jess on what she meant.

"Excuse me. I'm the cook, thank you very much, and for the record, I'm not interested." Ash looked at me. "No offence. I'm very happily taken."

Jess blushed, mumbling an apology.

"It's fine." Ash shrugged. "But when are we getting the bar back? Your big hole is getting in the way of serving drinks in the bar."

Jess snorted, her cheeks turning more red. I smothered a cough in surprise at Ash's innocent enquiry about Jess's 'big hole'. Typical Ash. Pretty sure she had famously said 'orgasm' instead of 'organism' for a junior science presentation back in high school.

"Oh my god, Terry Schultz, from the news. 'Cuse me." Ash hurried over to Terry, offering him the last glass of water.

"Thirty seconds!" the cameraman trilled, adjusting his focus on us.

Jan-Andrew ended his call and took his place beside Jess with a sleazy smile.

"And three ... two ..." Terry held up a finger for one, and then pointed at us. "Terry Schultz for the local news coming to you live from Ballydoon at The Town and Country pub where a ghoulish discovery has been made on Halloween."

I glanced to my left. John leant against a wine barrel with a tea towel over his shoulder, looking thoroughly bored.

"John, tell us about your discovery," Terry asked, breathless.

"Yeah, I really wanted to get the new lino down behind the bar. We're doing a reno and it's a real nuisance having a hole in your floor when you're serving customers. Dropped my sander down the trapdoor and it smacked the old cellar floor so hard it smashed the old wooden floorboards and there it was, a dead cat."

Terry swung his attention on us.

"I'm also joined tonight by two ghosthunters. Gentlemen, what makes this discovery so significant?"

A small voice in my mind wondered why the journo was asking us when it was Jess's discovery, but I leapt in, keen to get time on air. *Get that sponsor.*

"Thanks, Terry. I'm Matt from The Spectre Inspector channel." I flashed a grin to the camera. "The significance of this find is—"

"What my colleague is trying to say, Terry," Jan-Andrew interrupted, "it's witchcraft. Spooky, don't you think, Terry, for Halloween?"

Terry made a 'wooooo' sound and they chuckled. Jess and I stayed stony silent.

"It would be spooky if it had been found on Halloween," I said. Behind me, John snorted. "The best expert about this find is Jessica Knight."

I waved to Jess and moved back slightly, giving her more of the camera.

"The significance of the find," Jess acknowledged me with a brief nod and turned to the camera, "is that the mummified cat was placed in the cellar to repel witchcraft rather than a sign of it."

"Mummified?" Terry shrieked with horror.

"Yes, wrapped in cloth and interred, that is buried, with other items thought to protect the building and its owners from witchcraft and bad spirits. It's a good kitty."

"However, the cat didn't repel the Ballydoon Bandit," Jan-Andrew added, leaning forward.

Terry aimed his microphone to Jan-Andrew. "You wrote a paper on the famous ghost of Ballydoon—a bushranger known as Freddie Blunder."

"Indeed, while I'm well known as Ghost Host on my YouTube channel, I'm also an adjunct lecturer at the Queensland University where my PhD focussed on the myth and lore of the Ballydoon Bandit, AKA Freddie Blunder."

I had to salvage this interview for our channel. Jan-Andrew had scored points for his PhD. But I also didn't want to take the limelight from Jess. This was her find.

Terry flung his microphone to John. "Many have said they've heard the ghost of the Ballydoon Bandit while staying in the pub."

"A few, I guess."

I smiled. Mr Carpenter couldn't care less about this if he tried. In fact, I don't think I'd ever seen him get worked up in the ten years I'd been drinking at this pub.

"As a local growing up here," I flashed Terry my best smile, "we heard many tall tales about the ghost, but it seemed the only witnesses were always three sheets to the wind, Terry."

Terry laughed.

"I'll be here in Ballydoon all night at the local cemetery streaming a feed and discussing local ghost stories, and who knows what we may uncover on All Souls Night."

"I'll be with Dr Knight in the cellar tonight with the mummified cat to

see if we are visited by any ghosts or ghouls this evening," Jan-Andrew purred into Terry's microphone. "You can watch my live feed with the archaeologist on Ghost Host."

I ground my teeth. Jess moved ever so slightly away from Jan-Andrew.

"Well, folks. Looks like you need to tune in to Ghost Host tonight to see if the spirits come out to play on Halloween in Ballydoon! But now, Dr Knight is going to open one of the finds for us—a small bottle placed with the cat in the cellar."

"This small bottle could be a major find here in Australia," Jess said. "The stopper is intact, and the bottle has no cracks but if this is what I think it is, it's a witch bottle."

"I beg your pardon." Terry blanched. "Did you just say *witch bottle*?"

"Yes, it's folklore magic to ward off witches and evil spirits as long as the bottle stays intact. What I'd really like to find is rust as evidence of pins or nails. People believed the spirit would impale themselves on the pin and be trapped. Or, sometimes a potion was made with someone's urine, nail clippings and wine or port and mixed together. Mostly likely we will find dirt, sand, small stones or the dusty remains of herbs."

"A witch's potion." Terry shuddered as Jess walked with him to a table set up with plastic containers, a collection tray, and a scalpel. The camera zoomed in as she gently scrapped out the old, dried cork stopper.

I wasn't disturbed about witches; it was the letch beside me that had me shuddering.

"You're staying in the cellar all night with Jess?" I murmured to Jan-Andrew.

"Oh yes." His sleazy smile spread across his face. "Who knows what might happen in the dark of night all alone with the lovely historian?"

"And we may have just filmed the first witch bottle found in Australia. Do let us know the lab analysis of the contents, Jess." Terry smiled for two more seconds. "And cut!" he yelled.

Jan-Andrew stepped away. "You lost your chance at the Faculty Ball, if I remember rightly."

My face flushed red with anger. *How did this pork-pie-hat-wearing-idiot know about what happened between Jess and I?*

He walked off, laughing.

That's it. Time to confront Jess.

"What was that all about?" I spat. "Midnight in the cellar with Jan-

Andrew." I mocked in a falsetto voice. "You said and I quote 'I detest the man'. You don't even respect him as a historian!"

Jess raised an eyebrow. "Are you jealous?"

Jealously was just the tip of the iceberg. I was furious, hurting and sparring for a fight.

"Yes."

She blinked several times, her mouth parting, surprised I'd admit my feelings so readily.

"Just tell me this," I snarled. "Why didn't you return my calls? Or my texts?"

"I'm not having this conversation in public." She looked to her left, then right. No one was looking our way. "Follow me for some privacy."

She packed up the witch bottle and its contents in a plastic container and stomped off to the public bar.

I shouldn't follow her. I should just say we should have it out in the bar right now.

But my feet had different ideas to my head and I trotted after her, like the lovesick fool I was.

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*The Faculty Ball, one month ago*

"History isn't a commodity," Jess snapped.

"Everything is a commodity," I drawled, letting Jess pull me into a small room after checking if anyone was looking our way. Spare dining chairs were stacked in a corner. We'd snuck away from the hotel ballroom where our university colleagues danced, drank and made fools of themselves in front of the humanities students.

"Why does the past have to be something that's bought and sold?"

"Why can't it pay my bills?" I counteroffered, taking the bottle of champagne from her. "And besides, I don't sell history. My fans buy time with me to hear me tell stories about our past. They don't want to read a stuffy history book. They want emotion. They want—"

"Entertainment," Jess said as if it were sour.

"What's wrong with that? They're educated at the same time. Don't you read or watch something purely because it's a good story?"

She frowned. "Of course."

"Why then are you so critical that I've got subscribers who want the same thing? Am I only a real historian if I'm up the front of a lecture hall delivering the outline for assessment or writing academic textbooks? You're a snob, Jess. That's the plain truth."

"I am not," she growled, puffing out her chest.

"Yes, you are," I murmured, my gaze dropping to her red lips, the perfect shade for her red ball gown.

"I believe we should make history accessible for everyone and when you put a price on it, you immediately exclude those who can't afford it. History shouldn't be something exclusive for top tier subscribers. History should be an open table for discussion and interpretation."

God, she was so riled up. And standing so close, my chest almost grazing her breasts in her low-cut dress.

And then she did it: her eyes flicked down to my mouth.

I almost groaned. "I want to make some history right now with you."

Jess met my gaze and I held nothing back about how much I wanted her.

"A toast, and a kiss," I whispered.

Her eyes widened with shock, but her stare was heated as she watched me rip the foil off the champagne cork.

"Why did lead me into this storage room with me and a bottle of champagne?" I asked, working the cork out.

"Dancing with you was nice until you raised how history was a product like any other thing you find at a shop or online. I didn't want to have a fight in public."

"Oh Jess, we're always having fights. It's what we do." I popped the cork, catching it easily in my hand, then poured the champagne into our glasses and held mine up. "To passionate debates about our profession."

Jess raised her glass after a moment's thought and clinked it against mine.

We sipped, never taking our eyes off each other.

"And the kiss?" she murmured.

"It's yours." We were so close my nose rubbed against hers. "If you want one."

"Does it come with a price?"

"Yeah," I breathed. "For both of us."



Our glasses went slack at our sides as we pressed our lips together, the champagne running down our clothes.

I dropped my glass to the carpet, oblivious to its fate, as we deepened the kiss, pouring our fierceness from every fight and debate into this moment into passion.

Memories of every other woman I'd known faded.

All that mattered was Jessica Knight.

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Ballydoon Pub's cellar, present day

I hopped off the ladder and paused, letting my eyes adjust to the gloom. Stone walls were covered in freckles of mould. Hardwood floorboards overhead were supported by rough-sawn wooden beams decorated with centuries old cobwebs that hung like lace.

At my feet was Jess's discovery.

"Of all places to possibly have some privacy, it had to be with a dead cat," I deadpanned.

"Mummified cat," Jess said, hands on hips.

"Still dead though." I shivered from the dank cold. "You like meeting me in enclosed spaces, Jess."

"Ugh." She paced away from me, all of two steps to the far wall in this tiny cellar.

Being in a dark room with Angry Jess and a desiccated feline was not my idea of fun. But I could salvage that horrid news report with getting content for our channel. And get the jump on Jan-Andrew. I pulled out my Go-Pro, tripod, and microphone.

"Charlie wants me to get footage of the cat. I didn't think you were dragging me to the famous cellar of the ghost cat of Ballydoon until we reached the bar. Charlie will be furious if I didn't at least record something."

Jess didn't say a word. I didn't care—at least, I pretended I didn't. Might as well get my footage before she slammed my heart into the floorboards to rest in dirt beside the Mummified Moggy.

Considering she'd already stomped on my heart in a hotel storage a month ago, I should be used to this, but all I felt was dread.

"I've never asked, but—" she paused as I turned on the Go-Pro. The connection kept flicking on and off. The signal was rubbish down here through the stone and hardwood. "Do you really believe in ghosts?"

"Of course not." I pressed record but everything was frozen on screen. I sighed. "I believe in the past and the evidence left behind."

Jess sniffed.

"Do you mind if I film the cat and speak to camera? Streaming isn't working so I'll just record as video with a backup using my phone, then I'll get right out of your way."

She shrugged, but I noticed she watched with curiosity as I propped up my phone beside the Go-Pro and hit record.

I leant down beside the cat in the floorboards and aimed the Go-Pro at me.

"Welcome to this Halloween special with The Spectre Inspector, Matt Cavanagh. We promised you a tour of a pioneer cemetery and tales of bushrangers, but first something a little different. I'm at the site of a fantastic discovery in my hometown at the Ballydoon pub. I've drunk my fair share of schooners in the bar above me with no idea that below was a hidden cellar, untouched for decades and a mummified cat concealed under its floor.

"Mummification wasn't considered barbaric more than one hundred and fifty years ago by those who constructed the cellar. The way the cat has been buried, wrapped in cloth with a bottle and pennies placed with it, is indicative of an East Anglian practice to bury an animal in a structure so it would ward off evil spirits and witchcraft. They believed the cat protected the pub, rather than haunted it.

"I could tell you more, but I happen be with the archaeologist and historian with me who was able to identify this moggy as a significant historical find. Dr Jessica Knight, would you join me on camera?"

I glanced over my shoulder where Jess stood in the corner just out of the shot.

I wasn't an arsehole. I wanted answers about why she didn't give me a chance, not revenge. But this was her dig and she deserved the credit.

But would she deign herself to be interviewed on my lowly YouTube channel?

To my surprise, she nodded and knelt on the other side of the mummified moggy.

"Um, hi. I'm Jess." She glanced my way and I nodded, encouraging her to continue. She looked back at the Go-Pro, clearing her throat. "If we could zoom in on the cat, I can show you what we've documented about why we know this cat didn't accidentally get trapped under the floorboards, or was cruelly killed, as Matthew, ah, The Spectre Inspector, said. Although many would say it was a cruel practice, which is true by today's standards, this was done in full belief that burying the cat with these rituals would keep the house, or in this case, the pub, and its residents safe."

"What's the significance of the bottle and the pennies?" I asked.

"Witch bottles will often contain herbs or dirt. The dirt especially is interesting. It may have originated in the United Kingdom. Herbs were also thought to have properties that could ward off spirits."

Jess's face glowed as she told the story of her find including how only dust remained in the bottle but would be sent for lab analysis for plant and pollen remains.

"And are the pennies to pay off evil?"

Jess smirked. "Not quite. Think of these as bright, shiny things to distract the attention of goblin-elvish creatures looking to cause mischief."

"The cat looks like it was buried with care. They wrapped it in good quality cloth, too."

"Yes, I'll be removing the cat to do x-rays in Brisbane to see if there are more coins that were wrapped in the cloth with the cat. People genuinely believed that mischievous little creatures like gnomes, elves, imps would cause havoc and a cat was meant to deter that. It doesn't sound very evil, but people of the time really believed they existed. When we've finished our examination of the cat, it will be buried again here to keep on protecting the hotel. But a cat like this also meant good luck for the residents of the building."

She smiled and I grinned back. She was a natural at this. I'd watched her in the lecture hall captivating her students with her delivery of the curriculum.

Then I remembered how she'd ghosted me after our tryst at the Faculty Ball. My smile faded. How ironic.

"That's great. Thanks."

I stood and walked over to retrieve my phone.

"I don't hate your YouTube channel. I like the way you weave history,

myth and rumour together about paranormal stories.”

I blinked. “Then why are you always arguing about how crass it is?”

“I hate how your fans are constantly throwing themselves at you!”

I gaped. I was hardly a thirst trap. I didn’t even stream shirtless or anything like that. But she was right, we had a contingent of keen fans who were always suggesting they’d like to date me. And other things.

“Are you ... jealous?” I asked, mirroring her earlier question.

“Yes!” She threw up her hands. “No! I don’t know. A bit? I reacted like a bitch upstairs to your school friend. She’s gorgeous and I’m—”

Jess waved a hand up and down her front.

I stared dumbstruck.

“You’re beautiful, Jess, in dig clothes or anything. You’re smart, engaging, caring. You hold your students’ attention in the palm of your hand. I never tire having to sit in your lectures.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. So much for convincing myself I was over her.

Jess shook her head, with a look of disgust passing over her face.

“You don’t believe me?” I asked.

“As soon as we’d ... *you know* ... at the ball.”

Even in this gloom, I could see the pink of her cheeks.

“Had sex,” I muttered.

“Yes. Had sex.” Her face hardened. “You then picked up a waitress who was all over you. You’d just been inside me and then minutes later were flirting with another woman, passing on your number to her.”

Her voice cracked. A tear rolled down her cheek.

“You saw me speaking with a waitress?”

She nodded once.

“Oh Jess. No. It’s not—that waitress cornered me at the door to the storage room and, yeah, she was interested in me. I got rid of her by giving her my card. I had no signal in the storage room. Couldn’t call or text. With tissues and a used condom on the floor, I needed to call Charlie as a SOS for a plastic bag and a bottle of water.”

I took a hesitant step towards her.

“Jess, the waitress was about to bust me for very inappropriate behaviour at a work event and I wasn’t risking anything getting back to our executive team. We might have been in a storage room in a hotel but what we did was private and felt so right. At least it did for me. I was just

trying to get rid of her so I could get back to you.”

Jess sucked on her lips, staring.

“You left the ball after you saw me give the waitress my card.”

She nodded.

Any anger that I’d been carrying faded.

“Do you believe me?”

Everything came down to those four words.

Jess’s mouth parted but was cut off by a tinny, screeching voice coming through my phone’s speakers.

“It’s true, Jess!” Charlie shrieked. “Believe him. That waitress was an epic stalker. Matty had to block her twice from his phone. He wouldn’t stop talking about you when I found him at the storage room. Not about details of what you two did or anything. He was yammering on how you two had finally got together and he was convinced you liked him too and there was a future together. Not that I liked doing booty call clean up, just so we’re clear for the future.”

I fumbled with my phone.

“Charlie? Charlie! How the hell do you know what we’re talking about?”

“You’re streaming, dude. You dialled me but I’m getting you both loud and clear. Comments are going nuts.”

I whirled around, staring at my Go-Pro which I’d thought was dead as ... well a mummified cat.

“It’s ... working?”

“Oh crud,” Jess mumbled.

“I didn’t ... I’m sorry. I thought ...”

Jess cut me off by planting a searing kiss on my lips.

But her kiss ended as suddenly as it had begun.

“I should have talked to you,” she whispered. “And I believe you. Even before Charlie’s impressive speech, I believed you. Can you forgive me?”

An almighty howl reverberated through the air in the cellar.

Charlie’s voice squealed through my phone. “What the frack was that?”

I pulled Jess against me as I put my phone back to my ear. “Are you still streaming this?”

On cue, another howl echoed around us.

“Oh my god! Is that a ghost in the cellar?” Charlie screamed down the phone.

Cobwebs swayed in one corner of the cellar and I frowned.

"That's a—" I said.

"How is there—" Jess started.

We both laughed.

"I forgive you," I murmured in her ear before turning to the Go-Pro.

"Dr Knight, that's an impressive ghostly sound but is it evidence of a real ghost? First of all, I'm noticing the cobwebs in this cellar are swaying in a breeze. Do you think that's odd for a room that's underground?"

"Yes, absolutely," Jess nodded. "We definitely have air circulating in here."

Another howl ripped through the room.

"And that noise isn't a ghost. It's a cat," she stated plainly.

We both glanced down at the mummified moggy.

"A live one," Jess clarified, and pointed to a corner of the cellar's ceiling. "I have a feeling our answer is on the other side of the wood panelling of this room."

I picked up the Go-Pro and filmed as Jess pulled away a rotten board from its rusty nails.

"Bring the camera closer, Spectre Inspector," Jess chuckled.

I walked over and held up the Go-Pro to find Dickface McWhiskers with a chicken parmie in his mouth. Beside him was his missus lying down with four kittens suckling.

Dickface winked.

"I believe we've found the modern day Ballydoon Bandit with his secret family squatting in the Town and Country Pub. And he's filched some chicken from someone's plate. Petty theft in the name of love."

But I wasn't looking at McWhiskers and family. My gaze was on Jess who grinned.

"Halloween is about the spirit realm, not love," she said.

I faced the Go-Pro and winked. "Why not both? On that note, viewers, I'm taking Dr Knight to dinner and for some privacy. Have a great spooky night."

I switched off the Go-Pro and kissed Jess senseless.

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*Six months later*

"I got approval to exhume the bones of the Ballydoon Bandit!" Jess bounced on her heels, clapping. "And an autopsy on the bones to confirm if the deceased was male or female."

"You'll let me film that, right?" I grinned. "Everyone would go nuts to see an autopsy on a bushranger."

"I might be able to swing it. There are no known relatives so permission should be relatively easy."

We walked hand in hand under the light of a full moon across the 'top' paddock as our hosts, the Turner family, called it.

"I met Ryan Turner today. Showed me something from the family diaries dated 1881."

Jess stopped. "The note signed 'F.B.'"

I nodded. "Freddie Blundell, AKA Freddie Blunder, bushranger."

"And if he was writing notes in 1881 ..."

"He didn't die in a pub fire in 1867." I paused. "Jan-Andrew will be pissed when you debunk his PhD and prove that the Ballydoon Bandit was indeed a woman."

Jess shrugged. "Probably, but Jan-Andrew should have checked the evidence before he wrote his PhD. I can't believe he never actually came here when he was researching."

"Too busy building up his audience for his channel."

"Have you got more followers now?"

"We do. Five thousand more."

Jess glanced over her shoulder as I slipped through the barbed wire fence at the paddock boundary and held up the wire for her.

"Mrs Turner said dinner would be served in ten minutes," she said. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the unmarked pioneer's grave."

My hands were sweatier than I would have liked.

"Have you found something about the occupant of the grave?"

I licked my lips. If Jess thought it was something to do with the dig starting next week at this site, my secret was safe.

"Ryan said he had nothing on the books that explained the grave either. No mention at all in the farm diaries."

"So, we're sneaking off to look at a grave on a full moon?"

"Yeah."

Jess bent under the barbed wire with ease. "Is this a broadcast?"

I swallowed hard. "You'll see."

Less than a minute later, Jess laughed at the sight of my cameras, two spotlights and a boom microphone in front of the gravesite with its natural stone border.

I patted my pocket. *Still safe.*

Jess walked over to the grave, her eyes roaming over the rocks, wildflowers and weeds looking for clues.

"Are we doing a special broadcast before the dig next week?"

With her back turned to me, I got down on one knee under a spotlight and pulled out the small velvet box.

I glanced nervously to the camera, and then cleared my throat.

Jess turned, her hand flying to her chest. "What are you doing?"

I held out the box.

"Oh my god, are you livestreaming this?" she hissed.

I nodded, opening the box to reveal an engagement ring I'd picked out weeks ago.

"You're the love of my life. We declared our love for each other to the internet over a dead cat and I wanted to share this moment with the world, too. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Jessica Knight, will you marry me?"

Jess bit her lip, her eyes glassy. It could have been two seconds, ten seconds, maybe hours. It felt like eternity had stopped and we were trapped in a moment of hope, angst, terror. No matter what her answer was, my life was inextricably changed from this point as well as hers.

Slowly, surely, Jess nodded, smiling. "Matthew Cavanagh, I love you, too. Let's make history together."





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Mark McDonough*

For as long as Mark can remember, there have been characters in his head clamouring to have their stories told – everything from the depths of time when dinosaurs ruled the Earth through to the vast reaches of space where only the bravest spaceships dare to fly and everywhere in between. Most were written in secret until, one day, those characters demanded that their tales be spread far and wide. Thus, was born StargonBooks.

Mark has spent the last few years dabbling in FanFiction, primarily in the worlds of Harry Potter and Marvel, creating unique stories, situations and characters that have been loved by many. At long last, Mark has returned to creating original stories. In fact, there are quite a number that are bouncing around inside his head awaiting their turn to venture out into the world.

When he's not sitting with laptop or notebook in hand, he can often be found out on the football (soccer) field where he not only plays but also referees and Coordinates an entire competition.

Ultimately, Mark dreams of the day when he can write full time but until then, as he says, "I'm a wordsmith, it's who I am; if I didn't write, I wouldn't be me".



# FLIGHT OF THE MYSERINK

A Star Runner Story

## I

The market was busy. Just as he liked it.

Every way he looked, promises abounded.

That way, stalls lined the roadway, tables piled high.

This way, a row selling nothing but carved wooden figurines.

To the right, the tables were encased in glass. Fabulous jewels – loose or set in rings and necklaces; plates, cups and daggers glittering in the late afternoon sun.

Behind him lay intricate knick-knacks and decorations spun in fine ceramics, glasses and even carved from eggs. All would make the wealthiest individual weep with their beauty. All beckoned buyers to them.

Off in the south-eastern corner, he knew, were the rugs, tapestries and carpets fit for kings. He'd already been there; his meagre funds greatly reduced as he bought what little he could.

But here . . . here, the crowds were perfect. Just the place for the experienced touch of a light finger. Or even a tail.

Tran'aak Zheevlok grinned, his long canine teeth showing prominently, just for a few seconds.

His high, pointed ears flicked. It wasn't the language that caught his attention; its owner, a species that he hadn't encountered before. No, it was the tone. Rich. Dark. *Wealthy*. Without thinking, Tran altered course through the crowds.

His target appeared. He was right. Tran had never seen the like before.

Tall and thin and pink. But the species didn't matter to him. The clothes, that's what caused Tran to grin again. A long, red over-coat, not

unlike Tran's own brown one. He doubted that that one had as many pockets as his own did, though.

Tran's jacket was something that he never went without. It had dozens of pockets, both inside and out, only a handful of which could be seen with the naked eye. The rest were incredibly useful for secreting items that shouldn't be seen by others.

The best part was that one or two of them were perfectly suited for tails to make use of.

"Excuse me, sir," Tran purred as only a cat-like Ok'neie can, "can you direct me to the nearest tavern?"

The alien looked at him, a frown clear on his face. His gaze dropped to Tran's black furred hand on his sleeve. A pointed look that Tran had no intention of noticing. His hand was the decoy at the moment. Even as he babbled at the alien, more than half his mind was concentrating on his tail.

Tran swished it backwards and forwards. Each stroke edging closer and closer to the alien's sleek red coat. When the time seemed right, Tran shifted his hip ever so slightly, allowing his tail to neatly 'fall' into the other man's pocket.

He felt something small, flat and rectangular. Whatever it was, he decided that it was perfect. Tran wrapped his tail around it, swished it out and under his own coat without breaking his inane banter.

Pretending to finally realize that neither the alien nor he spoke the same language, Tran stroked his hand down the alien's arm and melted away.

He had half a mind to find somewhere to stop and examine his prize, but bitter experience had taught him the folly of *that* particular course of action.

Wandering on, he let his feet decide his direction. As long as it was further away from his mark, he wasn't concerned where he went.

He would have liked to stop at some of the stalls. Even with the carpets and rugs that he'd bought earlier, the hold of his ship, *Black Lightning*, was still more than half empty. Perhaps, he considered, he might come back tomorrow if he managed to acquire some extra funds.

Feigning an interest in the paintings that hung on the walls of one stall, Tran looked around, examining the crowds. None seemed interested in him. Which, as far as he was concerned, was all to the good.

He was just one more person enjoying the market. His planet, Ok'neie, wasn't too distant for others like him to come here. Short aliens with black

fur, pointed ears, a tail and a mane of copper hair that travelled from the top of his head to the middle of his back, were not considered out of the ordinary.

There were many others just as strange, if not stranger, around him. Like the ones with wings that wrapped around their bodies like coats or the three-legged green one examining the paintings that Tran himself was feigning an interest in.

He moved on, gradually altering direction to bring him out on the spaceport side of the market. Twice more, he helped himself to the pockets of others. The last time, he thought that he'd outdone himself.

Looking around, Tran found his gaze landing on one of the stallholders. The tall, brown-skinned alien's arms were stacked high with boxes. The pile reached from the middle of his orange vest, all the way up to his chin.

This trader was obviously wealthy. Every one of the five fingers of his hand was adorned with the largest, flashiest rings that Tran had ever seen. Some fingers even had more than one ring.

Tran allowed himself a quick grin. This alien needed to redistribute his wealth. And now that he was backing out of his booth, not looking where he was going, was, in Tran's opinion, the perfect time for him to do so.

Looking around, Tran's eyes fixed on a second alien. This one's trajectory would take him close to the booth. Walking quickly, Tran intercepted him, making sure to appear to be looking the other way as he did so.

The two of them collided, sending Tran spinning, arms waving wildly – right into the stallholder. The alien's boxes flew out of his arms and Tran hurried to apologise and to help him pick them up.

It surely wasn't his fault that in all the confusion, one of the smallest boxes was inadvertently mislaid. Continually moving the man's boxes backwards and forwards, Tran helped him to count them. Not once did either of them come up with the correct number.

By the time that Tran was moving on, the missing box carefully concealed inside one of the largest pockets of his coat, the alien was thanking him profusely for his help.

Tran couldn't help the grin that forced its way across his face. Four marks in one afternoon. That had to be a record. Unbidden, a soft purr escaped him. He cut it off as soon as he realized that it'd started. Purring was something that Ok'neie did *not* do among out-worlders.

With almost a skip in his step, Tran headed for the nearest gate.

As with trading markets all over this part of the galaxy, the gates were manned by a small security force. Tran had always maintained that it was in his best interest to be polite to them. He never knew when he might have need of a friendly security guard.

This, it seemed, was going to be one of those times.

He knew it the second the Liparti Security Officer laid his hand on his shoulder to prevent him from going through the gate.

"Is there a problem?" Tran asked innocently.

The tall, brown-skinned officer ignored him, his other hand pressing his earpiece against the side of his head.

The Security Officer nodded causing his large, floppy jowls to furiously wobble from side to side. Tran couldn't help but stare.

"You need to come with me," the Security Officer said, releasing his earpiece.

Tran noticed that his shoulder was still being held in a tight grip.

"May I ask why?" Tran asked, his mind in a whirl.

He guessed that one of the aliens that he'd robbed had finally noticed their missing item. But he was sure that he'd remained anonymous, a mere face in the crowd.

The Security Officer didn't bother answering. Instead, he looked over Tran's head, back down the path that Tran had come from. Morbidly, Tran turned his head to look as well.

His tail drooped.

There, bustling through the crowds towards them, a second security guard by his side, came the trader with the bright orange vest.



## II

Tran hunched on the thin, hard bunk. His head resting on both hands, elbows on knees.

It hadn't taken the two security officers long to find the merchant's missing package in his jacket. Which led to a whirlwind trip through the Liparti Law Enforcement Program.

First had come the escort to the station. With two security officers striding either side of him holding on to his elbows, both more than a head taller, Tran had had difficulty keeping his feet on the ground.

Once he had been deposited at the front desk, his jacket had been stripped from him. He'd watched as it was turned this way and that, scrunched through one pair of hands after another. His wallet, ship's keys and purchase tickets were quickly joined on the bench by all of the items that he had 'acquired' that day.

When the security officers had finished with his coat, they started on the rest of him. He was forced to remove his rust-coloured vest and black boots. His brown leather pants and white shirt were patted down. Then he had his retinas scanned.

Neither security guard bothered to even ask him if he was actually *guilty*. As far as they were concerned, he was. Not that Tran could blame them. They had the trader's testimony. They'd found the missing package.

In this case, one and one actually did make two.

Then he'd been left in the tiny room. It hadn't taken long to lose track of how long he'd been there. The only light source was a single bulb in its metal cage. There were no windows. Not even in the door.

A sharp scrape on the far side of the door snapped Tran's head up. His eyes narrowed. The second that it started to move, he shot to his feet.

Tran blinked at the security officer framed in the doorway. The brighter light in the corridor made him hard to focus on.

"Right. You're free to go," the security guard grunted. "Follow me."

For a fraction of a second, Tran stood rooted to the spot. It didn't make sense. They had him. He knew that he shouldn't be seeing the outside of his cell for a *long* time to come.

Then, his brain took over. If they were letting him go, who was he to question them?

Without a word, Tran followed the Security Officer back through the maze of corridors to the front desk. There, his boots, vest and coat were returned. A tray was dumped on the desk. To his surprise, Tran not only found his own belongings, but also the extra three items in it.

Scooping them up, he deposited them in the pockets that they'd come from.

"Stay out of trouble while you're on Liparti," the Security Officer advised him, "next time, we won't be so pleasant."

Tran's only response was a thin-lipped smile.

He turned, hoping he actually appeared as unconcerned about being arrested as he was trying to look.

He had no doubt that he was still being watched. He'd seen the security cameras on the top of the building when he was first brought in. His only thought was to keep walking.

*Black Lightning.* It was now his one, his only goal. To reach his ship and lift off this planet. His hold may be less than half full, but Tran figured that something was better than nothing.

As soon as he was out of sight of the security offices, he quickened his pace. Every now and then, he couldn't help but look over his shoulder.

It was this that did him in. With all of his senses focused on what might be behind him, he forgot to check what was in front.

A pair of hands latched on to his right arm. Tran looked down, his brain barely having time to register the sickly yellow-brown scaly hands before he was swung. He stumbled in a wide arc, coming up flat against the wall of an alley.

A second pair of hands caught his left arm, holding him in place. More hands held his neck against the wall, his face mashed up against the rough

brickwork.

"What do you want?" Tran managed to gasp.

His ears were flat against his head, his tail whipped about. Three men, his senses told him. Concentrating, he used his tail to probe the one directly behind him. Something that the tip of his tail told him was a gun, set low on the alien's hip, became his focus.

But before his tail could even begin to wrap itself around the handle, it was grabbed and squeezed.

"Yeeoww!" Tran screamed with the excruciating pain.

"Now, now, we wouldn't want to do something that we might regret," a harsh guttural voice said in his ear.

His tail was released, but Tran could still feel the throbbing pain.

"Whatever you want, I'll give it to you," he choked.

"That's better," the alien grunted. "Turn him around."

Tran found himself spun and smashed back up against the wall.

The lighting in the alley wasn't good, but there was enough to see the three who held him. Brenog. Tran had seen their species before.

Pirates. Thugs. Brigands. Brenog. It all amounted to the same thing.

These ones were typical of their species. Small beady eyes set high on a bald head. Bare chests showing off the twin spine ridges that ran from the base of the neck and disappeared below their black leather pants. Nearly half again as tall as Tran himself.

And all sporting the traditional blaster that Tran doubted he could even lift.

The only difference that Tran could see between the three of them was the extra touches that they used to make themselves even fiercer.

The one on the left was covered in tattoos; the one on the right had black leather strips tied around his biceps to match the whip at his belt; the one in the middle had a large silver-handled dagger thrust through his red leather belt.

"What do you want?" Tran asked again, voice quavering despite his best effort.

"Just your thanks," the middle one replied.

"Thanks?" said Tran, confused.

"For getting you out of jail free," the Brenog told him.

"And to offer you a job, hey, Zarn," the one on the left said.

"That's right, Norq," Zarn said, "and to offer you a job, little Ok'neie."

"A job," Tran frowned.

He didn't like the way this conversation was going. Working for the Brenog would not be a good career move. *Refusing* to work with the Brenog, he knew, would be an even worse career move.

"What could I possibly do for you?" he asked.

"You," said Zarn, poking a large scaly finger in his chest, "you can do what you do best."

"And what would that be?" Tran asked, dreading the answer.

"Transport some goods for us," said the third Brenog.

"And we'll even pay you to do it," said Zarn, snapping Tran's attention up a notch.

"You'll pay me?" said Tran, trying but failing to keep the scepticism out of his voice.

"The little Ok'neie doesn't believe us," said Norq.

Suddenly, Zarn's head was less than a whisker away. Tran's whole vision narrowed to two black eyes boring into him.

"You do believe us, don't you . . . Tran'aak Zheevlok."

"Yes," Tran's voice was barely a whisper.

He now knew that he never had an option. He was going to do the Brenog's bidding whether he liked it or not. They knew his name. And if they knew that, who knew what else they knew.

"Good. Good," said Zarn leaning upright once more. "Ok'neie have such *large* families. How many siblings was it you had again?"

He appeared to think. Not a good look for a Brenog, Tran decided. It just wasn't believable.

"Ah yes, that's right," Zarn continued. "Five brothers and three sisters? All older than you."

Tran knew that it was time to give in. "What do you want me to transport?"

"Containers. Twelve of them. To these coordinates," said Zarn.

A datapad was thrust into Tran's side. Without thinking, he took it from Norq. Looking down, he activated it with his thumb.

"These coordinates are on Tesnus VII?" said Tran.

"That's right," Zarn replied.

"And what's in the containers," Tran asked.

Once again, Zarn's face was pressed up hard against Tran's. This time, Tran took an involuntary breath and nearly keeled over. The Brenog's

breath was rank enough to strip paint.

"That's none of your concern!" he roared.

"Understood," Tran agreed.

It was enough to make Zarn act nice again.

"The containers will be delivered to *Black Lightning* within the hour. You will rendezvous with us at those coordinates in four days," Zarn told him.

Tran nodded.

"Now, scamper little Ok'neie. No tricks. No delays."

Tran decided that Zarn's smile was *more* than enough incentive.

He slid against the wall, moving past Norq as quickly as he dared. As soon as he was free, he quick-walked to the corner, not daring to look back.

Once around it, he ran.

### III

As promised, the twelve containers were delivered to *Black Lightning* within an hour of his 'meeting' with the Brenog.

During that time, Tran had seriously wondered what the best thing to do was. All through the run back to the spaceport, he thought about what the Brenog wanted him to do. It seemed easy enough. But he'd heard countless tales of dealings with the Brenog that had looked easy to begin with, but had ended up anything but.

As soon as Tran was reunited with his ship, he combed every inch of her, checking for sabotage. As he did so, his brain kept replaying Zarn's carefree manner of stating Tran's own name, the number of brothers and sisters that he had and even his standing within his family.

The Brenog knew too much. There was no way that Tran could take the chance that they wouldn't turn on his family if he didn't do exactly what they wanted. He *thought* that his brothers and sisters should be safe. Ok'neie was, after all, a fairly insular world. It wasn't easy for out-worlders to move around on the planet.

But he couldn't take the chance.

*Black Lightning* checked out clean. The flight deck, his cabin and living areas, the twin cargo holds and the tiny engineering compartment were all just as they were supposed to be. Tran even spent time scanning the hull. Nothing that he could find had been attached.

By that time, the choice had been taken from him.

The truck had arrived with the twelve containers.

Tran eyed them, curiosity building despite his best intentions. They were identical. Two meters long, a metre wide and a meter deep. Matte

black in colour with a tiny keypad locked in a clear plastic housing mounted on one side.

The driver, a Liparti, much to Tran's surprise, didn't even bother asking where to put them. He and his partner carried each one onto *Black Lightning* and into the empty cargo hold. Tran shuddered. They already knew the layout of his ship.

As soon as all twelve containers were loaded, a handling chit was thrust into Tran's hands and the truck was gone.

With heavy steps, Tran trudged up the ramp, closing the hatch behind him.

"Best to get this delivery made and be done with the Brenog," Tran said to himself.

He knew that he was deluding himself. Even as he padded to the flight deck, he could see how this was going to go. He'd make the delivery. The Brenog would pay him. And then give him another job to do. And another. And another. And by that time, he'd be well and truly trapped.

Shaking his head, Tran dropped into the pilot's chair.

"Lift first, then think," he told himself firmly.

There was no way that either he or *Black Lightning* was going to be caught in that cycle.

~~~

Tran set his bowl of *stenicks* soup on the table and leaned back in his chair. As much as he loved it, today the soup just couldn't compete with the thoughts running through his mind.

He decided that it was time to sort things out.

Resisting the urge to get up and pace, Tran instead closed his eyes and focussed his mind.

Fact one: he was headed to Tesnus VII to deliver some cargo and get paid. Good.

Fact two: the cargo belonged to the Brenog. Bad.

Fact three: he didn't know what was actually in the containers. Good.

No, he corrected himself, bad. Not knowing what you were transporting wasn't considered a defence in any court of law on any planet that he'd ever heard of. Laws all over the galaxy said that the transportee was just as guilty as the owner of the contents of the cargo

when it came to illicit substances.

Tran knew that the list of what was considered an 'illegal substance' was quite wide. Some cooking spices, for example, were illegal on some worlds, but not on others. Weapons and drugs were fairly widely outlawed. Even some gems and animals were prohibited on some planets.

No, not knowing what was in the containers could be a big problem.

He could open them. Tran was sure that his lock-picking skills would be up to the task. But that left the question of whether the containers were booby-trapped or worse still, designed so that they couldn't be relocked.

And then there was the threat that Zarn had made against his family.

If not for them, he would have already altered course, kicked up the speed and disappeared. The Brenog were notorious throughout this region of space, but there was bound to be somewhere where their influence had never reached.

With a start and a growl, Tran realized that he'd just thought himself in circles.

He was still no closer to figuring out what to do.

Suddenly, he rose. Snatching up his bowl, Tran sauntered down to the cargo hold. He opened the hatch and leant against the frame. The lights had come on automatically. The containers sat there. They were piled two deep, lashed six to each side of the hold.

Tran remained there until his soup was gone. Staring at the containers didn't help either.

With a sigh, he left. After depositing his bowl in the galley, Tran made his way back to his piloting chair.

He ran his fingers over his board. *Black Lightning* was running perfectly. Course and speed unchanged. Tran swept his gaze over the sensor log and froze.

About half an hour before, just for a second, *Black Lightning* had picked up an unusual reading. The tip of his tail began to twitch.

Tran's fingers danced. Pressing a final key, he made *Black Lightning* stutter. Her speed dropped for a fraction of a second. It wasn't much, but it showed him exactly what he wanted.

Now his tail was sweeping backwards and forwards. Tran narrowed his eyes. He was being followed. The mystery ship disappeared again. It seemed that they were keeping a close eye on the distance between their

ships.

Narrowing his sensors to dead aft, Tran activated the stutter manoeuvre again.

This time, he got a good, detailed look at the ship following him.

It wasn't Brenog. That'd been his first suspicion. It wasn't Liparti. That had been his second. This was something new. He ran the image through *Black Lightning's* database. No matches.

That meant that the mystery ship was one that neither he, nor his grandfather who'd owned the *Lightning* before him, had ever encountered.

Tran's brain raced. That ship wasn't after him, per se. They could only be after something that he had. That meant either the textiles, a notion that he instantly dismissed, or the containers.

Whatever is in those containers must be worth a lot of money, Tran reasoned.

Switching his scanners forward, Tran scanned the space ahead. Nothing. Not a rock, sun or planet anywhere close that he could use for cover. That left brazening it out and hoping that something would turn up. He grimaced. Even though it was a strategy that he was infinitely familiar with, it was never one that he liked using.

Tran looked back at the image that *Black Lightning* had captured. The ship was small and sleek. Built for speed, he supposed. But then, his ship was also built for speed.

The big difference as far as Tran could see was in the weapons ports. He counted six. Three times as many as the *Lightning* had and he'd bet anything that there were even more that his sensors hadn't detected.

The only option that he could see would be to try to outrun the other ship.

Keeping a close eye on his aft sensors meant that Tran saw the mystery ship accelerate back into sensor range within minutes.

His little trick to find out who was following him had obviously alerted its pilot to the fact that Tran had made them.

Tran kicked up *Black Lightning's* speed. Instantly, she pulled ahead. The other ship dropped out of sight. Within seconds, though, she was back. Again, Tran increased speed.

His mystery ship matched it and ever so slowly increased it. Tran punched his engines forward again. This time, a number of warning lights appeared on his console. He was at his absolute top speed.

He'd already guessed that the other ship had been built for speed.

Now, she proved it. The sleek, little ship matched *Black Lightning's* top speed and bested it.

Tran glared at his console. There was nothing more that his ship could give him. He let go a deep growl of frustration. He had ten, maybe fifteen minutes at most.

And then he'd be inside the other ship's weapons range.

IV

Tran nervously watched his sensors.

The sleek, little craft following him was continuing to gain. Impulsively, he threw his sensors forward again, hoping against hope for something, anything that could help him survive what he knew was coming.

He blanched. Stared. A nebula. His fingers raced. How long it had been within range while he'd been focusing on his aft sensors he didn't know. Or care.

It had just become his only hope.

He adjusted his heading and checked behind him once more. The gap between the two ships was quickly disappearing. Looking at his board, he did a couple of quick calculations.

He wasn't going to make it.

Tran considered flying an evasive pattern but rejected the idea almost instantly. His engines were already taxed to their limits, plus he knew that it'd only give the other ship extra time to catch him.

While he still had the time, Tran scanned the nebula. It was just as he'd hoped.

Thick, swirling particles of more than a dozen different types of gases. A perfect place to hide. Especially if he shut down everything except for minimal life-support once he was in there. He programmed it in. One button and his ship would go dark.

A second idea occurred to him and Tran pre-programmed the evasive manoeuvres that he wanted *Black Lightning* to perform as soon as they were inside the nebula.

Now, he thought, to reach there in one piece.

Eyes glued to his sensors, Tran flew on.

He knew that he'd need to weather at least two minutes inside the weapon's range of the other ship before he reached the nebula.

Probably more.

The weapon's ports on his sleek adversary lit up a fraction of second before they fired. Tran swerved *Black Lightning*. The shots passed harmlessly to the side.

He was still right on the edge of its range. If the roles had been reversed, Tran knew that he'd have waited a little longer, to cut down the reaction time for the fleeing ship to evade the shots.

A second set of shots lit up the space between them. Again, Tran was able to avoid them, but the miss this time was much closer.

The third shots scored a glancing blow. Warning lights lit up, accompanied by shrill whistles.

Tran ignored them. The piercing sound hurt his ears but he couldn't spare the time to cut it off.

He saw the tell-tale glow on the weapons ports again. On a sudden burst of inspiration, Tran smashed his palm to cut all engines.

His eyes screwed together, fully expecting the other ship to slam into the back of him. Opening one eye, he saw the other ship fly past, its weapons harmlessly shooting the empty space in front of it.

Tran re-engaged his engines. Now was his best chance to reach the nebula. The other ship slowed but not quickly enough. It shot into the nebula well before *Black Lightning*.

Tran altered course. Not much, just enough to confuse the other ship. Of interest, he noted an asteroid, almost the size of a small moon right on the edge of the nebula as he shot past.

The gases parted, swirling in his wake as he dove inside its cover. Tran hit the button to cut all power. *Black Lightning* drifted further in. There was no need now to execute those evasive manoeuvres that he'd programmed.

All he had to do now was to sit tight and wait.

~~~

Instinctively, he knew that the other ship had come for the Brenog

containers. Whatever they were, whatever they contained, Tran needed to find out. If for no other reason than to see how much trouble he was in.

The appearance of the mystery ship had decided Tran on that course of action, even before he'd consciously realised that there was a decision to be made.

There were eight hidden compartments scattered throughout *Black Lightning*. The one beside his piloting chair had precisely what he needed. Pressing his hand on a section of seemingly blank wall, Tran activated the small hidey-hole where he kept his lock-picks.

Picks in hand, Tran entered the cargo hold once more. He surveyed the containers, trying to decide which one to open first. He shrugged. They were identical. Pulling a small hand scanner out of his pocket, Tran passed it over the closest container.

He examined his readings, frowned, wiped the device and tried again. His scanner wasn't your everyday run of the mill type of scanner. It had been tinkered with and enhanced until it was almost more powerful than a spaceship's.

The scanner showed the same readings. Ore. More precisely, *kenitite* ore. An ore that had a number of unusual properties, including being able to disrupt sensors. Its own signature overpowered and masked every other element within a half metre radius. For that reason alone, it was incredibly valuable. And immensely sought after in certain circles. Particularly amongst smugglers.

Tran was more certain than ever that whatever was in the containers was worth a huge amount of money. His bet was on something illegal.

Moving closer to his chosen container, Tran focused his scanner on the lock. Three layers of security. And one small explosive charge. Tran breathed a sigh of relief that the booby-trap wasn't designed to detonate if it detected that it was being scanned.

Kneeling down, Tran placed his head against the side of the container. His ears were super sensitive and often, the old ways were best. He looked at the lock again, his head slightly cocked to one side.

Carefully, deliberately, he chose a particular pick. It was long and slender with a bulbous end that, when pressed, caused the other end to blossom out into a multitude of optic fibres.

Using a combination of his ear, the scanner and the pick, Tran went to work. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, but his whole body

remain rigid. Even his tail.

Suddenly, he sat back, grinning. One lock down.

He wiped his arm across his forehead, making his black fur stand up at odd angles. Then, while he got his heartrate back under control, Tran placed the pick back inside its case.

"Lock two," he said to himself.

This time, there was a simple DNA scanner.

Tran sat back on his haunches, thinking. The odds were high that the DNA would be Brenog. The question then became – was it for a certain individual or just for the species in general.

Either way, his solution remained the same.

The only speck of Brenog DNA that Tran had was a single scale that he'd found on his collar when he'd first come aboard. He assumed it was Zarn's.

He'd nearly washed it down the basin. At the time, Tran'd wanted to rid himself of all traces of the Brenog. He wasn't sure what had made him decide to keep it, but right now, he was glad that he had.

Extracting a small glass vial from one of his pockets and a pair of tweezers from amongst his locks, Tran pulled out the scale. Carefully, he placed it on the locking scanner.

A soft beep indicated that the DNA had been accepted. Tran had to force himself not to let out the huge sigh of relief that he wanted to. The scale could easily have been blown away if he did that. Carefully, he popped it back inside its vial and turned to the last lock.

This was the one that was going to cause him the most difficulty. It was the one with the explosive attached to it.

Once again, Tran used his scanner.

A simple digital code. He assumed that the explosive would detonate if he attached a computer to the lock to decrypt it. That meant that he had to do it manually.

Thirteen digits and no knowing how many tries he was allowed.

Tran sat back.

*This, he thought, is where I'll need to stop.*

Idly he let his mind wander. The Brenog weren't exactly the smartest species in the universe, so the code had to be fairly simple. What he needed to do was think like a Brenog. He didn't know how to do that.

A small etching on the top corner, just under the hinge caught his eye.

Tran focused on it. It was just the serial number of the box.

He sat there, minute after minute trying to come up with a set of numbers. The coordinates of the Brenog homeworld? But that had fifteen numbers. After every wild idea, Tran found his eye drawn back to the serial number.

He smacked himself in the forehead. The answer was staring him in the face. The serial number. Quickly, he scooted forward and counted. Thirteen digits.

Eyes flicking backwards and forwards, Tran keyed it into the pad.

*Hisss*

He looked up. The seal had broken. Scrambling to his feet, he shoved the lid back.

Ore. Just as his scanner had told him.

Yet it still didn't feel right. Yes, the ore was valuable, but he wasn't carrying enough of it to be followed and attacked like that.

His hands reached in, grabbed some of the ore and dumped it on the floor behind him. He grabbed more. And still more. Tran settled into a rhythm.

Unexpectedly, he hit bottom.

He leant back looking at the outside of the box. He was only about a third of the way down.

He grinned. He'd been right. These containers *did* conceal something else.

## V

Tran slumped onto his bed, totally exhausted.

The last six hours had been some of the most gruelling that he'd ever endured.

After dumping out the ore, he'd levered up the false bottom. Underneath had been a small cryostasis unit with an independent power supply. At one end of the container was a small viewport.

Tran had peered in and pressed the small button at the side. What had lit up had staggered him backwards until he'd been brought up short by the far wall.

*A myserink. A real, live myserink.*

He'd forced himself to look once more, not daring to believe his eyes.

Instantly, his mind was transported back six or seven years, back to the last time that he'd seen one.

Back on Ok'neie.

Before the war.

His parents had been the caretakers of Jeulb Island, just as their parents had been and *their* parents had been before them. It was only a small part of Ok'neie's largest national park, but an important one.

There were nineteen animal species found no where else except on that island. The *myserink* was one of them.

It was a small flightless bird with four legs and short, flipper-like wings. Looking at it through the plexiglass, Tran was able to make out its purple and blue feathers and its large orange beak.

They were one of the friendliest animals on the island. Insatiably curious and always getting underfoot.



Tran had loved them. He couldn't remember how many years he'd pestered his parents to be allowed one as a pet. They never gave in.

And then had come the war.

The evacuation and the stray bomb that had completely destroyed the island.

The island that would now be uninhabitable for the next two hundred years.

But that wouldn't help the *myserink*.

They were all gone now.

Extinct.

Or so Tran had thought.

Looking around at the remaining eleven containers, he knew that he had to know what was in them.

He'd spent the next six hours picking the locks of each of them and dumping the ore all over the floor.

Now he knew.

A pair of *myserink* – male and female. A couple of cat-like animals from Imul. *Snoobles*, Tran thought that they were called. There was also a pair of *nawor* – ape-like creatures with six legs, a tail and incredibly easy to train as pick-pockets.

Two *thekniss* were encased in the one container. The 'miner's friend' they were called because they could eat through a ton of rock and dirt in a matter of minutes, leaving only the precious gems and minerals behind.

Rounding out the bizarre zoo were a dozen each of the fire-breathing lizard-like *jamberk* and the *naryus*, a spider-like creature that spun thread stronger than the strongest refined metal.

Some very rare. Others completely outlawed except on their home planet. And all worth more than their weight in gold.

Now Tran knew.

He was transporting animals.

For most of them, it'd make him think twice. But with a pair of *myserink* in the mix, there was no second thought. Not even a first thought really. For generations, his family had been entrusted with keeping them safe.

Now, it was his turn.

Tran awoke with a plan already formed.

Whether it would work or not was another matter. There were definitely some things that he could do to increase the odds.

First and foremost was to erase any trace that he'd opened the containers.

Reloading the kenitite ore back into the twelve containers took almost as long as unloading them had. After making a few changes, he'd relocked them. The required DNA was now Ok'neie and the thirteen-digit code was one of his own choosing.

After that, he'd needed to do some housekeeping. Kenitite ore wasn't the cleanest of materials. Dust had collected and settled all throughout the ship. Tran turned the exhaust fans on high and went through the ship with a hand vacuum, jettisoning the excess dust into the nebula.

The next part of his plan involved convincing the Brenog that the containers had been stolen.

The mystery ship was going to prove to be very useful there. Scans of the ship were already in *Black Lightning's* database and there was the impact from its weapons on her hull. Tran spent some time doing a little cosmetic surgery to both the interior of his ship and to himself.

He was rather pleased with the results. It now looked as though *Black Lightning* had been through an intense fire fight. And the bruises, scrapes and cuts that he'd added to himself definitely looked authentic.

The next part of his plan involved finding somewhere safe to hide the containers until he could come back for them. His mind had instantly latched onto the asteroid that he'd passed on the way into the nebula.

Carefully, Tran eased the *Lightning* to the edge of the nebula. His sensors were still partially blinded when he probed the space outside, but it was a risk that he was willing to take.

The sensor sweep came back clean. With one hand poised to instantly reverse his engines, Tran nosed his ship out.

He smiled. No mystery ship.

On the off chance that she was still around, Tran was careful to hug the edge of the nebula until he reached the asteroid.

He scanned it as he approached.

Tran's eyebrows rose at his readings. Over eighty percent of it consisted of frozen ice and gases. Only the very top layer of the asteroid was rock.

He soon found what he was looking for. It wasn't . . . quite . . . a cave,

but it was close. Just to one side of a crater was a small depression. *Black Lightning* would fit inside with ease.

Activating the landing sequence, Tran took his ship in.

Puffs of dust flew up around the ship as she landed. He waited impatiently for the dust to disperse out into space before activating his external lights and cameras. Panning around the depression, he found a small overhanging rock on the far side of the crater.

The perfect size for twelve containers.

~~~

Several hours later, Tran left the asteroid.

The containers were as hidden as he could make them. He had no worries about the animals themselves. Snug inside the cryostasis units, they wouldn't come to any harm. Their power cells would last for fifty or sixty years. More than enough time for him to deal with the Brenog and return.

Thinking of the Brenog and the deception that he had planned for them, reminded Tran of one final piece of trickery that needed taking care of.

Pulling up the sensor readings for the last half day, Tran wiped them from the computer. Now, no matter what the Brenog wanted to see from his computers, they wouldn't see what he'd been up to.

That just left the hard part. Convincing the Brenog that he'd been robbed.

He prayed that his acting skills were up to the task.

VI

After pushing *Black Lightning* to the limit, Tran had managed to enter orbit of Tesnus VII early. He hadn't expected that. After being delayed in the nebula for so long, Tran was sure that he'd be late.

He assumed that the reason that the rendezvous had been arranged for four days from first contact was because the Brenog vessel's top speed was much slower than *Black Lightning*. That might be useful information if things went bad and he had to leave in a hurry.

Tran checked the coordinates again. It was set for one of the smaller spaceports on Tesnus.

"This is the tradeship *Black Lightning* to *Agatus Spaceport*," he called, "requesting permission to land."

"*Agatus Spaceport, Black Lightning. Permission granted. Coordinates to follow.*"

Tran nodded and cut the connection. It was standard procedure for tradeships to be given a set of coordinates within the spaceport to land at. He thought that it'd be interesting to see how close the Brenog vessel was to him.

As he approached the landing field, Tran conducted a quick scan. Half a dozen ships littered the field. None Brenog.

Although he was tempted to try to off-load his cargo of rugs, carpets and tapestries at the nearby market hall, Tran ultimately decided to pass on the option. At this small, out of the way port, he'd only get a fraction of the value that he could expect somewhere else.

There was also the matter of the Brenog. He wanted to deal with them as quickly as possible and lift up and out. He knew that he couldn't do

that if he was stuck in the middle of a deal somewhere.

Instead, Tran decided to sit tight and wait by his radio. It was tuned to the tower frequency. The second that the Brenog arrived, he'd know.

The hours that he spent waiting were excruciating. He wanted to clean up his ship, but he couldn't. He needed the mess to support his story of being boarded. He wanted a shower, but he knew that that would only destroy his carefully applied make-up.

He prowled the corridors. He tried eating, only to abandon it almost at once to continue pacing.

Finally, he heard the call that he'd been waiting for.

"Brenog ship Stalker, coming in to land."

Even over the radio, Tran recognized Zarn's voice. Obviously, the tower operator had dealt with Brenog before. He didn't challenge Zarn's lack of asking for permission, instead merely giving him the required coordinates.

Checking his map of the landing field, Tran noted the *Stalker's* intended destination. On the far side of the field from *Black Lightning*. That suited him fine. He didn't want the Brenog any closer than they had to be.

Tran watched them land, his tail flicking in agitation.

As soon as they were down, he headed for the hatch.

"Time to play the part of your life," he muttered to himself.

~~~

The Brenog kept him waiting.

Tran leant against the nearest support strut of the fat crab-like ship's main hatch. Finally, it opened and the same three Brenog strode down the ramp – Zarn, Norq and the other one.

"Well? Where are the containers?" Zarn asked, looking around the field.

"There was a bit of a problem," Tran began.

He didn't get any further. As Zarn took a step forward, one massive, meaty hand shot out, grabbed the front of Tran's shirt and hoisted his feet a meter off the ground.

"What do you mean 'a bit of a problem'?" he growled.

Both of Tran's hands were wrapped around Zarn's yellowish arm. With an effort, Tran hoisted himself up enough to get a quick breath of air.

"I was attacked," he managed to gasp.

"Who attacked you?" Norq asked, suspicion layering his voice.

"I don't know. I'd never seen them before," said Tran.

"Where are my containers?" Zarn hissed.

Once before Tran had nearly passed out from the smell of the Brenog's breathe. This time wasn't any better.

"Gone," Tran gasped. "They took them."

"And let you live?" the third Brenog incredulously.

"They just wanted the containers," Tran replied.

"And you let them take them?" Zarn roared.

"I didn't have a choice. I was knocked out when they attacked my ship. When I woke up, I found that they'd boarded and taken them," said Tran, desperately trying to remember his plan.

Being hoisted like this in Zarn's grip was making it hard for him to concentrate.

"So why did you come here without them?" Zarn asked.

"You said you knew my family. I was afraid you'd hurt them if you thought that I hadn't done what you wanted," Tran told him.

"Why should we believe you?" Norq asked.

"The scans my ship took! I can show them to you! You can see for yourself who attacked me!" Tran managed.

Zarn's eyes narrowed. His fist opened and Tran dropped to the ground. He lay there, looking up as the three Brenog glared down at him.

"Show me!" Zarn demanded.

~~~

The instant that Tran led the Brenog aboard the *Lightning* he knew that they'd been there before. Norq immediately turned into the cargo bay. Zarn and the third Brenog pushed past him, making straight for his piloting station.

Tran squeezed into the pilot's chair, tapping buttons.

"This is what the ship looked like when I first saw it," said Tran, activating the overhead monitor.

On the screen, he could see the small, sleek ship once more. Looking down, he tapped the controls. The visual log began playing. It showed the cat and mouse game that the two ships had played as first the *Lightning* increased speed and then the other ship sped up.

It didn't take long before it showed the other ship opening fire.

"Stop! Hold that image!" Zarn commanded.

Tran stabbed the button, freezing the image of the mystery ship on the screen.

"Lakdri!" Zarn hissed.

Tran looked around, interested. Now he knew who had attacked him and judging by Zarn's response, he guessed that there was no love lost between them.

"Continue," said Zarn.

Tran let the sensor images keep running. His nerves were strung taut. They were almost at the point where his computer hocus-pocus would begin.

The monitor showed *Black Lightning* being struck by the Lakdri weapons and then it cut out.

"What happened?" Zarn snarled. "Where's the rest?"

"I think they tried to wipe the computer when they came aboard," Tran replied. "I only managed to recover a couple of other images."

"Show me!" Zarn commanded.

Tran pressed the button. The monitor came back to life showing fuzzy, out of focus images that were hard to see. But that was all for the better. Tran reasoned that the hint of an image would be better than the proper thing. It would help keep the Brenog guessing.

A final image of the Lakdri ship approaching on a docking angle was shown before the monitor cut out again.

Thankfully, Norq chose that moment to rejoin them.

"The containers are gone. No sign that they were opened aboard this ship," he reported.

Zarn swung around on Tran once more. "Did you try to open the containers?"

"I looked at the locks," Tran admitted, "but that's all I did. You know who my family are. I'm not a fool."

Zarn glared at him. This was the part that Tran was most unsure of. He figured that the Brenog would have expected him to examine the boxes. By admitting it, he hoped that they'd believe the rest as well.

"Hmph," Zarn shorted. "Let's go. Looks like we've found ourselves a new hunt."

Tran saw the Brenog's faces split into a grin that he never wanted to see

again. It was all teeth and menace and promised that they were going to have a *lot* of fun tearing their prey apart when they finally caught them.

"What about my pay?" Tran blurted as they were leaving.

"No delivery, no pay," Zarn said simply.

Tran didn't push it. He hadn't expected any different.

VII

Tran forced himself to patience, waiting a full two hours after *Stalker* had left before even asking for permission to lift off the planet.

He had no idea where the Brenog were headed. They had the coordinates where *Black Lightning* had first detected the Lakdri. At worst, they would start their search there.

It was close to the asteroid where Tran had hidden the containers, but still distant enough that the Brenog shouldn't get close enough to pick up any readings. The nebula would also help. Its multi-layered gases would confuse any ship's sensors that came too close.

The day and a half trip back towards the nebula wasn't pleasant for Tran. He was too keyed up and fearful of running into the Brenog again to sleep more than an hour or two at a time.

He was afraid that the Brenog ship would catch the Lakdri, find out that she never had the containers and come looking for him instead.

Or worse yet, he'd run into the Lakdri ship himself.

As it turned out, all of his fears were unfounded.

Tran reached the nebula without encountering any other ships at all.

The asteroid was right where it was supposed to be and, after landing in the crater, his landing lights lit up the twelve containers. Stacked exactly the way he had left them.

Reloading the containers took a lot less time than unloading them had. Tran figured that the difference was the result of the extra adrenaline boost that he was receiving every time he looked up. He kept expecting to see a ship hovering there, waiting, watching.

Finally, though, he was done. All twelve containers were back safely in

his hold.

As tempting as it sounded to fall into bed and sleep for the next twelve hours, Tran resisted. Instead, he pushed himself back towards the piloting station. He felt too exposed sitting on this rock.

Resting inside the nebula seemed a *much* better idea.

Tran walked into the piloting chamber and froze. His eyes were transfixed by the sight outside his main viewport. There, hanging right in front of him, was the *Stalker*.

His eyes glued to the sight of the massive ship, he groped for his chair and fell heavily into it.

Tran had no idea how long the ship had been there.

It didn't matter.

The Brenog had found him.

They knew.

They knew that he had the containers.

They had come for them.

The message light lit up. They were hailing him. Tran had no need to hear what they were going to say. He already knew. His finger, though, betrayed him. It reached out and flipped the toggle.

"Give us our containers now or die!" Zarn snarled through the comm.

The channel was only activated for incoming. His finger hadn't gone completely insane. Tran hissed between his teeth, even as his brain went into overdrive.

Safety was so very close. The nebula. Once inside that, he was free. It was getting there that was the problem. One shot from *Stalker's* many gun turrets would be more than enough to blow *Black Lightning* apart.

His only asset was his speed. But Tran knew that flying out past the Brenog ship wasn't an option. There was just no way that he'd be able to accelerate fast enough before *Stalker* locked on to him.

He was stuck. Trapped on a ball of rock and ice and gas. He froze, eyes narrowing. An inkling of an idea emerged. The asteroid wasn't typical. He'd never come across one like it before. He doubted that the Brenog had even bothered to look at it.

Slowly, as though Zarn and his crew could see him, Tran powered up the gun in the belly of his ship. If the Brenog could detect it, they'd never feel threatened by it. It couldn't even aim at them.

He adjusted its aim – straight down.

"We're waiting little Ok'neie. You have one minute. Surrender the containers!"

Tran checked the power levels. The gun was fully charged and ready. He fired.

Under *Black Lightning*, the ground ripped apart. The gun bored down and struck the first ice layer. Huge vents of steam rocketed up into space around the ship.

Tran felt his ship buffeted by the super-heated gases. His thrusters were at maximum, holding his ship in place, preventing it from being blown into space.

He peered at his console. Sensors were next to useless in this mess. His belly gun was now firing blindly, no longer aimed steadily at the hole he'd created. A huge rent in the side of the asteroid was tearing open.

Ignoring it, Tran activated his forward cannons, at the same time turning the ship to face *into* the asteroid. Punching his main engines, he shot forward.

The ride through the asteroid shook him out of his seat. His head slammed into the console, dark blue blood immediately smearing across his controls.

Black Lightning flew on. Tran knew that he was no longer in control. All that he could do was trust his ship. It'd always kept him safe before.

He never knew exactly when he blasted out of the far side of the asteroid. All he was aware of was when the shaking stopped. *Black Lightning* was listing to starboard, but her engines were still working.

He cast his eyes out the viewport, finally finding what he was looking for. Using only his eyes for navigation, Tran limped his ship towards the nebula.

He didn't know what had happened to *Stalker*.

With any luck, he thought, the Brenog ship had been destroyed.

The crackle of his speakers killed that hope.

"Ok'neie, you will regret this day!" Zarn screamed at him. "We will get our containers back! They belong to me! There is nowhere where you will be safe. Brenog everywhere will hunt you down. It will be well worth their time. I will pay them more money than you have ever seen, little Ok'neie, just to capture you. Even more for just your head and tail. Remember that Ok'neie. Keep looking over your shoulder! The hunt has begun!"

Tran shuddered as *Black Lightning* sought the welcoming embrace of the

nebula.

For now, he was safe.

The containers were safe.

The *myserink* were safe.

It was all that mattered.

VIII

For the first time in nearly a week, Tran saw the black of space. It was such a relief, he almost purred with pleasure. Sitting safe inside the nebula had been worth it, but the time had begun to grate on his nerves.

He'd spent most of that time repairing his ship. *Black Lightning* had taken a *lot* of damage in his successful bid for freedom. He still shuddered to think about the explosive forces that he'd flown his ship through.

Never again, he'd thought as he'd stood surveying the state of his engineering compartment. *That had to be the stupidest stunt that I've ever pulled.*

And it wasn't just engineering that needed work. Every compartment on the ship had taken damage. The galley was completely upside down and even his bed, once bolted to the floor, had one side with a terrible twist in it.

Dreading what he would find, Tran had raced to the cargo holds. Only one set of straps had come loose, sending two of the containers skewing across the room. They'd come to rest on their sides, one wedged half-way down the room, the other set at a precarious angle against the back wall.

Tran's heart was in his throat as he scrambled to straighten them out, unlock them and empty out the ore. He sagged with relief when he finally found that the animals inside were fine. There hadn't been even a minor hiccup in their power supplies.

Now, he was ready to fly once more.

He checked the scanners. Clear space.

Tran eased *Black Lightning* further out, away from the nebula. The scanners stayed clear and he began to relax.

Suddenly, a bizarre reading appeared at the extreme range of his sensors. By the time that Tran had focused on it, it was already a third of the way to him. Whatever it was, it was moving *fast*, faster than anything that Tran had ever seen before.

His sensors couldn't define it. They could pick up the edge of it and tell him its size and shape. It was like a giant ball, the size of small planet, travelling through space. But otherwise, they were useless

Increasing the magnification, Tran looked at it. It was easy to see. Something that huge and an odd bluish-grey colour stood out against the black of space.

Tran projected its trajectory. It was headed out, towards the edge of the known worlds.

Somewhere the Brenog weren't.

A thought popped into his head and his fingers moved instantly in response.

He needed to get out of Brenog space.

That . . . thing . . . was headed in the right direction.

A lot faster than he could fly.

He hoped it wouldn't mind if he hitched a ride.