

Foxfire

Copyright © 2005, S. Y. Affolee

who

*can blame her for hunkering
into the doorwells at night,
the only blaze in the dark
the brush of her hopeful tail,
the only starlight
her little bared teeth?*

- Lucille Clifton

^^^^^

Chapter 1 - To the Open Sea

Uncle Elliot's cremation urn was still warm.

It weighed heavily in Zan's gloved hands, glinting in the waning sunlight. Father Oberlin stood on the sand, the receding tide lapping at the tips of his boots. He held a small black book in his gnarled hands and he was reading from it. An elegy to Uncle Elliot's life as a man of responsibility and genius.

Zan's fingers curled as a breeze suddenly whipped up, tugging at her black veil, Father Oberlin's silver hair, and the loose bits of clothing of the other funeral attendants. She barely paid any attention to the elegy or the waves on the beach or even the discrete rattling cough from those gathered. She focused in on the warmth in her hands, slowly leeching away and remembered a long ago winter day when her uncle had taken her hand for a walk in the park just outside the Museum. She had laughed, delighting in the steam that her breath had made in the cold air.

Just that morning, she had watched her uncle's body go into the crematorium. While she had waited for the ashes, black smoke had curled out of the crematorium chimney. Her parents and now her uncle—laid to rest by fire.

She flexed her fingers again. They had been stiff in the morning and she had first thought that it was just the cold or nervousness. But then there had been the *hair* and her gloves felt more and more strange as the elegy wore on.

Oh God, no. Not now.

When she had been young, her uncle had had a devil of a time teaching her how to control the *change*. After all, he wasn't what her father had been. And being not of her kind, Elliot's teaching had been imperfect. Sometimes, when things were simply too much, her civilized mask slipped. This, his funeral, was exactly the kind of time her uncle would have demanded her to be strong. So she consciously *willed* herself together. And her hand that had wanted to become a paw became a hand again.

She furtively glanced around her. The Church's emissary, Jebediah Southmore, in a fine black cloak, stood beside Father Oberlin with his white-flecked head bowed. Similarly, the rest of the mourners, from the irascible Pendergrast and the fidgety Del, had their eyes cast downward toward the sand. Only one man was turned towards her, longish black hair tousled by the wind and narrowed eyes studying as if he knew she had just been struggling with herself. Even with the protection of her veil, her gaze quickly flicked elsewhere. The only similarities between her and Caradon were the color of their hair and the shape of their eyes. Just because he had been Elliot's patron—that he had been supplying the funds for her uncle's work—didn't mean that she had to like him.

Staring at the swirls and eddies that the sand and the seawater made beneath her feet, she slowly became aware that Father Oberlin had finally finished speaking. He nodded to her and reflexively she clutched the urn tighter to her chest.

"Miss Hu, it's time to see him to rest." It was Southmore. His clear blue eyes were sympathetic and kind. He was someone who wanted to help in her time of need, had even offered to help her make the arrangements even when she turned down the suggestion that her uncle be buried in one of the Old Amanthus cemeteries. But Elliot loved the sea and a plot of land was too expensive.

When he moved to touch her, she stepped back toward the sea. She didn't want to let her uncle go

—the only bulwark she had since childhood. And now, there was nothing.

The cold water washed over her boots. This was the moment that they expected her to spread the ashes—at the edge. Instead, she waded into the water until it was up to her knees. Her mourning dress rose in the surf like a mushroom. The sea tugged and involuntarily she took another step into the sea. Behind her, the others were shouting. Father Oberlin in his shrill, rheumy tenor. Southmore in a deeper, cajoling tone. Del and Sabina, angry and worried. And Mrs. Philomon in huffy panic.

The lid of the urn had a tiny handle of ivory embellished with violets. With thumb and forefinger, she delicately lifted it as she tilted the urn forward. Gray-silver ash streamed from the lip of the urn into the churning green-blue waters. The sea air swept her veil past her face and for a moment, she could see the setting sun clearly—a globe of red fire—and some of the ash flying into the wind.

Uncle Elliot glittered like stardust and then he was gone. Only the brine was left, stinging her nose as she breathed.

~~~~~

## Chapter 2 – Down Tupet Road

There was one thing that gave her solace as she sat wedged into the corner of the enclosed carriage, teeth chattering and feet wet and cold. The sheer physical discomfort kept her mind tightly reigned so she didn't *change*.

The wheels jostled over a stone and she yelped as her teeth nearly cut into her tongue. The state of Tupet Road, especially heading into Amanthus, was in always in a deplorable state, despite the city's efforts at reconstruction.

Isadora, the maid, had filched a blanket from somewhere and was busy tucking the ends around her and shaking her head disapprovingly. Isadora was a dark, compact woman who easily fit in the wedge between Zan and the stoutly built housekeeper, Mrs. Philomon.

"That was a remarkably foolish thing to do, Miss Hu," lectured Simkins who was sitting across from her. "You could have caught your death out there. Or swept out by a riptide. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if you caught a cold from your adventure!"

Zan turned a small mean gaze towards the thin, spidery butler. "Adventure? You call what I did an adventure? Uncle Elliot wanted to be laid at rest at sea. As a young man, he sailed on a clipper to map the heavens in the southern hemisphere. It was his first love and his last love." Briefly, she closed her eyes, remembering the first day her uncle had shown her his chest of nautical instruments—telescopes, sextants, astrolabes, a barometer. She had pricked her finger on the point of a copper compass that had helped mapped many a course across the seas when she had eagerly picked up the shiny tool.

"But Mr. Waterstone would never have wished for you to actually walk into the sea..."

She opened her eyes and her mouth thinned into a repressive line. Simkins did not appear to be cowed by her look—after all, he had been around when she had been a girl running around, making mischief. "Would you allow me some eccentricity then?"

"Pah, eccentricity? No one would believe it. You're imminently practical. You said so yourself not so long ago."

She opened her mouth for a rebuke, but Boreas, the portly household cook taking up the bench beside the butler, broke in admonishment. "Come, come, now's not the time for bickering. We should be remembering Mr. Waterstone. He would disapprove of these arguments. And once we get home, I will certainly make some restorative herbal tea for Miss Hu. We wouldn't want her to come down sick."

"He wouldn't have noticed," Mrs. Philomon sniffed disapprovingly. "Besides, what shall we do now that Mr. Waterstone is gone?"

Pulling up the blanket to her chin, Zan closed her eyes again. She could hardly see the other occupants in the carriage anyway as the light from outside rapidly disappeared, making way for evening. Loose rocks on the road bumped against the carriage wheels and the occupants swayed in recoil. She could hear the pounding of hooves and the gentle yakking of the driver. "I spoke with Uncle Elliot's solicitor and lawyer, Mr. Naupolis, yesterday. The house and his assets were left to me, but there are some details that he said I had to oversee. I have an appointment with him tomorrow morning."

"At least you're not out of a home," said Isadora.

"And you're not out of a home either," she replied, hearing the quaver in the maid's voice. "I intend to keep all of you on. I know I haven't said as much, but you're the only family I have left."

The maid blubbered, “Ah Miss Hu!”

“How can you be so sure you can keep all of us on?” said the housekeeper.

“You mean, how can I afford your services if I don’t have an income?” Zan’s lip curled. “Do you have such little faith in me, Mrs. Philomon? I may not astonish crowds at the Academy gatherings like Uncle Elliot, but my work is solid. The Academy has no objection to it.”

Simkins shook his head. “They have no objection, but will they continue to have you on? You’re a woman...”

“So is the exiled charlatan, Greta Del Rassa. All she has done is to impress the gullible nabobs who think the Academy is the latest fashion and she is set. I have far more support behind me—did you not notice all the Academy members who attended Uncle Elliot’s funeral? They wouldn’t throw me out.”

“Don’t let your pride blind you,” Mrs. Philomon said dryly. “Mr. Waterstone is gone and they could do whatever they want to you.”

Zan gave an unladylike snort. “Not likely. If anyone is to continue on my uncle’s work, it would be me. Not even Pendergrast knows exactly how he built his latest machine. The old blowhard would make a hash of it if he took it apart. Besides, we all saw Uncle Elliot burning all his notes a week ago.”

“Fine. So the Academy would rely on you to make sense of Mr. Waterstone’s research. But what about Mr. Caradon?”

The carriage suddenly lurched and Zan pitched forward, unable to hold on to any part of the carriage since her hands firmly clutched at the blanket. Simkins caught her before she slid to the floor and set her back in her seat. She muttered a thanks and then said louder, “What about Caradon?”

“He financed your uncle’s research and in effect, financed all our livelihoods. Even with the stipend you get from the Academy, how will you take care of the household finances?”

“Caradon’s father would have happily continued the same patron agreement as he had with my uncle,” Zan muttered.

“But Caradon’s father is dead,” Isadora pointed out.

She nodded. “As dead as Uncle Elliot. Well, who knows what Caradon will do? I certainly have no insight into that man’s mind. In the meantime, I suppose I will have to line up possible patrons. Del and Sabina are supposed to call late tomorrow morning. Perhaps they will have some ideas.”

“Mr. Del Garrou and Mrs. Sabina Felis-Ackart?” said Mrs. Philomon disapprovingly. “I don’t understand why you think so highly of those two. All they discuss are fashions and society gossip. How on earth did you run into them?”

Zan finally smiled, thinking of her friends. “I met Del and Sabina at the Academy, at one of the lectures. Don’t let them fool you with their fluff-brained antics, Mrs. Philomon. They can be quite razor sharp when they want to. Between the two of them, they know every entitled noble, rich businessman, and heiress in Amanthus.”

^^^^^^

### Chapter 3 – The Letter

When the carriage stopped, Simkins got out first before helping Zan down. The rest of the household staff scrambled out behind her as she stood at the doorstep of 42 Warden Street. The jaunty townhouse in dove gray had been purchased by her maternal grandfather some half-century earlier. Back then, it had been fashionable for the upper class and wealthy merchants to live in or near the heart of Amanthus. Uncle Elliot and her mother Emily had inherited the house when they had turned eighteen—when their parents had perished in an influenza epidemic that had left nothing untouched, not any of the Islands and definitely not the Continent. To escape the aftermath of the disease’s ravage, Elliot and Emily took passage on *The Meriden*, a scientific vessel commissioned by the Queen to map the southern seas and the Far East.

And later, when Elliot came back to Amanthus without his sister, but with a five-year-old niece in tow, the townhouse had fallen into serious disrepair. Workers were hired to fix the place up, but it was simply not the same. Something nibbled at the edges, slowly wearing down the sparkle that had once been its newness. And it didn’t help that Warden Street was just one street over from Market Row—the shaky boundary that marked the slowly spreading decay of Old Amanthus from the rest of the city.

Despite the looming blackness of Old Amanthus, 42 Warden Street was home and Zan wouldn’t trade it for anything, even with her wet feet slowly turning to blocks of ice.

The driver cried out a “Yah!” and with a slap of the reins, a pair of chestnut geldings rendered mauve in the mix of evening sky and glowing light of the gas lampposts sprung away in a clatter of hooves. Simkins unlocked the front door and as everyone piled inside the front foyer, she could still hear the rattling of the carriage wheels down the street with her keen ears.

Isadora made a tsking sound and gave Zan a kindly push towards the stairs. “First we have to get you out of those sopping clothes and into a hot bath,” the maid said as the butler struck a match and lit a lamp on a foyer table.

Boreas muttered something about dinner and tea and promptly took off towards the kitchen. Mrs. Philomon picked up a white square on the floor near the front door.

“Simkins, could you please put the urn in Uncle Elliot’s study?” said Zan as she put a numb foot on the first stair. “On top of the mantle, next to the ship in the bottle.”

“Yes, Miss Hu.”

The housekeeper waved the white square. “Miss Hu, this is a letter addressed to you. Should I put this on your escritoire?”

“Leave it on Uncle Elliot’s desk. I’ll be down shortly.”

Upstairs in her room, behind a plain wooden screen, Zan gratefully stripped off the black hat with the veil, the overcoat, the black dress, and the wet petticoats. Then came the corset, the chemise, and the pins in her hair. Everything went into a pile on the other side of the screen despite Isadora’s complaint at her carelessness. She looked down at her pale feet, toenails with a faint blush of blue. She wiggled her toes and felt her muscles sting. Grimacing, she pulled on a white satin robe and stepped out from behind the screen and slipped into the adjoining bathroom.

Steaming water greeted her. The maid had already started running the bathtub and had liberally sprinkled lavender into the water. Zan wrinkled her nose at the strong smell and made a mental note to tell Isadora to leave off scenting bathwater until she could tell the difference between a spoonful and a bottleful.

\* \* \*

After the bath that had finally put some feeling back into her feet, Zan donned a plain gray woolen gown and the satin robe and headed to her uncle’s study. Her slippers made no sound as she made her way down the stairs and down the hallway. The door to the study made no sound as she closed it behind her.

Simkins had already prepared a fire. Zan stood in front of the flames of the hearth, but had only eyes for the objects on the mantelpiece. The butler had put Uncle Elliot’s cremation urn on it as she had requested, on the corner beside the glass bottle lying on its side on an ebony stand. Inside the bottle was a miniature copy of the sleek clipper with its proud sails—*The Meriden*. Next to the bottle was an ormolu clock that Zan had taken apart when she was fifteen. Instead of flying into a rage when he had discovered her in her room with clock parts strewn all over her bed, he had taken the time to explain to her all the parts of the machine and showed her how to put it back together. And it still worked, same as before.

On the other side of the clock were several small photographs in wrought iron frames decorated in scrolls and flourishes. The black and white photographs were in fact miniature portraits. One was of her parents. Emily Waterstone sat on a chair wearing a traditional *cheongsam* decorated with tiny cherry blossoms. Her light hair was pulled back into a severe bun, but her eyes twinkled and a mysterious smile lifted her mouth. Whenever Zan looked into the mirror, she could see the shadow of her mother’s face, pixie-like, almost delicate. A dark haired man stood behind her mother, his almond-shaped eyes looking solemnly at the photographer. But despite the strong stamp of Far East in his features, her father was wearing a western suit complete with waistcoat and cravat. And it was obvious that her coloring had come from Cai Hu.

Uncle Elliot had once told her that the photograph had been taken about a month before the accident.

Zan felt pressure behind her eyes and forcibly, she turned her head away from the photographs. She knew what the others were—one was of herself, looking decidedly uncomfortable in the striped dress that Mrs. Philomon had forced on her on her twentieth birthday. There were two with Uncle Elliot. One was of her uncle in front of the steps of the Far East Embassy shaking hands with his childhood friend, Peter Caradon, Queen’s ambassador and Earl of Gasmere. The other was of Uncle Elliot standing triumphantly next to one of his earlier inventions—light hair mused from several days of frustrated finger

raking and the elfin face that he shared with his sister and niece widely grinning in triumph.

She moved to the sideboard on the opposite wall of a bookcase and a desk made of cedar and pine. She poured herself a generous helping of brandy from a crystal decanter and downed a hefty gulp. The warm burn of her throat helped her focus on herself and the sluggish energy stirring about the room. It was then that she noticed the envelope.

Putting her glass down, she ambled to the desk and picked up the envelope and a letter opener. With a quick flick of her wrist, the envelope's edge gave way and she fished out official Museum stationary.

After reading the letter, she crumpled the paper in her fist.

*How dare they!*

She snarled, but forcibly restrained herself from chucking the offensive stationary into the fire. Instead, she tossed the ball of paper onto the desk and glared at it as her fingers dug into her palms. The sluggish energy absorbed her sudden anger and pulsed, gathering about her feet.

How dare they demand my uncle's research, she fumed. The machines and the inventions had been his pride and joy when he had been alive and now some fussy officials at some stuffy institute demanded that she hand them over the next afternoon so they could put it in a dark corner of the Museum archives to collect dust. Didn't they understand that those contraptions were all that she had left of him?

Her palms began to sting and she looked down to see that her fingers and hands had grown dark hair and had *changed*. Her control was in danger of completely slipping. She strode back towards the fireplace and crouched next to the grill. She felt the brush of a tail along her legs underneath her gown. A growl began at the back of her throat as her nose sharpened, detecting the scent of cook's dinner. Her hearing sharpened and she could hear the murmurs of the household staff down the hall, the skittering of rodents just outside the study window, the creak of the house's floorboards. Her gown became almost unbearable against her skin.

A knock at the study door startled her just as her vision began leeching of color and clarity—into an animal dichromism. The knock broke into that overwhelming tide of animal instinct and the human part of her gained her footing again and began pulling on that energy. The flames seeped back from gray to brilliant red, yellow, and orange. The touch of the tail vanished. Her paws became hands.

"Miss Hu," came Mrs. Philomon's voice on the other side of the door. "Are you all right? Boreas has prepared supper. And a restorative herbal tea. Will you be taking it in the study or in your rooms?"

Her voice felt scratchy as she replied, "I'll have it in the kitchen, Mrs. Philomon. Thank you."

~~~~~

Chapter 4 – Settling the Estate

The hackney left her on the corner of Meander and Doresse, just a block before the beginning of the newer wealthy neighborhoods at the outer limits of Amanthus. The office building in front of her was an imposing granite structure built with classical lines. It towered, making Zan feel like a gaunt shadow in her second-best mourning dress begging for alms. The neighboring buildings were as austere and the surrounding street was swept clean so that it appeared that the rot of Old Amanthus touched it not at all. Resolutely, she squared her shoulders and ascended the front stairs and rapped on the door.

A blank-faced woman with grayed haired answered the door and took in her black attire with matching veil and knitted reticule without comment. "Your business, ma'am?"

"I'm Miss Zan Hu. I have an appointment with Mr. Naupolis."

The woman nodded and opened the door wide to admit her into the foyer. As she closed the door, she indicated for Zan to take a seat on a wine-red couch pushed flush to the green wallpapered wall. "Mr. Naupolis will see you in a moment."

As the woman plodded down the hallway to inform the solicitor of her arrival, Zan stared through the doorway across from her seat. She had been to this office building once before when she had reached her majority. Then, it had been to set up her own account and to confer with Mr. Naupolis about how her business affairs would be handled. Then, she had to give some information to the secretary—a swarthy dark man with a thick mustache and a bright pink colored vest—sitting on that outer room and he had noted it in a large black ledger with gilt edges.

Today, the secretary sat at his desk using one of those new machines, a typewriter. Every time the man struck a letter, there was a grating metal slap against the paper that had been fed on the other end.

Every so often, there was a loud ping and the secretary reached over to shove the carriage into a new line. Taken separately, it could have been annoying, but Zan found the regularity of the harsh noise remarkably soothing.

“Miss Hu?”

She stood up at the sight of a barrel-chested man strolling down the hallway. Mr. Naupolis had a ruddy complexion and thinning hair parted meticulously to cover the bald spot. His checkered violet and navy waistcoat was impeccably pleated although it showed signs of strain from his expanding waistline, and a shiny gold watch chain dangled from his pocket. A puffy white cravat decorated his throat—no doubt tied by a highly trained valet from the Continent. Certainly, this solicitor and lawyer had looked after his investments wisely. And his plump cheeks showed that he was well fed.

Zan shook his hand briefly. “Mr. Naupolis. You mentioned that there were still details from my uncle’s estate that still need settled?”

“A few details, yes. But nothing serious, I assure you. I would think that we shall be done with all the papers in half-an-hour or so. No more than an hour. In time for brunch, I should say.”

“Brunch?” Zan remembered the two slices of buttered toast and a cup of oolong tea she had consumed just prior to getting out of the house to summon a hackney to his office on Doresse Road. “Did you not have breakfast today, Mr. Naupolis?”

The solicitor gave a chuckle as he directed her down the hallway to his lushly furnished office. “As a matter of fact, I did. My wife, however, is holding one of her brunches for her late rising friends today and she has insisted that I attend.”

She gave a small smile. “And you oblige her.”

“Of course! The woman would have my hide if I didn’t follow her commands. Takes after her mother, dear God.”

“Hopefully, then, we shall not tarry with my uncle’s estate details.”

“It will not take long in any way. Have a seat Miss Hu. I have all the papers here in a file.”

Zan sat down in a plain high backed chair facing Mr. Naupolis across a wide mahogany desk. He opened a cream colored envelope and slid several papers and a fountain pen to her. Quickly, she scanned the documents and nodded. “This is the official transfer of my uncle’s property to me?”

“Yes. It includes the house on 42 Warden Street, his bank accounts, and his stocks and bonds. The second sheet includes his material assets which includes the furniture and such things. His research, however, has been written off to the Museum.”

She suddenly looked up as the crumpled Museum stationery from the previous night loomed in her mind. “The Museum? What sort of research?”

“Your things will remain yours,” Mr. Naupolis assured her quickly, “but your uncle drew up an agreement about a month ago to let the Museum archive his inventions and his research notes starting from the past year.”

“Do you have that agreement on hand? May I see it?”

“Yes, it’s here somewhere,” the solicitor said, as he turned to rummage in a nearby file cabinet. “But it is all legally binding. I was there when your uncle and the Museum director signed the papers. Ah! Here it is.” He handed her a piece of thick paper.

She narrowed her eyes as she read the legal jargon. Indeed, what Mr. Naupolis had said was true. And the signature at the bottom was certainly her uncle’s signature. A bit of anger and disbelief pushed her to cry out, but she ruthlessly stifled it as she bit the inside of her cheek. “So it is,” she said finally, handing the document back to Mr. Naupolis. “I was not aware of this agreement. Strange thing that Uncle Elliot didn’t tell me.”

“Perhaps he meant to tell you but it slipped his mind. Your uncle was a genius. And he certainly had other more important things to think about.”

But this was important, she silently argued. It was his work, for crying out loud, and someone had somehow convinced him to *archive* it. Instead, she replied, “Perhaps so. Do I sign at the bottom?”

“Yes.”

As Zan scratched out her signature to the bottom of the documents authorizing her ownership to her home and her uncle’s monetary assets—or what was left of those at any rate—Mr. Naupolis put Elliot’s agreement with the Museum back into the filing cabinet and pulled out a manila envelope. He handed this to her as she pushed the signed documents back in his direction.

“Your uncle also wanted you to have that.”

She untucked the envelope flap and took out a remarkably heavy iron key the length of her index

finger. On the inside of the flap was an address. 3 Merrill Street. Box No. 802. "Three Merrill Street," she repeated. "The National Bank. I wonder what this is to."

The solicitor shrugged. "No doubt, someone at the National Bank would know. That is all that I have for you today."

She nodded as she tucked the envelope with the key into her reticule. "Thank you very much, Mr. Naupolis. I hope you will manage to enjoy yourself at your wife's brunch."

He gave her a warm smile as he shook her hand. "And even if I don't, at least the cook will outdo herself at the occasion. Nothing like a full stomach to erase all your cares away."

^^^^^^

Chapter 5 – Sandwiches

Simkins greeted Zan at the front door and took her hat. The expression on his thin face was grim. "What is it?" she asked as she pulled off her gloves.

The butler gave an exasperated snort. "Mr. Garrou and Mrs. Felis-Ackart have arrived about fifteen minutes ago wanting to see you. I put them in the sitting room."

She nodded. "But why that glum frown on your face?"

"They have been eating sandwiches."

Zan's brows knitted at that peculiar sentence. "Sandwiches?"

Simkins made a vague gesture with his right hand indicated the doorway to the parlor. She opened the door a crack and peeked inside.

The sitting room was decorated with overt fussiness. It wasn't Elliot's personal style let alone Zan's, but occasionally more well-heeled guests would grace their doors and they would expect to be entertained in a certain style. So the sitting room was packed with Continental knick-knacks such as a ponderous grandfather clock and gaudy vases sitting on pedestals to plush ottomans and oriental rugs. Even the portraits of her grandfather and grandmother were framed by carved wood, colored in gold.

Two figures were sitting on an empire styled sofa. One was Del Garrou. Despite being fop, dandy, and all-around fashion connoisseur for ladies' clothing, he still managed to put himself in the running in the minds of marriage minded mamas. Today, he was wearing a grey-green suit and ivory waistcoat, which as usual, offset his thick dark chocolate hair and green eyes to perfection. Beside him was Sabina Felis-Ackart, known in certain circles as the Cold Widow. But unlike Zan, she wasn't wearing any mourning clothes. She was wearing some sort of pale ivory confection flounced with similarly colored lace and puffy ruffles at the front of her bodice and a perky feathered hat which sat on top of her perfectly coiffed hair. Only her red lips and strange yellow-green eyes broke the monochromatic picture that she presented.

At the moment, it looked like a face off between the two, Del's sharp teeth barred in a strange imitation of a smile, Sabina's eyes sparkling, but her erect spine bristling. Their hands were hovering above a plate on the silver tea tray placed on a narrow coffee table. The plate held only one sandwich. Zan delicately sniffed. White bread, cucumbers, chicken, and Boreas' special mustard sauce. No wonder.

"Could I prevail our cook to prepare another platter of sandwiches?" said Zan lowly.

"I will try to convince him," said Simkins, "But I won't guarantee anything. You know how Boreas is when interrupted in the middle of his lunch preparations."

"Well, tell him that if he doesn't make another platter, and quickly as well, we're going to have a full scale war in here. And you know how Mrs. Philomon is about that. She'll be absolutely livid when she finds out it's Boreas' fault."

"I shall relay your warning," the butler said with a quick nod of his head before strolling towards the kitchen.

Zan pushed the door to the sitting room wide open. Del and Sabina didn't even blink as she made an appreciable amount of noise as she settled. Then she reached over and snatched the sandwich for herself. She took a bite as her guests slowly turned their heads to watch her in astonishment. She swallowed. "I'm famished after hearing about Mr. Naupolis' brunch plans," she explained. "And it didn't look like either of you were about to touch it any time soon."

"I'm a growing boy," complained Del.

"Ha!" exclaimed Sabina. "You're already a grown man. Yet you have such deplorable manners. What happened to giving ladies the right of way?"

“Oh, ladies can have as much right of way as they wish,” he leered. “But no one comes between me and my food.”

“Your food!”

“Actually, it’s my food,” Zan interjected before taking another bite. “Besides, another tray of sandwiches should be arriving sometime soon.”

“No one comes between me and food,” Del repeated smiling close-lipped at Sabina. “And aren’t ladies always watching their figures? Your corset ribbons aren’t too tight are they? Perhaps they’re the cause of your bad mood. Let me help you...”

Color dotted the Cold Widow’s cheeks. “Oh! You’re a terrible cad. I don’t know why I put up with you besides the fact that you are also one of Zan’s friends.”

Zan poured herself some tea. “As I recall, you two were together when I first met you.” She slanted them a speculative glance. The two, individually, attracted the opposite sex like flies to honey, but for the three years that she had known them, she had never seen them take notice of anyone else. Exactly how closer were they? But Zan wasn’t the nosy type and she didn’t ask.

“He is always following me around like a puppy,” Sabina explained. “Or rather, a very large, stupid dog.”

“Don’t pay attention to her,” Del shot back. “She was the one who dragged me out of bed this morning to see you. I was planning on waking up around noon and my cook always prepares a late breakfast of sausages...”

“Sausages, sausages, and more sausages,” continued Sabina.

“Hey, I happen to like sausages. And you never complained before.”

“Of course I haven’t complained. How many times have I been at your house around noon?”

Del frowned and began counting on his fingers. When he got to sixteen, he gave up. “Too many to count, actually. So why haven’t you complained before?”

“I was humoring you.”

“Humoring me? Then that’s what I’ve been doing when I’ve been over at *your* house. Your cook is a fish fanatic.”

“Fish is a healthy, low in fat, and delicious alternative to all that greasy red meat.”

“You know what, you’re a fussy eater.”

“Am not!”

Zan sipped her tea calmly, smiling. “You two sound like an old married couple.”

“Ha!” said Sabina in a huff.

Del looked thoughtful. “Now there’s a thought. Getting married wouldn’t be such a bad idea.”

Sabina shook her head. “I’ve been married. My late husband was a terribly complacent bore.”

“Of course some husbands are bores,” Del replied. “They don’t know anything about pleasing their wives.”

“And you think you know how?”

Fortunately, before the two of them could utter another word, Simkins swept in to replace the empty plate with one filled with more chicken and cucumber sandwiches. Immediately diverted, the two guests fell upon the sandwiches like ravenous scavengers. Zan gave a reassuring wink to the butler who only shook his head appalled.

Once assured that their mouths were stuffed, Zan said, “I went to see Mr. Naupolis about the estate this morning.”

Sabina swallowed daintily and dabbed her lips with a napkin. “So your uncle did leave you this house?”

She nodded. “Pretty much everything was left to me. Except his research.”

Del washed his food down with tea. “What do you mean, except his research? You told us before that he had burned all of his notes. So of course he wouldn’t have left you his research.”

“No, I mean the machines that Uncle Elliot built. Apparently he signed an agreement with the Museum about a month before to have them archive his things.”

“Really?” Sabina raised an eyebrow. “I thought your uncle’s relationship with the Museum wasn’t that amicable, especially after that terrible falling out with the Museum director.”

“Well, apparently it wasn’t so terrible or one or the other changed his mind.” Zan gave her head a shake, confused thoughts swirling in her mind. “What’s done is done, I suppose, but they’re my uncle’s experiments. And it doesn’t seem like him to do such a thing. But the worst thing about all of this is that he never told me. I thought he trusted me.”

“Zan,” said Del, “There are things about the people closest to us that we never find out about until too late. Sometimes, we never find out about it at all. Everyone has secrets, no matter how much trust is put with friends and loved ones.”

At that moment, there was a knock on the sitting room door. They looked up just as Simkins cleared his throat. “Miss Hu, Mr. Southmore is here to see you.”

A guarded look came over Sabina’s normally glittering gaze. “What’s he doing here?”

“Paying his respects, I suppose,” said Zan. “And he did have some sort of business with Uncle Elliot. I assume he’s here about that too.”

Sabina nodded. “That sounds legitimate. Look Zan, we know you’re going through a terrible time. Losing someone you love is not easy. But we don’t wish for you to molder in those mourning tweeds for the next couple of years. The day after tomorrow—there will be a new play at the theater. Del and I will come pick you up. And wear something cheerful. Your uncle would wish for you to be happy.”

“I know, Sabina.”

Simkins cleared his throat again. “Miss Hu?”

Zan waved a hand. “Send him in, Simkins.”

Sabina touched her fingers. “Be careful,” she said cryptically. Then she got up from the couch. “We’re leaving, Del. I’m sure Zan wants to conduct her business affairs in private.”

Del looked longingly at the remaining two sandwiches on the platter as he stood up. “Give my compliments to your cook, Zan,” he said. “You don’t suppose he would like to work under my employ?”

“I thought you already had a cook,” Zan replied.

“And you had too many sandwiches,” Sabina added. “Twice as many as me seeing that your mouth is bigger. I suggest we go to the park to walk off all that food.”

Then, Jebediah Southmore filled the doorway in unrelieved black—as if he was the one in mourning for his uncle, not Zan. His glittering eyes watched Del and Sabina with faint disapproval as the two of them gave the Church’s emissary quick, stiff nods and hastily retreated into the foyer where Simkins went to retrieve their coats. Zan made to get up, but he shook his head.

“Mr. Southmore...” Zan began.

“Miss Hu, again, my most sincere condolences about your loss. Mr. Waterstone will be missed by many circles. His was an unparalleled genius.” Without her offer, Southmore sat down on the couch that Del and Sabina had vacated.

A pounding ache formed behind her eyes. “Yes, I know that. This is an unexpected visit, Mr. Southmore.”

“Unexpected, but important.” The expression on his face was arranged in a pleasing, kindly smile, but his blue eyes were hard. “It is about your uncle’s business with me.”

^^^^^^

Chapter 6 – Southmore’s Offer

Was that tension or energy starting to coil at the balls of her feet? She took a calming breath and reached over to the tea set to pour out a new cup of tea for Southmore. “What sort of business? I was aware that you and my uncle had several meetings, but all my uncle told me was that you were making an offer that he was not interested in at the time.”

The Church’s emissary accepted the teacup and nodded as he sipped. “Understandable since at the time this did not involve you precisely. I had offered patronage for his research. Costs for the equipment required in his research and an additional five thousand pounds, annually.”

It was a nice figure, actually, that would supplement her stipend from the Academy. But Uncle Elliot had received a larger stipend due to his seniority. And his patron had been much more generous. So it wasn’t any stretch of the imagination why he had turned down Southmore’s offer.

“My offer still stands, naturally,” he continued. “You are Elliot Waterstone’s natural successor, aren’t you? You were the closest to him when he did his experiments. You knew how he thought. You have the training and I have heard that the Academy praises you on the work you have done. With my patronage, you can pick up your uncle’s reigns and continue his work.”

“My uncle and I may have shared laboratory space,” Zan found herself saying, “but electricity and physics are not my area of expertise. Why did you not approach Mr. Pendergrast from the Academy to offer patronage? Some account him quite the crack with the electricity machines.”

“Ah, Miss Hu, you probably do not know this, but I have several friends and acquaintances in the Academy and occasionally I avail myself of their opinions. You may be flattered that they recommended you as the most likely successor to Elliot Waterstone’s scientific legacy despite the fact that you are a woman. They have also mentioned that poor Mr. Pendergrast has a weak grasp of his subject despite his objections to the contrary. Completely below the league of your uncle’s genius, I assure you.”

Zan shifted in her seat, feeling the tension coiling up her legs to her kneecaps until they were locked in place. She shifted her gaze down to her own teacup to avoid Southmore’s penetrating stare. “I am flattered that your associates at the Academy think so highly of me. But I must admit, your offer is somewhat overwhelming. If you haven’t noticed, many things have happened in the past week and I am not sure if I want to take up my uncle’s research. My own studies on chemical composition are dear to my heart...”

“Your own pet projects can be funded as well, if you continue your uncle’s research as well.”

She looked up. “Why? Why are you so interested in my uncle’s studies into the electrical and magnetic fields? There are other competent experimentalists studying the same thing.”

“It has not escaped the Church’s notice that the newly discovered force of electricity could be used as a tool,” Southmore said, a pedantic tone entering his voice. “A tool for power. This could be used for good or evil, Miss Hu, and we would all wish that it would be used for the former and not the latter. The Church has a keen interest in emerging discoveries and wish that all could be used for the benefit of human kind and the glory of God.”

“Benefit for human kind? Wouldn’t you be surprised, Mr. Southmore, but some of the most productive of citizens aren’t what they seem. What you’re saying is that you want control over those discoveries. Science isn’t simply to be corralled. Benevolent guidance can turn to dictatorial control—and that may stifle the sort of creativity that led to the discovery of an electrical force in the first place.”

“Excellent arguments, but wouldn’t you be safe rather than sorry? Besides, those who are not human must still follow God’s path.”

It’s a risk we all have to take. Aloud, she said, “Mr. Southmore, I’ve had a busy day. And perhaps an even busier afternoon. Even if I finally decided to take up my uncle’s mantle, it would be very difficult going indeed. My uncle drew up an agreement with the Museum to have all of his research—which includes his machines—archived. I do not even have his notes to work from. My uncle destroyed them all about a week before his death.”

A frown appeared on Southmore’s brow. “How terribly unfortunate. I do not have any contacts with the Museum to prevail upon them about letting you access to those machines. And I cannot do anything about all the lost notes, of course. But you are still the best candidate to resurrect Elliot Waterstone’s studies.”

She swallowed as her throat tightened. “I shall have to think about your generous offer. I have yet to consult with my uncle’s last patron, Mr. Caradon, on whether or not he is to continue his previous agreement.”

“Caradon?” Southmore’s eyes widened. “Quite a shady character, Miss Hu. With your delicate sensibilities, you should not be associating with the likes of...of that merchant.”

Zan didn’t think she had delicate sensibilities, but she had to admit that her own control and moods had been wavering ever since her uncle’s passing. And as for what Southmore had been about to say, she could understand it well enough. Uncle Elliot’s patron, Moon Caradon, was the illegitimate son of an earl. A real bastard. “He has been civil enough to me, Mr. Southmore.”

“Being civil face to face is one thing, but beware of underhanded tactics behind your back. There are those unscrupulous enough to take advantage of you during your period of mourning.”

“I shall keep that in mind.”

Southmore finally got up and nodded to her. “And do think about my offer, Miss Hu. You will discover that there would be benefits with our alliance. Good day.”

Zan watched the Church’s emissary let himself out of the sitting room. A moment after his exit, she let out a breath and put her teacup down on the table. It rattled on its saucer. The tension or energy or whatever had been holding her legs in a paralytic grip slowly ebbed away until all she could feel was a faint ache along the arch of her left foot.

~~~~~

Boreas rolled out pastry dough as Zan entered the kitchen. The portly cook wore a wide stained apron made of thick brown canvas and a cap of similar material on his head. With flour stained fingers, he pointed to a bubbling pot on the stove. “Stew. Eat.”

Zan took down a bowl and spoon from one of the cupboards ringing the upper part of the kitchen which had been inlaid with cool blue-green tiles. She ladled a bit of steaming broth and chunks of beef, potatoes, and carrots into the bowl and took a sip before she took a seat at the scarred work table where Boreas was working. He had put in his special mixture of spices, she mused as the taste of the stew spread across her tongue. Cloves, nutmeg, rosemary, and something a bit pungent and salty—the mystery herb that Boreas always obtained every other Tuesday when he shopped for semi-perishable foods.

“You look a bit pale,” remarked the cook as he rhythmically rolled the dough. Zan guessed that it would either be the crust for a pie or shells for some kind of tart. She hoped they would be egg custard tarts. Boreas had learned the recipe while accompanying her uncle and mother to the Far East. It was one of her favorite foods—and even sour-faced Simkins had to smile whenever Boreas decided to make them. “Didn’t you eat any of the sandwiches I sent out?”

“Mr. Garrou and Mrs. Felis-Ackart ate most of them.”

“I don’t know why you put up with those freeloaders.”

She shrugged. “I like them.”

“Well, did you get any ideas from them about patrons?” Boreas gave his rolling pin a last pull before sprinkling a bit of flour on the surface of the dough.

“Strangely enough, I didn’t even have time to ask them. Southmore dropped in for an unexpected visit and uh, Mr. Garrou and Mrs. Felis-Ackart had to leave.”

“Southmore? Well, I suppose a representative from the Church is likely to make anyone nervous. What did he want?”

“Did you know he dropped in on Uncle Elliot several times before, well, before he passed?”

“I was aware that the Church’s emissary dropped by from time to time, but I never thought about it before. I always thought it was a courtesy call like any number of Academy members.”

“Apparently, he wished to patronize Uncle Elliot’s research but he turned him down for some reason. And now, Southmore is offering me the same deal—if I pick up where Uncle Elliot left off.”

“Well, that’s fantastic, Miss Hu. At this point, you can’t afford to turn away any possible income.”

She shook her head. “I told him that I’d think about it.”

“But Miss Hu...”

“I want to speak with Caradon first,” she continued. “As soon as possible. I should send a note to him about an appointment. Do you know if Mrs. Philomon is heading out today?”

“She and Isadora are putting rights to Mr. Waterstone’s bedroom this afternoon.”

“Oh, well, I suppose I’ll do it then. It would be better, I think, if I can convince Caradon to continue the same agreement he had with my uncle and let me work on my own projects without any stipulations.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, Miss Hu.”

“I know, I know. I suppose being around Uncle Elliot while he was inventing—listening to his theories and being his assistant when he needed one—I’m as good a person to continue what he was doing. But it would be nice to have someone support my own work now and again.”

“Miss Hu?” It was Simkins in the kitchen doorway. “There are these, uh, gentlemen at the front door. They claim to be from the Museum.”

She groaned. “I almost forgot about them. I’m coming Simkins.”

“You haven’t finished your stew,” glowered Boreas.

“I promise I will when I deal with these people,” Zan replied as she got up. “And what sort of dessert are you making?”

“Egg custard tarts.”

“Oh good. I’ll need them when I’m finished with this.”

At the front door, a tall narrow-shouldered man stood in the doorway, peering into the interior of the house. He was wearing a bronze suit with a matching top hat, a black vest, and white gloves. His thin, curling moustache twitched when he noticed Zan moving out from the hallway. He brandished a cane capped with a large lead crystal in a wide swoop as if he was the conductor of the theater orchestra. Behind him were two men, one stout and swarthy, the other thickly muscled yet pale. Both wore overcoats that

probably had seen better days.

“Dear Miss Hu, we did have an appointment, did we not? Your butler said we did not,” said the man with the cane in a sonorous, pompous tone.

Simkins, who was standing behind Zan, coughed loudly, but it sounded more like a “Ha!” than a clearing of the throat.

Zan recognized him. He was the museum director, Gustav Kruntz. He and Elliot had a falling out when Kruntz called her uncle’s machines “tinker toys.” The note from the previous night had been an insult enough, but this was just salt on the wounds. And now he had the nerve to barge into her home to take her uncle’s projects away. She clenched a fist as Kruntz gave her an oily smile.

“Mr. Kruntz. What a surprise to see you. I’ve been so busy this past week with my uncle’s funeral arrangements and settling the estate that I hardly had the time to read the note that you sent. I had completely forgotten about your arrival. Would it be possible if you came back another day when my schedule is not so crowded?”

“I’m afraid it must be today,” said Kruntz, his thin lips pulling into a wider smile. “The Museum is running on a tight schedule as well and even as director, I cannot change it once the wheels start rolling. Surely, Miss Hu, my associates and I will be in and out with hardly a peep. You won’t notice that we were here!”

Her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed in disbelief. But on all appearances, the Museum director was not to be dissuaded from his mission. Vultures, she thought. There were always vultures on the lookout to swoop in when a death happened. “This way,” she said finally. Slowly, she moved to a plain black door located just underneath the stairs to the second floor. She took out a key and unlocked it. “Simkins, a lamp, if you please.”

A flight of stairs led downward to the basement. The butler led the way with the light source with Kruntz and his muscle men tromping loudly behind him. Zan followed last, feeling her face tightening in disapproval and outrage with every step that she took.

Elliot Waterstone had converted the basement to a laboratory the same time he had the workers repair the house when he returned from his stay in the Far East. A row of small rectangular windows lined the very top of the far wall that was at the back of the house. From there, one had a mostly monotonous view of the grass in the back lawn. Against the walls were thick heavy shelves filled with all manner of materials from raw ore to coiled wire, glass bottles of strange powders, a variety of measuring gauges, and even rocks with odd looking fossils. The laboratory itself was clearly demarcated by a long wooden counter in the middle of the room. On the side next to the windows were all the chemical apparatus that Zan used in her own experiments—vials, tubes, beakers, balances, gas burners. The other side had been Elliot’s section of the laboratory.

With her uncle’s passing, Zan had not had the time to pick up the wrenches and screwdrivers and bits of sheet metal still littering the floor. Secretly, she hoped Kruntz might step on a long rusty nail that was sharp enough to penetrate the soles of his fashionable wide-buckled shoes.

“This is your uncle’s work space?” said Kruntz as he eyed the laboratory in calculating assessment.

“This half of it, yes,” Zan replied, keeping her voice soft, afraid of betraying any emotion. “My uncle kept all of the machines that he made on that table against the wall. Will you be taking his tools and raw materials as well?”

“The Museum will only be archiving his experiments. You are aware of the agreement Mr. Waterstone and I had? The Museum was also to have his notes to go with all the apparatus that he so ingeniously designed.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you there, Mr. Kruntz,” she replied. “His notes don’t exist any more. My uncle destroyed them a while ago.”

The Museum director swung his gaze to her. “Destroyed, you say? Are you sure? You must be mistaken.” His voice rose an entire half-tone at the last word.

“I really am sorry. But I saw my uncle burn them as did the rest of my household staff. I did not think that he knew that he would pass away so quickly and he told me once that he had no need of them since everything was already in his head.”

His henchmen were already taking one of the machines up the basement stairs. One of Elliot’s older electricity machines with the Leyden jar made out of a discarded pickle container. At the top of the stairs, there was a pungent curse and the sound of broken glass. Zan winced. “What a tragedy,” huffed Kruntz.

Her fist tightened and claws instead of nails dug into her palm. Egg custard tarts, she thought to herself. Think of tarts. There was another crash, and Zan closed her eyes in despair.

^^^^^^

## Chapter 8 – Shepherd’s Lane

The roof of the massive Queen’s style mansion at the end of Shepherd’s Lane shone like dying embers in the light of the setting sun. She could barely make out any detail as the entire façade of the house was cloaked in shadow. Then she saw movement and instinctively, she clutched her reticule and wished that she had not dismissed the driver of the hackney so quickly. Another carriage stood on the opposite side of the street, but she wasn’t sure that she could make it if another person gave chase.

“Damn you, Moon, open up!”

Zan tentatively stepped forward as the man on the mansion steps started pounding on the door and yelling in cultured accents. Closer, she could make out light hair and an expensively tailored coat. She had seen him before on occasion. The current Earl of Gasmere, the Honorable Oliver Caradon, cousin to her uncle’s last patron.

Gasmere finally noticed her as she approached the doorstep. His eyes glinted strangely in the weakening light. “Eh? Miss? What are you doing about at this hour?”

“I am here to see Mr. Caradon about a business matter.”

His gaze swept the whole length of her body, taking in her black attire. “Business matter? You certainly don’t look like his type. And I have not known Moon to take up doxies...”

Quick as lightning, Zan reached out and smacked him.

“Ow! What was that for? Do you have any idea who I am?”

“I demand an apology at once!”

“Why you...”

The front door suddenly opened revealing an elderly butler in a stiffly starched tie. He looked down at the two visitors with watery eyes. “Yes?”

“I am Miss Zan Hu,” she cut in before the earl could open his mouth. “I have a business matter to confer with Mr. Caradon that pertains to my uncle, Elliot Waterstone.”

“Miss Hu, this way. Wait here while I inform Mr. Caradon of your arrival.”

As Zan stepped through to the mansion’s foyer and the butler began to close the door, the earl blustered in, surprising the old man with his sudden strength. “And I am his cousin, Gasmere. I demand to talk to Caradon at once. It is of utmost importance.” And before the butler could stop him, he stormed down the hallway as if he owned the place.

The butler shrugged and motioned for her to follow him. “You might as well come along then, Miss Hu. I’m afraid some things one simply cannot control.”

Zan nodded sympathetically as they walked after the earl towards a thick door opened to a spacious study furnished with heavy wood furniture and plush dark carpet. She delicately sniffed the air detecting a faint pungent odor. Some sort of narcotic? She wondered.

The butler announced her and at some sign from Caradon within, the butler withdrew from the room and beckoned for her to enter. Inside, the pungent odor was stronger. There was a large hearth on one side of the room surrounded by two velvet armchairs and a small tea table. A figure sat in one of the chairs, wrapped in the shadows that the hearth flames drew around the room. Gasmere stood at the back of the other chair, glaring at Caradon and then at Zan. She could see red marks on his face where she slapped him.

“What’s that doxy doing here?” Gasmere demanded.

Zan stiffened at the affront to her honor.

“Oliver,” said Caradon in a hard, dark voice, “Apologize to Miss Hu at once.”

“But...”

“No buts, Oliver. You are behaving in an insensitive manner. Miss Hu is a respectable lady. She is here on legitimate business on behalf of her uncle who has been recently deceased.”

“Bastard!”

“As you and your family have taken pains to drill into me at every turn.”

Gasmere’s face turned a mottled purple as he muttered, “My sincerest apologies, Miss Hu. In the evening, even I make mistakes.”

Zan did not smile. "I suppose I should accept that apology since it is the only one I'm going to get."

Gasmere gaped at her and then furiously turned back to Caradon. "This is all your fault. I want to speak to you in private about a very important matter."

"You may speak now or not at all." Lazy amusement laced Caradon's voice. "I am sure Miss Hu can be trusted to be held in confidence."

"I do not gossip, if that's what you're asking," she said.

"There, Oliver, we have Miss Hu's assurance that she will not spill your Very Important Matter to all and sundry. So what is it? A new wardrobe for your fashion conscious mama? Your brother's gambling debts?"

"You really like doing this to me, don't you," said Gasmere as he flexed his fingers on the back of the chair, attempting to restrain himself from throwing a punch at his cousin. "God only knows why Uncle Peter let you have control of the purse strings."

"He was my father and he knew I understood business. The legalities may not have granted me his title, but at least he saw to it that I did not entirely lose my heritage. Besides, he knew the lot of you are spendthrifts."

"That has nothing to do with it! We are entitled..."

"To nothing. I haven't seen any of you work for a single cent."

Gasmere gritted his teeth. As Caradon patiently waited for his cousin to tell him what he wanted, Zan noticed a small bronze censer smoldering on a shelf of the bookcase. Discretely, she pulled off a glove and reached into the small bowl to draw out some resinous powder on her finger tips. The smell was quite strong, strong enough to slightly muddle any other scent in the room.

"Well?" prompted Caradon.

Gasmere straightened his spine. "Lady Penelope wishes for your attendance to her autumn soiree."

"You know as well as I do that Lady Penelope should send an invitation to me like anyone else. Why the personal visit?"

"She believes that it is time for you to get married."

"She wants to match make, I gather? Tell her to save her efforts. Your father's second wife has no sway over me. If she thinks that I will marry a pliable girl of her choosing in order to control me and the purse strings, she is sadly mistaken."

"Is your mind so mercenary and cold?" demanded Gasmere. "We are your relatives! We have your best interests at heart, how ungrateful you may be."

"You may be my relative by blood, cousin, but Lady Penelope is not. Nor is she to you. I wonder, what does she have over your head to make you come over here at this time of the day? You have surely not made any effort to come out of the way to befriend me in the past."

"You are insufferable," Gasmere declared. And then he turned on his heel and exited the room in angry strides.

Zan wiped her resin-stained fingers on her dress and donned her glove again as she wearily watched Caradon lean over to the small tea table to pour himself a glass of wine. "You are indeed lucky, Miss Hu, for not having any relatives who hound you at every step."

"I do not have any living relatives, Mr. Caradon."

"None even besides your uncle? My condolences then. Please have a seat and tell me what brings you here."

Gingerly, she took the armchair across from Caradon, sitting at the edge with her back erect. Closer, she could make out his features, the ruffled black hair and the eyes slitted as he studied her. His tie dangled undone around his neck and the buttons at the top of his shirt undone in a somewhat alluring yet alarming *deshabillé*.

Zan stared at his bare throat and the thought that she was alone in a room with a not-quite gentleman flitted through her mind. Perhaps paying a call to Caradon so late in the day was not such a good idea. "It is about my uncle's arrangement with you. About you being his patron."

"What about it?"

"Well, since my uncle's passing, I was wondering if you would still continue the agreement."

"I couldn't very well continue it since he is no longer here, can I?"

"No. But I would be hoping, Mr. Caradon, that you would continue that same agreement with me."

He was silent for a long moment as he took a sip from his glass and his gaze shuttered, hiding his eyes from hers. He appeared as if he had gone to sleep, but the prickling hairs at the back of her neck told her otherwise.

“Will you be continuing your uncle’s work, Miss Hu?”

“I could,” she said slowly, “But I have my own studies. And my uncle’s area of expertise isn’t necessarily mine as well. I would rather continue my own chemical studies. The Academy has supported the identification of compounds in our natural world as something that is scientifically necessary.”

“Of course,” he replied sounding rather bored, but something sharp and keen ran underneath his tone as he shifted in his seat so that he was leaning slightly forward. The fire from the hearth reflected from his dark gray eyes like silver sparks. “But could you not pursue your uncle’s line of inquiry as well?”

“It would be possible, but difficult. My uncle had an agreement with the Museum—all of his experiments and any notes that he would have left if he had not destroyed them already belong to them now, to be archived. I would have to work from memory. Is your agreement contingent on the fact that I must continue my uncle’s research?”

His lips curved in a dark imitation of a smile. “Miss Hu, the agreement wasn’t contingent on anything except that the work had scientific value. In my conversations with Elliot Waterstone, he often impressed upon me the merit of your work. So I don’t see any reason to not continue the agreement.”

She let out a breath she had not known she had been holding. “That is good news, then.”

“You do realize though, that the agreement I had with your uncle included a stipulation that I be able to drop in at any time to look in on the progress?”

She nodded, remembering the times that Caradon had visited the laboratory once every month to check in on Uncle Elliot. Hopefully, he would continue that same, infrequent routine. She was sure he had interests elsewhere that were more important for his attendance. “Of course.”

His smile widened into a lethal grin and Zan thought her heart stopped for a moment from fear. Or maybe something else. “Excellent. I will come by around, say, the afternoon and we will have a talk about your future plans.”

~~~~~

Chapter 9 – Box 802

Zan stood in the National Bank’s lobby staring up at the mural on the ceiling. The edges were gilded with flourishes of natural elements such as leaves and berries and nuts. The mural itself was in a classical style filled with figures clad only in flowing white sheets barely covering the essential parts. A multitude of cherubic angels with tiny golden wings flocked the larger figures like an uprising of birds.

Waiting for one of the bank officials to return with information about a possible account her uncle could have opened with the National Bank, her mind wandered from those perfect, angelic beings to the previous evening just as she was leaving Caradon’s residence on Shepherd’s Lane.

It’s a pity she’s not willing yet.

The low, masculine voice had whispered in her mind. Startled, she had said, “Did you say something?”

And he had raised a dark brow and replied, “Excuse me?”

She then second guessed herself. Perhaps her mind was playing tricks on her, she was too tired, too preoccupied with recent grief. Perhaps she had breathed in too much of whatever he had been burning. A drug she was sure. What kind of drug, she had her suspicions.

“A word of advice if I may,” she had said instead.

“You think I would listen to your advice?”

She had ignored Caradon’s faintly sneering tone. “Breathing in noxious vapors is not good for your health.” She had raised a hand indicating the bronze censer on the bookshelf. “No matter how you may feel, damage can be done to your lungs.”

“Perhaps you have been attending one too many of those medical lectures at the Academy. You’re beginning to sound like my doctor.”

“Your doctor sounds like a sensible man.”

He had risen from his armchair as she moved to the study door. A dark angel, she had thought. Or rather, the devil. “Oh, no doubt he’s sensible. I should dare say that you and he would find a lot in common. A man and woman of science—sensible and logical.”

“You make fun of me, Mr. Caradon.”

“That is not my intention.” He took a step towards her and she felt her muscles freeze in place. “Do you have transportation home, Miss Hu?”

“I was planning to call a hackney.”

“No, that won’t do. It isn’t safe for young ladies outside at this time of night. Let me offer you my own carriage.”

“That is very kind of you, Mr. Caradon, but...”

“I insist.” *No, I demand...*

The intrusion of his voice in her head sent her reeling and instinctively, she backed out the door and nearly ran over the butler who was passing by.

Caradon had sent her one final hard glance before turning to his butler to tell him to prepare the carriage.

“Miss Hu?”

She blinked, faintly shaking her head from the memory. A man in a dark striped suit and severe tie—the uniform of a bank official—stood before her, waiting. The staid suit, however, did not conceal the man’s shifty, impatient expression. “Yes.”

“You were correct, Mr. Elliot Waterstone did patronize the National Bank by opening an account. It consists solely of a safety deposit box.”

“I have a key.” Quickly, Zan opened her reticule and withdrew the envelope she had obtained from Mr. Naupolis. She took out the key. “Would this be from one of your deposit boxes?”

“I would appear so. Do you wish to see Mr. Waterstone’s deposit at this time?”

“Certainly.”

She followed the bank official through the lobby to the main room, past the clerks and bank tellers, to an area near the back where an enormous round metal door opened into one of the National Bank’s auxiliary vaults. Stepping inside, she found herself surrounded by ceiling to floor rows of boxes locked into the wall.

“Do you have the box number?”

She glanced at the envelope. “Eight oh two.”

The bank official pointed out a box at mid-level with the numbers hammered in gleaming brass. She thanked the official who left the vault for her privacy and then inserted the heavy iron key into the lock.

At first, it didn’t turn, but then with a creak, it moved and she was able to pull both the key and the box out of the wall. She placed the safety deposit box on top of a narrow, high table in the vault and flipped open the lid.

The first things she saw were two green pieces lying on top of a sheaf of papers. Both were jade. One was a small circle carved to resemble a fox curled in on itself as if it was sleeping. Long red thread was looped around it. She remembered that she had seen it before in a photograph of her father before he married her mother. He had been sitting on a bench in a garden in traditional scholar’s robes. The charm had hung, dangling on his wrist. Zan put it on and the jade charm hung lightly just below the hollow of her throat. She slipped it underneath the neckline of her blouse and turned her attention to the rest of the contents in the box.

The other jade piece was a large medallion etched with swirls and embellishments. Writing of the Far East variety was also etched on the surface, starting from the center and spiraling counterclockwise outward. Zan frowned, wishing that she could read the writing.

She set the medallion aside and riffled the papers. The writing appeared to be Uncle Elliot’s handwriting. Zan peered closer and began reading the first page. Her hands faintly shook. Her uncle’s notes.

But he had destroyed them, burned them in the kitchen. She had seen it with her own eyes, questioning her uncle on his suddenly odd behavior, trying to understand. Simkins had stood by in disapproval, keeping an eagle eye on the proceedings, making sure that Elliot didn’t burn down the house. Boreas was loudly complaining about Mr. Waterstone’s abuse of the kitchen hearth and Mrs. Philomon and Isadora were attempting to get them to bed. After all, it had been after midnight.

She rubbed her fingers against the paper feeling a bit of weak energy running across the fibers. A remnant of her uncle’s spirit? Then she remembered. The Museum. If Gustav Kruntz knew she was in possession of a copy of her uncle’s notes, he would be knocking down her door to have it.

Zan opened her reticule and stuffed the papers inside. Then more sedately, she closed the safety

deposit box and put it back into the wall. She dropped the key into the reticule, closed it, and then picked up the jade medallion before exiting the vault.

“Did you find all that you needed?” the bank official inquired as she took a step past the vault entrance.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Do you wish to keep the account since it has passed on to you from Mr. Waterstone?”

“Actually, yes. That would be very good.”

The official insisted on escorting her out again. But as she passed the sea of clerical desks, a flash of bright red caught her eye.

“Ah, Miss Hu, what a pleasant surprise in finding you here!”

Zan stopped and slowly turned around. Jebediah Southmore was wearing his finery as the Church’s emissary, a brilliant red cloak lined in white ermine and thick golden chains about his neck. He smiled at her as three priests in unrelieved black flanked him.

“Good day, Mr. Southmore. Are you here on official business?”

“Unfortunately, yes. But it must be done, in official costume and all. I’m here to meet the bank president on business on behalf of the Church.”

She nodded politely.

“Are you here on personal business, Miss Hu?”

“I was simply checking up on a personal account.”

“Of course, of course. Oh and by the way, have you had time to think about my offer?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. I’ve given it due consideration, Mr. Southmore, but I regret to say that I must decline your generous offer for patronage. I’m continuing the agreement my uncle had with Mr. Caradon.”

“Caradon!” Southmore suddenly burst out. “The very devil himself. Do you have any idea who you are associating with?”

Truth be told, she thought to herself, she knew very little about Caradon besides the fact that he was willing to fund her regardless of the subject of her studies and that he was quite possibly a drug addict. “I know enough, Mr. Southmore. Now if you will excuse me, I must be off. I have an appointment elsewhere.”

“Mark my words,” Southmore said as she turned her back to him. “Caradon is the very devil.”

^^^^^

Chapter 10 – The Challenge

As she walked up the steps to the front of her house, Zan noticed a sleek dark phaeton with a pair of black Arabians parked on the curb of the street. A gangly boy of perhaps thirteen to fifteen held the reins, waiting in a rather detached manner for the owner to show up.

At the door, Simkins took her hat and said, “Mr. Caradon arrived earlier wanting to see you. I have put him in the sitting room.”

“Thank you, Simkins.” She proceeded down the hallway to the sitting room and stopped at the doorway.

Even in daylight and impeccably dressed, Caradon still appeared imposing. Today he was wearing a dark brown suit, a waistcoat of a slightly lighter shade and a matching tie. All of this plain, but quite expensive—evidence of his fortune made in the shipping business. He stood up from his seat on one of the high-backed chairs and suddenly she was rather aware that he was like a giant among gaudy toys. The sitting room was rather fussy. Too fussy. And Zen resolved to throw out of the many vases the next time she had a free moment, regardless of future visitors with bad taste.

“Mr. Caradon.”

“Miss Hu. I hope I haven’t come at a particularly bad time but we did have an appointment.”

“In the afternoon, I thought. It is lunch time now.”

“I believe half-past noon is the afternoon.”

“I see you’re a stickler for technicalities,” she replied frowning. But she couldn’t very well throw him out. He was her source of income. “Very well. Why don’t we discuss my plans in the laboratory? It is easier for any possible demonstrations.”

“I am amendable to that.”

Zan stepped back out into the hallway to tell Simkins to inform Mrs. Philomon to bring down a light lunch to the laboratory. As she proceeded down to the laboratory, she was acutely aware of Caradon moving behind her despite his eerily noiseless footsteps.

"I was aware," she said as she began to light the lamps in the basement, "that my uncle sent you quarterly reports every year to keep you up to date on his progress. Do you wish to continue that arrangement?"

"That sounds reasonable."

As she finished lighting the last lamp, she went to stand next to the table in the center of the room. She realized that her reticule with her uncle's notes was still dangling from her wrist. Hastily, she pulled open a drawer, dropped the bag inside, and closed it, hoping that Caradon did not notice her furtive behavior. Then for a moment, she stared at what was left of Uncle Elliot's half of the laboratory. Despite the piles of unused materials, it felt stripped and empty. A lump formed in her throat and she tried to swallow.

"Miss Hu, are you all right?"

Her vision focused back on her guest who had grabbed a stool and was sitting across from her at the table. He wasn't smiling, but his expression was oddly calming and sympathetic.

"My father passed away a year ago, just as suddenly," he said. "I knew of him my entire life but didn't really meet him until a couple years ago. But it was still hard."

She nodded. "It was kind of you, though, to take up the patron agreement your father had with my uncle."

"Kind?" He regarded her, eyes suddenly hard. "Be careful of ascribing so many benevolent qualities on me, Miss Hu."

A warning? She wondered. There was a clatter on the stairs and Miss Philomon appeared in a voluminous gray apron and a silver tray laden down with soup and sandwiches and tea. The housekeeper eyed Caradon with suspicion and distrust before setting the tray down at the table. Caradon merely looked back at the housekeeper with an enigmatic smile.

"Will that be all, Miss Hu?"

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Philomon."

The housekeeper gave an unsatisfied huff and then tromped back up the stairs. As her footsteps receded, Zan began to pour the tea.

"Before my uncle's death," she began as she arranged the plates and bowls and motioned for Caradon to help himself, "I was in the middle of a project in which I was identifying the composition of some samples a member of the Academy had obtained from a coal mine on the Continent. Then once that was done, I would be comparing that analysis with an earlier analysis I had made of a coal mine about fifty miles north of Amanthus."

As he ate, Caradon asked, "And what will all that analysis yield?"

"Presently, we do not know how coal is naturally produced. I was hoping with the analysis, I would be able to compile a list of all the materials that all coal sites have in common. Then perhaps I could form a hypothesis for coal production. Think of the benefits we could reap if we could produce coal in unlimited quantities."

"Tremendous benefit, no doubt. All of the newer machines are powered by burning coal." He nodded. "Sounds like an admirable enough endeavor."

As she took a sip of tea and a bit of her sandwich—Boreas had made roast beef this time—she mused, "But what I don't understand is why I find so many microfossils at the coal sites."

"Microfossils? You've lost me, Miss Hu."

"I've heard of them in one of the biology talks in the Academy," she said. "Microfossils—very small fossils of tiny creatures that lived long ago. It's theorized that these creatures were actually sea creatures."

"And these microfossils, they were found on land?"

"The theory continues that the area used to be covered by a shallow sea that somehow drained off or dried out later." Somewhat distracted as she turned to survey her own part of her laboratory, she continued, "I don't know why so much organic matter is there. Did they contribute to the formation of coal?" She restlessly shrugged her shoulders and abandoned her lunch for a table with a microscope. "I have some of them on glass slides."

Curious, Caradon followed her and watched as she took out a slide from a box and adjusted its placement on the microscope stage.

Deftly, she manipulated the focus with a few quick twists of the knobs controlling the objectives and stepped away, motioning him to take a look. He brushed past her to look through the lens and she caught a whiff of scent that made her skin prickle. No, it wasn't the strongly spicy cologne that men of fashion were accustomed to wearing. It was more subtle than that—woody and faintly musky. *Like a forest*. She backed away half a step, afraid that she would involuntarily lean over and put her nose to his hair. Her fingernails itched, wanting to become claws.

"Fascinating. The skeletons of these little creatures are so varied. Some of them look like hydra with their little tentacles and some look like tiny stars. And yet others appear to be simply strangely shaped cages with fine netting..." He stopped talking when he looked up at her. He glanced down in the direction of her hands, she quickly put them behind her back. When he raised his head, she thought his eyes looked a little strange although at the moment, she couldn't put her finger on what exactly was wrong.

"I know," she said quickly. "Those tiny sea creatures were a varied lot, weren't they? But perhaps they were simply at the wrong place at the wrong time and they had nothing to do with the formation of coal deposits."

"I would have no idea," he replied. "I would leave the answers to you and your scientific acumen."

She edged back to the table with their half finished lunches. "Oh! We better get back to our soup before it gets cold. I apologize for babbling on so. Sometimes I can get carried away."

"Apparently just like your uncle." Caradon let himself be led back to the table.

"You mean lecture you?" Zan shook her head. "I should think that he was trying to update you on his studies. But sometimes he can forget that he is speaking to someone who is not so familiar with the technicalities."

"That does not bother me. After reading his reports, I have a grasp of the concepts. A poor grasp, but a grasp nonetheless. And I am not so blind as to not see possible applications. Your field is different so perhaps you should enlighten me on the basics."

"If you wish."

His lips curved. "Please give compliments from me to your cook for an excellent lunch. We can discuss this further in, perhaps, a less enclosed area? We can go for a ride in the park. I find that my mind is more amendable to new ideas in more open spaces."

"Fine. I suppose, then, that you rarely attend the lectures my uncle gave at the Academy?"

"The reports were enough."

Then he leaned over to touch the jade fox pendant that had somehow fallen out of her blouse neckline. She felt the faint pressure against the bone just below her throat as his finger briefly brushed against the design. His face was inches away and she noticed that his pupils were not quite round. And she wondered why she had been so hasty in accepting his invitation for a ride in the park. Perhaps she needed a chaperon to rein in her impulsiveness.

"How unusual," he said as he sat back.

"It belonged to my father."

"The designs on jade necklaces are usually dragons or symbols of good luck. The jade itself is believed to symbolize a whole host of good qualities—like wisdom and courage and justice. But the fox itself is a wily creature—the symbol for tricksters, drunks, seductresses. A contradiction, isn't it?"

She frowned. "You say it as if a fox is a bad creature. My uncle had once told me that foxes were also the symbols for scholars and devoted lovers and those with a moral heart. My father was a scholar and he was certainly devoted to my mother and I had no doubt he owned this because of what *good* it represented to him."

Caradon gave a short bark of laughter. To Zan, it sounded like a loud challenge. "Then it would be quite interesting, wouldn't it, to see what side would win?"

^^^^

Chapter 11 – Rational Explanation

Her palms underneath her black gloves were damp as she clutched the side of the phaeton and her hat. Riding in a closed carriage was usually a sedate affair, occasionally interrupted by the wheels going over loose stones and potholes. A phaeton was an entirely different matter. It was small and light so that it went extremely fast when the horses pulling it hit their stride. The phaeton was also open, letting the wind

and the scenery rush past one's face. As far as Zan was concerned it was rushing past entirely too fast.

Caradon manipulated the pair of black Arabians pulling the phaeton with deceptive ease. His expression wasn't of anything—passive, bored perhaps. But there was an almost mad glint in his eye as he directed the horses to narrowly brush past a large lumbering carriage with a team of four white mares. The driver of that carriage cursed loudly and Zan turned briefly to see him shake a fist as well. She glanced back at Caradon who didn't seem to notice and she wondered how his hat managed to stay on his head.

"Now I truly understand the objections about riding such a contraption," she managed to say as the phaeton shuddered around a corner. "Do you have some sort of death wish?"

"Of course not."

"Then why do you have such a fast vehicle?"

The road began to roughen and the small carriage began to jostle causing her to bump up against him, brushing against a shoulder, a thigh. Such close quarters, she thought sourly, one would think that he actually planned to drive fast.

"Phaetons are all the rage," he replied glancing at Zan's close-lipped expression. "Do you not follow fashion, Miss Hu?"

"Fashions come and go. I prefer to concentrate my energies on something more productive and important."

"Such as your experiments." With a flick of his wrist, the horses slowed their canter and the blur of the streets became discrete buildings. "I've heard that chemical experiments are very similar to the alchemical processes."

She took a calming breath as she finally surveyed the scenery. They had turned onto Cumont Road, heading north into the interior of the city. A mix of residences and shops lined the street. Old Amanthus loomed, oily and dark, ahead. "In a way, chemical experiments are alchemical processes. The field of chemistry originated from the efforts of the ancient alchemists. Many of the methods used then in trying to purify and identify unknown substances came from alchemy. Even some of the terms have survived—distillation, saturation, sublimation."

"Ah, I think I recall the vocabulary. Once, I had made a bit of a study of alchemy. It also inspired the field of the current apothecary—working with distilling the essential active ingredients for teas, infusions, tinctures, drugs."

Remembering the smoking censer in Caradon's study, she said, "I am not surprised."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," she replied. "We are heading into Old Amanthus? I thought we were going to the park."

"This is the quickest route."

"Yes, I should have known since we are riding in a phaeton."

"Unless you wish that we take a longer route?"

"This is fine." She doubted that she could control herself from the *change* or otherwise embarrassing herself if she had to stay in his company any longer than necessary.

Old Amanthus, now the center of the more modern city, was a complicated maze of old, shedding buildings. Millennia before, Amanthus had been a small port on the Island overlooking the sea. The inhabitants had been mostly fishermen and farmers. Then Amanthus had grown when the Roman Empire had taken over the area, as evidenced by the ancient cobblestones underlying the old main road, Tupet Road, or as they called it then, Via Tupia. Ruins of that ancient civilization still littered the Island countryside, but the most prominent was the Temple, though technically not in the geographical center of the city, was certainly the traditional center.

The Temple itself was remarkably well maintained. The city officials cited the preservation as an effort to keep the jewels of the Ancient World alive for future generations. But everyone knew the backing behind the preservation was that of an underground religious group still worshipping the old gods. Otherwise, the Church would have had it torn down hundreds of years ago in a proclamation to rid the Island of pagan and demonic influences. Now, the older and the newer religions stood on an uneasy truce, the Temple, a polished white dome surrounded by possibly even older cemeteries and the Church's cathedral, a hulking, towering gothic monster across North Bishop Street.

Decaying buildings littered the rest of Old Amanthus, peopled by the poor and the criminal. Needless to say, it was the bad part of the city and every year, the officials would make speeches to clean it up. But all of it was blustering and hot air. The last effort to tear down a street of abandoned warehouses and to build new ones had been stymied when machines stopped working and carts mysteriously broke

down. Fuses for demolition always sputtered out in the damp, moldy air. Something had its grip on Old Amanthus and every year, the strange malaise and rot that characterized it spread inch by inch outward.

Zan tried not to dwell on that thought too much. The Museum, where her uncle's things were now supposedly archived, stood on Market Row, the boundary between Old Amanthus and the rest of the city. It was possible that she would break down weeping if the dust and the cobwebs and the mold from the spreading decay took a hold of her uncle's experiments. So she concentrated directly ahead, watching Caradon's pair of black horses clopping along the paved street, twitching their ears whenever there was a loud sound.

"The mayor never follows up on his promises to revitalize Old Amanthus, does he?"

His voice broke her concentrated reverie and she slid a glance to him. "Not for a lack of funds. Perhaps using inferior equipment is the cause for his failure."

"Oh? Somehow, I don't believe that is the real reason."

"Inferior equipment," she repeated firmly. "Or else sabotage by the workers. Otherwise, how did everything get built in the first place? Unless you can prove to me that the failure of the latest demolition efforts was do to something else."

Caradon abruptly drew up the reins and the phaeton halted as a train of water-stained wagons bearing coffins pulled their way across the street to an already overcrowded cemetery filled with tombstones and funerary statuary. In front of the cemetery was the round Temple—a white, ghostly figure in the darkened atmosphere of Old Amanthus. He seemed strangely intense as he watched the procession instead of directing his horses to take a detour. And as they stayed in place, she became slowly aware of something—some sort of prickling energy that reminded her of the sting produced by her uncle's electricity experiments—coming from the direction of the Temple, creeping along her skin, pulling at her.

When the funeral procession passed and the phaeton rolled onward again, he said, "I'm not the kind of person who can prove to you anything. Tell me again why you think the stalled progress for fixing this part of the city is due to simple mishap. Can you prove to me that ordinary, mechanical mishaps are the root of it? Can you tell me that everything that happens has some sort of rational explanation?"

She thought of the *change*, just underneath her human skin, and decided not to reply.

~~~~~

## Chapter 12 – At the Park

"I admire what you and your colleagues at the Academy are doing for science," Caradon said. The phaeton passed North Bishop street and the cathedral. Zan kept her gaze steadily on the stone structure, consciously noting the thin, glass stained windows and the gray-black gothic columns. A small party of devoted worshippers, perhaps pilgrims from the Continent, slowly moved across the front courtyard to the front doors of the cathedral. Perhaps they were visiting to see the knuckle bones of Saint Sebastian. "But I think there are definitely things in this world which science cannot explain."

Zan doubted the knuckle bones belonged to the illustrious Saint Sebastian. More likely, the bones were of some poor soul who had originally been buried in a mass grave in the holy lands. Perhaps a mercenary crusader several centuries before had dug them out and sold them to some gullible monks. Finally, she shifted her gaze as the cathedral passed and the park came into view. "Maybe those things which you allude to, Mr. Caradon, are phenomena that we cannot explain presently because we currently lack the tools and understanding to do so."

"You do not believe in miracles? In magic? In beings not of this world?"

"Miracles and magic? They are either tricks of the slight-of-hand sort or phenomena that we haven't adequately explained yet. The Ancients believed that lightning were the weapons of the gods. Now we know it is a weather phenomenon in which peculiar air particles—or charges—are attracted to each other causing the lightning, which is a form of electricity. I have confidence that things we cannot explain yet will be explained."

The park starkly contrasted with the depressing atmosphere of Old Amanthus—it was a bright green lawn with carefully tended beds of roses and dahlias and pines and cedar. It was a garden paradise simulating the Queen's country, the Old Country, the Mother Country. Zan had never visited the place. She considered the Far East, the place of her birth, the true Mother Country. The park was an artificial place. The Island's actual landscape was dry—a bedrock of limestone overlaid with a red sandy soil. The forests consisted not only of pines and cedar, but also cypress, and along the coast, groves of olive trees.

Scent from the blooming flowers wafted in the air.

“And what of the beings not of this world?” he repeated.

This time, she gave him a close-mouthed smile. “Not of this world? You believe in demons and angels?”

“I haven’t seen demons or angels. Or at least I don’t think so. But I’m keeping an open mind.”

“There are people who are not what they seem,” she said slowly. “But I would be inclined to think that any differences are more biological than magical or divine. It would be a more sensible explanation.”

“And you dismiss magic and religion so easily?”

“I subscribe to a rational view of the world.”

“You’re an unusual woman, Miss Hu. Most women I have an acquaintance with believe in ghosts and fairies and other things supernatural. It’s quite fashionable nowadays to attend séances to make contact with departed loved ones.”

“It’s a pity that most people are disinclined to believe that such things are actually hoaxes designed to take advantage of the grieving and part them from their money.”

“And I thought I was the cynical one.” Caradon gave a half-hearted laugh before he continued, “My mother believed in such things. Spirits. Ghosts. *Gui*. She had the habit of going out at night to commune with the dead.”

“Your mother?” Zan said cautiously. She wasn’t completely oblivious to gossip although she rarely paid any attention Society’s self-absorbed nattering. But she had heard that Caradon’s mother had been a prostitute. How he became a businessman with that sort of background was something of a mystery.

“Have you not already heard the story?” he said in feigned boredom. “My mother was a courtesan in the Emperor’s court. My father met her when he was stationed at the embassy in the Far East as an ambassador. After he was called back by the Queen, my mother found out she was with child.”

“So you grew up in the Emperor’s court?”

“No, she left the court. When I was old enough, she sent me to a school. During my last year, she developed consumption. Now, she’s with those ghosts she always talked to.”

In sudden sympathy, she put her hand on his wrist. He looked down at her fingers and then into her eyes. She let go of him. “Why didn’t your mother tell your father about you?”

“She was stubborn and she didn’t want to leave her home. As soon as I was able to obtain the necessary funds, I went in search of Peter Caradon. The Earl of Gasmere was not what I expected. But I suppose we got on well enough despite the fact that he never got around to making me his legitimate heir. Which is just as well. I wouldn’t want the responsibility that the title entails.”

“Other men in your position would be a boiling mess of resentment and bitterness.”

“Who says that I’m not?”

“Are you implying, then, that you are controlling the current earl’s finances because you are bitter and resentful of his status?”

“My cousin was never sensible with money. He’s lived a privileged life since the cradle. He has never known poverty or hard work.” They were now in the heart of the park, somewhat sheltered from the public view by a copse of trees. A little ways away stood a granite gazebo with an altar that had stood as long as the Temple. Long ago, the Ancients had stained the steps red with sacrificed birds and rabbits on that altar for augury and other ceremonies requiring divination. Now it was whitewashed clean. Caradon relaxed the reins and the phaeton rolled to a stop.

“You like control. Over finances. Over your family.”

“Perhaps.” The reins lay limply in his hands. “It is a pity that you don’t have any of your uncle’s notes to continue on his research.”

Zan stiffened in her seat. “That again? I thought we had an agreement that I would continue with my own projects.”

“I didn’t say anything about stopping your own projects. Just that it’s a pity that you don’t have your uncle’s notes.” His eyes narrowed as he watched her. “You don’t suppose your uncle hid a copy of his notes elsewhere? Did you look in his study? His desk? His bookcase?”

“I told you I saw him burn his notes.”

She gasped when he suddenly turned to face her. To an outside observer, it looked as if Caradon had turned to engage her in intense conversation, but his arm pinned her own against the seat cushion. She tried to struggle, to throw him off, but he had the advantage of larger size and greater strength. Her heart hammered in her chest as his grip tightened to discourage any more movement.

“You know more than you let on,” he said lowly.

“If I knew anything, why should I tell you?”

Caradon leaned over until his mouth was quite close to her ear. His warm breath tickled the nape of her neck. “Because I am your patron,” he replied. “And you are mine.”

“You are just like your cousin with your assumptions! I am not some doxy, some courtesan bought and paid for!”

He abruptly released her, looking wary, and she belatedly realized what she had said. But she could not take those words back.

“Mr. Caradon,” she continued in what she hoped to be a calmer voice, “you are not the only one who likes control over his own affairs. If you insist on being domineering over what experiments I decide to pursue, I might as well take on a different patron. Like Mr. Southmore.”

“The Church’s emissary?” He took up the reins again. “The Church is far more strict than I am.”

“What are you suggesting? That I am better off with you?”

“No. In fact, you might not be better off with me. I can tell you right now that the association I had with Elliot Waterstone is far different than the one I have with you. I won’t be esoteric when I say that I am quite interested in what you know about your uncle’s nonexistent notes.” He barred his teeth in a harsh smile as Zan swallowed nervously. “The real question, Miss Hu, is if you want to take a risk and tell me or would you rather run back to what is safe and good and pretend of your ignorance of this entire subject.”

^^^^^^

## Chapter 13 – Last Notes

Clouds rolled across the afternoon sky, mirroring her darkening mood. A stiff breeze tugged at Zan’s clothes as she fumbled with the house key. She could feel Caradon’s stare at her back as she let herself into 42 Warden Street. Once inside the foyer, she shut the door away from any prying eyes.

Now alone, she took off her hat and felt somewhat unsettled. She had decided to tell him nothing. It was certainly all right not to reveal information. After all, didn’t everyone have secrets to keep? But why did she feel like she had lied to him?

The household staff was nowhere in the vicinity. She supposed Mrs. Philomon and Isadora were putting the house to rights or were out with simkins to obtain the weekly supplies. Boreas was most likely in the kitchen preparing dinner.

She slipped down to the basement laboratory, finding that the only lamp left burning was the one sitting on the central table dividing the room in half. Zan put her hat and gloves on the table before retrieving her reticule with her uncle’s notes from the drawer she had stashed it in earlier.

She took the notes out and spread them on the table. The loose leaf papers were all dated and numbered and mostly sorted in order. After shifting them to a more precise order, she noticed that the notes were dated from the past month and detailed the electrical experiments that her uncle had been conducting prior to his death. Most of the notes detailed the results of failed experiments due to incorrect parameters. One sheet immediately caught her eye. It was a diagram of a new apparatus that she vaguely remembered her uncle had begun building just before his death. She had not been paying so much attention since he had simply remarked to her that he was building an ‘improvement’ to the one he had built for an Academy demonstration.

The Museum now was in possession of that half-assembled machine.

Zan looked up from the table, surveying Uncle Elliot’s half of the laboratory. She narrowed her gaze, gauging the bits and scraps of material that had been left behind. There were sheets and rods of different metals, pipes, cranks, ball bearings, bits of wood in all shapes, glass jars of all sizes, bolts of fabric, gears, nails, coils of wire, and even a stack of old newspapers. If she had the inclination, she was sure she would have built the electricity machine out of all the left over materials. Or at least most of it. The diagram of the machine called for a ‘storage capacitor,’ an iron sphere as big as her head to help collect negative electrical charge.

She looked closer at the diagram which at first glance was a simple drawing of a sphere on a stand, and then the next page for further explanation. But to her surprise, she found the next page missing. She frowned, feeling uneasy about it all. From what she had, she could build the machine, but she would have no understanding of it.

For the next hour, she poured over the writing, trying to cobble together a mental picture of what her uncle had been doing by piecing together his brief notes and trying to remember what he had told her about the subject during his lecturing moods.

“It was the Ancients who first realized that lightning and *subtle fire*, the highly energized state of certain materials, were related,” he uncle had told her. Perhaps the lecture had occurred during lunch or dinner or in the laboratory when she had been watching one of her own experiments slowly coming to a boil. At any rate, it was the lecture and not the surroundings that stuck in her mind.

“Someday we may be able to study the phenomenon of lightning directly,” he had continued wistfully, “but for now we must content ourselves with something safer—the *subtle fire* or electrostatics of common objects. Stationary electrical charges, as some would say.”

“Electrical charges?” she had asked, unsure of the terminology.

“The stuff that gives certain objects that kind of energy that you can sometimes sense by touching and getting a nasty shock. The curious thing about charge is that it comes in two types called positive and negative. Just terms, of course, to indicate that the two are in opposites. It is no different if they were called right and left or stop and go. The two different charges attract each other while the same charge repels. In a way, it’s quite beautiful that nature has provided such symmetry.”

“Symmetry?” said Zan. “There was a recent Academy lecture on the grouping of chemical elements that rely heavily on symmetry. Perhaps that is what nature basically is—symmetry.”

“You may be right,” her uncle had replied. “We animals are symmetrical. Plants and flowers are symmetrical. Why not the inanimate world as well? I would not be surprised if the other forces of nature such as gravity, magnetism, and magic are inherently symmetrical as well.”

Ah, if magic were only so easily understood! Zan had and still mused not with a little bitterness. Her control of that particular energy was shaky at best.

“Charge can be transferred or built up whenever you create friction between two objects. Curiously, though, we only see the spark, the physical manifestation of electricity when some sort of metal is used. An interesting property, don’t you think?”

“I suppose that property could be used as an aid in classifying chemical elements,” Zan had agreed. “But what about materials that can carry that *subtle fire*, that charge, but are not metal? If you rub amber long enough, it begins attracting various things—similar to your attracting positive and negative charges.”

“Like the bits of amber we can find along the sea shore?” said Uncle Elliot. He had given her an enigmatic smile. “Why Zan, I haven’t thought about that before. But you are right, some non-metals can store electrical potential with some proficiency. The Ancients had in fact called amber *elektron*—which is the origin of the word *electricity*. It is also something to note, isn’t it, that the Ancients also considered amber an essential ingredient in spells and magical amulets? Amber was regarded as ‘solidified sunlight’ and it is said that witches wear necklaces of amber for rituals. Perhaps there is something about both electricity and magic. After all, both can be stored....”

“Miss Hu, I didn’t realize that you were already back from your ride at the park.”

She looked up to see Mrs. Philomon standing in the stairway with her arms crossed along her ample bosom. The housekeeper was frowning.

“I’ve been down here quite a while, Mrs. Philomon. I apologize for not informing the staff of my return.”

“Huh,” she replied. “Well how did the outing with Mr. Caradon go? I hope he did not try anything funny.”

“As well as it could be expected,” she replied, remembering the alarming declaration whispered in her ear and then the silent, tense ride back to her house. “I haven’t, uh, scared my patron off.” Or intimidated him. In fact, it was quite the opposite. At least she hadn’t given in to his not so subtle demand for answers.

“As you say, Miss Hu,” said Mrs. Philomon. “Will you be taking dinner upstairs?”

“No. I would like dinner in the laboratory this evening. There is some work I must see to before I turn in for the night.”

“As you wish, Miss Hu.”

When the housekeeper left, she looked down at the notes again and became aware of something not quite right nagging at the edge of her mind. She concentrated, trying to capture that elusive thought, but it continually flitted away, hovering just beyond her consciousness. She shook her head. It still did not come.



Instead of dwelling on that frustrating lack of insight, she got up from her seat at the table and began perusing the shelves filled with raw material. She might as well start making a model of the machine from the notes that everyone seemed to want. Looking for an adequate base for the machine, she pulled out a rectangular board of pine from a bottom shelf. As she lifted the board up to stand on the floor, a piece of paper slid down the underside of the pine board.

It was the missing page.

^^^^^^

## Chapter 14 – Cross Section

The wooden board went forgotten as Zan picked up the missing page. Instead of the explanation of the diagram that she had been expecting, there was another diagram—a cut away of her uncle’s machine revealing that the spherical metal dome and the stand weren’t solid at all but hollow.

“Miss Hu, where would you like me to put this?”

She looked up to find that Mrs. Philomon had sent Isadora down with a dinner tray. “on the table please. Let me clear away these notes first.”

As she gathered up the papers she had spread on the table, the maid remarked, “Are you looking over Mr. Waterstone’s notes? I thought he burned them a while ago.”

“That was what I had thought as well. But I found these. I confess, I find it terribly curious as to why my uncle would go through all the deception to fool us. To fool me.”

“Perhaps he was just being extra careful, Miss Hu. Perhaps he didn’t want any of us to accidentally talk about his notes. Didn’t he say at one time that some inventors are a rather unscrupulous lot?”

“No doubt, you are probably right, Isadora. What is for dinner? It smells quite different.”

“Boreas is trying a new recipe from some South Seas merchants he met at the marketplace. Saffron rice, trout, and sweet potatoes in some sort of milk sauce. I hope you don’t mind him ringing up the accounts with all the imported food he obtained. Simkins was telling him he was being foolish, but he insisted since you have a patron now.”

“The cook can have his indulgences, but it’s best not to encourage him to take any of it for granted,” said Zan. “After all, patronage could be withdrawn at any time.”

“Wise words, Miss Hu. Oh and there is one thing that Mrs. Philomon and I had wished to confer with you earlier. In cleaning up Mr. Waterstone’s bedroom, we wondered whether you wanted to leave it as it is or to turn it into another guest room.”

“I see no reason to let space go to waste. You may use it as a guest room.”

“There were also some of Mr. Waterstone’s personal papers there. We put them on the shelf in his, er, I suppose it is now your study.”

“What sort of papers?”

“Actually, it was a book. A notebook or journal of sorts. There were some sketches of machines in it so we had supposed it contained some of his thoughts on his experiments.”

“If it isn’t too much trouble, could you bring it down to me?”

“Certainly, Miss Hu.”

When Isadora turned to head back upstairs, Zan took off the lid and sniffed at the food. Generally, Boreas was a fine cook, but she was also leery whenever he chanced to try something new. Sometimes, new recipes did not go so well the first time around and at the moment, she wasn’t particularly in a mood to be adventurous—to try a failed culinary experiment. But her stomach growled in protest so with a few reservations, ate a spoonful of the steaming yellow rice. The rice was a bit spicy, but palatable. The trout turned out to be tender and flaky with the faint tang of ginger sauce. And the sweet potatoes with milk sauce was as creamy as pudding.

As she ate, she turned her attention to the page she had found. The inside of the electricity machine apparently had moving parts as well. There were two pulleys that rotated a belt. One of the pulleys was located inside of the metal dome, the other at the base. When the pulleys moved—either by an attached power supply or manually in some fashion, Zan assumed as her uncle had not drawn that part of machine—the belt would move. The belt itself brushed against a metal spike or needle of some sort embedded in the interior of the stand, near the bottom.

At first glance, the electricity machine was quite puzzling. What did it do and what purpose did it

have? But then she remembered that her uncle had built an earlier version of the machine that was smaller than the one in the diagram. At his demonstration at the Academy, Elliot had explained about moving charges. From what she could recall about his lecture, the machine made use of the fact that rubbing different materials together exchanged electrical charges. When the belt rubbed up against the spike or needle, the belt would gain a negative charge which it would carry up to the metal dome. The dome itself acted like a storage unit for the extra charge but when something of the opposite charge touched the dome, like a finger or a glass rod, there would be discharge and one would be able to see a spark between the metal dome and the object. Sort of like a miniature bit of lightning.

“Here’s Mr. Waterstone’s journal, Miss Hu.” Isadora had returned to put a slim, leather volume beside the dinner tray. “What should I tell the cook about his new recipe?”

“Quite good,” Zan replied. “The trout was perfect. I assume the sweet potatoes are dessert since they are so sweet? The rice is a bit spicy though. Boreas might want to tone down on what he put in it.”

Isadora nodded. “I’ll tell him.”

Zan made herself finish the rest of dinner and left Isadora to clear away the dishes before she opened the journal. She wasn’t quite sure what to expect. Certainly, Isadora and Mrs. Philomon might have seen diagrams, but it could have been anything. Even with her uncle gone, she felt guilty about peering into the journal. It was one thing to read a man’s laboratory notes and quite another to read his personal diary. It was an invasion of privacy and it made her slightly nervous that she might be delving into secrets that her uncle might have kept from her.

She slowly flipped through the pages and gave a small sigh. So far, the journal entries were about Elliot’s days at the lab, the lectures he attended or made at the Academy, and meetings he had with some of his colleagues. Then she stopped at an entry dated about a month before.

*“My niece brought up an excellent point. About the storage of energy in certain materials. This reminds me of Tarlton’s efforts on making a battery—a fuel cell to store energy to power other machines. If chemical energy can be harnessed, why not the electrical as well? We vaguely know of some materials such as amber that have the potential to store charge. I will have to ask Tarlton what he thinks of this.”*

Tarlton was one of Elliot’s colleagues at the Academy who worked on a variety of things at any given time. Sometimes it was analyzing the physical properties of various materials—such as the elasticity of various metals and fabrics and woods or the tensile strength of those same things—or he was dabbling in the mysterious forces of magnetism by mapping out what he called the “magnetic field” by studying the interaction between magnets and bits of iron. Like many of the scientists and inventors at the Academy, Tarlton was a harmless old, abet eccentric, man.

The next couple of entries, Zan skimmed. They were mostly notes about her uncle’s discussion with Tarlton about various materials he might use for his next electricity machine interspersed by brief irritated comments about his rival Pendergrast and Pendergrast’s idiotic efforts to trump him. Then, there was a final short and enigmatic entry dated a week before Elliot’s death and then the blank pages took over. That week—that day—was when her uncle had made a big show to her and the staff that he was burning his notes.

*“I ran into him today. He claims that he originally paid a visit to the Academy for other reasons, but I am not convinced. He was most adamant for a proposal of his which has made me quite suspicious about his motives. And if what he hints is true, I cannot trust anyone. Like this new machine of mine, it appears that everyone possesses a dual nature.”*

Zan closed the journal and tapped her fingers on the cover. Who was *he*? And what sort of dual nature did the machine possess?

~~~~~

Chapter 15 – The Rubbing Effect

A distinguished looking gentleman with golden hair burnished liberally with white sat at the large desk in the study writing in a journal.

“Uncle Elliot!”

She reached out and hit hard air, as if thick glass separated them. A lump formed in her throat and the backs of her eyes burned. She shouted, but he didn’t look up from his work. She pounded several more times at the invisible barrier until she realized that she was no longer in the study and that the blurring figure of her uncle was not simply due to tears.

Taking a step back, her bare feet crunched on dry leaves. The dead forest lay fallow under the cold light of a waning moon—the tree branches jutted up towards the sky, naked after the falling of golden leaves but before the onset of winter. Something tugged at her hair.

“A pity. A pity that you aren’t interested.”

She whipped around, seeing nothing. “Who’s there?”

“I’m here.” The Voice was soft, a whisper, strangely familiar.

“Who are you?”

She sensed rather than heard laughter. “Oh? You’re interested in who I am?”

“Yes, I’m interested. I like talking to people face to face—so show yourself.”

“Impatient as well, are we?” Warm fingers suddenly touched the side of her throat. She jerked away, but those phantom fingers remained on her skin.

“What do you want?”

Instead, the Voice ignored her. The fingers became a hand and it closed around her throat. A heavy musky scent of damp forest left her gasping. “Hmm,” purred the Voice, “I wonder if you taste as sweet as you smell.”

She cried out and tried to claw her way out of her invisible captor’s embrace, but the hand became two that clamped mercilessly at her upper arms, paralyzing her. Something slightly wet and feather-light traced the tendon and muscle and the pounding pulse just under her skin.

“Shh. You know who I am.”

A sob wrenched itself from her mouth and the Voice released her. She fell and the dry leaves crackled under her knees.

* * *

Zan took in a few vigorous breaths of air on the steps outside the massive institute called the Academy. The building had been built a century before dedicated to the Queen’s grandfather. The Academy faced Old Amanthus with solid and solemn columns. To the north was the Weaver’s District and to the south, the Museum and Market Row. Vestiges of the previous night’s dream still lingered at the edges of her mind like a malicious fog. Hot tea and a hackney ride had done nothing except to set her teeth on edge. Perhaps she was becoming as paranoid as her uncle at the end. Perhaps in a very near future date, she would even start considering burning her uncle’s remaining notes and moving elsewhere—she had heard about the warm islands of paradise in the South Seas....

“Ah, Miss Hu, fancy meeting you here at the Academy so soon.”

The voice was an irritating mix of a wheeze and a squeak and unfortunately, its intrusion destroyed her brief daydream of lying in a hammock and napping as the ocean crashed on the beach.

“My condolences on your uncle’s passing.” The second voice was smoother and cultured although it had a strong Iberian accent. Zan finally focused and realized that a woman was speaking to her—a woman in a fashionable red gown and equipped with a frilly lace parasol leaning against her shoulder. Greta Del Rassa. “I am glad to see that you are holding up. I had heard rumors from other quarters that you were quite devastated and perhaps also caught an infection of the lungs on the day of your uncle’s funeral.”

Zan narrowed her gaze at the gypsy woman in front of her. The Academy fraud—as she had privately dubbed her. Then she shifted her view to the men beside the woman—one, Del Rassa’s latest conquest, a Lord What’s-His-Name who was the wealthy son of some count on the Continent. The other was Pendergrast—the man who had initially greeted her—stout yet tall, balding although in denial by the few hairs combed meticulously over a shiny palate and in possession of a nose too round for its own good.

“I am glad to see you are hale and healthy as well,” added Pendergrast with a too bright smile. “Good to see you about. It’s entirely unproductive to be moping about.”

“Thank you for your well wishes,” Zan replied in a stiff, formal tone, wondering why these two who usually hobnobbed with the rich and famous were talking to her. “It’s a relief to find such a well of support during one’s time of need.”

“Speaking of time,” said Del Rassa, “We are heading to the Amanthus Club for brunch. You are welcome to join us.”

“Thank you, but no. I have some business I must attend to.”

“Ah, sorting out your uncle’s personal affects?” said Pendergrast with a sharpening eye. “Papers and notes about his experiments?”

“Actually, no,” she replied curtly. “I’m attending to my own business.”

Then the count’s son, Del Rassa’s besotted aristocratic admirer, exclaimed that his carriage had arrived and Del Rassa bid her a good day before she climbed into the coach with his help. Zan stifled a grin when Del Rassa tripped on her skirts and went sprawling on the floor of the vehicle.

Pendergrast ignored the debacle as he said, “Miss Hu, if you have any need of help in sorting through your uncle’s things, I would be pleased to be of assistance. After all, I am well versed in your uncle’s field and may be able to shed some light on some things that as a chemist you are not aware of.”

“That is very kind of you to offer, Mr. Pendergrast.”

He nodded. “Then good day, Miss Hu.”

For a moment, she watched Pendergrast struggle to get into the carriage before she turned back to the Academy.

Beyond the heavy brass doors and the foyer of the building were stairs leading both to the upper levels and the basement. She took the stairs to the lower level in search of Henry Tarlton’s new laboratory. Tarlton’s experiments, unfortunately, had the penchant for backfiring badly. Not too long ago, one of his experiments had ended spectacularly in the shed located in the backyard of his residence. No one had been injured, thank God, but the resulting bonfire had attracted the attention of the volunteer fire department, the police, the irate neighbors, and gawking passersby.

After that disaster, Tarlton’s wife had stolidly put her foot down that he not conduct any of his research in or around their residence. This, of course, left the Academy’s unused basement rooms. So far, Tarlton’s experiments had set fire to a table, flooded the basement, and punched a hole through a brick wall. At least the Academy members were not yet aggravated enough to kick him out just yet. So far, all they were doing were shaking their heads and muttering, “Ah, Tarlton’s at it again.”

It was with some trepidation then, that Zan stood in front of the door leading to Tarlton’s laboratory with a hand raised to knock. She heard a sudden burst of shouting.

“Faster! Faster I say! We’re never going to get it up to speed if you slack off!”

She knocked.

There was a crash.

“Erasmus, get the door!”

The door opened, revealing an out of breath youth who had probably just reached his majority wearing work pants and shirt, his face beet red from exertion and his mousy hair sticking up at odd angles. “Morning, ma’am. How may I help you?”

“Good morning. Is Mr. Tarlton here?”

“Miss Hu! What a surprise!” A fit middle-aged man in similar work clothes like his young assistant Erasmus and spectacles perched on the tip of an aquiline nose ambled toward the door. He wiped his hands on a rag and then shook Zan’s hand. “I see you’ve completely recovered.”

“Recovered?” she said, wrinkling her brow.

“Yes. I heard from the grapevine that you were suffering from a dreadful lung disease after attending your uncle’s funeral. An absolutely dreadful disease. And my condolences on your loss of course.”

“Thank you, but I wasn’t sick. I never came down with a lung disease.”

“Oh? Then perhaps I got it wrong and it was someone else. Now what brings you to my laboratory?” He turned back to his lab bench which was littered with odds and ends, bits of metal, containers made of various materials, vials of liquid and powder. Tarlton perched on a stool and licked his pen before making a notation in a notebook lying on the table surface. “All right Erasmus, let’s take it from the top.”

The assistant groaned and did an exaggerated shuffle as he went over to a strange contraption that looked like a mess of wires connected to a wheel with a handle. “Sir, it didn’t work last time....”

“But we must try again!” Tarlton exclaimed. “Now, Miss Hu, what were you here about?”

“I believe my uncle had consulted with you concerning some of his experiments?”

“He did?”

“Yes. One of his previous....”

Tarlton held up a finger. “In a moment, Miss Hu. Now get it turning, boy.”

Erasmus spit on his hands and then began to crank the wheel in earnest. With a bit of scrutiny, Zan realized that the wheel was rotating a block of material inside the coil of wire. The block spun faster as the youth cranked the wheel faster. While wondering what all the fuss was about, Zan gave a surprised cry as several sparks flew from the metal coils. One spark fell on the youth’s sleeve and caught fire.

Erasmus noticed the flames and shrieked before stumbling backward and waving his arms wildly. Immediately, Zan grabbed a bucket of water and threw it on the youth.

“No! No! No!” cried Tarlton. “Don’t stop now. We’re there. We’re almost there.”

“Mr. Tarlton, are you completely out of your mind?” demanded Zan as a wet Erasmus gingerly poked at his arm to check its roasted condition. “Of course you have to stop, or you’ll burn the Academy down. What were you trying to do anyway?”

“Testing something I thought about,” Tarlton replied. “I had noticed, not so long ago, that when I brought a magnet close to a coil of metal wire, there was a bit of spark. Like electricity. But is it the cause of the magnetic field generated by the magnet? I’m not sure exactly what it is—but it was similar to what your uncle had told me at one time.”

There was a loud, imperious knock at the door. Erasmus gave up examining his arm and said, “I’ll get it.” And stomped off towards the entrance of the laboratory.

Tarlton slumped over his stool in thought as his eyes behind his spectacles misted over. “In fact, Elliot had told me that he had gotten the idea from you. That when two objects rubbed together, those objects began accumulating charge. Of course, it would have to be certain combination of objects. Elliot had coined the term triboelectric effect for the phenomenon. It was from *tribos* which was the Ancient word for *rubbing*.”

Zan heard the door open and the assistant’s greeting. The hairs at the back of her neck prickled. She turned her head slightly to see a dark haired man in the doorway replying to Erasmus. Then the man caught her eye and his mouth curved. How on earth did Caradon find her?

“What your uncle had mentioned was amber and wool,” continued Tarlton, oblivious of his newest visitor. “But he wanted to use some materials on his experiment that could test—that could perhaps create a bigger potential of charge. I suggested using different combinations: silk, rubber, various metal. You know, the usual sort of things, because, of course, no one had tested them before.”

“If you don’t mind my asking,” interrupted Zan, “but what was the material for?”

“Why for his machine—the interior of it. There was a belt that rubbed along a series of spikes at the base. You do know that one?”

“Yes, I know it. I do recall about the belt and the spikes, but I didn’t know what my uncle used to make them.”

“I would assume the spikes would have been metal and the belt some sort of fabric. Elliot never did get around to telling me what he did before he passed. Of course, you have the machine, don’t you? I suppose you wouldn’t mind satisfying my curiosity by taking a peek inside the thing and telling me?”

Caradon had stepped fully into the room. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him move closer to her and Tarlton. He stopped beside Tarlton’s machine, merely a few paces away. She tried to ignore her patron. “I’m afraid I don’t have my uncle’s machine anymore, Mr. Tarlton. He had donated it to the Museum.”

“Well the Museum could certainly let you look at it since you are the niece of the inventor an all. I think it would be very interesting to see if he had tried some of the stranger materials that he had mentioned that he had obtained from some amulet shop in Old Amanthus. He was really excited about something he called duality, but he never bothered to explain that to me.”

Zan blinked. “Old Amanthus? I never knew about this.”

“You didn’t? Well, that’s strange. I thought he told you everything. Even his plans to visit certain places in the old part of the city to test some of his theories...” Then Tarlton snapped back to himself. “Well, I thought it was all talk anyway. Old Amanthus is a terrible place to do experiments—I thought Elliot was just joking. Now the cliffs at the coast—there’s a place to do it. Wonderful place. Anyways, to the next trial. Erasmus!”

Tarlton’s assistant gave a frustrated yell. “But sir, if we do this again, I’m going to turn into a roasted marshmallow!”

^^^^

Chapter 16 – Eels and Leeches

With Tarlton and his assistant Erasmus preoccupied with their own experiments, Zan quickly bid them good luck on their results and a farewell before retreating quickly from their laboratory. Once she reached the basement hallway, however, an insistent hand on her shoulder stopped her. She gave a stiff

jerk, shrugging it off.

“If you will excuse me, I have some errands to run,” she said, not looking back.

“I need to talk to you,” Caradon replied. He moved to keep up with her when she began walking.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“We never finished our conversation from yesterday.”

They passed the main foyer where she nodded politely to a few passing Academy members. “I believe that conversation ended,” she said as he opened the door for her. Zan sailed passed him with barely a tip of her head in acknowledgement of his courtesies. “Our agreement was settled. And I do not believe that you are in want of a report at such an early juncture.”

“It’s not about the agreement or the report. But you haven’t told me everything of what you know about your uncle’s affairs. If I wasn’t mistaken, you came to the Academy this morning to follow up on one of your uncle’s last ideas with Henry Tarlton. You’re planning on heading into Old Amanthus to investigate some mystery on your own, aren’t you?”

She was, but she would be damned if she were to tell him. Why would she tell Caradon anything anyway? “How on earth did you find me at the Academy in the first place?”

“I visited your residence first. Your butler told me that you were visiting the Academy on an errand. So I came here, hoping to catch you before you flitted off elsewhere.”

“You could have waited in the sitting room. Or sent a message earlier about meeting.”

“If I had waited, it would have been for hours. Your staff had no idea when you would return. And judging from our last meeting, I wouldn’t have been surprised if you had ignored my message if I had sent one.”

“Perhaps I would have.” She stopped at the bottom of the Academy front stairs and slanted him a look. “Fine. So you want to talk to me. So talk.”

Zan was amused at the annoyed expression that briefly crossed his face. “In such a high traffic area? Why don’t we use the privacy of the carriage while I take you to your next destination?”

“I’ve had enough carriage rides with you. Besides, my next destination isn’t too far and a nice brisk walk can do wonders for the constitution. Or are you afraid you can’t keep up?”

“Keep up?” He adjusted his hat in such a manner that she believed that he was trying to thumb his nose at her. “I can more than keep up. Where are you going?”

“Where? To the Museum, of course. I wish to look at where they’ve archived my uncle’s machines.”

Caradon waved down a driver waiting near the curb. His own carriage and driver, Zan thought with a wry twist of her mouth. While he was talking to the driver, she turned on her heel and headed down the street towards the Museum on Market Row, the large square building in classical lines approximately one block south of the Academy.

“You’re as slippery as an eel, aren’t you?” He had finished talking to his driver and had somehow sprinted back to her side. Apparently, the man was going to stick to her side like glue until he had wrung some answers out of her.

Well, he could hover as much as he wanted, she thought stubbornly. No matter how much he tried to intimidate her, she was going to keep her mouth shut on the subject of her uncle’s notes. “I may be an eel, but eels are noble sea creatures. You, sir, are a leech.”

“You aren’t very subtle, are you?”

“No. I prefer to be blunt. You are both annoying and persistent, Mr. Caradon. Why are you wasting time with me. I thought a businessman like you would be rather busy with his other affairs such as your shipping business. Aren’t you concerned with inventory and shipping schedules and tariffs and other sorts of things merchants like you are supposed to be worried about? I am nothing.”

“Miss Hu, you are not ‘nothing.’ You represent a considerable investment. And I always take care of my investments.”

“An investment!” Zan said slightly outraged and scandalized. Several passersby gave her odd glances, but she ignored them as she and her patron crossed Market Row to the front of the Museum. “So I am like your stocks and bonds? I’m not a person?”

“Of course you’re a person,” he replied, exasperation lacing his tone. “But the marketable inventions that you may produce are the investment. I never meant to imply otherwise.”

“I should certainly hope not.”

^^^^^

Chapter 17 – Museum Galleries

The Museum stood over Market Row like a blocky sentinel cut in dark, grimy but classical lines. The smudging of dirt and soot along the once gleaming granite was testament to the building's placement—at the imaginary boundary, the edge where Old Amanthus started and ended. That dirt and soot was evidence of the creeping rot attempting to spread from the old city outward. Steep steps led from the street to the wide front doors. Zan quickly climbed the steps with Caradon not far behind, a few inches from her elbow. Inside, the Museum lobby was cool, almost cold, and her footsteps clicked loudly over the polished stone floor.

Near the entrance was a wide open desk occupied by a young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, with slicked back hair and a stiff suit. He looked up when the two visitors approached the desk and stood up, hand resting on the top of the desk.

“Ma’am, sir, are you here for a visit?”

Zan shook her head. “No. Not exactly. I’m here to see some machines that my uncle had bequeathed to the Museum after his death. It was not too long ago.”

The young man began tapping his fingers on the top of the desk, his eyes narrowing as he took in Zan and her black mourning dress and the flinty-eyed man beside her. “I do not have any access to the Museum’s pieces. Many of the Museum’s new acquisitions are stored in the archives for inspection and repair for a few months before they are put on display. May I ask which representative had contacted you for your uncle’s machines and who your uncle was?”

“Elliot Waterstone. And the Museum’s director, Gustav Kruntz had personally overseen the acquisition of my uncle’s machines.”

“Mr. Kruntz is not available today, but you may speak with Mr. Dardanus, the assistant director. He may be of help. Do you wish to meet with him?”

“If you please.”

The young man beckoned them to follow him up a small stairway hidden by a door that looked like an exit to the museum. On the upper floor, they passed a narrow stairway and the passed three doors before the young man knocked on one with a brass plaque emblazoned with the name, R. Dardanus. From within the office, they heard a voice saying “Come in.” The young man opened the door for them and then partially went into the office to introduce the visitors to the assistant director. Then after a reply, he nodded at Zan and Caradon before heading back downstairs to his post.

The inside of Dardanus’ office was sparse—bare wooden floors, plain unadorned bookshelves with yellowing documents and leather-bound books lining one wall. The copper bust of an ancient pagan god stood on the edge of an uncurtained window slowly turning green. The man sitting behind the work scarred desk had the build of an acrobat, slim and hairless, completely bald. Without that hair, his ears appeared abnormally large and his nose was red and hooked. Dark eyes glittered behind a pair of spectacles as Dardanus scrutinized the visitors.

Zan frowned at the lack of extra chairs and instead opted to stand in front of the desk, hands not quite clasped in front of her, but hands not on hips either.

“Miss Hu. Mr. Caradon. What a pleasure to meet you,” said Dardanus. His mouth stretched across his face, revealing short, yellowing teeth. “To what do I owe for this visit?”

“Mr. Dardanus, a few days ago, the Museum obtained some of my uncle’s, Elliot Waterstone’s, machines for its collection. If it wouldn’t be any trouble, I would like to take one last look at them.”

“Oh?”

“For sentimental reasons, of course,” Zan clarified. “My uncle passed away not too long ago and those machines are really the only things of significance that are left of him.”

“My condolences,” said Dardanus, his strange smile not moving an inch. “But I must say that I cannot help you here. It is true that I’m the assistant director, but even I am not privileged to certain sections in the Museum. Many of the new acquisitions are first stored in the archives. I’m afraid I do not have access to the archives. Only the museum director, Mr. Kruntz has the key. These are security measures, I should say. Some of the Museum’s acquisitions have great monetary value and we must protect ourselves from vandals and thieves.”

“Of course,” she replied. “I understand. Is Mr. Kruntz available, then?”

“I must apologize again. Mr. Kruntz is not here at the Museum today. He had an important appointment elsewhere. But if seeing your uncle’s machines soon is a priority, I can relay a message to

him and I am sure that he will come to his earliest convenience back here to allow you access to the archives. In the mean time, you are free to peruse the Museum at your leisure. We open today until five.”

Her lips thinned, but she thanked the assistant director and exited the office with long tense strides. Caradon closed the office door behind them and followed her down the stairs. Downstairs, she nodded to the young man at the desk and walked into the first gallery of the Museum.

It was a moment before her mind began to somewhat settle and she began thinking and realizing what she was feeling—thwarted. She wanted to know what was inside Uncle Elliot’s last invention—what the materials that he used were. Usually answers came quickly when she asked a direct question. Other inventors and scientists, the Academy members, were blunt, direct people. Bureaucracy, she had believed, belonged to solicitors and lawyers and banks—people who were overly obsessed with money. The Museum, the bastion of learning as she had believed for most of her life, was not supposed to be like that. Or, she thought wryly, she had just arrived at an inopportune time. Surely Kruntz would be here the next time she came to the Museum.

Ancient statuary filled the first gallery. Many of the stone figures were that of pagan gods and mythological creatures, weather-worn, scratched, and occasionally missing limbs and heads. She remembered the first time that she had visited the gallery with her uncle. She had been a child and the statues had towered over her like giant monstrous phantoms. They had been frightening. But now, with older eyes, she saw them as sad old stones that had seen civilizations rise and fall during their long life out in the open. And they would still be around when the Museum fell.

At the end of the gallery was a short corridor winding in a right degree angle. Then it branched—off to a second gallery and to an adjacent room painted a deep blue. Automatically, she took stepped into the room. Sarcophagi lined the walls and in a complicated maze pattern on the floor. A single wooden bench stood in the center of the room.

Alone with the dead. And then she found her mouth twitching as she realized who was with her. *Or almost.*

“You were lying,” he said. Caradon stood slightly behind her, not touching, but his voice was close to her ear. She shivered, vaguely remembering her dream. “You didn’t really want to see your uncle’s machines because you were sentimental.”

“I was not lying. Do you think that I am so cold hearted?” she said as she examined the engravings on one of the sarcophagi instead of looking at him. “Of course I want to look at my uncle’s machines for sentimental reasons. My uncle left me many things, but the machines are the only things that are purely of his creation.”

“All right, so you were not lying. But you weren’t telling that assistant director everything either. Just as you are not telling me everything.”

“Would you stop bothering me if I told you everything?” she said.

“I would stop asking you that particular question.”

She turned her head to glare at him, but he was simply looking back at her, dark gray eyes solemn and serious. Zan let out a breath. “Mr. Caradon, I am of no concern of yours. What I seek isn’t of any significance to you.”

“I beg to differ, Miss Hu. Many things concern me.”

Seeing no one else in the room of sarcophagi and no other Museum visitors wandering out in the adjacent hallway, she sat down on one of the coffins lying on the floor. She leaned over and put her elbows on her knees before looking up at him, gaze veiled by eyelashes. “The answer would bore you.”

“I want to know despite the boredom.”

“Very well. I want to know what materials my uncle used to build his machines. Pure curiosity.”

He sat down beside her. “Curiosity, hm?”

“Have you just wondered about anything?” she replied. “Anything at all? Or is that not in your temperament? People like me wonder about things all the time. How things work. Why things do the things they do. What are things made of. How things came about as they do. So I should think it is natural for me to wonder what my uncle was using to build his machines. He discussed his work with me, of course, but since I had my own work, he never bothered me with the details.”

“Of course I wonder about things.” He was grinning and she felt her skin prickling. It was the combination of the shape of his mouth and his teeth, she thought. “I wonder about a lot of things. Granted, the questions I ask aren’t the same as yours. They’re more in the line of how profitable a particular stock is. How good will the weather be in the coming months for my ships to sail. How much the market will fluctuate in the coming year.”

“You have the mind of a businessman, not a scientist.”

“Ah, but I also wonder about how things work. How flowers bloom every year, how poems are written, how paintings are painted. Why the city is slowly deteriorating no matter how much the buildings and streets are repaired.”

“You have a bit of an artist in you? I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“Those sorts of questions usually come late at night when I am relaxing with various sleep aids,” he admitted. “They are merely the more mundane ones that cross my mind. Sometimes,” and then he leaned a fraction closer and she straightened her back as her hands closed into fists on her lap, “I wonder about you.”

“There is nothing interesting about me,” she said, more harshly than she had initially intended.

“Oh, you’re infinitely fascinating. What aren’t you telling me, Miss Hu? What are you trying to hide? What lurks behind those golden eyes of yours? What lurks underneath that placid façade? A strange energy? A touch of the unusual? No ordinary woman would go into the sea to let her uncle go...”

“Mr. Caradon!” She suddenly stood up. “What I did at my uncle’s funeral is none of your business.”

He looked up at her. In the angle of the light, his eyes turned black. “It may not be any of my business but I’m free to wonder, can’t I? Just as you’re free to wonder about how the world works.”

“Some kinds of wondering border on the nosy.”

“So I am nosy.” He stood up as well and followed her out of the sarcophagi room and into the second gallery filled with more modern sculpture. This gallery, as well, was empty of visitors. Their steps echoed in quick taps as Zan quickly traversed the room, not pausing to look at the artwork. “What I do know is that you are suddenly interested in the workings of your uncle’s machines when you haven’t bothered to ask your uncle when he was still here. You’re up to something—perhaps resurrecting your uncle’s experiments—yet you tell me that the only work you intend to pursue is that of your chemical studies.”

They entered a long hall peppered on one side with small pastoral paintings by unknown renaissance artists. The other side of the hall were long and tall windows; afternoon light streamed through them, illuminating dust motes drifting down from the ceiling like fairy dust. Zan stopped in front of a painting—one of a vast green hill with a dark city appearing on the horizon. It reminded her of standing just outside of Amanthus in the countryside and looking over at the city as if one was a bird, looking from far away.

“So what if I want to resurrect my uncle’s experiments,” she said. “I can do that if I want. I don’t have to tell you about it. The only things I’m responsible is for the reports that I’m sending you. If my results are good, you will know about it.”

“If you choose to tell me in the first place,” he said. He reached out and took hold of her right elbow when she made to move again. “Miss Hu, you can tell me. I’m no gossip. I’m not funding any of your rivals.”

She was silent for a moment, face averted. Then she pulled her arm out of his grasp. “There’s only one more gallery in this section of the Museum before there’s another exit from this place. I was planning to find that amulet shop in Old Amanthus that Mr. Tarlton had mentioned.”

“Old Amanthus! No proper young lady would ever venture into such a neighborhood!”

“If you offer to give me a ride in your carriage to the place in question, you’re welcome to accompany me.” Then she turned her head and gave him a stingy smile. “That is, if you are comfortable venturing into such a neighborhood.”

“You dare to take advantage of me?”

She gave him a sharp laugh which was amplified eerily in the large gallery. “And will you let me?” Before waiting for his answer, she started her trek down the gallery again.

In response, he stormed after her, muttering something about ladies and entitled carriage rides.

~~~~~

## Chapter 18 – Stonewall

Caradon’s driver had told them that there were many amulet shops in Amanthus, but that there was only one of any significance located in Old Amanthus on Galen Avenue, a small street alleyway running parallel to the cemetery surrounding the Temple. Amulet shops, usually small, were prolific and

often earned their profits from the poor and superstitious or the more wealthy eccentrics. They usually carried everything from locket inlaid with health and love spells to large amulets, as large as a man's fist, designed to be nailed to doors to ward off the evil eye.

Zan had never been to an amulet shop. Such things, in her mind, were hoaxes, the refuge of the superstitious and those overly concerned with magic although those same persons had no real magical ability themselves. Amulet shops were the suppliers of false witches and magicians and supposed cures for everything from colds and headaches to simple malaise. Then she remembered her father's jade amulet that she was still wearing and the larger one in her reticule. Instinctively, her hand formed a fist above her breastbone.

In the shadows of the carriage, Caradon's gaze tracked her movements.

She turned to look out the window, to watch the wretched, run-down buildings of Old Amanthus pass by to avoid his eyes. Some of the questions that he had of her applied to him as well. Why was he so interested in her uncle's experiments? Why was he so interested in what she was doing or why she was going to resurrect his experiments? What lurked underneath that hard gaze and what sort of secrets hid beneath that enigmatic smile of his? Why was he so interested in her and why did he so suddenly remind her of that dream?

*You dared me. You cannot ignore me.*

On the outside, she did nothing to indicate that she heard anything. Those dark thoughts suddenly intruding themselves on her mind made her want to cover her ears. But she knew that covering her ears wouldn't solve anything. She would have still heard it if she were deaf.

*What? Suddenly afraid of me? You were oh so bold before.*

He knew that she could hear him. Or did he? Was he simply testing himself, trying to see if he could goad her? And if she responded, could he hear her? *And you have no tact*, she projected.

She saw the slightest jerk of his head. "Miss Hu..."

The carriage stopped and Zan gripped the edge of the window before she could pitch forward.

The amulet shop was a narrow three story building of brick that had been stained completely black. The neighboring buildings were tall as well with windows filled with nailed wood boards or dark, dirty glass. A small stoop graced the green-black front door of the amulet shop with a wrought iron railing that was tilted at a drunken angle. A tarnished sign hung above the door and one could barely make out the shop's name, "Eridanus Amulets."

Zan stepped out of the carriage without the driver's help and surveyed the surroundings with a cool eye. The street was empty but everything seemed dirty and rotting. A strong odor of decay came from everywhere at once making her wish that her sense of smell wasn't so keen. She heard Caradon get out of the carriage after her as she walked up the store stoop and pushed the door open.

An old bell attached to the corner of the door rang weakly, almost overshadowed by the creaking of the door. Inside, the amulet shop smelled musty and old and the sunlight was mostly filtered out by the dirty windows and even heavier curtains. For a moment, she stood near the entrance, letting her eyes adjust.

Two lamps lit the store, both of them sitting on a long counter running along one side of the room. The walls of the shop were floor to ceiling drawers with tiny hand-painted numbers underneath the knobs. It looked just like a bank vault that had gone to seed. No one was out on the main floor of the shop.

"Perhaps the owner is out to lunch," Caradon said lowly.

"Lunch? I doubt it. He's probably sleeping in the back room. Considering the neighborhood, I doubt this shop gets many customers." She walked to one of the walls and randomly pulled out one of the drawers. She lifted out a necklace made of round orange beads. She dropped it back into the drawer and pulled out another one. The second drawer contained broaches made of polished hematite that winked silver gray in the dim lamp light. They reminded her of Caradon's eyes.

"Number seven four eight two. Ladies' broaches. Cabochon hematite."

At the sound of the rasping voice, Zan deliberately placed the broach back into the drawer and closed it before turning around. A lanky figure stood at the end of the counter, dressed in brown trousers and coat that fell into folds indicating the suit was too large for him. Stringy brown hair plastered against the man's forehead. His face was pock-marked but his eyes were clear and assessing. It was surprising since she detected the sting of alcohol in the air.

The man cocked his head, his gaze on Caradon. Apparently he deemed Zan beneath his notice. "I'm Eridanus. At your service. I know every item in my store. Every owner must know his own inventory. Are you looking for a specific piece for your wife, sir?"

An amused, ironic smile flitted at the edge of Caradon's mouth at the word *wife*. She turned a swift glare at him but he wasn't cowed. Instead, he replied, "I wouldn't dare be so autocratic as to choose what a *wife* should wear."

"Wise man," chuckled the owner of the amulet shop unaware of Caradon's sarcastic tone.

Zan thought about sharpening claws on the man's face. One wouldn't be able to tell the difference afterwards due to all those pockmarks. Her patron reached out to grab her left wrist and squeezed gently in warning. Damn the man for reading her body language correctly.

"Hematite is a perfect stone for ladies," Eridanus continued, oblivious to the byplay. "The word 'hematite' is from a word of the Ancients meaning 'blood'. It is said that it helps soothe the female ailments, to cure hysteria, and to center the mind, body, and spirit. Quite a benefit for a woman, don't you think?"

"Only if the woman in question wants to be a docile, mindless thing," Zan retorted.

"What, you like hysterical females?" said the shop owner aghast.

Caradon's smile turned into a grin. She had the impression that he would be laughing if the place and the audience weren't so inappropriate. "I prefer the word feisty myself."

The shop owner shook his head and decided to continue his sales pitch. "Many ladies are quite fond of hematite jewelry. Not only does it have practical uses." At that, Zan gave a small huff. Superstitious uses, more like. "But it is also quite fashionable in the upper circles. It is even said that the Queen had a million hematite beads sewn onto one of her evening gowns. Of course, hematite can also be quite beneficial to a man as well. I have several signet rings that you may take a look at, sir. The Ancients regarded the stone very highly for it means success for a petition you may have with a person of authority. The Ancients also associated hematite with one of their gods of war and it was accounted that warriors would wear the stone for good luck into a battle. Nowadays in more civilized society, battle is perhaps more of a metaphor for securing business deals."

"That is all very interesting," said Caradon.

"I am here for information, not jewelry shopping," Zan cut in. Her blunt tone caused the shop owner's head to jerk toward her, his eyes widening. He looked at Caradon inquiringly, but Zan's patron simply feigned disinterest.

"Ma'am?"

"My uncle was a customer of yours not so long ago," she said. "It is of utmost importance for me to know precisely what he inquired of you and what he purchased from you if anything."

"I don't usually give out privileged information about that, ma'am." His eyes reluctantly fixed on her as her eyes shone, intent. His body swayed on his feet as if he were drunk. Or hypnotized.

"Mr. Eridanus, it is quite important. It would set my mind at ease, of course, since he *passed away* not so long ago." She grinned at him, showing sharp teeth.

"Passed away?" he choked. His hands trembled as he clasped them in front of his chest.

"His name is Elliot Waterstone. Do you have any records of him?"

Suddenly, the shop owner straightened to his full height and shook his head vigorously. "I have no idea what you're talking about." His eyes narrowed onto her, fully suspicious. "I've never heard of that name before. You must have the wrong shop."

"Then have you any customers from the Academy?" she asked. "Any at all? What sort of things did you sell them?"

"No! I don't have any customers from the Academy! What would such men of *science*," and he spat the word *science* out as if it were a fly he had inadvertently eaten from his stew, "want to do with a place like this?"

"If an inventor, for instance, were to ask you about any ideal materials he would have on his project about magnetism or electricity, what would you recommend...?"

"I wouldn't recommend anything! I don't know anything about that. I don't know why you ask so many questions, ma'am. Are you here looking for a specific piece or not?" His eyes shifted away from her, and he cough nervously after his sudden outburst.

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "And you wouldn't recommend hematite, Mr. Eridanus? Magnetized hematite? I should think that every respectable amulet seller would know all its properties. Or have you not noticed its effect on compasses?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he repeated. A mutinous and sullen expression twisted his pockmarked face into an ugly sneer.

"I wanted to look for information, but apparently, you aren't willing to give it to me," Zan said

coldly.

~~~~~

Chapter 19 – Hint of Claw

“How does it feel to get a taste of your own medicine?” Caradon stood behind her on the stoop just outside the amulet shop. She stood on the bottom step, staring at his waiting carriage but also furiously plotting about how to extract the information that she was sure the shop owner had.

“What do you mean?” she said.

From a block away in the direction of the Temple, the strains of chanting drifted their way. Three white and red robed worshippers or the old pagan cults shuffled down the street carrying nothing more than a smoking censer bowl in one hand and a brass staff in the other. The sky, surprisingly dark for the afternoon, briefly lit up with a streak of lightning, bouncing from one cloud to the next. There was a rumble and then it began to rain.

“Now you know how it feels like not being able to get anything useful from someone who stubbornly refuses to say anything,” he clarified.

“If you think that this is going to make me more willing to let me share my thoughts with you, you’re sadly mistaken. If that amulet shop owner refuses to tell me anything, that is fine as well. It will take me longer to ferret out what I need to know, but I *will* find out, regardless.”

“Persistent and feisty. Quite an assemble of traits for a female. Have you ever considered going into the law profession?”

“Becoming a lawyer. Are you daft? That job is only fit for worms,” she sniffed as drops of rainwater dripped from the tip of her hat into her face. She passed her gloved hands over her face to wipe the wetness away. “Horrible weather. You don’t suppose you would be able take me back home.”

“You doubt my manners?”

“You aren’t exactly a gentleman.”

His eyes narrowed. “And you still trust me to take you directly home if I choose to offer you a ride?”

“I never said anything about trusting you.”

She turned to step down from the stoop of the amulet shop. At that moment, the three robed figures were passing a few feet away, chanting—prayers, spells, incantations, she wasn’t sure what—in the language of the Ancients. Smoke rose from their censers and melded with the rain creating a strange gray fog in the air. The robed figures swirled into misty phantoms in her vision and Caradon’s carriage was relegated into a small black blob that seems so far away. Caradon stepped beside her, putting an arm on her elbow and she felt oddly anchored onto the street.

As the figures passed, they gave a great shout. Zan sensed, rather than saw, the first figure flinging his bowl outwards towards her. In that moment, she wondered fuzzily if something was muzzling her head, if something about the entire scene was dreadfully wrong.

“Out, you slit-eyed devils, out!” the head of the trio screamed. “Go back to where you came from and let the gods’ Chosen Ones rule the Promised Land!”

And then the dust hit and she gagged and coughed, her skin stinging and burning. She felt, rather than heard, the rip in her gloves and blindly, she stumbled forward, swiping her claws and baring her teeth. But the hand at her elbow turned as sharp as knives and it flung her backward. In her dimmed vision, she saw a dark blur explode onto the three figures who screamed and fled.

Was it only her addled brain, or did she see a gleam of teeth, the point of a muzzle?

The smoke cleared and then it was just the drizzle of rain. Strong hands grabbed her forearms and pulled her up from the ground. The scent from the drugging censers slowly cleared and soon she was able to breathe in a more familiar scent. The familiar scent became stronger when Caradon pulled out a handkerchief and began wiping her face. She started coughing and shaking.

He pressed the handkerchief to her hand. “Did you get a good look at them?”

Zan coughed into the bit of linen he handed to her and shook her head before she shut her eyes against a wave of nausea.

Caradon cursed and with a hand at her back steered her toward his carriage. He shouted something curt to his driver before he almost tossed her inside and vaulted into the carriage himself. When the vehicle jerked to a start, she began coughing again. He shifted in his seat to sit beside her and began

pounding her back. The blows caused her to suck in a breath and slump over.

“I suppose I won’t act like a gentleman this time since I won’t be taking you straight home,” he said. “You need some medical attention.”

Breathing felt like having a million needles getting stuck through her lungs. Gingerly, she raised her head and examined her hands. The fingers of the gloves were in tatters and at her elbow, there were three strange tears on the sleeve of her dress. She slowly pulled her gloves off and stuffed them into her reticule. Then she looked up to watch Caradon. He looked the same as always.

“I don’t want to be taken to a doctor,” she said.

“You won’t be.”

~~~~~

## Chapter 20 – Herbal Tea

The bells from the cathedral’s clock tower rang the noon hour when the driver stopped the carriage at a small alley adjacent to Tupet Road. The alley was more like an alcove in the northwest section of the city—halfway between the weaver’s district and the industrial district. The large factories loomed not too far away, glittering like fat spiders with a hundred windows for eyes.

The alleyway beside Tupet Road was more modest. Smaller store fronts sat on the curbside. Shoemakers, hat makers, glove makers. Cafes, bakeries, pastry shops. The carriage had stopped in front of a low dark building with stone stairs leading downward to a basement shop of indeterminate origin. On the ground floor was a tea shop, shutters closed from the rain.

Caradon got out of the carriage first and he waited, with a hand outstretched to help Zan disembark. Groggily, she poked her head out of the carriage door and grimaced as the rain fell heavily on her face. She ignored Caradon’s hand, stepped forward, and tripped.

He caught her before she fell face first into a puddle. “Stubborn little baggage, aren’t you?”

In response, a fit of coughing seized her.

He told the driver to come back in four hours and then proceeded to drag her towards the steps leading to the shop below the tea house.

In between coughs, she asked, “What place is this? I suppose you’ve taken the opportunity to take advantage of me. Is this out in the middle of nowhere? Some place in the stews where you’ll murder me and dispose of my body?”

“I didn’t know you had such a morbid sense of humor, Miss Hu,” he said as they stood in front of the lower shop’s door. There was a plaque in front of the door but the letters were rubbed off. “However, since you are so curious as to our destination, I was hoping this place would cure you.”

“Cure me?”

Caradon pounded a fist on the door. After two moments, it opened revealing a wizened old man with a steel gray goatee and wearing a traditional Far Eastern tunic and trousers made of dark blue brocade and a black cap of the same material.

“What an unexpected visit,” said the old man with a clipped accent from the Far East. “Come in from the dreadful weather. You are fortunate I have a fire going today.”

Caradon helped Zan with her coat and hat before putting his own on the coat rack near the door. Then he steered her toward a great hearth at the end of the room where the old man placed a steaming tea cup in her hands.

“Drink,” the old man commanded.

So Zan drank. The tea was bitter and hot, but almost immediately, a warmth spread throughout her lungs and throat and belly and the violent urge to cough disappeared. Finally, she took an easy breath.

“What brings you this way, Mr. Caradon?” asked the old man, eyes fixed on Zan’s patron. “It is far too soon for your, ah, monthly doses. Surely you do not seek something stronger to clear the mind.”

“No. This was an emergency.”

“I had guessed as much. You never bring any companions here.”

The woolly sensation in Zan’s head had cleared enough that she was finally able to appreciate her surroundings. The shop was that of an apothecary who dabbled strongly on folk remedies. The room was a subterranean lair with shelves filled with glass vials of powders and roots and leaves. She sat on a wooden chair padded with red and gold satin and a table covered in a table cloth with matching colors. The tea set was made of blue and white porcelain painted with dragons and the Far East symbol for good luck.

At one corner was an iron stand where an owl perched, watching the room with round yellow eyes. On the month, there was a jade statue of a serpentine eastern dragon, a fist sized black pearl sitting on its own yellow silk pillow, three incense sticks smoldering in a green-tinged copper pot and a small soapstone carving of the Enlightened One with a palm held up in greeting.

"I suppose I must ask what sort of tricks you've played this time," the old man sighed. He poured her more tea. "I assume it is bad since you have coerced this poor girl to come along with you."

Caradon took a seat at the table to look at her. She kept her own eyes on the teacup. "She is no ordinary girl."

"Ha!" the old man snorted.

She finally looked up. "Thank you for the tea, sir."

"It's Long."

"Mr. Long," she added. "I'm Zan Hu."

"No, Miss Hu, it's just Long," the old man said. He squinted at her and then took out a pair of spectacles from a pocket and perched it on his nose. He glanced at her hands which seemed ordinary enough at the moment and then back at Caradon. "She's just like you, isn't she?"

"I'm not like him," said Zan.

"Yes you are," Long nodded and Caradon grinned. "One of your parents didn't come from here. It's the eyes. Our sort must stick together."

"Like self-segregation?" she retorted. "If I had that sort of attitude about things, I'd actually listen to those religious fanatics calling me a slit-eyed devil, ordering me back east. I'm a person, not some obedient pack dog."

"Miss Hu, what I meant is that we must help each other. And if others call us slit-eyed devils, then we must stick together and take the high road. Violence will not solve anything. It might even hurt you." Long glanced meaningfully at the tea. "But enough of that. You've both arrived just in time for the noon day meal."

Caradon ended up helping Long bring out bowls of steamed rice, a platter of roast duck, and bok choy drizzled in soy sauce to the table. Long continued to pour the special bitter tea for Zan while her patron and the apothecary drank a separate pot of oolong tea. Finally, curiosity overtook her and she asked Long what was different about her tea.

"It's an herbal tea," the apothecary replied. "It's an herbal tonic for respiratory problems and the lung's general health. It's particularly good for colds. It's basically an infusion of *gui zhi* or cinnamon, *shao yao* or white dahlia root, *gan cao* or licorice root, *jiang* or ginger, and *da zao* or jujube. All of this is boiled in water. If you like, I can give you a powder mix for you to make your own tea. Take it at least once a day and you will have healthy lungs."

"That's very kind of you but..."

"No buts," Caradon interrupted. "Long will make the tonic for you."

"Protecting your investment?" she grumbled under her breath.

Long's eyes glittered in amusement. "Ah, to be young again. When I was a young man and still lived in the East, I courted a beautiful lady with a fiercesome temper. Alas, it wasn't meant to be. We really were too different. The Tiger Lady needed a softer man. I could not oblige her—my temperament is that of a Dragon."

Surreptitiously, Zan glanced at the dragon statue on the mantle and then back at the old man. She cleared her throat nervously. "It sounds like a bittersweet love affair, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing, nothing at all." Long cut off a duck leg and held it out to his pet owl. The bird snatched at the meat and in one gulp, devoured it.

"Do you earn most of your living selling herbal teas and tonics?" asked Zan. "There are so few apothecaries still around. Most people turn to modern medicine nowadays. The body is a machine that can be repaired with surgery or vaccines."

"I specialize in medicines from the East, Miss Hu. The herbs that I prescribe help balance the energies in the body and promote health."

"It sounds similar to what the Ancients called the four body humors—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile."

"The Western Ancients had a different way of looking at it, but it's not quite the same. The body's energy is called chi in Eastern medicine. It's present in every organ, in every cell, in every breath. Some can draw upon their own bodies' chi reserves for a push externally. And this energy is not limited to

the living. Chi is everywhere in our surroundings. Some call the force a more mystical name.”

Zan frowned as she pondered her empty rice bowl. Was that what it was called—the strange pressing energy that she felt whenever she was verging on the state of *change*?

“What’s wrong?” asked Long.

“I was simply thinking,” she replied. “If everyone has this energy, this chi, as you say and everything must be balanced, how do you control it? By simply taking one of your herbal concoctions?”

“Part of the control may be herbal. Part of it is physical and mental exercise.” The apothecary gave her a canny look. “But sometimes your energy can only come back to balance if you stop trying so hard. Stress can be a great energy blocker. Relax. Be yourself. That in itself can bring on great results.”

~~~~~

Chapter 21 – No Play

Long had meticulously mixed several powdered herbs together—the licorice, cinnamon, dahlia root—and he had poured it into a small green-painted tin lined with wax paper for Zan. He had reiterated again that she should take the concoction daily. But despite her firsthand experience of the herbal tea’s effects, she doubted she needed it so often. She strongly suspected that her coughing fits had been caused by an external agent.

By the time they had left the apothecary and Caradon took her back home, the rain had stopped and the roads and her coat were merely damp.

“Miss Hu, welcome back,” said Mrs. Philomon at the door. The housekeeper ushered Zan inside and glared at Caradon who stepped inside as well. “Oh my, you’re soaked.”

“Only my coat and hat,” she replied as she peeled off her outer clothing and dumped them into the housekeeper’s arms. Then she handed her the tin box. “Have Boreas put this with the teas.”

“What is it?”

“An herbal tea.”

“Very well, Miss Hu. Will Mr. Caradon be staying long?”

Zan slanted a look at her patron who busied himself with taking off his own coat and handing it to the housekeeper. She couldn’t very well force him back out into the damp city after he introduced her to Long and his remedies and in a roundabout way, treated her to lunch. Why, she thought half exasperated and half reluctantly amused, did he so effectively insinuate himself into her increasingly chaotic routine?

“I don’t know,” she said. “Mr. Caradon seems to be running on a schedule that I am unable to divine.”

“Humph!” declared the housekeeper. “I suppose I will have to inform Boreas to make more tea. Mr. Garrou and Mrs. Felis-Ackert have already arrived and I have put them in the sitting room, as usual. Have you forgotten to tell the staff about a party that you are holding?”

“Of course not, Mrs. Philomon. I would not presume so on my staff. My friends must be here for another reason. Thank you for informing me.”

“You have friends?” Caradon said with a raised eyebrow when Mrs. Philomon headed toward the kitchen.

“What’s so unusual about that? Don’t you have friends?”

“My acquaintances usually don’t visit me unexpectedly.”

Once they reached the sitting room, Zan saw Del and Sabina already standing, wearing their evening finery. They were both wearing coats and hats; Del in a smart black suit and a cane topped with a clear crystal and Sabina in a lavender satin gown decorated with shiny ribbons about the bodice and a glittering diamond necklace around her neck.

“Dear Zan, I thought we told you to wear something more cheerful!” exclaimed Del as he suddenly took her hands in his own gloved ones.

Zan felt the skin on her neck prickle as she saw Caradon seemingly examine Del in a passive manner. The only things revealing his thoughts were the gleam in his eye and a slight tick in his jaw.

“Have you forgotten?” said Sabina. “There’s a play tonight and we were coming to pick you up for dinner before the entertainment. The play really is to be a good one.”

“Miss Hu won’t be going out anywhere tonight,” said Caradon. “She has had an exhausting day today and requires rest.”

“Really, Mr. Caradon,” she said pulling her hands out of Del’s grasp and glaring at her patron.

"I'm quite fine. You aren't my doctor. It will only be a moment for me to prepare...."

Caradon's mouth twisted. "Do I have to remind you, Miss Hu, about the incident earlier today in Old Amanthus?"

Zan found herself gaping at his audacity in ordering her around. He smiled with bared teeth, taking her speechlessness as acquiescence.

"Mr. Caradon, is it?" said Del, finally sizing up the other man. "I am not sure how you know our friend, but I don't think you have any right to dictate how she spends her time."

"When it comes to spending time attending entertainments and protecting one's health, which one would you sacrifice?" Caradon demanded.

Sabina glanced at Zan's patron warily and then put her hand on Del's arm when he looked as if he were to vociferously object. "Del, Mr. Caradon has a point. If Zan needs rest, then she should rest. She's been through a lot of strain lately." Then she touched Zan's hand and her mouth thinned. "I told you to be careful."

"I'm trying, but sometimes when you want to find answers, you have to take some risk," Zan replied.

"Some risk isn't worth it," muttered Del.

"He's right, you know," said Sabina. "I'd hate to see you completely disregard common sense. Well, we must be going. Promise us you will be available to come with us tomorrow morning."

"For what?"

"For some shopping," she said.

Zan made a face. Shopping with Del and Sabina usually meant going through dressmakers, shoe makers, glove makers and who knows where else for the latest fashion. "Must I?"

"Since you're weaseling out of our appointment tonight, yes. And we must chat sometime."

"All right. I will."

When her friends left, she slumped down into the nearest chair. Caradon took the seat to her left on the couch. He leaned toward her, elbows on knees, dark gray eyes searching. Zan turned her gaze elsewhere in the cluttered sitting room, studiously ignoring him by examining a vase.

"Oh, where's Mr. Garrou and Mrs. Felis-Ackert?" said Mrs. Philomon as she arrived in the sitting room with the tea tray.

"They had to leave early," said Caradon when Zan made no indication of answering.

"Well!" the housekeeper huffed before she left the room.

Zan sighed. "You ran my friends off."

"I don't think that going out tonight would be a good idea. You've already had so much excitement...."

"Do you think I'm such a fragile doll?" she suddenly burst out. "Do you think I'd break at any sign of excessive activity? I'd like to think I'm stronger than that!"

A smirk tinged his mouth. "Oh? I'd like to see that."

She punched him.

He fell back into the couch, breath temporarily knocked out of him. He lifted a hand to gingerly feel his jaw. Slowly, he sat back up. She simply looked at him, cheeks tinged pink, but showing no remorse. Her fist slowly opened and closed, her nails taking on an odd sheen. A brief tug of energy swirled around her feet.

"You are very lucky that I don't make it a habit to hit women," he said softly.

"Am I?"

He grabbed her wrist and abruptly tugged, sending her kneeling to the floor, in front of him, between his knees. She looked up at him and her breath caught at the harsh, terrifying gaze. His fingers were firm and warm against her wrist. His nails dug into her skin. She watched his mouth, almost mesmerized, as he said, "But that doesn't mean that I don't like to take other forms of retribution."

"What do you want from me?"

His other hand came up to her neck and slowly closed over her throat. She gave a small intake of breath and licked her dry lips as the palm of his had come in contact with her skin and his fingers rubbed along her pulse. "I don't think you're willing to give what I want, are you?" He squeezed gently; it was almost a caress. "Not yet at any rate."

She trembled as he leaned over so closely that all she saw were his eyes—flecks of silver in a sea of gray and black pupils stretching longer and longer. And the reflection showed her own eyes, *changing*. She tried ducking, but his hand at her throat held her fast and she couldn't look away. His breath flickered

over her skin.

“My staff...”

“Isn’t coming,” he replied. He tilted his head and his breathing grazed her cheek, her ear.

She flexed her free hand and found her fingers caught on strange, smooth fabric encasing something warm, unyielding. She glanced down and saw her hand on his thigh.

“This isn’t...”

“Appropriate?” The tip of his nose touched the back of her ear. “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters.”

He let go of her wrist and raised his head. The hand at her throat trailed down her shoulder and arm to rest on top of her hand on his thigh. “I am no paragon of virtue. But I suppose I shall forgive you for your lapse in temper. I think it may be more of an asset than a hindrance.”

“Forgive me?” She tried to retrieve her hand from his, but he refused to let her up. “I am no penitent. And you are no priest.”

“No. But I am your patron. And I do have your welfare in mind. So I ask that you not go haring off tonight in search of entertainment or information or whatever it is swirling around in that head of yours. Tell me what is on your mind and don’t go risking your neck like you did this morning.”

“I’m not promising anything.”

He squeezed her hand in warning and then stood up. “Is that all I’m getting today? I suppose I will have to be patient as well.”

She turned her head to look up at him as he moved toward the door. “I don’t want you following me around as if you were my shadow.”

“And as you said, ‘I’m not promising anything.’” He inclined his head and then he was gone.

Zan sat kneeling in front of the couch for a moment longer, breathing in the fading scent of musky forest in the air. Then she put her hand on the couch cushion, still warm from him, and lightly raked the fabric with claws.

~~~~~

## Chapter 22 – Watching Tithe Night

The wood door felt cool along the skin of her earlobe as she listened to the receding footsteps in the hall on the other side.

After supper, she had claimed fatigue and retired to her room after dismissing the staff for the night. She turned the lock in the door and the metal mechanism clicked into place. Her own room was a remarkably impersonal space—although it wouldn’t be so surprising to those who knew Zan. She usually spent more time in the basement laboratory than her bedroom which was mostly filled with functional furniture—the bed and dresser on one side of the room, the wardrobe next to the window overlooking a small back yard, and a changing screen at one corner.

She came away from the door and went over to a small round stand next to the bed. On it were two framed photographs—one of her parents, the other of her uncle—a book about the chemical elements, the key to her room, and the heavy jade medallion with etched foreign symbols from her uncle’s safety deposit box. She took off her father’s fox amulet and placed it before the photograph of her parents.

“You made me what I am,” she said aloud to the picture of parents, but quietly, conscious that sudden loud noise carried through the walls. She then glanced at the photograph of her uncle. “And you tried your best. But I won’t simply let this go. I must know what you *found*.”

The picture of Uncle Elliot remained silent.

“I’m sorry.”

Zan went over to the window and pulled aside the drapes. She unlatched it and then turned to the dresser where the gas lamp was burning. She blew it out and the room immediately plunged into darkness. Moonlight streamed in through the window, silver beams illuminating strips of the floor and across her bed. She made her way to the changing screen without tripping and quickly shed all of her clothes. She raked fingers through her hair, dislodging pins which clattered onto the floor. The room was slightly chilly, but she ignored the goose bumps forming along her arms as she crouched naked among her discarded clothes, hair tumbling past her shoulders and her face, obscuring her vision.

Was there ever a time that she had consciously willed the *change* to come over her? If there was, it had been a long time ago when she had still been a child. And afterwards, the *change* had always been

about suppression. It wasn't acceptable to go about society as a naked animal—snarling out instinct and primitive desire. If she had wanted to yip in delight or to hunt down small rodents in her path, the urge had to be stifled.

Uncle Elliot had said that it was unacceptable to have such lack of control and inhibition. She was to use her energies to become civilized—physically, spiritually, mentally, intellectually. Her uncle had mentioned that the fox was inherently an intelligent and curious creature, but that wisdom couldn't be obtained without some modicum of restraint.

The entire *change* came almost frighteningly easy. Energy pounded up from her toes and curled around her spine, arching her backward. Hands and feet became paws, a tail erupted from the base of her spine, wrenching a gasping breath from her throat. She snapped her teeth as scent and sound became more acute and whatever color in her night vision bled into black, white, and gray.

She padded to the other side of the screen, claws clicking softly on the wood floor. She passed by the open door of the wardrobe and stopped. A tall mirror hung on the inside of the wardrobe door, reflecting the shape of a black fox with glinting eyes.

*I am still myself, yet I am not.*

She shook her head at the thought and prowled toward the window, putting two forepaws on the sill. Uncle Elliot meant well, but her mind was still hers despite her different physical shape.

She nudged the window open with her nose and stepped onto the ledge two stories above the ground. Gingerly, she made her way down the ledge to the corner of the house and leapt the small gap from the ledge to the top of the stone wall that separated her back yard from the neighbor's. She teetered for a moment on the stone and then crouched low when she heard the barking of a dog and the rattling of its chain.

The wall terminated into small steps down to the ground and into a bit of hedge that separated the backyards from the houses on Warden Street from those facing the parallel street to the north. She crept through lawns, yards, and the sides of houses, avoiding feral cats and guard dogs. Eventually, she ended up on one of the major roads, Doresse, which ran southwest to northeast and straight through the heart of Old Amanthus.

Although her perspective was different now than during the day in her human form, the dark strange shapes of the old city still graced the rest of the city with a menacing air. Even without knowledge of the streets, she would have oriented toward the city center unerringly. With her heightened sense of smell, she could detect the rotting core of Amanthus quite easily. But the stench was oddly different as well. A human nose would have been unable to detect the difference between the city rot and the rot of decaying refuse. But to an animal nose, city rot had a distinctive tang with a hint of sulfur.

She kept to the shadows although the streets were practically deserted and she heard the clatter of carriage wheels and horse's hooves only once from one street over. After one particularly long sprint, she rested in the shadows of the Museum with a view down Market Row. A few lampposts lit the street but it was mostly dark. As she breathed for a moment, she became aware of something—either the sluggish movement of energy counter to the current of the street or the presence of something with eyes. She pricked up her ears and glanced quickly around her. She saw and heard nothing. With an irritated swish of her tail, she bounded into another shadow to the next street, heading deeper into Old Amanthus. Perhaps she was just paranoid and that in reality, there was nothing.

Further down Doresse Road, the dilapidated buildings of Old Amanthus stuttered upward like thin crooked piles of rubbish emitting some sort of foul odor. A few blocks from the old city's cemeteries, she turned into an alleyway transformed into an alien landscape in the darkness and thin moonlight. She crouched in the shadow of the stoop leading up to the shop that she had visited earlier—Eridanus Amulets.

But the shop was shut tightly—closed—and no light flickered at the windows indicating that any of the occupants were present or awake.

The whisper of voices caught her attention and quickly, she slipped from deep shadow to deep shadow until she was standing at the edge of one of the old cemeteries surrounding the Temple. She saw two cloaked figures a few paces away arguing over the timing of the tithe day and the full moon. She looked up and saw that the moon was indeed full, but it was cloudy as well. Deep blue clouds coiled like serpents around the moon, diluting its gleam to a pale gray-blue. The remaining light shone on the weathered tombstones in the cemetery like faint motes on bobbing corks on a black sea.

"It is a sign," said one of the cloaked figures. "You know full moons always mean a terrible portent. Bad things happen during full moons. People get attacked by werewolves. Thieves steal into houses. People get murdered in their beds. Evil sorcerers and wicked witches summon demons to do their

bidding.”

The other figure scoffed. “You’ve been listening to too many children’s bedtime stories of bogeymen—stories in which the sole purpose is to scare children into good behavior. I say we take the full moon as good tidings on this tithing day. Good luck for our future endeavors, won’t you say?”

“But what about all those rumors about the night being the mother of all ills? Surely, the moon is merely the indicator of the height of the night’s powers.”

“If the High Priest heard you babbling like that, he’d send you to a real doctor to have your head examined. I’ve heard that mesmerism works wonders.”

“But...”

“Come on!”

Zan moved to follow the two figures hurrying down a path through the cemetery. It led to the Temple which looked like a giant bleached skull in the night with the moonlight reflecting off its dome and classically straight columns. She suddenly stopped when she passed the first tomb marker. Her fur raised at the same disquieting sensation she had at the Museum. She wasn’t afraid of the dead—no, they were safely buried and rotting beneath her paws. This thing watching her was alive. But whatever it was, she could not catch a scent. She was perhaps upwind from the position of the watching thing. She hoped that it would decide to keep its distance.

She turned her head and thought she caught a glimpse of a pair of shining eyes. Blood pounded in her ears; she bolted after the figures ambling towards the Temple.

There were other worshippers of the pagan gods gathering inside the Temple. But despite the large open space at the center where everyone was congregating, none of the people noticed a small black fox sitting on her haunches beside a column, watching the activities.

At the center of the room was a pedestal holding a large black bowl made of obsidian. The worshippers began forming a loose circle around the pedestal. One person came forward to put a small wooden crate at the base of the pedestal. She heard the crate squawk and with a brief sniff of the air, determined that the crate contained a live chicken. Some other people began lighting their own hand bowls. The scent from the censers irritated her nose so she curled up into a ball and put her nose in her tail to filter out the air.

The worshippers began chanting in the language of the Ancients and the light of the lamps they held flickered. The drone of their voices would have been a peaceful lullaby under other circumstances, but there was no mistaking the steady pull of energy as it was suddenly given direction. The energy flowed into the Temple, straight toward the bowl on the pedestal.

Slowly, the energy became thicker and with the combination of the smoking incense, breathing became difficult as well. She wondered at the purpose of the Ancient chants, wondering what they were trying to achieve when she saw the bowl expand.

She abruptly sat up and took a breath and sneezed. The chanting continued uninterrupted as something black emerged from the bowl. A pungent rotting stench followed it. A thick black tentacle oozed down the pedestal like a fast growing vine and wrapped itself around the crate. Then she watched, paralyzed, as the tentacle took the crate into the bowl.

The crate exploded. The chicken screamed.

Bits of wood and a spray of blood erupted from the bowl and pelted down on the closest worshippers.

She yipped, terrified, and raced out of the Temple and past the cemetery. At the last tombstone, she paused to catch her breath.

Then a presence began tickling about the back of her awareness. Something was watching her again. She whirled around and saw the gleaming eyes. She had not been mistaken before.

A black fox lounged insolently on top of a particularly large tombstone, watching her. A male. And he was lazily swishing his tail in an amused manner as if he were playing with his food.

Zan bared her teeth in challenge.

*You do know the saying about curiosity, don’t you?*

His voice had filled her head, but with the combination of her recent scare and adrenaline rush, it had only made her more irritated.

*I’d say you got more than you bargained for roaming about the old city without preparation.*

*Didn’t I tell you not to go haring off to places unknown tonight?*

*And I thought I told you to stop following me,* she replied.

He leaped down from his perch and padded toward her. *You may have told me, but I promised*

*nothing.* He took another step and she backed away, ears lying flat against her head.

*Don't touch me.*

*Or do you mean the contrary? I heard no protest when I had my hand around your neck.*

She growled.

*Ah, you're definitely a troublesome little baggage.* But then his amused tone turned hard. *Go home, little vixen. This is no place for you.*

*I'll have more to say about that the next time I see you.*

Then she slunk back into the shadows of the streets, fuming at his witness to her moment of weakness. But leaving that aside, she was oddly comforted that he had been watching over her the entire time.

~~~~~

Chapter 23 – Danaides

Danaides, a gentleman's tailor shop, stood at the corner of Kessel and Merrill near the weaver's district. It was a tall, stately building, three stories tall and decorated with gilded plaster in elegant flourishes. The shop front had a window decorated in red drapes that showed off the centerpiece—a mannequin dressed in a dove gray suit, a pearl pink waistcoat, and a golden tie—in the latest fashion. The name "Danaides" was painted on the window in straight, no-nonsense lines.

Inside, the first floor was more of a showroom—filled with mannequins wearing sample suits and displays of gentlemen's hats, gloves, canes, and shoes. The second floor was the fitting room where patrons of Danaides came to be measured and the third floor was the workrooms where the tailors made their living.

Zan sat on a padded chair near the window on the second floor. She looked out over the street as Del stood in front of a mirror without his coat—only in a cream colored shirt, brown vest and trousers. His arms were spread out as a bespectacled tailor with pins in his mouth took his measurements. Sabina, dressed in an unrelieved dark mauve dress with a matching hat filled with dyed feathers, hovered over him, frowning at two pieces of fabric in her hands.

Zan's mind was elsewhere. She had had little sleep the previous night. Three, perhaps four hours at most. There was an antsy feeling at the back of her mind as well as a frustrated one. The previous day had been terribly unproductive, in her thinking. She had had no time to work in the laboratory, she had gotten no straightforward answers from any of the places that she had visited, and to top it off, something very strange was happening at the Temple. So that morning, she had gotten out of bed in an attempt to work off her agitated mood in the laboratory.

By the breakfast hour, Isadora had found her hunched over a workbench in the basement vigorously rubbing a bit of yellow silk along a rod of aluminum. She had collected assorted bits of material and arranged them in a rough order on her bench. There was fabric such as cotton and leather and wool, solid non-metals like paper and wood and a lump of resin, and metals such as copper and tin and nickel. Her current test consisted of rubbing one material against another until it produced a spark such as the oft cited silk and amber. The idea had come from her conversation with Henry Tarlton about what he called the triboelectric effect—the charge that objects obtained after sustained friction with another object. The results from the test, which she meticulously plotted in her own lab book, would determine which two objects would create the greatest spark. And from those results, she hoped she would be able to deduce what sort of materials her uncle had planned to use for the machine that he had sketched in his notes.

After breakfast, she had suddenly realized that she had promised to accompany Del and Sabina on their shopping trip, so she hastily scribbled out a shopping list—primarily of materials that she could not scrounge up in the laboratory—of things she wished to test as well. And as her friends had arrived and exclaimed over her deplorable lack of fashion—she had been wearing a black dress again—she had given the list to Simkins to oversee.

"Dark gray," said Sabina in a sudden decisive voice that brought Zan out of her reverie. "Dark gray would be the perfect color. It will go quite nicely with an emerald green waistcoat with brass buttons."

"Dark gray!" Del tried to turn his head, but the tailor moved his chin back into position as he took measurements for the collar. He looked at Sabina in the mirror. "What about brown? What's wrong with brown?"

“Brown is a plain, drab color. It’s for businessmen and dull men who have nothing to do except to go to work and come back home to their little wives. Entirely too sober for you. Dark gray will cut a more dashing figure.”

“Are you saying I’m not sober?”

“Sometimes you don’t act like it.”

“Ha! Well, I like the brown, dear Sabina, and I am paying for this suit, mind you. Brown with a silver waistcoat.”

“Dark gray with an emerald green waistcoat.”

“I am not some clown! I am not wearing emerald green. I’d be the laughingstock of society!”

“No you won’t. Most men wouldn’t care less. Besides, emerald green will match your eyes.”

“Damn my eyes! I’m taking the brown and silver and that’s it. What do you say, Zan?”

Del, Sabina, and the tailor turned towards her. Zan simply shrugged at the three pairs of inquiring eyes. “How should I know? You told me I had a deplorable sense of fashion. But Sabina does have a point. Emerald green will match your eyes.”

“Zan!” Del whined.

“You worry too much,” said Sabina to Del. Then to the tailor, she said, “Make the suit dark gray.” She gave the scraps of fabric back to the tailor who nodded his head and remarked that he would come right back with samples of green cloth for her perusal.

Del sighed and dropped his arms. He turned to glare at the two women. “The next time I come to Danaides, I’m coming by myself. Both of you have absolutely no sense of what kind of colors a man should wear.”

“That is your opinion,” Sabina sniffed. “No woman would take a second look at you if you didn’t have any help.”

“Help? Ha! Well, look at Zan. All in black! Quite cheerless.” Del shook his head. “Why didn’t you wear a bit of color, anyway?”

Zan frowned. “Uncle Elliot passed away not so long ago. And I believe the customary mourning period is about a month.”

“A month is too long,” Sabina replied. “I think our mourning customs are dreadfully tiresome. I mean, look at the Queen. It’s been five years since her husband has died and they say she’s still moping about in her palace draped in black veils and laces. Her morbid behavior has unfortunately started this horrible trend. Just think, Zan, your uncle wouldn’t have wanted you to be so morbid. He would have wanted you to go about your life, working on your experiments, visiting friends, and entertaining suitors.”

“I’m talking to you, aren’t I? And what about you husband?” asked Zan.

A small smile curved Del’s mouth as Sabina made an exasperated noise. “That old coot? He was already halfway to the grave when she married him. She was just sorry he didn’t die sooner.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say,” said Zan. Del just shrugged his shoulders and Sabina just shook her head. “Didn’t you love him? There are women who’ve been widows longer than you have and they’re still mourning.”

“No. But my relationship with my dead husband is neither here or there.” Sabina gave her a close-lipped smile. “Anyways, you’ve been in a very strange mood lately. We’re not sure if this melancholy over your entire demeanor is entirely caused by your uncle’s passing. Is it because you haven’t been doing any of your experiments? Have you missed a lecture at the Academy that you have wanted to attend? Or does this Mr. Caradon we met the other day had to do with anything?”

^^^^

Chapter 24 – The Latest Crack

She slouched in her seat and stared at the carpeted floor, thinking of fingers against her neck and the sensation of a fox’s eyes at her tail. “I haven’t been exactly neglecting laboratory work although what I’m working on isn’t exactly my own project.”

“What do you mean?” said Del. “I thought you were testing some samples from some coal mine. It seemed rather dreary work to me, but I suppose whatever interests you. So why the glum mood?”

“I’m trying to reconstruct my uncle’s latest work.”

“But that’s fantastic,” exclaimed Sabina. “Your uncle would have been proud of you to continue his work. You’re continuing his scientific legacy.”

“No, you mustn’t tell anyone.” At her friends’ puzzled looks, she clarified, “I suppose his work isn’t particularly secret. Everyone knew about it, but I don’t want everyone knowing that I’m neck deep in his research. My uncle had willed his machines and his notes to the Museum and the Museum director was quite keen on getting his hands on those machines and the notes. But at the time, I thought Uncle Elliot had destroyed his notes.”

Del raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“It turns out that the notes weren’t destroyed after all. No one knows about it except me, and I suppose you now. The Church’s emissary, Mr. Southmore, stopped by for a visit right after the funeral—you do remember the day in which your visit was cut short?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Southmore,” Sabina said, eyes narrowing. “What did he want?”

“Well, he wanted to offer patronage—that is—only if I agreed to continue my uncle’s work. Besides the Museum director, Mr. Kruntz, Southmore, I think, would be quite glad to get his hands on the notes. For what purpose, I have no idea. He claims that granting patronage to research would be for the greater good.”

Sabina smiled strangely. “Of course he would say it would be for the greater good. Isn’t that what all the agents of the Church must say whenever they want to wrest control over something?”

Del looked disgruntled. “That is odd. Didn’t you tell us at one time, Zan, that all the members of the Academy either received some sort of support from the Academy itself in the form of a stipend or had some patron—an aristocrat or a particularly wealthy businessman—who was interested in the sciences? The Church is more known for giving patronage to architects and artists who are building religious buildings or painting religious murals. Why would Southmore be so interested in work trying to understand the physical laws of the universe? If anything, your uncle’s work and science in general tries to unlock the mysteries of what some would call divine and describe them as merely mundane physical phenomena.”

“I don’t know. But I do know that Southmore had been visiting my uncle before his death discussing a possible patronage. For some reason, my uncle had refused his offer.”

At that moment, a door on the second floor slammed, making the three of them jump. The cause wasn’t the returning tailor, but of a man dressed neatly in a dark brown suit and top hat, walking in an agitated yet Continental air. Something was familiar about his features, but the thought didn’t click in Zan’s mind until one of Danaides’ employees walked up the stairs with a customer in tow.

“My lord!” exclaimed the employee. “Did you find the items to your liking?”

“Yes, yes,” said the man who Zan now identified as the What’s-his-name lordling who was Greta Del Rassa’s latest beau. “Just send them to my residence. I have an appointment shortly that I must attend. Now if you excuse me. Oh, Gasmere, is that you?”

The other customer nodded as Del Rassa’s beau hurried away and followed the employee to another fitting room. But before he left the landing, Gasmere glanced at the fitting alcove near the window and his eyes widened in surprise when he caught sight of Zan. The Danaides’ employee said something and he reluctantly left the area.

“I did not realize that the Earl of Gasmere patronized this establishment,” Zan mused. She wondered if Gasmere was more surprised to find ladies in a gentlemen’s tailor shop rather than the fact that he recognized her specifically.

“Oh, the man tries to be up to scratch when it comes to fashion, despite his rumored financial difficulties,” said Del as he rubbed his jaw in thought. “And am I not mistaken if Gasmere’s family name is Caradon?”

“Indeed,” Sabina added, suddenly enthusiastic. “We did a bit of discreet inquiring along the social whirl since you didn’t come with us to that play last night, Zan. We found out some very interesting information on that Mr. Caradon. It turns out that Moon Caradon is one of the city’s big shipping businessmen and he was the illegitimate son of the previous Earl of Gasmere. The previous earl had lived for several years in the Far East as an ambassador and it’s said that he had an affair with one of the courtesans of the Emperor’s court. The current earl is his cousin, Oliver Caradon. And it’s rumored that the current earl and his family are in a bad way financially because they go through money like water and the entire inheritance is in fact controlled by the illegitimate son.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that,” Zan murmured.

Del shook his head. “I’ve heard that Gasmere owns five phaetons, one for each color in the rainbow. And I thought I was frivolous.”

“Phaetons are horribly fast,” Sabina sniffed.

“Ha!” said Del. “I didn’t hear you complaining the last time—two weeks ago, I believe—when we went on a phaeton ride.”

“I wasn’t complaining because we were going too fast to say a word! Besides, catching that dreadful villain who snatched that poor boy straight off the street—in broad daylight!—was more of a priority. It’s a shame we didn’t catch the villain.”

“You two went after a kidnapper by yourselves?” said Zan, blinking. “Didn’t you contact the authorities?”

Del shrugged. “That would have wasted precious time. At any rate, Henry Tarlton got his assistant back in one piece. It was rather foolish, however, that he sent the boy alone to Old Amanthus to obtain materials for his experiments. Eccentric inventors, an entire lot without common sense! Except for you, Zan, of course.”

“Anyways, a warning, Zan, if you do happen to be offered a ride. Phaetons are the latest crack, but don’t let fashion fool you,” said Sabina. “Those small contraptions are entirely too dangerous for very fast driving. One faltering horse and the whole thing could be overturned.”

Zan shifted her gaze to some point above their heads. “Uh, well, I have ridden in a phaeton before. I suppose the level of danger also depends on the skill of the driver.”

“You have! When?” Sabina demanded.

“Are you calling my skills as a driver into question?” said Del at the same time.

“Er, well, Caradon had offered...”

Del snorted. “Odd fellow, isn’t he? I seem to have remembered him at the funeral, but I wasn’t paying much attention to everyone else. I just assumed that almost everyone there were from the Academy. How on earth did you meet him? I assume you haven’t known him long. And he seems strangely protective of you for someone of brief acquaintance.”

“He was my uncle’s patron. And now, I suppose he’s my patron.”

“Patrons usually don’t take such an intimate interest in their charges,” said Sabina, watching Zan who flushed under her friends’ scrutiny.

“It’s nothing like that! He only wants to protect his investments.” She let out a breath. “But I must admit, he does have the bad habit of following me around. I will have to confront him about that. I don’t need anyone hovering over me!”

Sabina gave another smile. “So you say.”

Quick footsteps pattered their way and they turned to see the tailor returning with several scraps of fabric in his hands. “Mr. Garrou? Ladies? Here are the samples that you requested.”

“Green?” said Del as he looked over at the samples in dismay. “All of them are green.”

“Emerald green,” Sabina clarified. She pointed to one of the pieces of fabric. “That one looks rather fine.”

“Excellent choice, Mrs. Felis-Ackert. It’s made of silk. Excellent quality,” quipped the tailor.

Zan slumped back into her chair with an inaudible sigh as Del and Sabina began arguing again, this time on the cut of the waistcoat that was to be made of emerald green silk. She glanced at the window and looked down from the second story to the road below. Carts and carriages, horses and people passed across the cobblestones, intent on their destination. Over the weaver’s district, in the skyline, was the distorted black shadows of Old Amanthus. She thought of slinking through the old city’s shadows in fox-form, scenting, listening, watching. And then she thought of another watching her.

She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. Being watched over wasn’t a terrible sin, but he could have *told* her beforehand that he was going to do it. *Soon*, she told herself. Soon she would pay him a little visit and tell him what she thought of his overbearing behavior.

^^^^^^

Chapter 25 – Restraint

In the daylight, Caradon’s residence on Shepherd’s Lane did not look as imposing. Zan opened and closed her fists as she stood in front of the door, feeling a bit of temper boiling just beneath her skin. Opening and closing her hands again, the gloves began to feel strange as her fingers and nails shimmered between wanting to become paws and claws and remaining human hands.

After Del’s fitting at Danaides, the oppressive feel of inevitable confrontation began pounding at the back of her head. It was like a headache, except it wasn’t the pounding of nerves, but the pounding of

blood, a low roaring in the distance and the slightly itching sensation of the *change* just under her human face. So she pleaded a headache and told her friends that she would be going home. Del told her to lie down, to take a nap, to not do anything strenuous, and especially not to go down to the laboratory and to tax her brains by doing experiments. Sabina only looked at Zan meaningfully. Perhaps she knew what Zan was about.

Zan had called a hackney and had told the driver her home address as her friends saw her off, but before the vehicle reached Warden Street, she had directed the driver to change direction—to Shepherd's Lane. Now, Zan stood in front of Caradon's lair, half wanting to storm in and half wanting to flee. As she stood there, she thought she detected the faint stirring of a curtain in one of the windows. She straightened her spine. She was not going to let him see her weakness in this. She would be both firm and furious. She had never asked to be followed and he had never asked her if she had wanted to be.

She steeled her own nerves as she listened to the dull throb of her own pulse and knocked rapidly, three times. The door opened revealing Caradon's butler.

"Good day. I'm Miss Hu. I'm here to see Mr. Caradon."

The butler gave her an impassive glance and then moved out of the doorway as he gestured for her to come in side. "Mr. Caradon said that you might come by."

"He did, did he?" Her own pulse quickened. So he had anticipated her. Was he so arrogant that he believed that he knew her every mood, her every thought? And was she surprised at this? No, not really, she told herself. She knew he was waiting in his study for her. He was ready for whatever she would say—just that she knew that he would tail her every move regardless of what she would say or shout or rant at him.

As a courtesy, the butler knocked on the door at the end of the hall. There was no audible response that they heard, but she could feel the quickening of the energy currents in the hallway, tugging at her elbows and shoulders. The butler opened the door for Zan and she stepped through into Caradon's study which was filmy with drugged smoke. The door behind her suddenly closed and Zan whirled around at the sound of the slam. For a long moment, she stared at the seam between the door and the wall.

"Miss Hu, you came to speak with me?"

She turned her head and finally noticed that Caradon was indeed in the room, sitting at one of the two armchairs facing the cold fireplace. On a nearby table was the bronze pot with the smoking resin. The smoke curled and wafted along the swirling energy spiraling around his feet and knees. His head rested on the back on the armchair, dark hair spread, mused, along the chair's dark green fabric. His eyes glittered as he watched her slowly turn her body toward him.

"You're completely cracked, aren't you?" she said.

He straightened in his seat and leaned forward until a lock of his hair fell over his forehead, slightly shadowing his gaze. He was only wearing a shirt and dark waistcoat that matched his trousers. One button was undone on his collar and a black tie dangled on his fingertips. His lips curved.

"You are cracked. Isn't it too early in the day to be doing this?"

"Too early or too late?" he replied. "Actually, it doesn't matter, does it? I came here, straight after your escapade, waiting for you to come here, to give me your lecture, but you're as wily as any fox. You're not so good as you thought foxes had symbolized, are you? You waited and took your time coming here. Meanwhile you moped, letting your anger simmer."

She took a step toward him, fists clenched. "You think I'm just like any other female of your acquaintance—falling into whatever you say? I did not ask to be followed around the city like an errant child. And you did not ask me if I wanted to be. For your information, I did not stay at home 'moping' as you say. I had an appointment. I had obligations to attend to. I'm not letting something petty stop my life. If anyone is moping, it is you, Caradon. Look at you, slouched on that chair like a despot. Where are your obligations?"

"My business? I have associates who help me with the details. And for your information, Miss Hu, *Zan*, I am not cracked." He stood up and involuntarily she took a step back. The smile turned into a lethal grin and somehow he pounced, leaping from the spot in front of his chair to a point near the door. She gasped as he caged her up against a book shelf with his arms. His nose nearly touched hers. "I'm actually *quite* lucid."

"You're mad," she whispered.

"I'm not mad in the way you are thinking of." He tilted his head so that his breath grazed the side of her jaw. She edged backward, feeling the shelves and the books dig into her spine. He pressed against her, his chest against her chest, his leg against her dress, forcing its way between her thighs. She clawed at

the shelves behind her as she breathed in a lungful of his scent and his mouth found its way to her ear. A small, mewling sound forced its way through her throat as a wet tongue traced her earlobe.

“Get off me.”

The tongue retreated at the small, faint voice. “Are you sure about that?” he said in her ear.

She shut her eyes in defeat. *I don't know. It depends on what you're planning to do to me.*

Something that you would like?

He moved off her and stood about a foot away, watching the expression on her face, a curious mixture of relief and disappointment. She looked up at him and tried to move away from the bookcase, but abruptly she halted. Her right wrist was tied securely to a metal hoop screwed into the bookcase by a black tie. For a moment, she glared at the black tie on her wrist and then at his empty hand. She looked up at his face and there was something dark in his gaze that sent her heart pounding.

“What do you think you're doing?” With her left hand, she tried to loose the knots, but the fabric wasn't budging.

“Introducing a bit of restraint. Haven't you ever heard that restraint is one of the marks of civilized beings?”

“Or debauched ones. According to my uncle, restraint was required to prevent oneself from lapsing into instinct and animal desire. I would think he meant mental control, not physical.”

“Some restraint can repay you with ample rewards.” Caradon reached out to still her fingers that had begun clawing at the knots. “Don't do that. The more you struggle, the tighter they become. Those are sailor's knots—I doubt that you would be able to get out of them yourself.”

“Then you undo them since you put them there in the first place!”

“No.” He began pulling off her gloves and dropping them on the floor between them. He used a fingertip to trace her itching nails. She could feel the heat radiating from his skin. Then he raised her free hand, palm up, to his mouth. She took shallow breaths as they watched each other while his tongue darted out to trace the lines on her palm. “What do you like, Zan? Do you like this?”

She felt a flush slowly creep up her neck to her cheeks. “We should be talking about why you feel so compelled to follow me around the city. You're only my patron. Patrons are supposed to be only worried with the results of my experiments, not the minutiae of where I run my errands. We're supposed to be talking about why I don't want you to...”

“To what?” A lump formed in her throat preventing her from speaking as he smiled into her palm. “I want to follow you. I'm interested in what you're doing. What is wrong with that? However, I'm not quite sure what you are hiding from me. Definitely something about your uncle's work, but I'm not quite sure what. Don't you trust your patron?”

“Trust you?”

“I haven't wished you any harm. Far from it.”

“Then what's this about tying me up to your bookcase?”

“I want to please you.” His mouth briefly touched the inside of her wrist before he reluctantly let go of her hand in favor of running his fingers up to her elbows, then her neck. He tilted her head back slightly and put his nose to the base of her throat. She felt him breathing against her skin.

“Please me? You seem to be pleasing yourself.”

“Then what do you want me to do?” he murmured.

“Well, for one, you could just...”

“Put my mouth here?”

Her next words disappeared from her head when his mouth moved on her throat.

“Or here?”

He lifted his head and she had a brief glimpse of the crinkle at the edge of his eyes before his mouth touched hers. A flood of thoughts and sensations flowed through her mind, but the flow went too quickly for her to catch any one of them. All she felt was heat and energy concentrated on the bit where lip met lip and where his tongue insinuated itself into her mouth.

Something pounded at the back of her mind. And then there was a voice in the distance that seemed to say, “Mr. Caradon?”

After a long second, he finally took his mouth from hers and the sudden empty air between them felt cold and lonely. She pressed her lips together as he turned and looked at the butler at the door. The old man looked at his narrow-eyed master and the young woman tied to the bookcase. The butler quickly looked elsewhere when a frown creased Caradon's forehead.

“A message recently arrived, sir. From Captain Isidro Ramon of *The Conquistador*. He wishes to

deliver his quarterly report.”

Caradon shook his head. “Did the messenger say that *The Conquistador* just arrived?”

“Yes.”

“Send a message to the captain that I will meet him at the docks on his vessel for the report later this evening.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the butler left, Caradon prowled toward the chair at his desk where he had left his coat. As he put it on, Zan said, “Aren’t you going to release me, Caradon?”

“I have half the mind to leave you there so you won’t cause more trouble with yourself,” he said. But he moved to undo the knots. Briefly, he put the scrap of fabric against his nose, and then put the tie on himself. “Hm. At least it has your scent now.”

“You’re mad,” she said, but without any of the former angry heat, as she picked up her gloves and shoved them back onto her hands.

He ignored her comment. “I believe I’ll take you home now before your staff and your friends wonder where you’ve been. It is on my way to the port.”

“Why are you going to the port?”

“You heard the message. I’m going to see the captain of *The Conquistador*.” At her inquiring expression, he clarified, “It’s one of my cargo ships, not some battleship for the Queen’s navy.”

“It’s a very odd name for a cargo ship.”

“Don’t ask me why it’s named that. Come on. I’ll call my carriage to take you home, if that pleases you.”

She slanted him a glance as she exited his study and breathed in the clearer air out in the hallway. “And what if it doesn’t please me?”

“Then I’ll walk you home.”

“That’s quite a ways walk from Shepherd’s Lane to Warden Street,” she remarked in a serious tone. “I don’t suppose you would be able to keep up. Excessive walking would ruin your expensive shoes. Perhaps the carriage would be a better idea.”

In response, he wrapped his fingers around her right wrist and gently squeezed. His expression was equally as serious. “But I don’t care very much for my shoes.”

^^^

Chapter 26 – Claw to Face

“You don’t care very much about me, do you?” he said.

Zan turned her gaze from the carriage window to look at him. “Why do you say that?”

“Most of the time, you’re angry or annoyed.”

“You seem to be quite amused when I’m angry or annoyed. You like it when I’m angry or annoyed. So why are you complaining about it?”

“Because I’ve seen you when you weren’t angry or annoyed.”

She gave a small sigh when the carriage rolled to a stop and she put out her hand to unlatch the door. “I suppose I should thank you for the ride home. Is it a habit of yours to see unaccompanied ladies home or are you only doing this in an attempt to annoy me further by following me?”

“Or maybe, I just want to see you home.”

She didn’t respond to that remark as she stepped off the carriage and quickly made her way across the sidewalk to the stairs leading up to 42 Warden Street. At the door, she retrieved her keys from her reticule and looked up and frowned at the door. It was slightly opened.

Disturbed, she put a hand against the door and it swung inward an inch before it suddenly slammed open and two dark figures shoved her aside as they exploded out from the door. The reticule and the keys flew out of her hands and landed on the neighbor’s front landing with a thump. The force that one of the figures pushed her to get away was great enough to send her crashing, back first, down the stairs. Brief jarring pain lanced through her shoulders as she heard the figures shout in deep, harsh voices, and their feet thundered over her as she heard the door to the carriage bang open and Caradon shouting.

Zan rolled over onto her feet crouching and she shook her head as she saw Caradon moving toward her. She pointed toward the dark figures and then sprinted toward them despite the restriction from her heavy mourning dress. The petticoats shortened her stride, but adjusted the number of her steps. Her

hearing and smell sharpened and she felt her gloves tear at the fingertips. She mentally sighed as she finally caught up with the ruffians—another pair of gloves destroyed. Mrs. Philomon would be livid.

Caradon and his driver—a mustached, gaunt man—had actually caught up with the housebreakers before Zan. The driver grabbed onto the end of one man’s coat as Caradon took hold off the collar of the other housebreaker and grinned fiercely, showing teeth. Caradon reached back and punched him. The man’s head lolled back on his shoulders. When her patron let go of his neck, the ruffian fell onto his knees.

Meanwhile, the driver had taken a blow from the first housebreaker and was crouching on the ground gasping. As the housebreaker raised a hand to deal the driver another blow, Zan kicked him in the back of the knees and tore at his hair. The man cursed and reached for her throat. With a quick swipe, she raked his face with a fistful of claws. The man howled and suddenly let go of her in favor of clutching at his face.

“Zan! Get away from there!”

She turned her head at Caradon’s voice. The expression on his face was both fierce and something else that made a bit of fear flicker through her. She tried to mouth a question, but he was already moving, his hands thrust out in front of him as tried to push her away from her position. She saw the man that she had just clawed, hands on his face. And then she saw the man that had fallen to the ground from Caradon’s blow. The second villain was clutching his belly with one arm. In his other hand, he held a gleaming pistol.

Zan opened her mouth to yell, but Caradon was already on top of her, pushing her to the ground.

A shot rang out and the air near them exploded.

Caradon rolled with her to the side of the street and slowly, they came to a stop, breathing harshly in each others’ ears. They stayed frozen in position as the footsteps of the housebreakers broke out into a run. The echoes of those running footsteps faded as the paralysis of shock slowly wore away from her bones and muscles. She raised a hand to push Caradon away. He grunted as he rolled off her.

The view of the street finally cleared in her head and color began to trickle back into her vision. She looked at Caradon, his eyes still wide, pupils still slitted, and smelled something odd—something salty and metallic. She flickered her gaze over him and saw a red seeping stain on the upper arm of his coat.

“Zan, are you all right? You look a bit pale.”

She bit her lip as she came to her knees. “Actually, I should ask you that question. You’re the one who’s been shot.”

~~~~~

## Chapter 27 – Household Disorder

Warden Street was strangely empty when Zan got back to her feet. Caradon had wordlessly accepted her hand to be helped up. He winced, when he stood and automatically grabbed hold of his bleeding arm with his other hand. She noticed that Caradon’s gloves, like her own, were torn at the tips.

The driver had gotten up from the ground as well and he briefly wavered where he stood. A dark smudge ringed his left eye. It would be quite bruised before evening fell. “You’re injured, sir! I’ll take you to the hospital.”

Caradon gave a brief shake of his head. “Thank you, but no. It is not as bad as it seems. All I need are disinfectant and bandages.”

“You’re as stubborn as I am when it comes to seeing doctors, aren’t you?” said Zan as the three of them walked up the front steps and through the door. The interior of her house was eerily quiet. “Simkins? Mrs. Philomon? Isadora? Boreas?”

Her calls to her staff were answered by faint shouts in the vicinity of the kitchen. Zan directed Caradon and his driver to the sitting room and told them she would be back shortly with the medicinal supplies. Quickly, she sprinted towards the kitchen and slammed open the door only to find her entire staff tied into their chairs next to the kitchen work table. Simkins blubbered apologies while Boreas ranted about a ruined dinner. Isadora had been crying.

“Well, it’s time you got back!” said Mrs. Philomon imperiously.

Zan simply shook her head and began untying their hands which had been bound behind the backs of the chairs. The knots, compared to Caradon’s, were quite clumsy, but they were good enough to do the job. “What happened?”

“There was a knock at the door and I had thought you had come back from your outing with Mr.

Garrou and Mrs. Felis-Ackert,” said Simkins. “I should have looked through the window first to see who was visiting. I would have prevented this entire debacle. As you can imagine, these two ruffians barged in demanding to see your laboratory. I didn’t say where it was, but they had threatened all of us with a pistol and tied us up.”

“Most awful!” wailed Isadora.

“Now, now,” said Zan. “I’ll see to the damage. Meanwhile, Mr. Caradon and his driver are in the sitting room. If one of you would take out some medicinal supplies to them—disinfectant and bandages and some hot water—I would be much obliged. The driver has taken a facer and Mr. Caradon has been shot.”

Mrs. Philomon visibly paled. “Dear heavens.”

Isadora cried harder.

“I’ll get the bandages,” said Simkins as he got out of his seat and headed to the rest of the house.

Boreas rubbed his wrists and declared, “I’ll get the hot water.”

“I would give you a handkerchief,” Zan told Isadora, “except I’ve forgotten my reticule and keys outside.”

“We shall retrieve them,” said Mrs. Philomon, pulling a sobbing Isadora with her.

With her staff now busy, she immediately retreated from the kitchen and headed towards her basement laboratory. Once she arrived at the bottom of the stairs to the lab, she forced herself to swallow the lump in her throat. The entire place was decimated—broken glass, various materials thrown out of the shelves, drawers pulled out and ransacked. She hurried toward the table at the center of the laboratory and found that the materials that she had meticulously gathered to test for their electric potential, their triboelectric effect on each other, were scattered on the floor.

The notebook that she had been making notations in was missing. So were her uncle’s notes that she had been studying.

She crouched on the ground and found a clear spot to sit down. Zan picked up a tattered piece of silk and squeezed her eyes shut. A trickle of wetness ran down her cheek. Who on earth would wish to destroy all that she worked for? Who wanted so badly to get their hands on her uncle’s last work? And what sort of bastard would steal her uncle’s notes, the last bit of connection that she had still had with Elliot Waterstone?

She took in a ragged breath and opened her eyes. Her vision bleary, she wiped her face against her sleeve and then glanced about her. The housebreakers had stolen the hardcopy of the notes, but they hadn’t taken the knowledge she had about the notes and what she was using them for out of her head. Time would be wasted cleaning up the laboratory first, but that would have to be done. Her staff could help her out there. And while that was happening, she had the hunch that she would have to bully out the answers that she wanted.

Someone was after what her uncle was getting at before his death. She had a strong feeling that she had to find out what that thing was first before the person or persons behind the ransacking of her laboratory figured it out.

Stiffly, she stood up and took a slow tour of the room to survey the damage more closely. Glass crunched beneath her heel. Almost all of the empty glassware were broken and a distillation apparatus smashed against a wall. Some of the vials containing chemicals were also broken, the contents spilling out onto the floor. She wrinkled her nose at the strong smells and put an overturned chair upright to stand on to open some of the basement windows.

The equipment could be replaced. She would start over. Zan jumped off the chair and made her way toward the stairs. As she took her first step, something grated along the bottom of her left shoe. She looked down and saw something odd and black.

Zan picked up a string of shining black beads. She fingered it and listened to the beads softly clack against each other. It looked like a rosary except most of the rosaries she saw were made of light colored stone like rose quartz or amber and had a cross at the end made of the same stone or of a precious metal like gold or silver. These beads were made of some dark stone—jet or obsidian, she guessed—and the cross at the end wasn’t like any of the crosses she ever saw in the Church or those worn by the devout. This cross was made of the black stone and had equal length arms like a plus sign circumscribed by a ring of silver. Zan didn’t own any rosaries and to her knowledge, neither did her staff. Whoever had left it did not live in her house.

She made her way upstairs. In the hallway, she saw Simkins, the driver, and Caradon turned toward the front door. Simkins was clutching a roll of bandages and a bottle of ethanol. Caradon was

holding his stained coat, and his right shirt sleeve was rolled up to reveal a strong arm lightly sprinkled with dark hair. A white bandage was wrapped neatly around the upper arm where he had been shot.

“Mr. Caradon, where do you think you’re going?” Zan said, startling the three men.

Caradon turned his head slightly to acknowledge her. “If you recall, I have an appointment with one of the captains of my cargo ships...”

“No.”

“Excuse me, Miss Hu?”

“You’re not going anywhere. You’re going to stay right here until you’ve recovered your nerves from the recent incident.”

“My nerves?” He sounded like he was trying to contain a laugh. “I’m perfectly all right, I assure you. It was only a flesh wound. The bullet simply grazed my arm.”

“Your employee will understand your absence is due to extraordinary circumstances. Simkins and your driver will agree with me, don’t you gentlemen?”

“Miss Hu,” said Simkins as he glanced from her to Caradon uneasily and the driver hemmed and hawed, “Your patron does have an appointment.”

Caradon only grinned. “Perhaps you are right, Miss Hu. Perhaps I do need to recover from my nerves. I suppose a bit of restraint from any further activity is sound advice.”

Simkins and the driver looked confused, but Zan flushed. “What an idiotic thing to say. Restraint from any further activity as sound advice, ha!”

^^^^

## Chapter 28 – Never Called Son

As Zan sent Simkins back to the kitchen to get tea, Caradon dispatched his driver with a message to the captain of one of his cargo ships, The Conquistador, to meet him at 42 Warden Street instead of the usual meeting place at the docks of Amanthus’ sea port. After her request for tea, she managed to herd her patron back into the sitting room. Or perhaps he let her herd him. She was slowly beginning to figure out what the man might be thinking or at least she hoped so, but he still boggled her.

“There are no other injuries?” she inquired as she took the seat beside him and scrutinized the bandage on his arm. It appeared that Simkins had did an adequate job. There were no bloodstains.

“No. The wound has stopped bleeding.” He looked down at her hands. “What is that?”

“Oh?” She looked down at the direction of his gaze. She dropped the black rosary into her lap and then began tugging her gloves off her hands and putting them on the nearby table. “I suppose their ruined. Mrs. Philomon would be furious.”

“I don’t mean your gloves. The bit of jewelry. I’ve never seen you wearing any except for your father’s jade pendant.”

She held up the string of black beads with the strange cross dangling at the end. The light from the window threw silver highlights which made the stones gleam. Caradon’s eyes narrowed speculatively as he contemplated the rosary. “I haven’t been wearing it. I found it on the floor of the laboratory. It’s completely destroyed. The laboratory, that is.”

“Those housebreakers were after something, I suppose.” His lips thinned as he took hold of the end of the string of beads and Zan let go so it fell into his palm like a coiled snake. “Have I ever told you how I found my father after his death?”

She tried swallowing, but her mouth was dry. “No.”

“It was a day similar to this one except it was raining. It was almost a year ago.” A coldness had seeped into his voice and his eyes had taken a hard look as he stared down at the black rosary. She hunched her shoulders as she felt a shiver at his tone. “Peter Caradon, Earl of Gasmere and Queen’s ambassador to the Far East, was deeply entrenched in the political goings on of foreign governments. He had been recalled back to Amanthus before my birth by the Queen for certain reasons. Perhaps it was strategically important since Amanthus is sometimes called the gateway between the east and the west, but who knows. My father never confided to me any of those reasons.”

“Did your father still had ambassadorial duties or did he become a foreign correspondent instead?”

“He still kept the title of ambassador. At any rate, shortly after I met him, he and I struck a deal of sorts. In my business, traders must be knowledgeable about the state of different countries in order to keep an orderly flow of goods and profit. If I were to find any bit of useful gossip or rumor about the state of

affairs of, say, a country of interest to the Queen, I would pass it on to my father.”

“And what did you get in return?”

His fingers closed over the rosary. “He wondered why my mother saddled me with his family name. And all he ever called me was by my first name.”

She cocked her head, examining his intense, far away look. “You didn’t get anything in return, did you? You expected to spend time with a father you never knew while growing up and hoped that he would acknowledge you. Instead, he didn’t do that, did he? He rewarded you with your information by granting you control of his fortune after his death, but he never acknowledged you as his son. He used you.”

“What do you know about it?” he said suddenly furious. He turned on her and shoved her back to the couch. She held her breath as he snarled at her, showing sharp teeth. “You’re not illegitimate.”

There was a cough and he let go of her, sinking back onto his side of the couch. Simkins was standing at the table with the tea tray and as the butler put the tray down on the table, he gave Zan a worried glance. And then he shot Caradon a disapproving frown. “Are you all right, Miss Hu?”

“I’m fine Simkins. Mr. Caradon is just a bit overwrought from all the earlier excitement. And please thank the cook for me for making these tarts on such short notice.”

“They were to be for tonight’s dessert, but Boreas thought you might like them now. He’s planning a cake for tonight’s dessert instead,” Simkins replied.

She nodded. “There’s also the matter of the laboratory. It’s a dreadful mess down there.”

“The rest of the staff and I will get right to it. Where would you like the materials that you had requested earlier? I had them stored at the back of the kitchen.”

“That is indeed fortunate, isn’t it?” she murmured to herself. Then louder, she said, “Thank you, Simkins. If I need anything else, I’ll call you straight away.”

The butler nodded and left. Zan turned to pour the tea. As she handed Caradon a cup, she said, “You are right. I do not know exactly what it is like to be in your shoes. But I do know that I would be absolutely devastated if I had a parent reject me.”

“I apologize for my outburst. The subject of my parentage is a touchy subject with me.”

“I’d imagine, especially with your cousin and his family taunting you about it all the time.”

He grinned. “Well, they can taunt, but I at least hold their purse strings.” He took a sip of the tea. “Anyways, where was I? Oh yes, my last visit with my father. It was raining and all of his staff had the day off. He was to have answered the door himself, but there was no reply to all my knocking.” He was frowning again as he looked at the rosary in his hand. “When I finally got inside his residence, I found him in the bath tub. I took him to his bedroom and dressed him. And I noticed a burn mark, here.” He turned his hand and rubbed against the inside of his wrist. “The mark was a cross inscribed inside a circle.”

“Like that rosary,” said Zan.

He nodded. “I don’t think this is a coincidence. My father was also a patron to your uncle when he had been alive. Do you know what this symbol means?”

“I have no idea. At first, I thought it was religious. It is a cross and this is a rosary, but I’ve never seen a rosary like this one before.”

“It’s a sign that some of the pagan worshippers of the Temple use. Not all of the worshippers, I think, only a subset. Unfortunately, I haven’t discovered this group’s name or where they meet other than along with the other old religion followers at the Temple.”

“So you know what they do at the Temple?” she said. “You knew what sort of things they called up the previous night?”

A strange smile quirked at his lips. “You saw, then? Of course. You were racing out of there like a pack of hell hounds were at your heels.”

“Oh!” She reddened, reminded of her weakness. “I did not have hounds at my heels. I was startled, that’s all.”

“If you say so.” He held up the strange cross to his eye. “You found this in your laboratory which you say is in ruins. How much of your equipment do you need to replace?”

“Some delicate instruments are completely destroyed as well as some supplies—especially much of my glass equipment.”

“I can supply the funds for the replacements.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“I’m your patron, remember? I should be responsible for such things. How will I ever see any results if the inventor I’m patronizing doesn’t have her supplies?” He put down his tea cup and leaned

closer to her. “Tell me, Zan, what were those housebreakers looking for in your laboratory?”

She took a sip of her own tea and tightened her own fingers on the cup. Should she tell him? Before, she had been extremely unsure of him. She glanced at the bandage on his arm and heard herself say, “They were after my uncle’s notes.”

“You said that your uncle had destroyed them shortly before his death.”

“I did. I thought he did. But I found his notes in his safety deposit box at the bank. I didn’t know that he had kept them there. He had made some notes on an improvement on his last machine. I remember what he had written down but,” she paused as he cocked his head, frowning. Did she want to tell him her hunches? Did she want to tell him what she suspected about her uncle’s research—that he was not only trying to control and produce electrical energy, but possibly other kinds of energy as well? Or did he already suspect? “I never told anyone about my uncle’s notes except for Mr. Garrou and Mrs. Felis-Ackert earlier today. But I know they wouldn’t send anyone to steal from my laboratory. They are fashion connoisseurs. They don’t care a wit about machines. At least not much anyway.”

“One shouldn’t think too highly of one’s friends,” he said. “You did tell them so they are suspect.”

“Someone else could have found out. I know my staff is loyal to me, but they could have said something in some gossip to some of their acquaintances that could have been picked up by whoever was responsible for this.”

“If that is the case, the list of suspects could be nearly limitless.”

She placed her tea cup next to his and rubbed her temple. “That could also mean that you were after my uncle’s notes. You were rather keen about my uncle’s last research, weren’t you?”

“Zan, if I were after your uncle’s notes, would I hire a pair of ruffians to instigate a violent burglary and get myself shot?”

“Miss Hu?” She looked up to see Simkins in the doorway. “There is a Captain Isidro Ramon here to see Mr. Caradon.”

“Mr. Caradon is expecting him,” she told her butler. She turned back to Caradon who had slipped the black rosary into a pocket. “I don’t know what you would do if you had known about my uncle’s notes before the burglary,” she said lowly, “but I do know that you would be far too intelligent to have gotten yourself shot.”

She felt his eyes on her as she got up and headed out of the sitting room. In the hallway, she saw a tall swarthy man in a dark blue uniform—the Captain, she assumed—and turned back toward the laboratory with Simkins.

Simkins coughed to catch her attention. “The cook has some soup warming for you...”

She halted at the door leading to the basement. “Tell cook to prepare another place for dinner.”

“Miss Hu?”

“And tell Mrs. Philomon and Isadora to prepare the guestroom.”

“Mr. Caradon is staying?” said her butler, alarmed.

She simply gave him a look. “I’ll be in the laboratory cleaning.” And she opened the door and descended the stairs.

~~~~~

Chapter 29 – Tagging Along

She had just finished *changing* when she heard the lock in her bedroom door jangling. With a yip, she dove under her bed and crouched in the darkness, ears pricked.

Supper had been a quiet affair in the dining room. Zan had not used it since her uncle’s death. Instead, she had taken her last meal of the day with her staff in the kitchen. With her staff gathered around her, simply the presence of others had helped stave off the melancholy and grief that seized her at other odd moments, rendering her momentarily frozen and mute. But since Caradon was a guest—and it had surprised her that he had put up little protest when she offered to put him up for the night—the dining room was used.

Uncle Elliot had sat at the head of the table, in front of a long window that overlooked the back yard. Since Zan was now head of the household, she had the right to sit in that seat, but she did not feel right occupying the place where her uncle had once presided. So she had taken her customary place—the seat to Uncle Elliot’s left. Caradon had made no mention of her unusual seating. Instead, he took the seat

across from hers—the one that was usually reserved for guests—and helped start conversation by reminiscing about his childhood in the Far East with his mother.

Zan mostly had questions for him as she had left that country at such a young age to remember very much. And then she had said, “I wish to one day go and see it again. No doubt, it will be quite different from all these years. A child’s memories cloud reality and perhaps it is not as colorful and vibrant as I have remembered.”

Caradon had given her an enigmatic look before saying, “I too wish to see it again. It is home to some old, fond memories. Perhaps we could go together.”

Startled, she had replied, “Together? What do you mean by that? I thought you saw different parts of the world all the time since you own a shipping business.”

“I own a shipping business, but that does not mean I sail on my own ships. Most owners stay in one place and let their assistants and their captains handle the more mundane chores. And what is wrong with going to visit the place of our childhoods together?”

The lock at her bedroom door rattled again. Who on earth was trying to get into her room? It was ten at night—a time when most people were in bed although some of the more gregarious were still out in the social whirl of soirees and gaming halls—her staff were already turned in and Caradon was supposed to be sleeping in the guest room. Or was he?

She heard the creak of the door as it opened and then shut. There were footsteps. She could feel the vibration of them along the floor with her sensitive paws. It was a man’s tread—too solid for that to be Simkins but not heavy enough to be the cook. The coverlet on her bed trailed the floor so she could not see or smell who belonged to those footfalls. But she had a fairly good guess for who it was.

The footsteps stopped at the foot of her bed. “I know you’re in here, Zan.”

Men like you should be strung up by his toes for violating a proper lady’s bedchambers. How did you get in here? I had that door locked.

“A piece of wire can do wonders with a lock.” The sound of fabric softly sliding against each other and then landing on the floor seemed to echo in the room.

Zan scrambled further back under the bed, her claws clicking on the hardwood floor, a thought both frightening and arousing flickering through her mind. *What do you think you’re doing?*

She could hear the dark smile in his voice when he said, “What do you think I’m doing?”

I’m not going to have a naked man in my room. And I’m not going to start now either. Put those pants back on!

“Too late, Zan.”

There was a brief surge of energy that churned the air in the room. She could sense the tug whispering along the edge of the bed coverlet as it gently swayed against the floor. Then a nose, followed by silver eyes and fox ears, poked past the coverlet and under the bed to survey her crouched form. His mouth opened revealing teeth and a lolling tongue in a fox laugh.

Go back to your room, Caradon.

What? And let you have all the fun, romping about in the city tonight? He slunk all the way under the bed until he was crouched in front of her, his nose inches away from hers. *I’m not about to let you go about your little adventures alone.*

You think I’m just out and about having adventures? She blinked and gave a disgusted yip. *What happened to your bandages? You still have that wound on your shoulder.*

He looked down at his foreleg. *Ah. Well, I suppose it just fell off when I changed. Don’t worry, it’s just a surface wound.*

Don’t worry? Famous last words, she scoffed. Zan scooted out from underneath the bed and located the pile of bandages next to his clothes. *If you insist on following me, you’re going to put this bandage back on. It would be more painful for you if it gets infected.*

Very well. He laid down and extended his foreleg. She took the edge of the bandage in her mouth and awkwardly wrapped it around. She left the ends dangling for him to tie the knot. *I will have to take this off again to change back.*

Of course. And I get no thanks for being practical.

He suddenly nuzzled her throat. *You get my thanks. But I wouldn’t say you’re being very practical trying to get at this by yourself.*

She scrambled backward towards the window, surprised at his contact. *I’m going to get some information that might help me figure out what my uncle was getting at and what those housebreakers wanted.*

*I guessed as much. So how are we getting out of this room without alerting your staff?
Through here.* She opened the windowsill with her nose and jumped onto the window ledge—the flash of her tail flickering like a black flame as she proceeded along the house.
Caradon jumped out the window after her.

^^^^^^

Chapter 30 – False Demons

From the rooftops, the roads of Amanthus wound around the buildings like shining, writhing black snakes. The lampposts were pinpoints of light—eyes looking upward to the sky, searching for their sisters, the stars, that were hiding behind the cloak of cloud. Sound from carriages or the occasional person’s footsteps against pavement sounded like faint tinny bells—discordant wind chimes muffled against a thick night air. The air was a bit clearer at this height, but the stench of Old Amanthus still beckoned, a rotting carcass to flies and vultures.

A break in the clouds revealed that the moon was not as full. It was slightly slimmer than the previous night—waning, giving way to darkness.

Zan followed Caradon among the roofs, skirting vents and chimneys as they steadily made their way toward the city interior. He had said that the route would be quicker and safer than following the open major roads. As she followed him over a ledge to the roof of a shop on Market Row, she wondered if this had been his method for traveling the previous night, if he had followed her thusly. A pity she had not glanced up as well as behind and around her.

Caradon stopped at the edge of a roof facing the street running parallel with Market Row, on the old city side. Most of the lampposts on this road were dark—only a few flickered dimly, lighting occasional patches of the road. She stood beside him, looking down at the street. It was busier than most as a many seedy taverns and pubs lined the streets along with a brightly lit house at the end of the row of buildings—the loudly laughing women in brightly colored dresses and drunk men waving bills about marked it as a brothel, a gaming hell, or both.

The building they were on top of was one of the many drinking taverns on the street. She watched the men stumbling out, drunk and tired, and quickly narrowed in to one figure who moved and smelled familiarly. The lanky man was wearing a long coat that came nearly to his ankles and a battered hat smelling of soot. He stood leaning on the tavern’s outside railing at a drunken stoop and fumbled in a pocket to light his pipe. From the high angle on the roof, she couldn’t make out the man’s face.

Someone standing inside the tavern, just before the threshold of the front door, laughed loudly and threw something into the street which clanked noisily along the pavement. The figure at the railing gave no indication that he heard the noise. “You watch your back, you hear?” said the person inside the tavern. “With that conjunction coming up and all those culties agitated, beware of all those demons.”

“Yah!” the man on the railing scoffed. Then he rasped in a sneering drawl, “You’ve gone to one of those church sermons again, haven’t you, Willie? You’re too gullible about all that fire and brimstone lecturing. The only sort of hell on earth we’re going to see are the usual sort of things—murder, thievery, no beer.”

There was laughter from Willie. “It’s your own fault they ran out of beer when it comes to you. No coin, no drink, Eridanus. Everyone knows that. Nothing’s free, you know.”

“Ha! I’m a right regular customer. There should be specials for people like me.”

“You know they serve no specials to anybody. I’m not kidding—watch your back on your way back to your hole. I’ve heard from this one bloke who’s in the know about the Temple goings on. The culties are expecting the border between here and the other world to thin and the demons will be out in force, I grant you that.”

“Oh? Will there be organized armies?” Eridanus replied in a mocking tone.

“That would be too obvious. Demons can come in different forms. They can look like you or me except for their red eyes. Some of them come in different animal forms like dogs and foxes and cats and crows.”

“And fish too, I suppose. Fish with red eyes. I can see it, Willie. Fish with red eyes cause all the shipwrecks that happen on the sea—not the storms.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Demons like forms that can cause harm. If you see any talking dogs...”

“Talking dogs! Just listen to yourself. I think you’re the one who’s drunk too much, Willie.”

There are no such thing as demons—it's all superstition.”

“Humph. Disbelieve all you like, but I suppose you have cause to be arrogant. Go wrap yourself up with all those amulets you give away for money. You'll need them, mark my words.”

Slowly, the amulet shop owner straightened up from the railing. “Perhaps I'll just go and do just that. There's no talking to someone who's in your state.”

As Eridanus walked off into the street, Willie laughed uproariously before stopping abruptly with a hiccup. Willie cursed and hiccupped some more before stomping back into the busy tavern. The amulet shop owner didn't turn around to say goodbye to his acquaintance.

Caradon and Zan slipped down a narrow iron stairway bolted to the side of the tavern and kept to the shadows as they tailed the amulet shop owner who seemed quite cavalier about walking on a street in Old Amanthus at night.

I suppose you have some idea on how to find out information from our drunk little victim?

She gave her patron a hard look. *This is serious, not some silly little adventure!*

You don't have a plan, do you?

She was tempted to bat his nose with a paw, but she kept her eyes on the amulet shop owner instead.

The man wavered through the streets, passing other drunks and some gamblers, surprisingly avoiding getting accosted from any of the criminal class that were surely lurking in the old city. The two fox-shifters followed him deeper into Old Amanthus via a strange twisting path through small streets and alleyways until he turned onto Galen Avenue, the address for the amulet shop. They watched him amble up the stoop to the front door and slip through his door with no more than a faint jingle of his keys.

Zan eyed the closed door in vague frustration. She wanted answers, and being locked out of the man's amulet shop was not going to get her any. She glanced at the windows in the shop front and tapped the panes with her paws. On the second window, a shutter gave way and quickly, she leaped up the window ledge and slipped into the front room of the shop. Caradon soon followed her and for a moment, they waited at the bottom of the window, watching the shop owner open a door at the back of the room and disappear into that room. Then they heard him stumble up a flight of stairs.

The room behind the store front was a combination of a sitting room, a study, a dining room, and a kitchen. A small wood stove sat in the corner, at the moment, unused. A worn couch was pushed against a bare wall and across from that was a chair and a battered desk strewn with small, odd objects, papers, and books. On the opposite wall were a wall of cupboards and a wooden stand holding a brass statue of some old pagan god. Zan took a closer look at the objects on the desk and quickly dismissed them as broken bits of amulets—perhaps in the middle of repair.

Perhaps those are his accounts. I think it'll be a better idea if you look through them. And I'll see if I can wring some information out of him myself.

Caradon jumped onto the chair and opened one of the books with his paw. *You want me to do this? Can't I ask the questions?*

You don't even know what questions to ask, she replied. *Check the books and see if there are any transactions with my uncle. Or anyone from the Academy for that matter.*

Well, you haven't told me what sort of questions you were going to ask.

If you want to learn, then listen in. She left him in the back room and ventured up the stairs, slowly and cautiously, ears pricked for any sudden noises.

At the top of the landing, there was only one door, but it was open. The shop owner did not notice her dark form in the doorway. He had dropped his coat on the back of a chair in his sparse bedroom and had flopped into his unkempt bed with all his clothes still on. He snorted as he pulled a ratty, moth-eaten blanket up to his shoulders.

Zan padded closer and jumped up to the nearby bed stand to look at the drowsy, drunk man. She projected a thought: *Quite full of yourself, weren't you?*

The shop owner suddenly sat straight up, eyes wide. He turned and saw the black fox on his bed stand and he shrieked.

Mr. Eridanus, theatrics are most unbecoming.

“Ah!” He grabbed something from beneath his pillow, but she was too quick for a man who had his senses dulled by liquor. A shot went off before she chomped down on his wrist. The bullet hit the ceiling and plaster rained onto the bed. The shop owner gave another high pitched scream with the pain of teeth on his hand and he dropped a small pistol which bounced on the blanket before clattering on the floor.

Zan?

I'm all right, she privately told Caradon. He was too surprised, that's all.

"What are you? How do you know my name?" the shop owner whispered as he clutched the edge of his blanket when she let go of him.

Didn't your friend at that drinking tavern warn you about talking animals?

Eridanus made a choked sound at the back of his throat. "Demon! Demon, get out of my house! I have all sorts of magical artifacts that will send you straight back to hell!" Then he pulled out something else from underneath his pillow. A very large, silver cross.

She simply blinked. *You think that will stop me? I'm here to account for your business, Mr. Eridanus. You'd better give me truthful answers or something might happen to you.*

The shop owner dropped the cross and pulled out a vial which he unstopped and flung the contents over her while shouting, "May the power of God compel you! May the power of God compel you!"

Oh, I don't think holy water will work either, Mr. Eridanus. She shook her head and gave him a large toothy grin. *First you will tell me who you sold your little amulets to this past month.*

He wailed. "You must be one of the old pagan gods. I'll do anything. Just don't hurt me."

Answer my question.

"My customers were the usual lot, you know. Those little old ladies and those wormy chaps down at the stews. You know, the superstitious lot," he rambled. "I sold charms for wealth and love and health and keeping away the evil spirits. They probably don't work, you know. You just say that they do and those gullible ignoramuses will believe anything. And then there were the culties. They all want the same thing so I have them specially made for them. Just some decorative jewelry, that kind of thing. They've never told me what it means or whether they are amulets at all besides the decorative aspect. However, some of them have told me that they like to wear them at the Temple or the surrounding ruins because it is said that the Ancients built them on spots where there was a great upwelling of energy or magic or the power of the gods or whatever it is that they believe." He paused to take a breath.

Is that all?

"Well, there were some eccentric people, you know. The kinds who think demons are after them all the time so I have the usual charms and amulets for them. There were a couple of new eccentric old biddies too, but I suppose they just got word of my shop, you know? Some of them ordered needles made of a variety of materials, especially some made of resins like jet and amber and..."

The store owner had attempted to distract her with his blabber as his hand inched toward the heavy silver cross that he had dropped. Zan noticed a fraction too late as he swung the cross. At least her reflexes were faster and he only hit her nose which caused her to yip in pain. But before he could aim another blow, she bit down on his wrist again and swiped at his face with her claws. He screamed.

She could feel Caradon's anger bubbling through her as he pounded up the stairway to the bedroom, heedless of the noise that he made, and pounced onto the bed. He placed a clawed paw on the man's neck and stared into his face. The shop owner flailed uselessly and made a gurgling sound as sweat trickled down his temple and his eyes glazed over in fear.

"Two demons!" Eridanus gasped out.

That's right. Caradon opened his mouth so that the amulet store owner stared into a maw of teeth. *And you had better be careful of who you irritate. Otherwise, your face might not be the same when morning comes.*

The shop owner squeaked and tried to nod.

Privately to her, Caradon said, *I found your uncle's transaction. Are you done here?*

She rubbed a paw against her nose in irritation. *I suppose so since you've so effectively ended the interrogation.*

As they left the bedroom and headed down the stairs, they heard the door slam and then the frightened chanting of the store owner as he recited some sort of purification ritual designed to clear a house of spirits and demons.

~~~~~

## Chapter 31 – A Hungry Temple God

A small black fox slipped from the shadows of the old city's buildings and squeezed through a hole in the dilapidated iron fence that surrounded the cemetery. She crouched behind one of the headstones at the periphery of the cemetery and briefly turned her head to watch a larger fox flick his ears in irritation

and search for a larger hole. She turned back to peer at the Temple at the center of the city—appearing in patches of dark and light gray as the almost full moon was covered in broken clouds.

*Don't you already have the information you were searching for? Why come out here in his morbid place when you could be sleeping safe in your bed?*

Her tail twitched. I'm not doing any sleeping when I have a clue to follow. *If you're so tired, why don't you go back to bed?*

The larger fox approached her from behind and then swiftly imprisoned her tail between his paws. *Not without you.*

She whipped her head around, coming nose to nose to him. *You aren't suggesting...*

*And what if I am? It wouldn't be such a bad thing, would it?*

*Cad!* She freed her tail from his paws and slapped him on the side of his muzzle with it. *You weren't breaking into my room to follow me at all, were you?*

*Oh, I was. Don't mistake me about that. But on the slim chance that you weren't heading out on a bit of adventure, I thought you might be amendable for a bit of...midnight talk. It isn't every day that an unmarried lady asks an unmarried man to stay the night as a guest.*

*Aren't we doing some midnight talking now?*

*Not the sort that I had in mind, but I suppose I'll take whatever I can get.*

She hit him again with her tail, but he only gave her a foxy grin. *So my uncle had gone to that shop to order needles made of different kinds of resins like amber and soft stones like jet.*

*Do you know what those needles were for?*

*Perhaps.* She didn't tell him that the needles would have to be attached near the bottom of her uncle's machine in the same place that Elliot Waterstone had attached the metal needles on his prototype that he had shown the Academy weeks before. On the prototype, the metal had been rubbing along a moving belt of rubber that had moved negative electrical charge into a small metal dome. If something came in contact with the dome when the machine was turned on, there would be an electrical spark between the dome and that object. She was fairly sure she knew how her uncle's methods had worked. He would have experimented with a great many different materials in order to get the greatest amount of spark or electrical charge for even his prototype. So why had he ordered needles made of resins when he had already found the combination of materials that collected the maximum amount of spark? Elliot Waterstone must have figured out that something else must be behaving similarly to electricity.

*You're not telling me everything again, he told her. You like trying to confound me, don't you?*

*I wouldn't have guessed. You seem to read my mind quite well. But if that is the case, then we're even. Sometimes your actions are beyond my comprehension.*

*Really?* He seemed pleased. *So what are you doing out here for? From all appearances, no one is coming to the Temple now.*

*Then that's perfect. The amulet shop owner had mentioned that there were certain places that the Ancients built their temples because there were places where the energy—some would say magic, I suppose, and your apothecary friend Long would call chi—is stronger than the rest of the country. Without anyone else around, it would be a perfect time to go exploring.*

He shook his head. *Exploring? What for?*

*My uncle was interested in going into Old Amanthus for something. He never told me. He never explained to Tarlton who he only consulted with briefly. My uncle had been working with electricity machines in the later part of his life. Electricity is a form of energy. So it would make a sort of sense that he would try visiting places where it is said that there is a greater accumulation of energy.*

*And you think the Temple is one such place?*

*It's a possibility. I never really noticed the last time I was here because there were so many of those old pagan worshippers doing, well, something.* She wove among the tombstones with Caradon keeping up with her. She could still sense his bewilderment. Truth be told, she wasn't too sure herself. But if her hunch was wrong and the Temple, on this night, was simply another structure built by the Ancients—nothing more and nothing less than any of the other buildings built recently—then she was back where she started. Or rather even less than where she started. She no longer had her uncle's notes.

Without occupants, the Temple was dark and colder than she had remembered. But in her fox form, her eyesight in the darkness was many fold better and she could make out the pedestal in the center of the main room with its black bowl sitting on top. She swiveled her ears and heard nothing.

*You don't have any instruments with you to detect any accumulation of energy if there is indeed one.*

Her ears twitched towards him. *I'm not doing any electricity experiments or anything quite scientific either. So far, I feel nothing particularly different about this spot.* She cautiously moved forward, toward the pedestal. A few yards away, she stopped as she felt a faint vibration running across the floor underneath her paws. *Is someone else here?*

He stopped beside her and swiveled his head to sweep the room. *No one I can see but I believe someone is indeed coming from outside. Several someones.*

They bolted to a hiding place behind a nearby column in time to see two dark robed figures ambling toward the pedestal and the large bowl. One figure was holding a torch and the other a wooden crate with a chicken. The figures murmured an offertory prayer to some old pagan god that consisted of praises and beseeching the god to take their sacrifice as a tribute to his rising powers as some conjunction of planets was drawing closer.

Zan felt all of her fur raise on their ends as a cold, dark power washed over the floor and swirl lazily in the air. A rotten smell began to permeate the Temple. Caradon moved closer to her until she felt his warm body press into her side.

A noxious vapor spilled over the black bowl and the black tentacle slithered out to take the crate and the chicken. There was the destruction of the crate, the death cries of the chicken, the bit of blood. The two worshippers stood transfixed at the sight, perhaps awed by the power and the voraciousness of their god. Then, as the offering was consumed, there was a brief silence as the vapor continued to spill out and the dark energy became stronger. The two figures began to move backward.

Suddenly, the tentacle shot out, as fast as a whip, and curled itself around the foot of one of the figures. There was a scream before the man was lifted into the air and dropped head first into the bowl. There was a sickening crunch and blood trickled over the side of the bowl.

*Come on!* He bellowed in her head.

She wasted no time as she ran after him, toward the entrance of the temple. But as they got further away from the pedestal, the blanket of dark energy seemed to thicken into a solid wall that blocked off the exit.

*It's some sort of trap!* He growled.

She heard the running footsteps and shrieking of the remaining worshipper. Those shrieks were silenced as well. And then there was the sound of grinding bone that made her heart beat faster. *The Ancients must have known what that thing was. They would have built another exit for themselves in case things got out of hand.*

*But where?*

She skidded backward and began racing against the side of the main room. The thing in the bowl was still preoccupied with its two human victims as she passed through a doorway into a smaller room, Caradon close behind her heels. Strangely, the dark energy had missed this room and it felt empty of its presence. There was a dark hole in the middle of the room with stone stairs leading downward. Broken hinges clung to the opposite edge of the hole—evidence that there had been a door covering the opening some time ago. She sniffed and thought she detected a faint circulation of air below.

*Are you afraid of the dark?* She asked him.

*Vision is only one of five senses,* he replied. *I'll go first.*

As he proceeded down the steps, she felt her fur rising again. She looked behind her and saw a black tentacle oozing along the floor, bringing its vapors and stench along with it to the entrance of the small room.

*Zan...*

*Go! I'm right behind you.*

The tentacle reached out in lightning speed. In anticipation, she leaped to the side, claws extended, scratching. Something thick and slimy squirted beneath her paws and she slipped when she landed. At the attack, the tentacle reared up like an affronted arm and swung sideways towards her last location. She flattened herself against the floor as the thing smashed into something behind her. She scuttled away, toward the stairs, as an enormous column came crashing down to the floor.

*Zan!*

*I'm coming!*

She felt the energy twist behind her, a marker of the thing's next strike, and she bounded down the stairs, crashing into a warm, furry body as she hit bottom. She blinked and her eyes immediately adjusted to the dim surroundings. It wasn't pitch dark as expected. There was a faint green glow coming from some sort of mold that was coating the walls. The walls themselves were made of human skeletons.

*This is no basement, he said as he nudged at her with his nose. There is a tunnel to somewhere.*  
She flicked her ears in agreement and they both burst into a run down the tunnel of bone as a thick tendril of hungry darkness above searched for them.

~~~~~

Chapter 32 – Drunk Monk

Once they turned a corner, Zan stopped, panting. The air inside the tunnels was damp and musty—an ideal environment for the luminescent mold coating the bone walls. But surprisingly, there was little odor for spoilage and rot. Any energy in the tunnels was stagnant and little used, non-active. Caradon halted.

Do you suppose that thing will go back where it came from? She inquired.
I would assume so. Otherwise, why would they take the trouble to actually call it forth to take their sacrifices?

She let a shudder finally run through her body. *We were about to be next.*
But we aren't. He turned toward the unknown end of the tunnel. *Hopefully, we haven't jumped from one danger into another. Surely this tunnel will lead out at the other end. Otherwise, what would be the point in building the thing?*

To inter those bodies that no longer fit in the cemetery? She replied. *Perhaps we are in some sort of catacombs that the Ancients had made.*

The Ancients? I would say not, he mused. With the sort of atmosphere we have now down here, the mold would certainly destroy these poor people's remains sooner than later. I would guess that these had been here only a few hundred years.

They started a quick walking pace instead of a run. The tunnel seemed to go on for quite a ways, sometimes curving, sometimes branching. By mutual consent, they ignored the passages that went left or right in favor of continuing on one course. It would be less likely that they would get lost that way. The empty eye sockets of the skulls watched the passage of the two foxes, silent and uncaring. The air and the darkness pressed inward despite the glow of the mold making her feel vaguely claustrophobic.

You are certainly not like other young women.
She kept her glance ahead. *What do you mean? I certainly consider myself quite ordinary.*
Ordinary?

I'm not above average with the domestic arts. Perhaps worse. I don't know how to embroider a wit. My friends tell me I have a terrible sense of fashion.

You do. You can't wear black all the time, even with the excuse of your mourning.
I hardly know how to cook, although I do know how to boil water. I'm not brilliant at dancing or composing poetry. I don't even like poetry all that much. I do not understand what all the rage is with the novels other ladies are so fond of reading these days. Or those fiction serials in the newspapers. I don't listen to gossip. But I do like gardens and flowers. And if it weren't for that incident outside the amulet shop the other day, I would have attended the play my friends wanted to take me to. I like plays and opera although I cannot carry a tune.

I can't carry a tune either. He gave a low yip of amusement. *Look, you know how to do things that they don't. Not many females have the inclination for working at the Academy. No female of my acquaintance would dive headlong into dangerous situations and try to best an old pagan god or monster or whatever that things was. An ordinary female would faint at the sight.*

Is that a complaint?
I'm not complaining. But if this is how you normally go about things, no wonder you're not married. Your husband would be tearing his hair out at your antics.

She turned to glance at him. *You think I'm unmarried because I think a husband is too much of a burden? That I'd rather be a spinster than to put myself under a man's protection?*

Well, do you?
She was silent for a moment and there was only the sound of faint breathing. *You want the truth? I don't really know. I've never really thought about it. Of course, I've seen other women of my acquaintance slowly getting married off, but I had always considered it their ambition to get married, have children, and to take care of a family. My ambitions and focus were elsewhere. My uncle never encouraged me to do otherwise. I suppose I was the son that he never had.*

But you must admit that you do have suitors. Like that Mr. Garrou who comes visiting your residence to take you to a play.

Del Garrou is my friend, not my suitor. He wouldn't think of me in that way and I wouldn't think of him that way either. He's far too foppish for my taste. Besides, if you haven't noticed the other day, he is far closer to another woman than he is to me.

Faintly, he asked, Would you ever consider marriage?

It would depend on who was asking. She suddenly gave him a fox grin, showing sharp teeth. But I wouldn't set aside all of my work just to raise children. I'm not going to put aside everything to become a mouse because I'm not.

A smart man wouldn't ask his wife to become a mouse.

She yipped in vulpine laughter. There aren't too many of those around, are there? Besides, why are you so interested in my social life all of a sudden?

He ducked his head and said after a moment's hesitation, It was the first subject that came to mind, that's all. I was thinking of my parents. My father never married my mother. And my mother didn't think so much about the institution of marriage.

And what do you think of the entire subject?

Some men seem perfectly happy with it. Others do it because they see it as an obligation to society. I think it would depend on who one was married to. I wouldn't want to be bored.

Or unhappy? Are you afraid of suffering ennui?

I had thought so, until recently.

Hm. I wonder why that is. Perhaps because you've taken it into your head to follow me around when I never asked for it?

It doesn't matter whether or not you asked for it. You're just plain reckless!

I suppose you're lecturing me now. I can take care of my own safety

As you always say.

The walls of skulls and thigh bones abruptly ended and beyond the skeletons, the tunnel continued in hard packed dirt and stone. The air became slightly lighter as they continued down the tunnel—perhaps an indication that they were closing in on the exit. The glowing mold that had coated the human bones could not find any purchase on the dirt walls so the light faded as well and increasingly, they had to rely on touch and smell.

Then the tunnel itself ended as well. A flight of rotting wooden steps led upward to the ceiling of the tunnel. Zan snorted in frustration as she butted her head against a wood plane. It creaked upward an inch and then slammed back down.

This is an opening, I know it! Do you suppose it's been boarded up?

Or this could just be a door in the floor of some room somewhere. Here, we'll both push it open.

They both threw their strength onto their heads and forepaws. After a moment of struggling, the door lifted several more inches, revealing a glimpse of a dimly lighted room. Zan slipped up into the room first as Caradon supported the edge of the door with his shoulders. Then she braced her forepaws on the door and stood up on her hind legs to push the door upward by another fraction for Caradon to escape. When he climbed out of the tunnel, she let go of the door and it fell with a dull thud.

The two fox-shifters found themselves surrounded by wine casks. Each barrel, made of aged oak or walnut imported from the old country, were as big around as a fat cow's torso. The barrels were stacked along enormous shelves constructed out of heavy, unvarnished timber that showed signs of being infested with worms at one time. The air was free of the dark energy that had flooded the Temple, but it was tinged with the sting of alcohol.

What is this place? Zan asked as she peered around a barrel and was greeted by another line of casks.

Somebody's wine cellar, I would guess, Caradon replied. A very wealthy person's wine cellar. This place is enormous.

Bigger than your wine cellar?

Bigger, he agreed. My first guess would have been that this was some storage room of a winery, but that would be impossible. Not only does this place not have a wine press, but all the known wineries are located outside of the city, in the country amidst the vineyards.

Do you suppose this is the mayor's cellar?

No. He doesn't have the funds for this kind of thing, even if he took all the bribes that were offered him.

They ventured along the rows of barrels until they reached the last line and saw the entrance to the cellar. But not only was the door of the cellar closed, but there was someone standing just inside the door—a portly, bald man with a red nose and a monk's cassock decorated with ropy braids and a golden amber rosary dangling on his belt. The monk was holding a mug and drinking deeply. When he finished, he sighed happily and wiped his mouth with his sleeve before turning to the nearest keg and flipping the tab to pour himself another mug of drink. An iron ring of keys dangled on his wrist.

Damn. We're in the church cellar, exclaimed Caradon. We're going to have to get a hold of those keys to get out of here.

Unlike that amulet store owner, at least the monk doesn't have any pistols, she replied wryly.

One of us will distract him and the other will grab the keys.

Are you sure we'll be able to reach the keyhole? Wouldn't it be easier to just coerce the monk to open the door for us and let us out?

That would make sense as well. Hopefully he's drunk enough to believe anything he sees. But I think we should try grabbing the keys first. That way, he'll interact with us in a minimum amount of time and he'll most likely take the whole incident as a hallucination.

This time, Caradon crept forward first. The monk did not notice the black fox heading towards him until he finished his mug and looked up. The man gasped as the fox snarled, showing teeth, and he dropped the mug to clutch his forehead. With the man's attention turned elsewhere, Zan slunk toward the door to watch for the moment the monk flung out his hand with the keys.

"Oh you poor creature!" the monk exclaimed. "What on earth has happened to you?"

At the outburst, Caradon stopped growling and his ears flattened against his head as he looked down at the bandage on his foreleg.

"At least some good Samaritan had the heart to bandage your wounds." The monk reached out as if to touch him, but Zan immediately leaped between them and barred her teeth.

"Oh, am I seeing two?" murmured the monk. "No, I'm not," he corrected himself. "You don't have a bandage. What a lucky circumstance! Two little black foxes. You must be protecting your mate—how absolutely wonderful. You do know that foxes mate for life and what wonderful pelts you have? I remember when I was a boy, I found a little fox kit injured at the edge of my parents' farm. It was red with ears and paws and tail tipped with black fur. I nursed it back to health in secret. My parents wouldn't have been pleased, you know. They say that foxes liked to eat the chickens, but as far as I could tell, they were probably being poached by some of the poorer folk living nearby."

Zan's ears also flattened against her head as she listened to the monk ramble. *What on earth is he talking about?*

I have no idea, Caradon replied. But he seems harmless enough. I think.

"You do know that black foxes are symbols of good luck?" the monk told them. "Which means such a windfall for me since there are two of you standing right in front of me! Of course, this might be due to the wine that I've consumed, but that doesn't matter. I tell you, I've been waiting for a promotion in the order for ages! I've done my duty, and well too I must add. No one can find fault with me. Except for the drinking, I suppose. But everyone has vices—mine is relatively harmless compared to others. Why, I take absolutely no pleasure in harming God's creatures, I can tell you that."

Zan tried to direct a thought toward the monk. *Excuse me...*

"Why, I even hate hunting!" the monk talked over her. "When I grew up on the farm, I grew to dislike the whole process immensely. I couldn't stand it when it came time to slaughter the cows and the pigs and the chickens. Too much blood! It's much too violent and gruesome to me. I leave all of that to people who can stomach all of that. I would guess that it was a hunter that did that to your leg, hm? Those accursed traps that they put all over the countryside! It's very well that they trap rabbits and other sorts of game with those, but what about all the other hapless animals who get caught in them? Like wandering dogs and cats and foxes? Well, unfortunately, I do know what happens when a hunter catches a fox. Do you know? I'll tell you."

She sat back on her haunches and exchanged a look with her patron who gave a vulpine sigh in resignation.

"I'll tell you what a hunter does to a fox that's been trapped," the monk said a tad too enthusiastically with an overdramatic air of horror. "The fox gets skinned. That's right. Skinned! Fur traders usually get stocked with red and silver fox furs, but the black furs are most prized. You were lucky that you escaped from the hunter's trap! You're still alive to help your mate provide food for your growing kits!"

Kits? Caradon privately said to her in confusion. *What kits?*
Baby foxes, Zan supplied. *He thinks we have kits to feed.*
Is the man delusional?

“Oh my, and you’ve let me ramble on so.” The monk chortled to himself and then bent over to retrieve his mug. He poured himself another lager and was about to offer it to the foxes sitting in front of him when he thought better. “I suppose wine isn’t in your diet is it?”

It is in mine, replied Caradon.

Now is not the time to get drunk! She admonished him. Then to the monk, she directed the thought: *Please, we want to get home. Could you direct us out of here?*

“You want to go home, you say?” said the monk, wide-eyed. Then he vigorously rubbed his face with a hand. “No, no, you didn’t say that. I’m just hearing things. I’ve just had a little too much to drink. But it is odd, isn’t it, that you are in here and not out there? I wonder what sort of sadistic person would lock such beautiful animals down here. God’s creatures deserve to be free—running in the forests and the plains and the meadows—to live in the wild!” He groaned as he straightened up and quickly drained his third mug of wine. Or at least it was three that they had witnessed. Who knew how much the monk had drained from the wine cellar before they showed up? “Come, come, I have the key to this place. I locked myself in, you know, just in case someone came by to check up on the cellar.”

The two black foxes watched avidly as the monk fumbled with his ring of keys before exclaiming happily when he found the one that he wanted. He took up the mug and the lamp that he had carried with him and turned the key to open the door. Once the door was wide open, Zan and Caradon bolted out, only to skid to a stop as they found themselves in a low roofed passageway built with mortar and heavy dark stone that stretched outward in two directions.

“The basement of the place is a labyrinth!” the monk said as he closed and locked the wine cellar door behind him. “So you’d better follow me if you want to find the way out. No telling what you’d find down here if you didn’t know the way. I’ve heard that there are even dungeons and torture rooms in the place!” The monk shuddered and proceeded down the hallway to his left. The two foxes followed closely by his heels. “Why a church has dungeons and torture rooms, I have no idea. Men of God work here, not villains! I just keep telling myself that the cathedral was just built on some foundations laid by the barbaric Ancients.”

^^^^^^

Chapter 33 – The Cabal

The dank basement hallway slowly slanted upward as the monk plodded onward. At the end of the hallway, there was an intersection that branched left and right. He took the left which went a short ways before terminating in a semicircular hub with three identical doors. The monk scratched his bald head as Zan and Caradon paused by his knees, ears twitching.

“This is the right way,” said the monk, a bit of doubt creeping up in his voice, “but I don’t remember which door I went through. Ha! This is what I get from drinking too much. I can’t remember anything any more. My memories are going. First, my directional sense and then the Lord’s prayer!” He gave a great sigh and ambled toward the door that was furthest to the left. “Let’s try all of them, shall we? This one looks promising. I must have left it open a crack to remind myself of the way.”

As the monk lurched toward the door and reached out to push it open, Zan thought she heard the murmuring of voices on the other side. *No! Don’t go in there!* She bit the edge of his robe and tried to drag him back. Caradon gave a soft bark and followed suit.

“What? What?” exclaimed the monk. “What’s the matter with you?”

Suddenly, one of the voices on the other side of the door became louder and clearer. “Oh, this isn’t closed all the way. We can’t be too careless.” And then the door abruptly slammed shut.

“Humph! Now that’s certainly strange.” The monk glared at the closed door. “I didn’t know there was a meeting about. And they never invited me! Well, I couldn’t very well go about ignorant about the Church’s workings, can I?” And he promptly pressed his ear against the door to listen in on whatever conversation was happening on the other side. Unable to resist eavesdropping, Zan and Caradon listened as well.

“...just arrived last night. He gave word that the Queen was seriously contemplating the Iberian ambassador’s offer of an alliance.”

“Oh? Has he resorted to petty gossip now? Has nothing happened at court at all? The Queen must be preoccupied with the latest insurgency in women’s fashions. Stripes and color wouldn’t do at all! She is still fond of all that black mourning lace, isn’t she?”

There was a brief round of loud masculine laughter.

“I suppose you could call the alliance offer petty gossip if you care not a wit for the consolidation of the country’s military with Iberian might,” said the first voice.

The laughter sobered. “What? Did the news include that bit in the negotiations with the alliance? How on earth did the Queen go from ignoring this to serious consideration? I thought she was on bad terms with the Iberian King.”

“She was, ever since she got snubbed by the royal pompous oaf at some official function that the Northern Tsar held in one of the Low Countries during the wedding celebrations of his second daughter about a year before. It is said that the King held a *tendre* for her, but she didn’t return his affections or his letters, so in retaliation, there was that horrible snub.”

“Well, he should know!” said a third voice. “The Queen’s been mourning the loss of her spouse for years now. I don’t think there’s any chance any of that mourning will let up. Sometimes, I think she uses it as an excuse to keep everyone away and to ignore her duties.”

The first speaker scoffed. “Ignore her duties? Certainly not, if the latest news is to be believed. If she does accept the alliance proposal by the Iberian ambassador, the mother country’s military will be augmented. And considering Iberian maritime might, the navy’s power would be increased at least three-fold. And if that happens, what will happen to relatively autonomous Islands like this one? The Queen’s Empire is already firmly entrenched here. Do you want this Island to be completely subsumed?”

“He does have a point. If that happens, our operations for independence will be in serious jeopardy.”

“Does this mean that *his* plan for deposing the Queen will actually come to fruition? After all, if she is gone, the crown goes to her half-wit son who cares only for his own pleasure.”

The monk gasped at the statement.

Deposing the Queen! That’s treason, Caradon growled to her.

“But we’ll have to wait until he gets back. After all, he’s the one authorized to send the message back to our contact back in the mother country.”

“When does he get back anyway? Is he missing our little tête-à-tête tonight or will he be by later? What is he doing, anyway?”

“Preparation for our plans, he says. He sent me a message to my home earlier saying that he finally had the final components for something some of his associates are working on that will help us keep even closer tabs on the Queen and possibly watch the goings on of other sovereigns as well.”

“Other sovereigns! Just imagine—if we could tell what the Iberian King was doing or the plans of those backwoods New World governors before they even knew what they were doing. Our mission to infiltrate...”

“Well, what have we here?” This well modulated voice with dangerous undertones came not from behind the door, but behind them. The monk and the black fox-shifters turned to see Jebediah Southmore, the Church’s emissary standing in the middle of the hallway end dressed in the simple dark red robe of his station.

“Emissary!” stammered the monk. “I just happened by and heard something...”

Southmore’s face hardened into a grim mask. “Heard something? I think you heard a little too much, my dear Brother.” He withdrew a small shiny pistol that he had tucked inside one of his sleeves. “You will have to go, and your little dogs too.”

At the surprising appearance of the emissary, Zan froze. Caradon bristled and snapped his teeth. The monk emitted a thin high wail as Southmore took aim. The pistol fired with a deafening bang, but the monk had already collapsed on the floor, nearly squashing her. She looked up to see a bullet hole in the door and Caradon leaping toward the emissary.

Caradon, you idiot! He’ll kill you! She scrambled out from underneath the prostrate, sobbing monk and leaped after him.

He had aimed for Southmore’s weapon hand and as his jaws snapped around the man’s wrist, Southmore yelled. Zan clambered up the emissary’s robed figure and grabbed a hold of his graying hair before getting a better purchase of her hind legs on his shoulders. Then she covered his eyes with her paws.

“Damned bloody animals! Call your dogs off me, monk!”

In reply, the monk stuttered incoherently.

The door opened, revealing several men—some in suits, some in the vestments of church officials. “Southmore, what the hell is happening here?”

“Somebody get these beasts off me!”

One of the men took a step forward, but tripped over the monk on the floor. The others following behind him stumbled as well and they dropped around the doorway like so many wobbling toy soldiers, only with much cursing.

“You fools!” Southmore managed to fling Caradon away. He landed on all four paws, growling and barking.

“It’s a demon!” someone yelled in the pile of men.

“Demon? Where? Does anyone have holy water with them?”

“Fools!” Southmore shrieked again. “They’re some damn dogs!” He switched his pistol to his other hand and tried to bat Zan off his head. Before she dropped to the floor, she tore a lock of hair out of his head with her claws. The emissary howled, more in rage than in pain, and the pistol went off a second time, with the bullet ricocheting off the ceiling.

The cabal of men who had been conspiring against the queen began shouting and stumbling back to their feet at the sound of the shot.

Come on! We have to get out of here! Zan had run back to the monk and was pulling on his sleeves. The portly man got up to his feet unsteadily.

“Get out of here?” asked the monk. “Oh yes, that sounds like a fine idea.”

Meanwhile, Caradon was busily snapping at the heels of the other men, trying to create a diversion. They panted and shouted, “Demon, demon!” trying to get away from his jaws. Southmore looked wild, his normally coiffed hair in a mess after Zan’s tussle.

“Stand still, you idiots, and let me get him,” the emissary commanded. He fired in Caradon’s general direction, but one of the men screamed.

“I’ve been shot! My foot...”

The monk tried the middle door and then the one at the far right. Finally, they found a flight of stairs.

Hurry, over here, she shouted in his mind.

Caradon streaked past panicked legs and through the door, just as the monk slammed it shut and locked it with one of the keys on his keyring. The three of them raced up the stairs. They could still hear shouting from the basement and Southmore shooting his pistol yet again. Then someone pounded the door and rattled the doorknob.

Near the top of the stairs, the monk panted. “I’m much too fat, my furry friends. It’s nothing a bit of exercise wouldn’t cure, but I’m afraid I am too addicted to food and drink. I must thank you for saving me from a terrible incident.”

Thank us later, Caradon directed the thought to him. *We’re not out yet. And if you haven’t realized it, you’re no longer safe staying at the Church.*

~~~~~

## Chapter 34 – Little Baggage

The monk was shivering and second guessing his footsteps when the two fox-shifters finally led him through the thin winding streets of the old city toward one of the main roads—Tupet Road—and then one of the smaller alleyways branching off that road near the weaver’s district. In the late night, even the stalwart gas lampposts flickered and stuttered. Long’s apothecary seemed as dark as the closed tea house on top of it.

“Where are we going?” the monk whispered as he followed Zan and Caradon down the steps to the apothecary’s shop. “I sincerely hope that you are good luck spirits and not the demons leading me to hell that those blasphemers had shouted about.”

*You will be safe here,* Caradon replied. *Knock on the door.*

The monk visibly steeled himself and then pounded four times on the door. For a moment, nothing happened.

“All right, no one’s here,” said the monk in a thin laugh. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

*Oh no you don’t.* Zan grabbed the hem of his robe with her teeth and pulled the nervous monk

back. *Someone will be coming.*

The door opened, revealing Long's old, wrinkled face. The old man raised a lamp high and peered out the door and stared at the monk. "Who are you?"

"I-I-I'm Brother Thessalonius. Or at least that was the name I took on when I got inducted into the Church's order. I was told that this was a safe place."

"Told by who?"

"One of these foxes."

"Foxes, eh?" Long opened the door a crack, revealing his black brocade dressing gown. He looked down at the monk's feet and was met by two pairs of vulpine eyes. "Well, well. So you're here with your lady friend. Decided to elope, eh? And you've brought a priest with you for the vows as well? But I have to tell you, I just got out of bed and the shop isn't the greatest place for an impromptu wedding..."

*Shut up, Long, Caradon interrupted, annoyed. And let us in.*

"I'm not a priest, I'm a Brother," the monk added. "They're completely different ranks and occupations in the Church."

"I never paid much attention to that sort of thing," Long replied as he opened the door wide to let the monk and two foxes inside. "So, what seems to be the problem? I assume it is not health related?"

"But it's a life or death situation!" the monk exclaimed as he followed the apothecary to the back of his shop and took a seat next to the flickering fireplace. "I was going to be killed!"

"Killed, hm?" Long poured some tea into a cup for the monk who hastily gulped it down. The apothecary took his time sipping. "Just slow down and tell me what was the matter."

"Some cruel person locked these two poor creatures down in the wine cellar of the Cathedral. I don't know what they were thinking. Wild animals deserve to be free."

*There was another entrance to that cellar, Caradon interjected. We were trying to find another way out.*

*Another entrance, eh?* Long thought. *This is not the beginning of the story?*

*Not by a long shot, Zan replied.*

Oblivious to the mental byplay, the monk continued, "So I found them down there and we were about to go out of the basement when I heard something coming from one of the rooms. There was a meeting going on. I didn't mean to overhear, but of course, they weren't being particularly quiet about it. And you wouldn't believe what I heard—some of the church elders were planning something insidious and treasonous against the Queen!"

Long nodded calmly.

"And the Church Emissary was in on the plot as well! I was about to be shot dead where I stood for what I overheard. It was by divine intervention, luck, and these intelligent animals that I even got out of there by the skin of my teeth!"

The apothecary poured the monk more tea. While he slurped it down, Long said, "Excuse me while I let these two out."

At the door, Caradon turned to tell Long, Keep the monk here for the night. *I will send someone to take care of him sometime tomorrow.*

*Take care of him? How?* Asked Long.

*I'll put him on one of my ships heading out on one of the northern trading routes. I'll have the ship drop him off at the Capital where he will deliver the news of a treasonous resistance group here on the Island to the Queen and her advisors. Meanwhile, there will be people looking for him.*

*So I suppose I'll have to beware of anyone else claiming to be a man of God, eh? Well, there will be no worries there. They won't be stopping at this heathen's shop.*

As Long closed the door to his shop, two foxes trotted up the steps into the street and began their trek south to Warden Street. Once they arrived in the neighborhood, they backtracked through the neighbor's backyard. A dog began barking and the animal's chains rattled. They jumped up on the wall that separated the next house from Zan's residence and flattened themselves at the top of the wall as a light came on in the neighbor's house and a rotund figure in night clothes walked out the backdoor toting a hunting rifle.

"Anyone out there?" the neighbor shouted out in the night. He noticed nothing as he scanned his back yard. Then he yelled at the dog to shut his trap. The animal whined at his master's scolding and then became silent.

They leaped up onto the ledge ringing the second story of Zan's house and carefully made their

way to her bedroom's open window. Once inside her own room, she finally gave a great sigh. Thoughts of sleep tumbled in her head as Caradon made his way down to the floor from the window ledge.

*You'd better change first and go back to your room, she told him.*

*Right here?* He stepped toward her and gave her a bold lick on the muzzle.

She barred her teeth and bristled. *Behind the screen!*

Caradon lunged and she suddenly found herself sprawled on her belly, his mouth on her neck, his teeth prickling her skin. *You've ordered me around enough tonight. If you hadn't gone out in search for your answers, you wouldn't have been endangered three different times. Perhaps even more if I weren't around!*

*You're just surly because of all the excitement we had tonight. At least we saved a man.* She twisted and broke from his grasp and the enforced submissive position. *You're just irritated that you didn't think of this yourself.*

He gave a disgusted snort and tugged at the knot on the bandage on his foreleg. It loosened and he took that and the pile of his human clothes in his mouth and dragged them behind her dressing screen. After he had *changed*, rewrapped the bandage, and pulled on a robe to cover himself, he stepped out from behind the screen and glared down at the small black fox swishing her tail impatiently. She gave an annoyed yip and then trotted behind the screen. She waited until her bedroom door opened and closed with a click before her own change.

She quickly pulled on a nightgown and stepped out into the rest of the bedroom. Abruptly, hands grabbed her wrists and pulled her arms behind her. She gasped and struggled. "Caradon, let go of me at once! As a guest, you're acting abominably. And pretending to have left the room..."

She was dragged a few steps backward and then pressed into one of the wardrobe's doors, the handle digging into her stomach. She turned her head to the side, feeling the cold wood against her cheek, and she saw that the other wardrobe door was open, revealing the mirror. She looked at herself, and then the man pressed up behind her, his mouth and nose in her hair. His gaze met hers in the mirror and sharpened. She couldn't look away.

"The other form isn't conducive for saying a proper good night," he said, his breath whispering close to her ear.

"Proper?" she replied in disbelief. "Do you make it a habit to compromise ladies every time you feel the urge to say good night?"

"No." He pulled away her hair to reveal her neck and then his hand drifted down to cup a breast. She froze, feeling only the heat of his fingers seeping through the single layer of muslin that her nightgown was made of and warming the skin beneath. "Only you." In the mirror, she watched him lower his head and then his mouth pressed against the nape of her neck. He whispered against her skin, "Good night and sweet dreams, my little baggage."

Then he released her.

She listened to his footsteps and then the final opening and closing of the door. After a moment, she pulled herself away from the wardrobe door and glared at the darkness. A hand closed into a fist. Sweet dreams, she thought in a huff, she would be lucky if she ever got any sleep after *that*.

~~~~~

Chapter 35 – Breakfast Chat

She had tossed and turned for four hours and had gotten little sleep. So in the end, she had gotten up and gotten dressed to go down to the laboratory to work.

She had lit a single lamp as company. The lamp only granted a small pool of light around her. It was still quite early in the morning and the small windows of the basement were still dark.

Simkins and the rest of the staff had done an excellent job of clearing all of the debris left after the two housebreakers had done their best to destroy everything they could lay their hands on. Only a few glass vials were left on the shelves. There was less one glass distillation apparatus. The microscope was righted back on its stand, although the barrel was sadly scratched and the lens missing. The more hardy metal instruments were also put back into their places. There were all the materials that Simkins had obtained for her on her list.

Zan found a good chunk of wood on a shelf—a heavy bit of cedar approximately the size of a good quality atlas. Then she scrounged around for nails, a hammer, some tubing, and several small pulleys

that looked more like wooden spools than gears. She had also pulled out a new notebook, dated it, and made a few sketches from memory of what her uncle had devised. After finishing the drawing, she studied it with a close eye and made a few minor changes.

Then she started building.

The morning light had begun to stream in through the window when the first pulley was being affixed to a strip of wooden stand. The lamp had then spluttered out, but she paid no attention to it. The door to the basement banged open and there were footsteps on the stairs. She did not look up when the person stopped in front of her work bench.

“You haven’t had breakfast yet, have you?”

She tapped in one more nail in her project before looking up. Caradon was looking at her, a lock of dark hair falling across his forehead. The edge of his mouth threatened to curve upward and in his hands was a breakfast tray with enough food for two. He placed it on an empty spot on the table and pulled up a chair across from her.

“No,” she replied to his question. She put aside the hammer and took one of the scones on the tray. “How is your arm?”

“It’s fine. I had a fresh bandage applied this morning.”

“Good. It would be a terrible thing to have a wound get infected.”

His half smile turned into a grin. “So you do care about me.”

Zan ignored his comment. Instead, she bit into the scone as Caradon poured the tea. She swallowed the first mouthful and said, “Why didn’t you let one of the staff bring all of this down?”

“I wanted to bring it down myself. Besides, doesn’t a hostess eat with her guests?”

“Is that a not so subtle hint that I am a particularly bad hostess? I must remind you that I failed to attend any of the hostess classes when I was being taught etiquette.”

“You’re not a bad hostess,” he replied. “Just a very absent-minded one. You must do this often—working and then forgetting meals.”

“Mrs. Philomon always complains about that.” She accepted a cup of tea and took a sip. She looked down at the unfinished project, brooding. “Do you still have that rosary made of black stone?”

“Yes.” He took it out of his coat pocket and placed it on the table top. She picked it up to examine it in the morning light. “Tell me what you’re thinking. What was it all about at that amulet store last night? Did your uncle purchase something that had relevance to his notes that were taken?”

“Probably.” She put the rosary down and concentrated on eating. “You do recall that my uncle was making a sort of electricity machine? It was more like a generator, really, because it collected electrical charge.”

He nodded.

She showed him the notebook with her sketch. “Basically the machine consists of two pulleys, one at the bottom and one at the top. While these rotate, they turn around a band of material. In my uncle’s prototype, it was made of rubber. At the bottom, the rubber band brushed against some grounded metal needles. The basic premise is that the metal needle is negatively charge. Like charges repel each other so all the charges try to get as far away from each other as they can, hence the charge pushes itself off the point of the needle. The rubber band is positively charged which helps attract the negative charge. The band is being moved by the pulleys so the negative charge moves up here to the metal dome where all of it is collected.”

“All right. I think I get it. But where does the metal needle get all of this negative charge? You said that this was a generator. Negative charge can’t just come out of thin air.”

“The negative charge is from the ground where the needle is connected. The ground is an enormous reservoir of negative charge.”

“Then what are the resin needles that your uncle had ordered for? Was he testing different materials for whether one was better at attracting negative charge from the ground?”

She shook her head. “No. Metal is best for doing that. I’m guessing that my uncle was after something different. Electricity isn’t the only form of energy in nature, you know. What do you think facilitates us in our *change*? What do you think powers that summoning we saw at the Temple?”

The scone paused halfway up to his mouth. He put the pastry back down again. “Last night, you said that you were looking for places where there was a great energy reservoir. Was your uncle trying to build some sort of magic generator? Why didn’t he tell me? I was his patron. It could revolutionize everything. Alchemists and soothsayers would see a boom in trade. Sorcery would actually be made practical because for the first time, we will be able to *control* magic.”

“Uncle Elliot was getting paranoid there, at the end so he made the big show of burning his notes. But his paranoia wasn’t for naught, because someone knew about his research and realized the implications. It’s just that I still don’t know who.”

“Whoever he is, he’s dangerous. He wasn’t above hiring a couple of goons with pistols.”

She sighed. “Well, I’m not giving up. I’m going to work some more on this today and then go to the Academy.”

“The Academy?” he said, eyes narrowing. “Tonight?”

“Today at noon. There’s a lecture there every time this week, and I know that Henry Tarlton will be attending. I have a few more questions that I hope he can answer for me. I suppose you’re tagging along this time as well?”

“Of course,” he replied, with an arrogant lift of his eyebrow. “I have some of my own business to attend to this morning, however, so I must leave you after breakfast. I will meet you back at the Academy. At noon.”

^^^^^^

Chapter 36 – Poppycock

Two constables in starched dark navy suits with bright brass buttons rushed past Zan on the stairs up to the Museum. She looked up to the doors where the two men went through and squinted at the stony, classical façade which gave nothing away.

Earlier, she had finished patching together the skeleton for the machine in her uncle’s last notes. The pulleys had moved smoothly when she had attached a bit of linen cloth around them to test for their movement. She had taken a round copper bowl from the kitchens—with much grumbling from Boreas about having his favorite sauce bowl being commandeered for science—and an amber comb from her jewelry box to attach to the apparatus. There was still the matter of the battery which she had yet to rig to the bottom pulley to help turn it, but for the moment, she had added a handle which she turned. Some electrical charge had been transferred to the copper bowl which had been mounted to the top pulley, but in the end, it had fizzled.

So she had sent Simkins out to obtain more materials—specifically the chemicals needed to make the battery, bowls made of other metals, and a bit of silk, long enough to wrap around the pulleys. Boreas had been overjoyed when she had returned the copper bowl to him, although there were two holes on the edges where she had pounded some nails in when she had initially attached it to the machine.

Visiting the Museum again had been a last minute decision. It was on her way to the Academy, she reasoned, and hopefully now, the Museum director was back to show her what he had stored of her uncle’s things in the Museum archive.

Entering the lobby, Zan noticed that the constables were joining two other uniformed officers questioning the young man who was in charge of greeting Museum visitors. He was answering the questions in a calm, modulated voice, but he continually blinked nervously and occasionally tugged at the collar of his shirt.

“Ma’am?”

She turned at the voice and found herself facing a tall distinguished looking gentleman with a moustache. He wore a plain brown suit coupled with an atrocious looking plaid waistcoat. “Yes?”

“Parts of the Museum are off-limits today for visitors. I suggest you come back on another day.”

“Another day?” said Zan, frowning. “I’m here to see the Museum director, Mr. Kruntz. I was told that he would be back. I have some inquiries for him. Who are you to tell me the Museum hours? It is open, is it not?”

“I’m Detective Moren,” he bowed to her and raised his hat for a moment before continuing, “There has been a robbery here. I’m sorry, ma’am, but I am positive that the Museum is off-limits for visitors today. My men and I are questioning the staff and taking evidence. Mr. Kruntz, unfortunately, is unavailable. We were informed by some of his staff that he is out of town on some sort of business—an acquisition for the Museum, I believe.”

“Huh. And I was assured that Mr. Kruntz would be back to speak with me. What are you taking evidence for?”

“I’m sure he will be back in due time once the news reaches him. A robbery occurred sometime

last night. Some valuable Museum pieces were taken. Paintings and sculptures and that sort of thing. I'm sure some intrepid reporter has already ferreted out all the details. So you are better off reading a newspaper while the authorities do their job."

"Newspapers! But..." She shut her mouth when one of the constables called for the detective to come over. Moren excused himself, leaving Zan standing in the lobby rather dumbfounded. She turned on her heel and marched back out of the Museum, feeling peeved and frustrated. Yet again, the Museum director had managed to make himself unavailable and on top of it, a robbery.

She stood on the bottom step of the Museum step thinking. But the timing did seem rather suspicious. What sorts of things were stolen besides those paintings and sculptures? And if she had taken the main road last night to get to Old Amanthus rather than Caradon's shortcut, would she have noticed a burglar breaking into the Museum?

"Oh, Miss Hu, fancy seeing you taking a stroll out here on this fine day!"

Zan looked up to see two figures, arm and arm, passing by on the street. One was Greta Del Rassa—this time she was wearing a frilly pink confection that looked more like a cake than a dress and her dark hair was pinned neatly underneath a hat with feathers dyed to match her outfit. One of her hands held a pink parasol and the other was on the arm of her Lord What's-His-Name who she had seen at the tailor's, Danaides, for her meeting with her friends.

"Good morning, Miss Del Rassa. And, er, you must forgive me. I never caught your name before, sir."

"Hyssop," Lord What's-His-Name supplied, giving her a benign smile.

Zan nodded. "Lord Hyssop. I must admit that I am terrible at names. I must be reminded every day or I shall forget them."

Del Rassa twittered in her version of an amused laugh and fluttered her eyelashes in an attempt to enhance her gypsy green eyes. "Oh, Miss Hu, what an odd little habit you have! Tell me, have you just come back from the Museum? I had heard that it was closed for today, and possibly for the entire week."

"Yes, it is closed today. But if you excuse me, I must be on my way to the Academy..."

"That's wonderful," Del Rassa interrupted. "That is our destination as well. We are going to visit Mr. Pendergrast as he is working on his latest project and requires some of my advice. We three can go to the Academy together."

"All right," Zan replied, thinking that Del Rassa was delusional if she thought she would be able to provide even the incompetent Pendergrast advice. The woman didn't even know the right end of an egg.

"The newspapers say that the Museum was robbed last night," said Hyssop as the three of them walked down the street in the direction of the Academy. "Two valuable paintings, a sculpture, a sarcophagus, and a golden scepter studded with sapphires were all taken."

"The scepter used to belong to the Great Emperor about three centuries ago," Del Rassa added. "I saw it on exhibition the last time I visited the Museum. It was a magnificent thing. I do hope the authorities catch the thieves quickly and recover those valuable treasures to the institution."

"It was also reported that the Museum archives were also ransacked," Hyssop added. "From all accounts, the archives were not well organized and not all of the items were catalogued, so who knows what else was stolen from the Museum that might not even be recovered?"

Zan felt a shiver, having a premonition that when the Museum staff got around to finally cleaning up the archives, her uncle's machines would be missing.

* * *

She found Henry Tarlton in his basement laboratory after Del Rassa and her titled beau gave her a farewell in the foyer of the Academy that made her grind her back teeth. The Academy Fraud had a way with words that made anyone who wasn't so polished or fashion-conscious seem like backward idiots. The condescending laugh that Lord Hyssop gave her was no consolation either. But she put these annoyances to the back of her mind when she found the door to his laboratory open and stepped inside.

"Damn it, where is it?"

A tin can went flying through the air and Zan ducked as it went crashing through the doorway.

Tarlton's assistant, Erasmus, was sitting at a table serenely writing in a notebook despite a suspicious looking smudge on his tie. "It's on the next to the top shelf on the far right."

"Ah ha!"

"Mr. Tarlton?" Zan called out. "Have I come at a bad time?"

“What?” Tarlton turned around and shoved his spectacles that had drooped downward on his aquiline nose closer to his face. “Ah, Miss Hu! Another visit so soon!” The object that he had retrieved from the shelf was a bow tie of indeterminate color. It could have been burgundy or brown, but Zan wasn’t quite sure, and she wasn’t about to ask. He put it around his neck to secure it to his collar. “What brings you here?”

“I have a few more questions,” she replied. “You were busy the other day and didn’t have time to go in depth with what you told me.”

“You were busy as well, as I recall,” said Tarlton as he went over to take a seat next to his assistant and to fiddle with a strange coiled contraption that was lying on the table top. “Didn’t a beau of yours come looking for you that day? Nice looking young man. Didn’t catch his name, though.”

“Mr. Caradon,” his assistant supplied.

Zan felt her cheeks coloring. “I don’t have a beau. Mr. Caradon is my patron.”

“Huh,” said Tarlton. “Odd behavior for a patron. Say Erasmus, do we have some nickel wire version of this?” he asked, waving the contraption in his hand under his assistant’s nose.

“No sir,” Erasmus replied. “But we do have the materials. There’s quite a bit of nickel wire stashed in the corner over there...”

“I have some questions,” she interrupted. “Before you had to continue on your own experiments, you said something about my uncle investigating some places in the old part of the city.”

“Oh, that,” Tarlton gave a sigh and began juggling the contraption in his hands. “Well, Elliot did say that he was going to test some of his theories about certain places being more powerful—that is, having a greater energy potential—than others. His electricity prototype had to be grounded for it to work, so I suppose he did have a point. There is some energy in the ground. But more in certain places? Why would there be more? It doesn’t really make sense to me.”

“Did my uncle mention to you what particular places he would look into?”

Tarlton tapped a finger to his chin. “Elliot did mention that he was looking into the works of Walter Bittenburg. You do recall him?”

She shook her head.

“Bittenburg was before your time. He worked his entire life at the Academy and passed away about thirty years ago. His experiments were devoted to proving the existence of magic. Some people thought he was a complete crackpot, but there were many patrons about willing to pay for his research. At one time, even the Great Gallic Despot sent him funds—in hopes that he might find a reliable way to see into the future.”

“That sounds like poppycock,” said Zan.

“That’s what I told your uncle, but he just dismissed my comments and said that there is always a grain of truth in everything. Do you know how Bittenburg got into the who subject in the first place? He got married.”

“Married? What does that have to do about anything?” she asked.

“His bride was from the Isle of Eire. They said that she was a fisherman’s daughter in a small coastal village and she was accounted to be a great beauty. And then there were rumors that she was a selkie—a seal shifter—and somehow old Bittenburg had captured her. But he was knowledgeable about those mythic creatures, you see. He had stolen her seal pelt and had hidden it so she was forced to become his bride. It was no secret that she was terribly unhappy in that marriage and longed to go back to the sea. It was said that she walked the coasts of Amanthus every morning, trying to call back to her own kind.”

“How sad for Bittenburg’s wife. But I still don’t see how that relates to his study in magic.”

“Well, Bittenburg lived in constant fear that his bride would find the pelt and leave him so he was always trying to find a way to destroy the pelt. The thing can’t be burned or cut up for some reason. So he went into the study of magic. In one of his projects, he measured the amount of magical energy each place in the city held. In his reports, he discovered that certain places definitely had more energy—particularly those places where the Ancients had built their religious places of worship. Elliot thought this was quite telling for some reason.”

“I see. But how on earth did Bittenburg tell quantitatively that one place had more energy than the other. As far as I can remember, there aren’t any measuring devices for that sort of thing. Perhaps psychics and mediums could be used, but they aren’t very reliable.”

Tarlton shrugged. “I don’t have the answer to that question, Miss Hu. I’m not a scholar of Bittenburg’s work and Elliot never told me the specific details of what he did find in that crackpot’s results. But whatever he was up to, Bittenburg failed in his initial goal. After about twenty years of marriage, his

wife disappeared after one of her morning walks by the sea, never to be seen again.”

“She found her pelt?”

“I’m not sure I believe in selkies,” Tarlton replied. “Shifters, ha! That’s physiologically impossible. But Bittenburg’s wife definitely was unhappy. My hunch is that she was finally fed up with living with him and ran away.”

Zan frowned. “Anyway, I do have another question. Did my uncle ever mention using resins? And if so, what sort of resin did he propose on using?”

“Sir?” the assistant piped up. “It’s five till noon.”

“Ah!” Tarlton got up from his chair and tugged at the lapels of his jacket. “The weekly Academy seminar. Are you attending, Miss Hu?”

“Yes, I suppose so...”

“Of course you are! In answer to your last question—no, Elliot did not mention anything about resins to me. Perhaps he talked to one of the botanists about that. Today’s lecture will be by one of those electricity experts. It might help you answer some of your questions as I dabble more in magnetism and a bit of chemistry than the electric field.”

^^^^

Chapter 37 – Blowing a Gasket

The Academy’s lecture hall was located at the rear of the building. It was a large auditorium containing a stage that could fit a fifty piece orchestra rather comfortably and benches for the audience that resembled church pews down to the minute scrollwork at the ends although for some reason, they were far less comfortable than their siblings down at the Cathedral. One could hypothesize that the hardness of the benches were due to their newness. Or the wood could have been different despite the same shade of varnish. Whatever the case, it kept people awake, mostly. Ten minutes into the lecture, there were already a few heads lolled back, snoring.

Halfway through the lecture, Zan was glad that she had declined Tarlton’s offer to sit with him and his assistant on the second row in favor of a back row seat. She found the lecturer—an old, bent man with a ragged beard and a stiff coat that was obviously only used for such occasions—to be a mumblor, a bore, and pointlessly unoriginal. He was demonstrating some sort of contraption that was a rehash of experiments that had been new two years ago—there was a box consisting of a series of Leyden jars and metal switches hooked to some sort of motor powered by steam. And all of that was hooked up to a broiler which was emitting a bit of black smoke. The people in the front row were coughing loudly and the lecturer kept mumbling, oblivious to his audience’s health.

A familiar forest scent came into the edge of her awareness. Someone slid into the seat next to her. A masculine hand came to rest on top of hers. “Hello, my little baggage. Sorry I’m late.”

She turned her hand and lightly sank her claws into his palm.

“Ouch.”

She leaned over and whispered in his ear, “Don’t surprise me like that.” Then she took her hand away from his. “You didn’t miss much,” she continued. “Tarlton wasn’t much help. I also went to the Museum in hopes that I would finally get a glimpse of my uncle’s work, but the place was swarming with policemen when I got there. Apparently some sort of robbery took place last night. And the Museum director is still out of town.”

“You still are going to build the machine you started this morning?”

“Yes. I sent Simkins to get the rest of the materials that I needed today. I hope to get it up and running soon.”

“What do you expect that it would do?”

“I did have it tested earlier, but I think I had the wrong materials because the results were rather abysmal.”

“You shall figure it out. So what is this lecture about?”

“I wouldn’t bother trying to understand it because I don’t think that old man knows what he is talking about. Or if he does, he is the only one. That machine of his is a monstrosity. And what sort of machine uses energy like coal and steam to make electricity? The way he has it rigged up is terribly inefficient.”

“Not to mention particularly hazardous to your health,” Caradon observed as a man on the front

row let out a series of particularly loud hacking coughs as the broiler belched out a particularly nasty bit of smoke. The man finally got up and ran up the aisle and out of the auditorium, holding a handkerchief to his face.

“That’s the sort of thing that will end up as an unworkable curiosity in history books a century from now,” Zan sniffed. “But I suppose there will always be idiotic patrons willing to pay for moving parts.”

“I suppose you could think of a million ways to improve that contraption.”

“Of course! Why for one, I could...”

But Zan never got a chance to elaborate on her ideas. The broiler must have blown a gasket because more smoke and another stream of steam erupted from it. The small door where the coal was supposed to be shoveled in blew out in a bang and the broiler began spitting out bits of flaming coal. One flew into the box with the Leyden jars and glass shattered. The old man stopped his mumbling and began waving his arms frantically as the box began to go up in flames. Another bit of flaming coal fell into the audience. Someone screamed. Someone’s hat became a blazing inferno.

Caradon and Zan hastily got up from their seats and exited the lecture hall with part of the audience while the remaining people began shouting for calls to the fire brigade and for water.

“That’s the fifth time for the past six months that this has happened,” complained someone passing by them. “I think the Academy should begin investing in having a representative from the fire brigade or the fire marshal come attend these lectures as a precaution.”

“Quite right,” another person agreed. “Science is a dangerous business. It’s a wonder that no one has had his hand amputated by some machine or other already.”

Caradon pulled Zan into a shallow alcove in the hallway just outside the lecture hall to wait out the crowds as they streamed through the doors. “What are you doing?” she said, as his hand tightened on her elbow when she made to move out.

“It’s best not to get trampled in the panic,” he replied. “I think it’s more sensible that...”

“Why Mr. Caradon! It’s such fortunate luck that I’ve found you here attending today’s lecture!”

A small ratty man with spectacles squeezed into the alcove with them. Zan remembered the man from another lecture—he was some sort of chemist specializing in flammable liquids. “I’ve been trying to contact you all week, but your staff informed me that you were busy. Why, I have an excellent proposal for you.”

As the ratty man pulled Caradon out of the alcove with surprising strength, he gave Zan a hard glance. “Stay right there. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Zan crossed her arms over her chest as she watched Caradon disappear into the crowd. Stay? She supposed she would obey his instructions for once. She didn’t relish walking out of the alcove into the disorganized milieu in the hallway. Since the lecture hall doors were wide open, she could hear what was going on inside despite the murmur of the crowd. Someone evidently had called the fire brigade and yet someone else had found a source of water to help put out the flames. The person who had his hat burned to a cinder because of the flying coal was loudly complaining the destruction of his clothes to the architect of that horrible invention.

“Miss Hu. This is certainly awkward circumstances for a meeting, isn’t it?” A tall figure had detached himself from the crowds and was walking toward her in the alcove.

Suddenly, Zan felt very hemmed in. She edged outward to the corner of the hallway and the alcove and dropped her arms. “Mr. Southmore. It is indeed a surprise to see you here. I did not imagine that you would take such interest such scientific affairs.”

“Oh, I’m very interested in the subject of electricity in all its forms,” the Church’s emissary replied, smiling congenially. She noticed that the scratches on his face from her claws were merely faint lines. Perhaps he had put on some sort of concealing makeup? “I had considered in putting Mr. Featherington onto my payroll, but as you and everyone else has witnessed, his experiment did not go quite right, did it?”

“It was a disaster,” she agreed.

“Fortunately, I did convince another electricity expert to accept my patronage.” Southmore widened his smile to show white teeth. Zan felt distinctly uncomfortable under his regard. “Mr. Pendergrast was particularly amendable. But my offer to you is still open, Miss Hu, along with my generous terms.”

“Since your terms include the fact that I continue my uncle’s research instead of doing my own, I don’t consider them very generous at all,” she replied. “So I will have to say again, I must decline. Unless

you can manage to match what Mr. Caradon has offered to me....”

“Caradon again!” Southmore’s usually amicable expression twisted into something dark and ugly. “That bastard? That whore’s son? Mark my words, Miss Hu, you are making a terrible mistake.” He moved his right arm in a sweeping motion to emphasize his point, but her gaze was caught at something dark and shiny that dangled on his wrist. It was a bracelet with a cross of equal arms made of some sort of black stone and encircled with silver. Why didn’t she notice that before? “Caradon will only use your own work for his own ends.”

“I haven’t seen any evidence that he would....”

“He’s a spy! An enemy of the crown! You wouldn’t be so naïve as to believe that he is merely a shipping magnate? A merchant? The Church has eyes everywhere, Miss Hu. If it’s been found that Caradon is doing anything outside the law, it is possible that you may also be implicated because of your association with him.” With that threat, the emissary turned on his heel and stalked down the hallway with his cloak flapping out behind him.

Zan leaned back against the wall and took a deep breath as she watched the crowd slowly thin. What had that been about—and why would the emissary accuse her patron of something that he himself was guilty of? And why was he so eager to patronize her uncle’s work. And finally, was that bracelet charm she saw on his wrist really there or just her imagination?

“Are you all right?”

She jerked, startled, but came face to face with Caradon who was looking at her puzzled.

“You seemed particularly deep in thought.”

“I was,” she replied. “Just thinking about a particular problem. What happened to that little man who wanted to talk with you?”

“He was trying to get potential patrons to back his work,” he told her. “I told him I wasn’t particularly interested in his line of research.”

“Oh.”

In a lower voice, he said, “Besides, I saw Southmore approach you. You must tell me exactly what he wanted.”

“But it was nothing!”

“No it wasn’t.” His eyes gleamed as he took her by her elbow and propelled her down the now nearly empty hallway. “Anyways, how about some lunch? There is this quaint café on Market Row...”

^^^^^^

Chapter 38 – Warning Advice

“This isn’t Market Row. This looks like Tupet Road. And the tea house.”

Caradon shook his head as he held out a hand to help Zan down from the carriage. She decided to put her hand in his this time which made his eyes widen a fraction. “The little baggage accepts my hand?”

“Don’t read too much into it,” she replied as the driver slapped the horses with his reins and the carriage rolled off down the street. “Why here? You said we were going to a café.”

“I’m allowed to change my mind, aren’t I? Besides, this is near Long’s and I wanted to check up on the old man before we go.”

“I suppose you mean the monk we saved last night. You said that you were going to put him on one of your ships.”

He pulled her along through the doors of the tea house. The interior was dark and smoky with the hint of opium. Zan pulled out a handkerchief and sneezed. “*The Conquistador*, to be exact. I sent Captain Ramon to personally escort the monk to the ship. It’s due to set sail tomorrow.”

The customers in the tea house appeared to be bent figures in the dimness, looking over their own tea or their own card games on the small wooden square tables placed at regular intervals throughout the restaurant. They glanced at the new guests with beady eyes, assessing Zan and Caradon before dismissing them as no more than a pair of upper class upstarts looking for a new thrill.

He took her to a small table pushed up against the wall although it had a good view of the doorway. A waiter in a black linen jacket of the Far Eastern style came by with a pot and tea cups. While he poured, Caradon spoke in low tones about lunch. The waiter nodded and then retreated back to where he came from.

“I can see why you favor this place,” Zan said as she took a sip of the tea. “Dark atmosphere.

Too much unhealthy smoke. Not to mention drugs...”

“Now where have you gotten that idea?” His eyes gleamed brightly as he peered over his own cup.

“I have a nose, don’t I? And being a chemist, I have been exposed to many strange vapors. You can’t deny that you use them yourself. Every time I’ve visited you at your residence, you’ve been burning it in that bronze censer of yours.”

“What a disapproving tone!” He was grinning, but this time, she wasn’t cowed by his sharp teeth. “Don’t dismiss something you haven’t tried yourself. It frees your mind and loosens your inhibitions.”

“You mean losing control?”

“Why not? Sometimes, I think you’ve got entirely too much control.” The expression on his face slightly shifted into something darker as he flicked a thought her way.

She gasped. “Why, if we weren’t in a public place, I’d punch you in the nose. Or wring your neck.”

“Tsk, ts. I think you have something else in mind that is entirely different. I’ve intrigued you, haven’t I? You should look at yourself. You’re all delightfully flushed.”

“A punch would be too good for you,” she replied, staring him down. “It is the bad air in here. I wouldn’t be surprised that you actually ingest the foul stuff as well.”

“Well, I suppose that is the strange thing. I haven’t ingested the stuff, just burned it. I am far too fond of my tongue and stomach to ruin them.”

“At least that is something. Addiction can be a terrible thing.”

“Oh really?”

At that moment, the waiter came by with the food and conversation dwindled as they concentrated on lunch consisting of rice, greens, and fish—perch—cooked in a dark, slightly sweet and salty sauce and sprinkled with lemon juice. After the meal, Caradon left payment with the waiter and they walked outside only to venture down the steps to Long’s apothecary.

When Long answered his door, the old man exclaimed, “Oh, you’ve received my message already?”

As they came into the shop, Caradon said, “What message?”

“I sent a message back to your residence about two hours ago when Brother Thessalonius came stumbling back with a bullet through his leg. The man just came straight here instead of going to hospital like any sane person. He muttered about the will of God or some such nonsense as he got here.”

At the news, Zan covered her mouth to stifle a gasp. Caradon froze and a dark frown creased his forehead. “Where’s Captain Ramon?” he asked.

The apothecary shrugged. “The Captain? He came here to escort the Brother to one of your ships just as you said. But at the docks, there was some sort of attack. The Brother got shot and managed to make his way back here. He told me that the Captain got abducted by four men in black coats with pistols. He said he never got a good look at their faces.”

Caradon nodded curtly. “Can I speak with Brother Thessalonius, then?”

“Probably not for a few hours,” said the apothecary wryly. “I had to get the bullet out of him, remember? I dosed him with a pretty strong anesthetic. He is in a very deep sleep at the moment.”

“Great,” Caradon said. “Somebody knows about us and they want us out of the way.”

“No, that’s not entirely set in stone,” Zan hastened to add. “If the attackers knew all about us, then why didn’t they attack Mr. Long’s shop first? I think what is more likely is that the attackers were waiting for your Captain and the Brother was simply in the way. Either they thought they killed the Brother with the shot or they did not care about abducting him.”

“It could also mean that someone is trying to get to me,” said Caradon slowly. “This isn’t the first time that business rivals have resorted to dirty tactics in an attempt to stop me. I’ll hire someone to find the Captain. Meanwhile, I’m sure I will get a ransom letter in the next day or so. It is terrible that the monk was caught in the middle of all of this.”

“Extremely bad luck,” agreed the apothecary. “I suggest that the Brother stay with me until he is well enough to travel. Then you can send another of your employees to help see him to the Queen.”

“Yes,” Caradon replied. “It seems to be the only way we can work these things out at the moment. I will reimburse you for the Brother’s stay.”

The apothecary bowed his head. “If that is your wish. Also, I have some advice, if the both of you would like to listen.”

“What sort of advice?” asked Zan.

“If you two make it a habit to frequent Old Amanthus at night, I suggest you do not go tomorrow night. The conjunction of five planets will occur on that night—it’s a rare occurrence for it comes around every five hundred years. In certain places where the chi has accumulated, the conjunction will cause violent fluctuations.”

At Long’s words, a thought tried to surface in the back of her mind, but she couldn’t retrieve it. “I’m not sure I follow you,” she said. “What’s so bad about energy fluctuations? The energy in itself doesn’t do any harm if it isn’t channeled.”

“Fluctuations will mean that some spots will completely be void of chi while other spots will be packed with it. Condensing the energy will cause barriers to be formed. What I’m trying to say is that the old city contains a lot of stagnant energy that will finally be put into action on that night. When the conjunction occurs and you are inside the old city, you will not be able to come out until the next day. And when other places thin of energy—other things thin as well and beings and creatures from elsewhere may use the opportunity to break through.”

“Beings and creatures?” Zan repeated, glancing at Caradon. “Like those things? There was something at the Temple...”

“You are not going there again,” her patron said firmly.

“There are many Ancient buildings constructed on places where there is much energy accumulation,” replied the old man as he slowly moved toward his counter and began to grind the herbs that he had placed in a mortar and pestle before answering the door for Zan and Caradon. “Some cultures viewed the beings who live on the other side as monsters and demons always trying to seek an entrance into this world for the purpose of conquering and destruction. Others thought they were just evil spirits. And yet others—like the Ancients who lived on this Island—thought they were gods.”

Zan shook her head. “But what are those things really?”

The apothecary shrugged. “Are you sure you really want to know, Miss Hu? No one who has found out has come back sane. Or come back at all.”

~~~~~

## Chapter 39 – A Black Needle

Zan had just finished screwing in a new dome—this time made of an iron and nickel alloy rather than copper—onto her project when she heard someone opening the door to her basement laboratory. She did not look up when she started checking the battery for leakage. The battery itself was a rather crude invention as she had rather hastily cobbled it together earlier. It consisted of a glass tube with two bits of metal wire coming out of the stoppered top to be connected to a magnetized motor that was running the lower pulley. Inside the glass tube was a voltaic pile which consisted of pieces of cloth soaked in salt water between alternating zinc and copper discs.

“What are you doing here, Caradon?” She peered closely at the battery, appearing completely absorbed in her work. “I thought you had your business to attend to.”

“It can wait for a few hours.” He walked over to her bench and looked over at the metal parts she had strewn about her work space and the breakfast tray which had an empty bowl, a half-eaten piece of toast on a saucer and a barely sipped tea cup. “Have you had breakfast?”

“Yes, I have.” She reached out for the cup and took a sip of the tea. She made a face before putting it back down on the tray. Finally, she looked up at him. “Cold tea,” she explained. “Have you come to oversee my meals, then? I’d have to tell you that Boreas and Mrs. Philomon wouldn’t be pleased with that new development.”

“Another person reminding you of meal times wouldn’t hurt anything,” he replied. Caradon looked at the long glass tube stuffed with layers of cloth and metal in her hand. “What on earth is that?”

“My hastily put together battery,” she replied. “This will contain the power source for running the motor that is connected to the bottom pulley. The cloth is soaked in salt water which will provide the medium in which an electric current could flow between these metal disks.”

“I see,” he said, although it was obvious that he did not grasp the basic concepts of how that would work.

“You don’t see at all,” she told him. “But that doesn’t matter. All you have to understand is that this will provide the power to turn the generator. You’ve come just in time to see me connect this to the motor.” She opened a drawer and rummaged around until she found a pair of pliers. She used this tool to

help her wrap the wires of the battery onto a pair of nubs sticking out of the motor.

Once she was done, she flipped a switch on the motor and the moving arms that were attached to the motor and the pulley began to moving in a regular clacking motion. A faint sizzling sound also accompanied the noise of the pulleys as the silk belt that she had attached rubbed against the amber needles she had broken off of a comb.

Puzzled, he asked, "What is this supposed to do?"

"Watch this." She began pulling the pins out of her hair.

His eyes gleamed as he watched her dark locks tumbled to her shoulders. "Is this something that I will like?"

"In the way you mean? Doubtful." She tossed the last pin onto the work bench and then put her hand on the metal dome. "In my uncle's prototype machine, the idea was that the negative charge would be stored up here on this metal dome. Because all the charge is the same, they repel each other so they spread out on this dome, seeking a way out. When something touches this, the negative charges immediately jump to the next object in order to get away from each other."

Caradon's eyes were widening as he watched her hair rise and stick out like a puff ball. "Uh, Zan. Your hair..."

"It's sticking straight out, isn't it?"

"Like a porcupine!"

She grinned, which made Caradon chuckle nervously. "It's supposed to be like that. Haven't you been listening? All of that charge is going through this dome to my body. In an effort to get away from each other, the charges are pulling at my hair..."

"All right. So I get the point. Is this all that this machine can do?"

She took her hand off the dome and flipped the switch. The motor and the pulleys' grinding sounds stopped. "As I recall, it was what the prototype did—but everything was made of metal, including the needle that was grounded to the base." She reached up to try to smooth her hair down. "But I'm sure that my uncle hypothesized or guessed that something else would happen as well, just with different materials. But I am using an amber needle this time—the tree resin that my uncle had been looking for—but the effect is the same as the prototype. I think I may be missing something."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually. Meanwhile, try not to experiment on yourself next time, hm?"

"What do you mean? This little generator is completely harmless. I can envision this as a future toy where children could use it for amusement."

Caradon grimaced. "Amusement?"

"Yes, amusement. In fact, I have a knick-knack that I made a year ago on another project. It's quite fun. Here, you should try it." Zan began rummaging through a nearby drawer, but when she finally withdrew an object, it wasn't what she was looking for. "Oh. This rosary again. You know, I haven't quite figured out what sort of stone this is. Do you have any ideas?"

"The first that come to mind is jet. Or obsidian. There are many types of black rocks but not very many that can be polished to such a sheen. Could it possibly be onyx or maybe even black spinel?"

Her fingers rubbed against the beads, testing the hardness. "Maybe. But it feels a bit waxy and I think it could be fairly soft. Doesn't amber come in black varieties?"

"I believe so. What makes you think that it may be amber?"

She shrugged. "Could you hand me that mallet at the end of the table?"

"Whatever for?" he asked, even as he passed the tool to her.

"I just want to see..." With a loud whack, she slammed the mallet onto the rosary. There was a crunch as the piece of jewelry splintered into tiny pieces. "Did I ever tell you that Mr. Southmore had one of these on his wrists?"

"No, you didn't. And you never told me what he was talking to you about either. You do know what that means, don't you? He's connected in someway to those ruffians who came in here and stole your uncle's notes."

"That does make a sort of sense," she replied as she sorted through the black shards on her bench top and picked out a likely looking piece to test the sharpness on the end of her finger. "He was pestering me again about patronizing my research—if I took up my uncle's research instead of my own. Of course, I didn't mention that I am doing it anyway, but his reaction to my refusal was telling. Besides, he had made the same offer to my uncle when he had been alive. He's probably the person that my uncle was worried about having all of his work falling into."

“So Southmore is intensely interested in your uncle’s work. But if he already has your uncle’s plans yet still asked you to work for him—that means that he still hasn’t figured out how everything is put together. But it still doesn’t come together. He’s part of a group that is planning a coup against the Queen and he wants this invention. From what I’ve seen, I still don’t know why he wants it. As you’ve said, it’s merely a toy.”

“It’s a toy now, but that’s with the materials I currently have to work with.” She made an approving sound at the back of her throat when she finally found a black shard sharp enough to suit her. “There’s a knife and some glue over at that end. Put them over here, please.”

“Am I your assistant now?” he said as he did what she told him. “You seem awfully fond of giving me orders.”

“But you’re so eager to obey.” She took the knife and used it to pry off the amber needles that she had grounded at the base of the machine and then used a dab of glue to attach the black shard where the amber needles used to be. “That ought to do it. The glue will dry in a few minutes.”

“What will that do?” he asked doubtfully. “If it is indeed black amber, won’t the properties be the same as the lighter amber?”

“Yes, that’s the prediction,” she said. “But if it isn’t, the effect won’t be quite the same. Would you like some tea while we wait?”

“No thank you. It’s already cold, isn’t it?”

“Hm.” She grabbed the half-eaten toast and nibbled at it as she stared at the black shard. Then after a long moment, as Caradon opened his mouth to say something to fill in the silence, she tossed the rest of the toast back on the breakfast tray. “We’ll try again, shall we?” And she flipped the switch.

At first, nothing seemed different. The motor and the pulleys were whirring and the silk belt was being rubbed on the black shard. Then, she began to sense a bit of movement at her feet. Energy was moving inward toward the work bench, toward the machine. She put a hand on the metal dome.

“It’s quite cold,” she said promptly as Caradon watched her closely.

“You’re hair isn’t acting strangely,” he replied.

“That would mean that it isn’t generating any charge. I suppose that didn’t...” Her voice trailed off as she stared at her hand. The nails were lengthening and curving—and she was feeling perfectly in control of herself. In her mind, she willed her hand to remain a hand, but it didn’t listen. Her fingers were becoming claws. “Caradon, I think I’m changing, yet I haven’t willed myself to do anything.”

“Zan, your eyes and ears...”

She could feel her teeth lengthening and her voice was rough as she said, “This sort of energy isn’t the same.”

“Zan, take your hand off of that at once!”

She tugged, but her hand, fast becoming a paw, was stuck. “I can’t.” With her free hand, she tried to pull at her wrist, but to no avail. Caradon reached out and took hold of her elbow in order to help free her, but she yipped, frightened, and unable to speak aloud. *Caradon, your hand! All of this energy is transferring to you as well!*

*But I can’t let you stay stuck on this thing.*

She could feel the energy, the magic or the chi or whatever it was called, coursing through her arm, forcing fur through her skin. With an effort, she reached over with her free hand-paw and grabbed at the switch. A bright spark sizzled between the motor and her hand which made her hiss in pain. But with the flip of the switch, the motor stopped and the strange energy coursing through the machine halted. Her hand became unglued from the metal dome. Caradon gave one final tug at her wrist that was a little too hard and the both of them tumbled backward onto the floor.

Zan’s will began to reassert itself over the sudden rogue flow of energy and she felt herself, as well as Caradon’s hand on her wrist, fade from fox form back to human form.

“I suppose we shouldn’t turn that thing on again.”

Caradon grunted an assent beneath her.

There were footsteps on the stairs and then Simkins appeared at the entrance of the laboratory. Hastily, Zan got up and dusted her dress off. “We just had a small accident, Simkins.”

The butler gave them a disapproving stare. “Really? Your hair is in disarray, Miss Hu.”

“Oh. Well, I was just doing this demonstration...”

Her patron grinned as she babbled. She gave him a repressive glare.

“Miss Hu,” the butler interrupted. “There was a visitor who came not a moment ago.”

“Who was it?”



“A Detective Moren from the police headquarters. He wishes to take you in for questioning.” Zan blinked. “Me? For questioning? I haven’t done anything. Is he still up there?”

“No. I told the detective that you were indisposed for the next couple of hours. He said that he would be back later to see you. And he said he would see Mr. Caradon as well since he had been informed by his sources that he has come here to visit.”

“I think it is a bit suspicious, don’t you think, that the police want to question us at this time?”

“I suppose so. I did meet the detective at the Museum while he and his constables were investigating the robbery there, but I never gave him my name.”

“There is one other thing, Miss Hu,” said Simkins. “The rest of the staff and I have discretely observed the neighborhood through the windows and have seen policemen stationed around the house. I think the detective knows that you are here already. He and his men are just waiting for you to come out so he can take the both of you into custody.”

~~~~~

Chapter 40 – Under a Rosebush

“We have to get out of here.” Zan said as she draped a cloth over the machine after disconnecting the battery. She took the entire thing off the bench and shoved it into one of the bottom shelves of the laboratory.

“We?” said Simkins, with an eyebrow raised.

“Mr. Caradon and I,” she replied. She began gathering everything on the work bench and dumping them into a drawer. “The detective and the other policemen will return here surely and no matter what you will say, they will demand entrance. Perhaps they’re back at their headquarters obtaining a warrant for a search right now.”

“But how will you leave if the entire place is being watched?” her butler replied. “And it’s broad daylight as well!”

Caradon opened his mouth to speak, but she shook her head to dissuade him. “It’s better that you not know how we get out,” said Zan. “Especially if they try to question you, you will be telling the truth that you don’t know what happened to us.”

Simkins gave an exasperated sigh and then trudged back up the stairs.

“How do you propose getting out of here?” said Caradon. “If we get caught, I think it would be all the worse. And I will never be able to make the meeting.”

She suddenly turned to him. “What meeting?”

“I received a message this morning from the Captain. Apparently he is all right and he is staying at an inn in the old city. He’s in hiding at the moment and he is to tell me exactly what had happened yesterday with the aborted attempt at killing the monk.”

“A message? How do you know that it is really from your Captain and not the kidnapers themselves?”

“There was his signature...”

“A signature could be coerced out from people,” she replied. “Come on. We don’t have much time to lose.”

“Would you mind telling me what your plan is?” he asked as they sprinted up the basement stairs and then took the stairs up to the second floor. They passed Isadora who gave them an odd look, but otherwise, did not ask any questions.

“There are two ways to get out of this house,” Zan said as she opened the door to her bedroom and ushered him inside. “We could exit this house in a disguise.”

“That will never work,” Caradon replied as he watched Zan walk behind the changing screen and listened to the sound of skirts dropping to the floor. “With all the policemen watching, they’re bound to notice anyone coming and going. What’s the other way?”

“Changing.” She came back out from behind the screen in her fox form. *What are you waiting for? Hurry up.*

“You’re an incredibly bossy female, you know that?” He told her as he went behind the screen himself. “I’ll have to think up a suitable bit of retaliation for that.”

You’re just annoyed. She nudged open her bedroom window and peered out. She couldn’t see any policemen out in the backyard, but she could smell two of them in the vicinity. One was standing next

to the back door and the other one was standing in the shadow of some trees in the neighbor's back yard. Both of them would be eyeing the back door. After all, what sort of person would jump out of a second story window?

All right. I'm ready.

She turned to see a male black fox padding towards her.

We're going out there? Wouldn't people notice two foxes prancing about on the second story ledge?

No they won't. Their eyes will be attuned to looking for two humans. Two people. We will be mere shadows to them.

They went out on the ledge and quickly traversed it and the wall separating the neighbor's yard and hers. Her ears were continually pricked, alert to whatever unusual sounds that might spring up while they traveled exposed. Then the dog began barking. Zan jumped into some bushes at the base of the wall with Caradon following soon after.

"What is it?" yelled one officer. "Did they try to make a break?"

"No! This dog has just crazy over some black squirrels, that's all."

Zan let out a breath of relief. *Good. Let's go.*

Go where? If you haven't noticed, we're in our animal forms. If we change, we'd be naked. As much as I'd like to see all your lovely skin, it's not very practical.

She slapped him on the nose with her tail. *I thought of that. I suppose going to your residence is out of the question?*

If they're looking for me as well, it would not be out of the realm of possibility that my residence is being watched as well.

Then we will go to one of my friend's house. I am sure she will have clothing for disguises since she is such a fashion expert.

* * *

Are you sure she's at home? Inquired Caradon as the both of them lurked underneath a yellow rose bush in Sabina Felis-Ackert's garden. From Zan's residence, they had managed to make their way down several blocks to Mrs. Felis-Ackert's house without being run over by carriages or being spotted by pedestrians.

She will be out any moment, Zan assured him. *She's an avid gardener and she must be home at one time or another. She's usually out here in the morning before she goes out on one of her shopping or amusement jaunts with Del.*

Does she know that you're a fox shifter?

Of course. She's a shifter herself, you know, as well as Del. Her form is a cat. Del is a wolf.

Really? I wouldn't have guessed.

Well, you don't expect every shifter to shout out his or her true nature to the entire world, do you? Ah, there she is.

Mrs. Felis-Ackert was wearing an old and faded blue dress covered with a dirt-smudged smock and a straw hat. In one hand was a pair of shears and the other, a basket. She was heading straight towards the rose bushes.

I never thought she was the type to ever be out of fashion if she's such an expert, said Caradon.

There's more to Sabina than mere frippery, Zan replied as they heard the shears snipping away above them. Then she directed her thought to her friend. *Sabina!*

The sound of the shears abruptly stopped. "Zan? Am I hearing things?"

No you aren't. Sabina, down here!

The skirts of the old blue dress moved and then they saw Sabina kneeling in the dirt and looking under the rose bush. "Why Zan, what are you doing down there? And with such a nice looking fellow as well? Don't tell me. You two are eloping. Your staff—particularly Mrs. Philomon—must be livid!"

What is with everyone and eloping? Zan thought sourly. *That's Caradon.*

"Oh." A frown appeared on Sabina's forehead. "I didn't know you could *change*, Mr. Caradon."

You never asked, he replied, amused.

"Well, come on out of there, you two," Sabina finally said. "There must be some reason you must be slinking about my garden."

The two foxes followed Mrs. Felis-Ackert through her garden and then into her house by the back

door. The cook and the kitchen maid seemed startled as Sabina walked past with the foxes at her heels. She waved cheerily. “Just some friends. You don’t have to worry about a thing.”

Bewildered, the kitchen staff just nodded and went back to their work. A lot of strange things happened in the Felis-Ackert household, but as long as they got paid, they would just mind their own business and keep their mouths shut.

Finally, Sabina led them down a hallway to a guest room. She began opening the wardrobe and pulling dresses out of it. “The screen is over there, Zan. I have a perfect outfit for you. You know this is the first time that you’ve really allowed me to dress you? I promise you—you will look absolutely marvelous. Those black dresses were doing nothing for your complexion.”

Sabina...

“I’m sorry, Mr. Caradon, but I don’t have any gentlemen’s clothes for you.” She took out an armload of dresses and dumped them on the bed. Then she tapped a finger to her chin in thought. “I doubt you wish to wear petticoats and a bonnet. However, I’m sure Del has a great many things that might fit you.”

Sabina, Zan interrupted. There are policemen looking for us.

“I’d imagine it was something like that,” remarked Sabina. “What did you two do? Rob the Museum?”

No, of course not! I am not sure why we are being hounded although we do have some suspicions. Zan jumped onto the bed and sniffed at the dresses. *Do you have anything that will be a bit of a disguise?*

Her friend rummaged through the dresses before pulling one out. “This one will do nicely. It is gray muslin—fantastic for remaining anonymous, yet also quite tasteful and fashionable. I shall have one of the maids fetch the matching accessories. The hat has a bit of a veil, you know, just to make one appear a little mysterious. But it is quite the crack these days so you won’t look out of place at all!” Sabina then turned to Caradon who was sitting on the floor by the bed with his ears twitching. “What do you think about this as a disguise, Mr. Caradon?”

What is she going to wear underneath?

Zan’s ear’s flattened against her head and she barred her teeth.

“Oh! You’re almost as bad as Del!” huffed Sabina.

I was just curious, he told them in faux innocence.

“Zan, go behind the screen.” She hung the dress over the changing screen just as Zan got off the bed and trotted off behind it. Then Sabina opened a trunk at the foot of the bed and pulled out a some undergarments that she threw over the screen as well. “Turn around,” Sabina told the male fox-shifter. “I’m seriously beginning to think that all men should have a certain portion of their anatomy cauterized.”

Ouch, Caradon winced. And then he turned his back to the screen.

After a moment of clothes rustling, Zan came back out in her human form, dressed in the gray dress. Meanwhile, Sabina had called for one of her staff to retrieve the necessary accessories and she helped Zan adjust her clothes as she stood in front of the mirror on the wardrobe. Caradon looked on patiently.

“Do you think this will work?” asked Zan.

“Of course it will,” her friend replied. “This style is so fashionable, no one will believe it is you. Those near-sighted policemen will be looking for a woman in mourning weeds, not haute couture. Now all we have to do is to find your patron something suitable to wear. We will pay a visit to Del. Unless Mr. Caradon wishes to remain in his animal form until the authorities let up?”

That will be out of the question.

Zan found herself grinning. “All right. Then we shall all go pester Del.”

^^^^

Chapter 41 – Fish and Sausages

“You know, I am not surprised,” said Sabina after Zan and Caradon took turns telling her about the latest strange coincidences and their suspicions. The three of them were traveling in a hackney to Del’s residence which was across town. “Southmore always seemed like an unsavory character to me. Did you know that the man asked me to marry him, twice?”

“Twice?” said Zan, surprised. “I never saw him look at you more than once.”

“That’s what he likes other people to see. Before my marriage to Ackert, but while we were engaged, Southmore professed his love for me and begged me to run away with him. You can guess how well that went over. He was already the Church’s emissary—and the man is older than you or I by at least three decades.”

“Haven’t emissaries from the Church taken a vow of chastity?”

“That’s what I asked him, but he told me he would break from the Church if I said yes. But there was just something about him—other than his age and his occupation—that really put me off. Ackert may have been an old dullard, but at least he was never cruel, if you take my meaning.”

Zan nodded. “But twice?”

“Of course, he never asked me while I was married. And for a while, I felt safe from his advances. And then my husband passed away. I suppose I cared for Ackert, in a way, but I never really loved him. I think Southmore knew that—so it wasn’t yet one week after my husband’s funeral that he asked me to marry him again. At the time, I was also visiting Del, who had been supportive through the ordeal and he had come by, worried that Southmore was unnecessarily bothering me. I refused Southmore, again, and the man went into a terrible temper—accusing me of having an affair behind my husband’s back. The nerve of him! I didn’t love Ackert, but I was at least faithful to my husband.”

“And Del witnessed his entire tirade?”

Sabina smiled in memory. “He is a loyal friend. He defended my honor rather admirably. Southmore, however, had to go around for the rest of the week with a black eye.”

The hackney jolted to a halt in front of a row of tidy townhouses. Sabina stepped off first. From within the vehicle, Zan heard her friend loudly exclaim, “Oh, good morning constable, a fine day, isn’t it?” How did they...

Before Caradon could finish that thought, Zan scooped him up into her arms and descended the hackney. As the driver of the vehicle clicked to his horses and rode away with the clatter of wheels, the constable in front of Del’s residence in a starch uniform made a bow to Sabina and Zan and said, “Good morning ladies. May I ask who you might be, visiting this neighborhood at this hour?”

“Well,” Sabina said, mustering up an indignant tone. “I always come to this neighborhood at this hour. Everyone here knows who I am. Why should you know?”

“I apologize, ma’am, but the authorities have all been instructed to be on the look out for certain persons of interests.”

“Oh really? Are these persons of interests wanted for some kind of crime?”

“The Church has told the chief that these persons are conspiring against the Queen. Treason is a serious offense, but the Church has yet to provide any evidence. So as a benefit of a doubt, the chief has ordered everyone on the force to look out for these persons—but it is only for twenty-four hours, you understand.”

“Why twenty-four hours?”

“Well, if there is still no evidence against these persons of interest, the chief will drop the case. You can’t accuse everyone of treason and expect them to be all charged. Innocent people would be implicated simply because someone else bears a grudge against them.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Your name, ma’am?”

“Mrs. Sabina Felis-Ackert,” she replied in ringing tones. “Now if you will excuse us...”

“And miss?” the constable asked, turning to Zan.

Sabina took a step to slightly obscure his view. “That is my cousin Solange, from the Continent,” she said before Zan could speak. “I’m afraid she doesn’t know the language, my dear constable, so I’m accompanying her to see the sights.”

“And what is that?”

The black fox in Zan’s arms hid his face in her bosom. *Caradon!*

He peeked up at her, his silver gaze smug. *You’re soft. And you smell wonderful.*

Zan gave a sigh.

One of Sabina’s eyebrows went up. “My cousin’s little dog. Quite an affectionate fellow, isn’t he? I’m assured that the breed makes excellent companions. You know, like a lap dog or a bed warmer.”

“Lap dog?” the constable repeated. He reached out as if to touch him, but Caradon whipped his head around and barked before barring his teeth. The constable quickly withdrew his hand. “Uh, excitable little fellow, isn’t he?”

“He makes an excellent watchdog. He’s quite protective of my cousin.”

“Right,” said the constable, as he slowly backed away as Caradon gave a menacing snarl for good measure. “Well, I must be on my way, again, good morning ladies.”

Sabina gave the faintest nod in acknowledgement before walking up the stairs to the front door of Del Garrou’s residence. Zan followed after she let Caradon back on the ground. After a swift knock, the door was answered by a portly middle-aged gentleman who glanced at Sabina and then Zan with resignation.

“You’ll find Mr. Garrou in the dining room,” the butler said tiredly.

“Is he still eating breakfast?” demanded Sabina. She marched through the foyer with Zan and Caradon behind her. They heard the butler close the door just as they turned a corner and entered a dining room wallpapered in a tasteful beige and brown design and occupied by an enormous mahogany table supported by legs with feet carved to resemble animal paws.

Del was wearing a light gray-green suit and sitting at the end of the table reading a newspaper. A plate of half-eaten sausages and a cup of tea lay forgotten in front of him. Slowly, he lowered the newspaper and observed his visitors. He smiled. “Why Sabina, how nice of you to drop by! And Zan, too! And another friend as well. Is he your beau, Zan?”

“He is not my beau!”

Caradon yipped, amused.

“Well, if you say so,” he replied.

“Del, we need a favor,” began Zan.

“You need to eat breakfast first,” Del interrupted. “There’s plenty of food.”

She glanced at the sideboard and only saw a platter filled with sausages. “Uh, no thank you. I already had breakfast.”

“You don’t offer sausages to a guest!” exclaimed Sabina. “You’re an idiot as well as a dunderhead.”

Del began grinning. “She called me a dunderhead yesterday, you know. It means she’s quite fond of me.”

Zan rolled her eyes.

Sabina colored. “Don’t sit there mincing words. This is a bit of an emergency. Zan and her patron are being pursued by the authorities. For at least twenty-four hours, at any rate, and they need to go undetected for that time. You don’t suppose you have some sort of disguise for Mr. Caradon?”

“Oh, is that Mr. Caradon?” Del peered at the black fox who gave him a steady stare. “Well, I suppose that’s all right since you’re one of us. Anyways, if we must disguise you, we will do it with style. I have a wonderful black greatcoat that could hide at least ten people!” He folded his newspaper and placed it back on the table before getting up and taking the plate with the unfinished sausage with him. “Come on, then, Caradon. I have everything upstairs.”

When her friend and the black fox exited the dining room, Sabina wrinkled her nose at the platter of sausages sitting on the sideboard. “Del has abominable eating habits.”

“I heard that!” came a masculine voice in the other room. “You should speak for yourself. Fish! Feh!”

~~~~~

## Chapter 42 - Binding

“You should go back,” Caradon said. “Mrs. Felis-Ackert was quite willing to put you up until the authorities drop the search.”

“Oh, you’re not putting me off that easily, Caradon. You’ve tagged along on enough of my excursions. I’m just repaying the favor.”

“It will be quite uninteresting for you...”

“Do you think I could fall for that? If your Captain’s message doesn’t seem suspicious to you, it does to me. Besides, I am curious as to what did happen with that attack on him and the monk at the port.”

He smiled humorlessly. “You do know what they say about curiosity, don’t you?”

They were sitting in another hackney, heading towards Old Amanthus after a brief meeting with Caradon’s solicitor to borrow some funds. Caradon looked like a voluminous black ghost with a pair of sharp eyes as he sat, across from Zan, wrapped up in Del’s enormous greatcoat and hat with a wide brim. Outside, the sky was a deep pink salmon interspersed with lavender clouds. It was close to dusk, and the

hour at which the Captain had told Caradon that the meeting would take place.

He had the driver drop them off at the intersection of South Bishop and Orpine in the old city. When Zan stepped off the hackney, a strong gust of wind came up, almost blowing the hat off her head. The wind tugged at Caradon's coat. In the sky, clouds raced hard, from west to east. The streets, odorous and dank, were shadowed. What few working lampposts in Old Amanthus had not been lit quite yet. Zan tucked her coat closer to her body as she walked with Caradon down South Bishop. She thought she saw something scuttling past her peripheral vision. Was it a beggar or a rat?

After a moment's consideration, she took off her gloves and tucked them into a pocket. She flexed her fingers and felt the *change* humming just beneath her skin. How easy it was to let the *change* just come over her, she mused as she walked down the street. It wasn't so long ago that she had believed that she had to have complete control over that part of her nature. Exactly when did she finally have the courage to accept that the animal part of her was indeed part of her and not something separate and grotesque? She had been frightened of the change—she admitted that now. The *change* really was no more a malignant tumor than one of her toes. There were still moments when she automatically tried to suppress its urges, but she was learning to go with its ebbs and flows.

"He said he would be at the intersection with Maudlin." Caradon's voice was almost lost with the wind. "It should be the next street."

Zan looked ahead and saw the intersection. South Bishop was a larger road—big enough to let two carriages pass side by side. Maudlin was far smaller, a brief gash across South Bishop, that looked more like a crevasse that could barely fit even a vegetable cart. The corner was surrounded by narrow, three-story buildings built of brick that was already crumbling under the influence of the old city's strange malaise. She thought she saw a figure leaning against the wall of one of the buildings. "Is that the Captain?" she said, pointing.

"It must be him." Caradon quickened his steps and Zan almost had to jog to keep up with him. "Captain Ramon," he called. Once at the building at the intersection, he reached out to touch the man's shoulder.

There was something strange about his stance.

"Captain!" Caradon shook the man's shoulder, but his body slumped against the wall and then fell over. Her patron took a step back and she heard his quick intake of breath.

She looked down. The hat had fallen off the body and she saw the pale face of a man. She recognized him as the Captain who had come to her residence to speak with Caradon on the day that her laboratory had been ransacked. The Captain's eyes were open, seeing nothing. Her patron crouched down and tugged at the man's collar. His skin was broken by a black-purple line. Zan suddenly raised a hand to cover her nose and mouth. The poor man had been strangled.

"So it wasn't his note after all," Caradon murmured. "So who..."

She felt the hair at the back of her neck raise. In a split second, she whirled around with fists raised. Someone attempted to grab at her wrists. She twisted again and for a brief second, she saw Caradon grappling with another man.

"Look miss," growled the man in front of her. "Just surrender and no one will be hurt."

"I just bet," she replied as she swung her hand across to rake the man's face with her claws. But he was faster as he finally caught her wrist.

The man laughed and backhanded her, sending her hat flying off into the street. She replied to the slap with a punch in the face with her free hand. She wrung out her fingers as the man momentarily released her and staggered back. Zan darted forward and swung as far as the dress would allow her leg to go and sent him toppling to the ground with a cry.

Her attacker immediately rolled onto his side and curled up as if in a fetal position, but she spotted one of his hands reaching into his coat pocket. She sent another kick, this time into his stomach, and the man howled. A revolver tumbled onto the street. She stomped onto his wrist as he struggled to reach his weapon and picked it up herself.

She pointed the revolver at her attacker's head. He whimpered.

Zan turned her head to see Caradon make his way toward her, dark gray eyes gleaming with approval. She saw his attacker slouched against the building—unconscious or dead, she could not tell. Her patron reached down to retrieve her hat, dusted it off, and then put it back on her head.

Her attacker was pale and muttering pathetic excuses and apologies. Blood trickled from the man's nose, staining his chin bright red. For some reason, that made her feel inordinately pleased. Caradon crouched until he was eye to eye with the man. He grinned, showing inhumanly sharp teeth, and

her attacker wailed.

“This was a trap, wasn’t it?” Caradon asked in a low, dark tone.

“Y-y-yes,” the man babbled. His eyes darted from Caradon’s face to the end of the revolver’s barrel and then back again. “The note was forged. The Captain was killed. He was a l-l-liability.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t want you around.” His eyes darted back to Zan. “We didn’t count on her being here.”

“Never mind that. Who didn’t want me around? Who’s behind all of this?”

“Don’t know! We just get paid to do the job!”

Instead of yelling at him, Caradon merely raised an eyebrow.

The man swallowed nervously and then blurted out. “It was just some man we met on the street, all right? Southport or Southworth or something like that. He was real religious cause he was all decked out with all that expensive religious jewelry, you know?”

“Hm? And how do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“I am telling the truth! Really, I am! He hangs out with the cultie crowd, you know. You might even run into him tonight. The culties are meeting at the Temple around midnight for some big celebration or festival or something.” He paused for a moment to catch his breath and then he said in a small voice.

“Are you going to kill me?”

Caradon grinned again. “I’m thinking about it.” Then he punched him and her attacker fell back, unconscious.

When her patron stood back up, Zan tucked the revolver into her pocket with the gloves. “Should we contact someone about these ruffians and the Captain’s body?”

He shook his head. “We’re wanted by the authorities, remember? We’ll let someone else make the discovery. Besides, these goons will wake up soon enough. In the meantime, we should be off. I need to take you back home. This is far too much excitement for a lady.”

“It was invigorating exercise,” she said instead as they turned onto Maudlin and walked south, heading out of the old city. “And we must see what Southmore is up to. Why on earth would he involve himself with the old pagan cults at the Temple?”

“I have no idea. But you are definitely not going up to the Temple tonight to see what Southmore is doing. It is far too dangerous.”

“No it isn’t. Not as long as I have my new friend here,” she replied, patting her pocket.

He gave a rueful chuckle. “I don’t suppose you would give it to me for safe keeping if I asked nicely?”

“Not a chance.”

After a few blocks, the road began to widen and various businesses began to appear as they approached the intersection of Maudlin and South Moule which was only a block away from Market Row—the demarcation between the old city and the rest of Amanthus. The shops were small and the windows dark, indicating that they were already closed. She noticed a shoe shop and a tiny grocery. A pawn shop was still open—a faint glow emitting from windows covered in iron bars. At the intersection, before the other side of Moule, was a tavern named the Black Lion. Patrons were slowly trickling out of the place, stumbling back into the depths of the old city. Across from the tavern was an inn with a sign depicting a sleeping owl. From the sign post, a wind chime glittered and clanked in the stiff wind.

Zan quickened her pace, but Caradon reached the curb a half pace before her. She heard the air sizzle as he took another step and there were sparks that shot out from nowhere to fizzle on the dark ground. He jumped back from the contact, shaken, but apparently unharmed.

“What on earth was that?” she asked.

He looked at the smoking air and shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

She reached out with her hand and the skin on her palm tingled. Energy swirled densely and vertically. She moved her hand side to side, finding no break in the invisible wall. She poked one finger into it and the invisible wall erupted into another shower of sparks. She pulled her hand back to look at her finger, but there were no burns. She put her hand near the barrier again, but she felt no indication that there had been any disturbance.

“What a run of luck,” Caradon sighed. “We might as well be netted in by the authorities.”

She looked up at the sky—clouds moved quickly over a thinning moon and a few stars were already out in the deepening velvet space, revealing a hard shine. “Mr. Long.”

“Long?”

“It’s the conjunction he talked about,” she said. “He said something about the planets lining up

and the disruption of the energy in Old Amanthus. He never mentioned how all of this really worked, but I suppose it doesn't matter if he knows or not, because we're trapped in the old city until tomorrow."

"Damn."

"But look on the bright side, Caradon. This will give us an opportunity to go to the Temple tonight."

He roughly hooked his arm around hers and dragged her away from the intersection. "You never let up, do you?"

"You're angry."

"I'm exasperated," he corrected her.

He finally stopped in front of the door to the inn. Before he pushed open the door, she noticed that not only did it have a wind chime on the sign post but also a pendant of amber. The doorway itself was carved in an odd geometric pattern. She touched it, feeling a current of sleepy energy coursing through the wood. There was a slightly different quality to it than the energy at the barrier erected on the intersection, though. Like wine, it felt smoother, mellower, aged. The energy at the barrier had a bitter tang like that of raw, unfiltered cider.

She followed her patron into a tiny lobby where an old heavy set woman in a plain woolen dress swept the floor in slow, circling motions. The old woman looked up when then entered. Caradon asked her about a room and dinner. The woman replied with the answers and then money changed hands before she ambled to a back room and returned with a slim iron key. As Caradon urged her ahead to a flight of wooden stairs leading to the upper floors, she noticed a small white cat with a torn ear and a missing eye sitting at the head of the banister with his paws tucked underneath him. At her pause, her patron placed a hand at the small of her back and gave an insistent push. The cat blinked his remaining eye lazily and his whiskers quivered in a feline laugh.

Who are you laughing at, cat?

Trapped is as trapped does, the cat replied enigmatically. But what will you do about it?

"Talking to animals?" Caradon inquired as she continued up the stairs and turned on the landing.

"That cat was making fun of me," she replied. "Or at least I think he was."

The key was to the room at the end of the hall. The room itself was somewhat sparse—there was a lamp on a table beside a brass bed covered in a thick rose-colored comforter and another on a table accompanied by two chairs. A large worn rug covered the wood-planed floor and a dresser was pushed against the corner. The window at the end of the room was draped with deep green curtains. Caradon immediately made for the window to peek outside. She took her coat off and draped it over a chair.

Someone knocked on the room door. Zan opened it and found the old woman standing outside with a tray in her hands. She took it and closed the door with an elbow. She placed the tray on the table and looked at the bowls of soup and thick slices of bread. There was one bottle of wine. Caradon moved away from the window and took his greatcoat off. He reached for the wine. Zan took a spoonful of soup even though she wasn't feeling hungry.

As Caradon poured out two glasses of dark red wine, she asked, "So we have dinner. And then we *change* and go to the Temple to see what's going on." She took her glass of wine and sipped. She grimaced and put the glass down. The wine was warm and slightly sour.

"No, we don't go anywhere. You're going to stay here where you won't get into any trouble."

"Now tell me who's stubborn," she replied. "You can talk about me staying here all you want, but I'm going."

He had been about to put the wine glass to his lips, but his gaze hardened and he put the glass back down on the table, firmly. "Get up," he said softly.

She cocked her head. "Excuse me?"

"Get up."

Zan narrowed her eyes and got up from her chair. "All right. I'm up. Are you happy now?"

"Hm." His eyes burned, but she refused to look away. "Take off your dress."

"What!"

"I have a burning curiosity about women's undergarments," he replied. "Surely you would oblige to indulge me?"

"As you said, there is this saying about curiosity," she shot back at him. But she found her hand straying up to the buttons. Her fingers twisted, and they came undone one by one. The top part of the dress slid down her body and she caught it in her arms. She stepped out of the dress and folded it across the chair over her coat. Caradon sat back in his chair in deceptive ease, but she knew his eyes missed nothing.



“White, white, and more white,” he murmured. “Take down your hair, Zan.”

She bit her lip, half of her wanting to say no, half of her eager to fling herself into this new, dark avenue.

Something subtle flickered in his expression. “Are you frightened?”

“Well, not of you.”

“Perhaps you should be. Take down your hair. And then remove your stockings. And your drawers.”

Her fingers trembled as she pulled the pins out of her hair and put them one by one on the table. And then she sat back down in her chair to pull off the stockings and to wiggle out of her drawers, giving him no chance to glimpse anything else. She placed these articles of clothing on top of her dress.

“Did I say you could sit down?” he asked, an eyebrow raised.

She suddenly stood up, feeling dizzy and flushed. “No. But I could very well sit down if I wanted to.”

“Some would say that is far too independent of you. Now turn around.”

She turned. And then she heard the scrape of a chair being pushed back and then footsteps.

Hands came to rest on her waist. They moved up her ribcage and then stopped short of her bust. Then he pulled her hair over her shoulder and his mouth lightly brushed the nape of her neck. She shivered.

“Walk to the end of the bed and put your hand on that bedpost.”

In other contexts, the entire situation would have seemed surreal, but in the moment, she could sense everything—every sound, every touch, every smell, was as acute as a slash of a sharp knife against the back of a hand. She was hypersensitive to her own movements and to his behind her. The sluggish energy hinted at the entrance of the inn began to move slightly faster underneath the floorboards, in response to the pounding of the blood in her ears.

She bent over and placed her fingers on the bed knob and it was cool to the touch. Then she heard him shrug out of his jacket and take off his waistcoat. There was the whisper of linen and then she felt him leaning over her, not quite touching. The length of linen dangled into her sight. His tie. He looped it around her wrists and secured her to the bedpost before her overwhelmed mind could process what he was doing.

“Caradon...”

Her voice faded into a hoarse rasp as his hands rested on her back. The ties to the corset were being loosened. Every time he eased a finger into the lacing and pulled, she felt her body being tugged back, toward him. Eventually, he reached the last one the corset fell away. Then he began work on the buttons on the back of her chemise and he gently peeled it away until it only remained, dangling at her tied wrists like a limpid white cloud. He leaned over her. For a split second, she felt his warm breath on her skin. And then his mouth. When his kisses reached her spine, he moved back up and his fingers followed suit along her torso, tracing the curve of her breast, pinching her nipples. She bit down on her bottom lip, trying to tamp down on any sound, any movement, any whimper that may give him any indication that he was winning.

His lips traced the nape of her neck, then the back of her ear. Softly, he said, “Haven’t I told you before that I wish to please you?”

“What sort of games are you playing, Caradon?” she managed to say in an even voice.

One of his hands on her breasts decided to trail downward again, past her belly, down to the place between her legs where it teased at her inner folds and delved deep.

A gasp burst out of her.

“Games? Oh no, Zan. This is the real thing.”

His hand teased and coerced and she breathed hard, attempting to keep her mind on control. The thought came, as his tongue flickered out to taste her skin, that there were different types of control. One was that of the *change*. And then there were other kinds. If she had thought she had conquered her fear of losing control by making peace with her shifter nature, she had been sadly mistaken.

She cried out suddenly, feeling pure sensation rip through her. After that one, pure, electrifying moment, she slumped over, breathing hard.

He removed his hand and then the tie was removed from her wrist. He pulled down the covers and half led, half carried her to the bed. She lay on the sheets feeling as if she had been infused with energy and sensitized. She turned on her side and watched him remove his own clothing, observing the play of muscle beneath skin, the exquisite bluntness of his arousal. When he finally got onto the bed and rolled her over to her back, she felt herself tense again as his hands trailed down her sides to her hips. He

leaned down and kissed her as thrust himself inside of her. Pain mingled with pleasure and she shrieked—but it was muffled by his mouth.

Caradon paused and raised his head when he ended the kiss. She opened her eyes to look up at him. His own gaze was narrow, concentrated, and sweat shone on his brow. It had been more surprising than painful and the pain itself seemed to ease just a bit every second that went by. Experimentally, she shifted her hips and she saw a lopsided smile shape his mouth before he took over the movement.

She watched him, noting how his nostrils flared, how sinew strained. Was losing control in this way a bad thing? He had wanted to please her. And at the moment, she couldn't seem to muster any reasons to object to it. Instead, she looked up at him yet not seeing him at all. It was only sensation and then that electrifying moment that she had thought was so singular, seized her again and she was dimly aware that he was gasping in her ear, spilling inside of her.

An eternity seemed to go by until her senses returned. He had rolled over and pulled her to him so that she was now sprawled on top of him. She could smell his scent of sweat and dark forest and feel his heart beating beneath her hand.

*Zan, I didn't mean...*

*If I didn't want it, I would have stopped you,* she interrupted. She lightly raked her claws on his chest to emphasize her point and then she willed her paw to become a hand again. Her fingers traced the path her claws left. Then she yawned. *It was a lesson I needed to learn in control, my Moon.*

He silently laughed. *Ah, my little baggage.*

She found herself smiling as she fell asleep.

~~~~~

Chapter 43 - Collared

The sound of lowing bells jerked her away from her sleep. She curled her hands and found her fingers grasping at warm flesh. She tilted her head and found him watching her. Then he gently nudged her to the side and got out of the bed to peek out of the window. The lamp on the table with their cold dinner was still on; the light a golden glow that shone on his skin in shadowed bronze. The bells of the Cathedral continued to toll. She counted them—eleven.

Zan flung the covers off and felt the cool air slide over her naked skin. She walked over to him to peer out the crack the curtains permitted. There was a ledge, just outside the window, and then there was a short, brief space before the roof of the next building which only had one level. From there, it would be possible to find an outside stair to get to the ground. She felt his hands on her shoulders sliding downward and pulling her toward him until they met, skin to skin. He brushed her hair away from her face.

"I suppose I can't convince you to stay here."

"No," she replied. "I am going."

He briefly pressed his mouth against hers, leaving her lips tingling. "If we are both going no matter what, then who is following who?"

"No one is following anyone. We both have reason to see what he is up to. My uncle's work. Your captain. The plotting against the Queen."

"And one could wonder if there isn't something that he isn't involved in," Caradon said in mock humor.

Somewhat awkwardly, she leaned over to brush her lips against the edge of his jaw which was slightly rough with stubble. She could feel energy pulsing beneath his skin, calling to her, drawing her out. She felt his hands flex on her waist, the prickle of his claws. The bronze-gold glow of the room slowly began to fade into gray and the rest of her senses heightened. She buried her nose into his neck, but somehow, the perspective was off—her nose was growing into a different shape and she felt fur on her cheek. She found herself crouched beneath the window instead of standing by it—and he was softly yipping in her ear, bringing her back to alertness.

It was so easy, changing, she thought as he raised himself up the window sill and pushed it open with a paw. *I was hardly even aware that it was happening. It's frightening.*

He glanced back at her. *It is easy if you don't try so hard to control it. The less you worry about it, the change will happen when you need it and wait when you don't.*

She followed him up the ledge. *I was very young when my parents passed away so my father had no chance to teach me how and why I had these urges to burst out of my civilized shell. My uncle taught*

me to control this animal nature because it just wasn't done.

No offense, but Elliot Waterstone was not of our kind. He had no comprehension on what it is like to be a shifter.

The ledge ended at the corner of the building and they easily leaped over the few feet that separated the inn from the store next to it. The roof of the store was flat, except for a single chimney. On the other side of the roof was yet another building—this one three stories tall. A stair crisscrossed the side in a jagged pattern. From the store's roof, they jumped onto the stair and proceeded to the ground. The night was complete and the small street of Maudlin narrowed into further darkness towards the old city.

At the intersection between Maudlin and South Bishop, the street was clear. Their two attackers, from earlier, were gone, as well as the Captain's body. She sniffed the air and noted that the paths of the ruffians and the corpse had diverged. Someone had discovered the Captain's body shortly after the two men had woken up and left and had taken the dead man west toward the morgue and the crematorium. The two attackers had taken the opposite route and had headed down South Bishop on a northerly route.

They followed the scent until the next intersection where the two men had turned into a small alleyway heading west. For a moment, Zan stood on the curb, peering into the night. The dilapidated buildings around them were either abandoned or dark because everyone was asleep. The rotting smell from the center of the city made her nose itch, but the unusually stiff wind that had sprung up earlier in the evening and was still blowing took the harshest sting out of the odor. Caradon looked down South Bishop, his ears twitching.

He glanced at her and she flicked her tail, almost imperceptibly. Together, they proceeded down the street until South Bishop began to curve westward and to change its name to North Bishop. The Cathedral loomed ahead—a hulking black thing along the street with several towers—one of which was the clock tower—and one spire that towered above the rest like a sharp spike piercing the heavens. Across from the Cathedral was a small field of headstones and then the Temple. The sky was cloudy and there was little moonlight so the headstones appeared little more than dark lumps surrounding the stark shadowed dome of the Temple. Even from their distance, they could see a line of robed people slowly making their way into the ancient building.

She darted into the cemetery, sprinting from one headstone to another. Nearing the entrance of the Temple, she could make out each individual in the procession. Each person was cowed—their faces covered—and carrying an object—be it a censer smoking with incense, brass staves studded with dark glass, or chains of black beads capped with the odd black cross encircled in silver. Caradon caught up with her a moment later and they watched the pagan worshippers moving in. As the last person took a step through the threshold, the two foxes followed behind and kept to the unwatched shadows that the pillars holding up the ancient Temple cast on the cold floor.

Which one do you suppose is Southmore? She asked. *The incense is overpowering almost every other scent.*

I don't know, he replied. *He could be any of those people. Or none. But do you really suppose he is a follower like them? Southmore strikes me more as a man who wishes to take charge. He is, after all, an emissary.*

That's right. He'd want to direct and choreograph the entire ceremony, not sit back and watch everything that's going on. I want to get a closer look.

He gave a low, almost inaudible growl. *You've seen all of this before. There will be incantations and a sacrifice. If we stay here, nearer to the entrance, there's a chance we may be able to get back out before that thing throws up a barrier on the Temple.*

Hm? I wonder if the barrier that had been on the Temple is similar to the one around Old Amanthus?

Who knows? But the one of the old city is the same as the one that had been here in one respect—they kept things in.

She started to slink closer to the gathering around the pedestal and the black bowl by keeping her back to the far wall.

Zan, where do you think you're going? Come back here.

We're not going to find out anything if we stay in one safe spot, she told him. Besides, don't you remember that there is another exit to this place as well?

He sighed, exasperated in her mind and abandoned his post in favor of coming along with her. They padded around the perimeter of the main hall. None of the worshippers gave any indication that they saw two small fox shadows passing their peripheral vision.

As they passed the main hall, her ears pricked up at an unusual scrapping sound. She followed the noise until she came to the entrance to the small room that they had found in their last visit to the Temple. She peeked around the edge and saw that there were three robed figures already in the room. They were holding torches and looking toward the hole in the floor that went down to the passageway that connected the room to the wine cellar in the Cathedral.

The figures were not wearing their hoods. When one turned to another to speak, she saw that it was Southmore. He appeared impatient as he asked the other man what the time was. The man took out a pocket watch from beneath his robe. It was half-past eleven.

The scrapping sound came again and then two men emerged from the stairway leading down the hole carrying a contraption. Zan stifled a surprised yip. It was her uncle's last invention—one of the machines that had supposedly been placed in the Museum. But there was something odd about it—someone had definitely altered it. She could see a tiny hairline crack at the base of the electricity generator where someone had cut it open and possibly fiddled with the interior before sealing it back up with glue.

“Well, it is certainly time you got it here,” Southmore told the dark hole.

A moment later, a portly man—Pendergrast, Zan recognized with another shock—ascended the stairs and stepped into the room wiping his brow. Like Southmore and the rest of the men, he was dressed in the robe uniform of the pagan worshippers. “If you had been more efficient at obtaining the information or even securing the help from Miss Hu, I wouldn't be in such a hurry!”

Southmore sneered—an ugly expression on a face that she had usually seen a congenial or sympathetic smile—“You assured me you were an expert in the field, yet you had to resort to your associates to obtain the necessary information.”

“Well, lucky for you my associates were fortunate in obtaining the information at all.”

The emissary waved a dismissive hand. “Never mind. What's done is done. Time is growing short.”

Isn't he one of the inventors at the Academy? Asked Caradon.

Yes. But I don't understand—how did he get the information to modify my uncle's prototype? She paused, thoughts slowly coalescing. *It was the day at the gentlemen's tailor when I was talking to my friends about this entire situation. Lord What's-His-Name must have overheard me telling Del and Sabina that I had found my uncle's notes.*

Lord who?

Hyssop, she clarified. He's some count's son from the Continent. He's Greta Del Rassa's beau—and she is friends with Pendergrast. The news must have gotten to him through that direction and then they had sent someone to take the notes that day.

Oh. But if that's true, what is Southmore doing with your uncle's machine in this Temple?

I don't know.

“Take it out,” directed the emissary.

Zan and Caradon made themselves smaller along the shadows of the wall as the two men carrying the machine lugged it out of the small room and toward the main hall of the Temple. Soon after them followed Pendergrast and the two other men that had been with Southmore. The emissary did not follow. Perhaps he was doing the final preparations for something else.

She peeked around the corner, but did not have a chance to see anything. Something tightened around her throat and she gagged. *Caradon!*

He pounced forward, growling, but halfway across the entrance to the small room, he stumbled as a loop of rope fell over his head and pulled taunt. Southmore finally emerged from the room, grinning down at them. The two fox-shifters growled at him, but he merely tugged at the two rope-leashes, silencing them.

“I knew my personal demons would be hounding me again,” the emissary said as he dragged them off towards the main hall. “Well, I'll get rid of you two soon enough. You should be honored I've decided that you'll do nicely as dessert for an old god.”

^^^

Chapter 44 – Fire and Smoke

How did he know? Zan wondered.

Southmore had tied them to a pillar close to where his henchmen had put down the machine. They

had walked to the other side of the pillar, out of immediate sight of the worshippers and Southmore's group. Caradon had nosed at her throat and then started gnawing at the rope at her neck.

There are some people with heightened senses of intuition, he told her. Have you ever heard of mediums and psychics?

I had always thought that most of them were frauds.

Most. But some aren't. Many of the people who do have an affinity with energy—the kind that we use to switch forms or the kind that formed the barrier to the old city tonight—do not know that they have the ability. They mostly believe that they just have a good sense of intuition or that they are just lucky that they have a better chance at guessing than the regular person. Or when they have visions, they simply write them off as hallucinations or dreams.

She lowered her head to his neck and found the rope imprisoning him. She bit through it and felt a few strands give way. *So let us suppose that Southmore is one of those people with an affinity with energy, chi, magic. And we know that my uncle's machine—with certain modifications—can help harness that energy. Do you suppose Southmore is trying to do something with that? This is a place where the Ancients accounted as a place of power, but why now—during the conjunction when we're all trapped in the old city and those cultists are preparing for their summoning ceremony?*

"How much power does this generate?" they heard Southmore ask.

"I have no idea," Pendergrast answered.

"Well, you must, you old bat. You built this thing!"

The portly inventor snorted. "Resorting to insults now, dear emissary? And must I remind you again that I did the modifications? I did not design this thing. And your associates had damaged the dome in their haste to retrieve this from the Museum. Do you know how much effort I put into just replacing it?"

"I don't care if you sailed all the way to the Far East to get it from the Emperor himself. You haven't answered my question."

"Well, there was that preliminary test we did earlier."

"Yes, yes, that worked fine. I was able to enhance my abilities so that I could actually see what was happening in the next room. But that isn't good enough. I need to be able to see farther distances and not just the neighbor's house. Like the Queen's court, for instance."

"That would require quite a lot of power, Southmore. How much, I'm not sure, but would this machine be able to generate enough? I'm afraid you're getting ahead of the available technology."

"But you had explained it to me before. From what you've deduced, the power output from the generator would be proportional to the amount of energy in the ground, isn't that right?"

"As far as I understand it—but I don't see how..."

"The time and place is right for all that."

"But we haven't tested it yet."

Southmore gave a harsh bark of laughter. "We don't have time for more tests. And the thing is harmless from the time I first tried it. You worry too much, old bat. The only thing to worry about is if there is enough power. If everything goes as planned—with the help of an unwitting old god who is nothing more than some powerful creature we can use as an energy source—I shall be able to see vast distances, both in space and time. Do you know how much control of the word events I will have with that?"

So that's what he's doing, Zan remarked. Old Pendergrast never knew what he was talking about anyway. This is all wishful thinking. Nothing will happen.

Are you so sure? Caradon responded. He gave one last tug at the rope around her neck and it fell away. *Well, that was a rather poor restraint. My ships would never use such a bad quality.*

I'm sure you don't. With a last snap of her jaws, the rope fell away from him as well. With the freedom of movement, they darted off behind another pillar to watch and listen from a few more paces away.

The robed figures began to chant lowly. One of them walked forward with the usual offering of a chicken in a crate and then hurriedly scuttled backward when he finished putting the crate at the base of the pedestal where the old god was to appear. The air in the Temple began to move and some of the torches lighting the area began to splutter out. Smoke, energy, and odor spilled out of the black bowl and onto the floor of the Temple. The agitated sacrifice began clamoring at the sides of the cage, terrified. A tentacle unraveled itself from the bowl and took the sacrifice.

It was the third time that she had witnessed the rather gruesome offering, but she still ducked, hiding her eyes briefly with her tail. Caradon nudged her.

Look. Something else is happening.

As the tentacled god was preoccupied with its meal, the worshippers began to move in a formation, circling the pedestal in a wide circle. All of the people holding staves and crosses laid them on the floor so that they laid end to end in a circle of black stone and brass. On the sidelines, Southmore nodded to Pendergrast who awkwardly bent down and flipped a switch on the electricity generator that Zan suspected had been modified to become an energy generator.

As the gears and pulleys inside the machine slowly ground up to speed in a scratching noise that echoed in the quiet main hall, the crunching sounds emanating from the black bowl suddenly stopped. There was a loud, inhuman shriek that filled the air.

Zan and Caradon flattened their ears to their heads as everyone else dropped everything they were holding and covered their ears with their hands.

After a long moment, the shriek subsided and the black oozing tentacle snapped out angrily—quick as a whip. But as it attempted to go past the point where the staves and crosses had marked off a boundary, it crashed into an invisible wall and an explosion of sparks rained inside of the boundary. There was another shriek.

But while everyone else was busy trying to keep the sound out of their heads, a strange light came into Southmore's eyes as he put his hands on the metal dome of the machine. Dark energy which had been pouring out of the old god's resting bowl and spilling across the floor of the Temple was now being pulled back, towards the machine. The generator was gathering the energy from the ground, just as negative charge was gathered in an electricity generator, and pulling it up to the dome where anyone who touched it would have access to it.

The emissary was grinning now as the dark energy traveled up his hand and through his body. Even in the torchlight, his body seemed to take on a weird sheen. His eyes were fixed at a point beyond the pedestal as he peered into a distance far from the current place and the current time. "Yes," he hissed. "I can see it. I can see everything. This will make me into a sage, a prophet, a god!"

We have to stop him!

Caradon grabbed onto her tail with his mouth before she could bound off. No! It would be terribly foolish.

At that moment, the tentacle crashed into the invisible wall again, followed by a second tentacle. And then a third. Something was emerging from the black bowl. Something large, dark, and horrible. The smell became overwhelming and Zan and Caradon turned their heads to gag and retch. The worshippers with their less sensitive human sense of smell began detecting this as well and their hands moved from their ears to their mouths. After yet another shriek, one of the tentacles punched through the invisible wall, reaching out.

The pagan worshippers screamed and they all started to run toward the exit. Censer bowls were dropped and incense scattered in a burning cloud of ash. The floor itself trembled and vibrated under the pounding feet and the sudden influx of more energy from the manifestation of an angry creature from a different plane breaking into the world. The tentacle wiggled out of the barrier further like a birthing snake.

"The sacrifice!" yelled Southmore. His skin had turned a shade darker and when he opened his mouth to yell, he showed black teeth. A thin wisp of smoke rose from the ends of his hair. "Quick, old bat, there are two animals tied to that pillar. Throw it to the monster!"

Pendergrast was slowly edging away, eyeing the emissary and the black tentacle in growing horror. "I only see bits of rope on the pillar. You must be seeing things, Southmore. And get away from the machine. Something's gone wrong. Turn off the switch!"

"What? And let all this power go? No!" Southmore threw back his head and laughed, his mouth stretching inhumanly wide. Pendergrast gasped and ran off, following the rest of the pagan worshippers as they attempted to break out of the Temple through the main exit.

Let's get out of here! Caradon tugged on her tail.

She turned to follow him against the back wall. For once I agree with you.

"You!"

At the sound of Southmore's now distorted voice directed at them, the two fox-shifters froze and turned to look at him.

"I know who you are." The emissary grinned and smoke began to rise in earnest from his clothes. He opened his mouth and his tongue flickered out, black, like a miniature tentacle. Zan and Caradon stared, transfixed, unable to look away.

Then the old god's tentacle outside the barrier swung, cracking the air, and smashed the generator which went up in a small ball of fire. Southmore fell over from the impact and as the dark energy was loosed back into the environment, it swarmed over the screaming emissary like a hungry fog and turned him into a pile of ash.

Finally let go of the emissary's mesmerism, the fox-shifters leaped into a run as the tentacle moved again, slapping the place on the floor where they had been standing a second before. As they reached the small room tucked back in the Temple, there was a fiery rip as the creature tore through the rest of the barrier. And then, there was an explosion that rocked the ancient building.

They scrambled down the steps to the underground tunnels. At the bottom of the stair, they stood panting as glowing green skulls lining the walls of the tunnel stared at them. Above, they heard a roar. Zan looked up at the stair and saw flames. She yipped in alarm and Caradon looked up as well. Both of them sprang into another run, rushing straight down the tunnel as the flames roared closer, chasing.

The wooden stairs up to the Cathedral wine cellar were still present and the trap door to it had been thrown open—perhaps left that way by Southmore's henchmen.

This isn't a safe place, Caradon panted as they emerged into the wine cellar. If the flames reach this place...well, let's just say that wine is quite flammable.

They found the door to the wine cellar unlocked. They ran through the basement—the place was as silent as a tomb except for the distant roaring of the following fire. The door up to the main floor of the Cathedral was open. When they finally stopped for a second time, they had emerged from the Cathedral and back to the street, North Bishop, in front of the cemetery. The wind was stiff and cold. The sky was completely dark with clouds. But the Temple was afire like a brilliant torch—its white dome blackening within the licking yellow flames.

As they watched the Temple burn, glass shattered behind them. The stained glass windows of the Cathedral were blown outward and the lower windows of the house of worship were bright with fire and smoke.

~~~~~

## Chapter 45 – Gray as the Clouds

The drop of phenolphthalein glittered at the end of the modified syringe like a glass cabochon before it dropped into a beaker of clear oily liquid that Zan stirred with a long glass rod. She continued to concentrate on the titration as Simkins cleared his throat and announced visitors.

“Zan, have you read the newspaper?” Sabina demanded, from the other side of her work bench.

She frowned as another drop fell into the beaker. “We get newspapers every morning. Ask Simkins. He has probably put them in the sitting room or the study.”

“No. I didn't ask if you had any newspapers. I asked if you have read it.”

“The most extraordinary thing has happened last night,” Del added. “They've reported that the Temple in Old Amanthus has been completely gutted by a fire.”

After the third drop, the clear liquid in the beaker turned a bright red. She quickly turned the knob on the side of the modified syringe to prevent any more of the pH indicator from dropping into the solution and in a nearby notebook, wrote down how much lye she was to add later. Then she looked up at her friends. “Fire?”

“Yes, a fire,” confirmed Sabina. “And the entire lower level of the Cathedral was burned too. All of those wonderful stained-glass windows gone! The authorities have no idea how the disaster happened. You don't suppose you and Mr. Caradon had anything to do with it?”

“I have no idea,” she replied with a straight face. “And I doubt Mr. Caradon has either. By the way, thank you for lending the clothes yesterday. I'll have it cleaned and returned to you as soon as possible.”

“Oh no, Zan,” her friend said. “You should keep it. It looks good on you. And it will liven up your wardrobe.” Sabina pursed her lips. “You're back in black again.”

“I don't think I'm quite ready for color yet. Perhaps in a few weeks.”

Del shook his head. “But you know your uncle wouldn't have wanted you to forever wrap yourself up in grief.”

“No, I suppose he wouldn't.” She moved across the basement laboratory to a shelf where she examined the vials of liquids and powders.

“So, what happened last night?” asked Del. “You said you were going to this meeting with Mr. Caradon. Did it go well?”

Her mouth twisted as she remembered the dead Captain and the fight. “Not exactly.”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs again. Simkins appeared. The old butler coughed and gave a disapproving glare. “Miss Hu, you have a visitor upstairs.”

“Another one?” she sighed. “Who is it this time? If it is the Museum director asking again about Uncle Elliot’s things, throw him out by the ear.”

The butler only shook his head.

She climbed up the stairs with her friends close behind her. When she emerged into the hallway, she saw a figure in an immaculate mahogany-colored suit waiting just outside the threshold to the sitting room. She felt her pulse quicken. So her patron had not forgotten her after he had accompanied her back to her residence early that morning and then turned back to disappear into the rest of the city.

“Mr. Caradon.”

“Miss Hu.” He then nodded to Del and Sabina behind her. They nodded back to her patron, looking puzzled. “You do remember we have an appointment?”

What appointment? She opened her mouth to deny it, but then momentarily paused. Instead, she said, “Of course. It nearly slipped my mind. Simkins, could you please get my hat and coat? And Del and Sabina, you’re welcome to stay here for lunch. It would be a shame if we let my cook’s work go to waste.”

“Is he making chicken and cucumber sandwiches?” asked Del hopefully.

“How crass!” Sabina exclaimed, slapping him on the wrist. “Stop thinking with your stomach. You’re going to eat Zan out of house and home!”

Once she was ready, she followed Caradon out of her house. His phaeton was waiting on the curb. He helped her up and once they were both seated, he slapped the reins and the pair of horses leaped forward, cantering at a fast clip down the street.

When they turned on Tupet Road, she said, “We don’t have an appointment, do we?”

He slanted her a glance. “I wanted to see you. Hold onto your hat.”

“What...?” She barely had time to grab the top of her hat and the side of the seat when Caradon cried *yah!* and slapped the reins again, sending the pair of horses into a gallop. The phaeton roared down the road, past a cart and two slow moving carriages. People on the sides of the road yelled up at them, but she could not catch any of their words as they blazed past.

The vehicle stormed through the road, heading southeast towards the sea. As they approached the fork where Tupet turned east, he pulled in the reins and the horses slowed down to a trot and headed to the road that branched off west from Tupet, called Arellis. This road meandered along high cliffs that overlooked the sea. No one else was traveling the road, so Caradon stopped the phaeton.

The gray-blue sea hissed beneath them, under a windy, cloudy sky. The air smelled of brine as she turned her face outward. The waves rippled through the sea, occasionally breaking into white, foaming caps. She took off her hat and let the breeze tug at the loose strands of her hair. Of all the years that she had lived in Amanthus, she had never been up on the cliffs. She thought of her uncle’s ashes and wondered if any of it were in the wind. Or had his remains been blown halfway around the world already?

She turned back and caught Caradon staring at her, his eyes as gray as the clouds.

“What did you want to see me for?” she asked.

He reached out to run a finger down her cheek. “Last night was not a one time thing.”

“You mean burning down the Temple? I don’t know. I think one time is enough for me.”

“You know I don’t mean that.” His finger trailed lower to touch the jade fox pendant around her throat. “I wanted to say that you win.”

“Win? Win what?”

“On our first ride together, to the park, I said that foxes were wily creatures who were tricksters and seducers. You argued to the contrary.”

She felt a lump forming in her throat as she remembered her words. “Ah.”

“I’m not like my father,” he told her. “I won’t leave. And even if the Queen commanded it, I would take you with me.”

“Well, I suppose I could perform experiments overseas as well as here,” she said lightly.

“Simkins would grumble about packing the instruments, but Mrs. Philomon would be absolutely livid with the extra work.”

He laughed at her quip and then pulled onto the reins for the horses to start in a canter again. “I don’t think that would be necessary.”



THE END