

Embattled

Darlene Jones

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For my family

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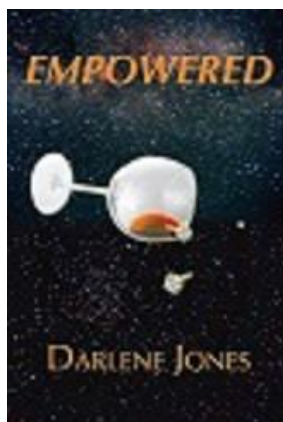
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Prologue

“But Yves, will she know what’s happening to her? Won’t she be terrified? What if she gets hurt? How will she cope with a double life?”

Elsbeth was asking too many questions and her no nonsense big sister tone demanded answers.

Questions that mirrored my fears.

I’d been ordered to find an agent and fix Earth. I’d found the woman and set to work, bouncing her from her everyday life to war zones, bouncing her from the safety of her family and friends to danger and fear, bouncing her back and forth and leaving her to puzzle it out on her own.

And there wasn't a damn thing I could do to make it easier for her.

Chapter 1

She turned her hands over and over. No sign of a wound. No pain. So, where had the blood come from?

At the light tap on the open door, she clenched her hands on her lap under her desk. A head popped around the corner. "Hey, Boss."

“Nee saida?” What the...?

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“Uh ... sorry Tom, nothing.”

“Sue says can you take a call? Line two.”

Touch the phone? She could feel the blood soaking through her skirt. “Ask Sue to take a message.”

“O-kay.” Tom backed out the door.

When she was sure he was gone, she wrapped her hands in wads of Kleenex and peered out the door. A couple of students chattered their way out of the general office, and Sue, hunched over her keyboard typing the message.

She scooted to the staff bathroom, locked the door, stuffed the tissues into the garbage can, and looked in the mirror. Good Lord, her face and neck had little splatters of blood too. Tom couldn’t have been paying close attention

or he would have seen them. She scrubbed until her skin felt raw.

If there were specks of blood on her jacket they didn't show. But the large blotch of blood on her gray skirt seemed to challenge her. *Explain me!* she could almost hear it say. She grabbed a towel from the staff kitchen and tucked it into the waistband of her skirt. If anyone asked, she'd say she'd been washing dishes.

She slid back into her office and closed the door. At her desk she checked her hands. Clean, smooth, unmarred. She took a little mirror out of her purse to examine her face and found a few flecks of blood in her hair. She combed them out.

Looking down, she grimaced and peeled the sticky mess of her bloody skirt away from her legs. *I've got to get out of these clothes.* "Sue," she called. "I'll be out of the office for a bit. Back as soon as I can."

Wait a sec. Anything urgent this afternoon? She turned to the computer to check her schedule. What she saw on the screen made her gasp. She grabbed the back of her chair to steady herself. A mass of red looked just like the blotch on her skirt. And swirls of jungle green... *What the hell?*

*

She struggled through the thick vegetation, swinging the machete awkwardly, working her way towards her destination. Vines wrapped themselves around her legs. She yanked at the long skirt of her dress to free herself. She swung the machete again, and pushed through the narrow opening she'd created, ignoring the thorns that scratched her bare arms and shoulders. "Suitably dressed, I am, I am." A monstrous spider web blocked her passage. The machete cut through it easily enough, but remnants clung to her skin.

Her heart pounded and caught in her throat with each pop of gunfire. “Oh Lord, what am I heading into?”

She plunged on and burst into a clearing with a final swing of the machete that nearly toppled her. She pulled the heavy knife back, scraping her shin, but pushed ahead yelling, “*Favór ida*, stop! Stop!” She waved the unwieldy machete and forced her way between the combatants. Cries of rage rose from them. She watched the arching swing of machetes above her head, cringed, and waited for the killing blows. “Stop, Stop.” She yelled. The men dropped their weapons, fell back, and let her through.

*

Too damn antsy to go back to work, she paced her living room, poured a shot of whisky, choked as it went down, and paced again. She kept looking at her hands, expecting to see them covered in blood. Her shin burned

from the scrape she had first noticed in the shower. Blood still seeped through the dressing.

The television droned in the background. She caught fragments only ... gunfire ... screams ... wails of grief ... screech of vultures ... extraordinary woman ... *la madame des miracles* ... natives are calling her ... effected a miracle village ... tribal leaders ... debating ... peace....

She sank to the sofa. *Could that have been me?* She squeezed her eyes shut. The jungle battle replayed on her eyelids. That was her, madly waving the machete. She held her face in her hands, inhaled deeply, smelled blood, and felt the jungle close around her.

“Oh, my God! What’s happening to me?”

*

Wednesday morning dawned clear and bright. The sun sparkling on the freshly fallen snow cheered her even

as she dreaded heading out into the cold. She contemplated calling in sick. But what would that accomplish other than give her too much time in an empty house to think about yesterday? Best to keep busy. A snow shovel scraped the sidewalk. Jimmy'd do hers today. She'd return the favor next time. Better hustle, she'd need extra time for the car to warm up.

“Hey, Boss.” Sue rapped on the open door.

She jumped and looked at the clock. Eleven already and she'd accomplished nothing, other than brooding.

“¿*Qué pasa?*”

“What? Oh, that's Spanish, right? You taking lessons or something?” Sue asked.

She shook her head. “No-o-o.”

“I need you to look at this.” Sue held budget documents in her hand. “I hate to interrupt. Looked like you were in deep thought.”

“I guess I was.” Liar, liar, pants on fire. Would you believe I was in Guatemala? Walked boldly into a courtroom populated with more guns than people, more malice than the air could hold?

The courtroom tension held her in its grip. A corrupt regime, an innocent on trial; a case he and his lawyer couldn't possibly win. A trial she had won with a few words. And, no, she didn't speak Spanish.

Sue cleared her throat. “Um, like I said, sorry to bug you, but there's a problem here that you're not going to like.”

About to reach for the file, she held back. What if her hands were covered in blood again?

“Leave it on the table, would you? I'll get to it later.”

She checked the minute Sue turned her back and let out a heavy sigh. Her hands were clean, thank God, but

then the courtroom had been calm after she spoke. No gun shots, no fisticuffs; nothing to cause bloodshed.

*

After shoveling the walks that evening—would it ever stop snowing?—she flipped on the TV and heard her favorite announcer say,

“It is calm and peaceful as the citizens of Guatemala City sit in the soft warmth of the evening shade and tell and retell the story of *la señora de los milagros*. With Mendez’s release comes hope for resolution of complex political issues and a rosier future for their country.”

Thursday she waited for it, the light-headedness and the sensation of lifting just a touch off the ground that had preceded her “trips” on Tuesday and Wednesday. As the routine of the day wore on, she became increasingly unsettled and when she climbed into bed that night it was

with a feeling of great insult, as though someone important had slapped her in the face, or worse, walked on by looking directly at her without acknowledging her.

She needn't have worried. She hadn't been forgotten. Friday brought another journey.

*

She inhaled sharply. "Oh, dear Lord." The man's loathing slammed into her with such force that her legs wobbled. Bearded, scruffy, angry, and armed, he stepped from behind the shell of a burned lorry. Her throat wrapped around the scream forming deep inside her.

Spinda! The most fanatical of the terrorist groups. And there she stood, a woman alone in the street wearing that stupid dress again in this land of burqas. Too little material up top to protect her from thorns or spider webs. Or eyes. A long skirt almost to her ankles, perfect length to tangle in jungle vines or trip her when running. And

running was what she needed to do, but she froze under the man's glare.

She tried to swallow. The dusty air caught in her throat. The stressed silence drummed in her ears, broken only by her short sharp breaths and his huffs of anger. Relax, she told herself. You survived the jungle battle; you didn't get shot barging into the courtroom. You'll be fine here too. *Yeah, right.*

The man raised his arm, fingers coiled into a fist. He gestured and more men emerged from the shadows, slipping out from behind piles of rubble and the twisted metal of bombed vehicles. They fell in behind him. Thin, wiry men, faces hidden by their beards; only the slits of their eyes gleamed in the sunlight.

Torsos criss-crossed with ammunition bands; they brandished their Mausers and Arisakas and Kalashnikovs which was somehow more threatening than if they had

pointed the rifles directly at her. And just where had her knowledge of guns come from?

Again the first man gestured. Fifty voices rose in feral shrieks that shattered the silence. She was the little mouse and the trap was straining to snap shut on her. They charged, rifles raised high above their heads, ready to bludgeon. She closed her eyes and cringed anticipating the first blows. Flecks of their spittle splattered her face as they came near.

She opened her eyes to see an empty street. Scuffling from behind drew her attention. She turned and watched the Spinda stumbling to a stop. *What the hell? They ran right past me?*

The men regained their footing; the leader raised his fist. They charged again. She lifted her hands, palms facing outward to stop them. She stood dumbfounded when they careened to a halt.

The distinctive whirr and click of a camera broke the silence. She didn't dare glance around to see where the sounds had come from.

Slowly, she advanced toward the Spinda. "You." She gestured to a youth. "Come here."

He was shorter than her, scrawny, even for a teen, with a shadow of a moustache on his upper lip. The stench of fear and sweat that emanated from him made her gag. She screwed up her nose and tried not to breathe too deeply. He trembled and tears escaped from the corners of his eyes.

"Are there radio stations here?"

"Oui, madame."

"Go then. Tell the reporters to be here at noon tomorrow." She spoke more harshly than she had intended and the boy scrambled away.

A stone landed near her left foot. Another ricocheted off her shoulder, but she felt no pain. “Shoot! Shoot!” someone yelled. She heard the soft scuffling of rifles raised to chins, pressed snugly against shoulders, and the short sharp clicks of safeties flipped to the off position. Fifty rifles aimed at her. A frigging firing squad. Would they offer a last cigarette?

“Don’t move.” She lifted her hands again. They froze. *Oh, Lord, help me.* She looked up, but the bright sunlit sky had no answers for her.

“You.” She addressed the man who had led the charge and now stood at the center of the group. A stocky man with cold eyes, his dark skin flushed, his lips pressed so tightly together that they were almost lost under his heavy beard and moustache. He glared defiantly, but made no move toward her.

“Tell Mullah Mohammed to be here at noon tomorrow.” She paused, furrowed her brow wondering what to say next and abruptly the names were there. “Tell him to bring Mawlawi and Jamal and the tribal chiefs.”

“Oui, madame.” He fled.

She ordered the remaining men to tell every man, woman, and child to meet in this same square the next day. The moment she stopped talking the Spinda evaporated into the narrow streets.

*

A pile of rifles filled the staff washroom. She sucked in air and let it out in a great whoosh. “Dandy! Just dandy. Now that life is following me here.” She stared at the weapons. What would it feel like to hold a gun? To aim at someone? To pull the trigger? She bent to reach for one, but instead poked at the pile with her foot. One of the rifles tumbled onto her toes. “Ouch! That hurt.”

A burst of laughter jolted her upright. She spun to face the door, and then relaxed at the sound of footsteps moving away. A quick glance back told her the rifles were gone. “Thank God.” She took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

“Oh, there you are.” Sue looked frantic. “He’s here! Waiting in your office.”

“Mitoonam ke komakatoon konam?”

“Huh? Boss, are you okay?”

Damn, she’d thought the words were just in her head. “Yes. Yes. Fine. Thank you, Sue.” She fluffed her hair and straightened her jacket. Satisfied that she looked presentable for the superintendent’s visit—no chalk on her clothes or hands. No blood either. She bolted to her office, seeking escape with the boss and her performance review.

Chapter 2

She stared into the vacant square dumbfounded. Why did everyone listen and obey? How did she know what to do and when? She looked around for something familiar, anything that would make her feel safe, but all she saw was the monotony of sand and brick and rusted metal. A dog whined, although there were no signs of animals, not even mice or rats. Another whine shivered up her spine with its melancholy.

And then people crept out from behind buildings, from sunken doorways, from rooftops, daring to reveal themselves now that the square was empty. They advanced cautiously. She sympathized. It would be so hard to be brave in a world of Spinda. She saw a tall, skinny clean-shaven man in

front of the others. European? A camera hung loosely in his hand.

“Don’t be careless with that. Your pictures will be important if I accomplish the changes I intend.” As if she knew what she intended. But even as threads of despair assailed her, ideas were forming, coalescing, and building. Maybe she did know what to do? A thrill of joy ran through her.

The man looked down at his camera as though astonished to see it there. It took him a split second to react and then he was snapping pictures again.

She ignored him and spoke to the people standing in small clusters, alternately staring and then ducking their heads. She glanced down at her dress and tried to imagine what she must look like

to them. No wonder they gaped, she thought, as her bare toes seemed to wink at her with complicity; *so brazen you are in this flimsy dress*. The few women, dark shadows shrouded in burqas, glided silently among the men and seemed the most reluctant to leave. That was good. She needed the women.

She sank to the ground in a limp pile of flesh and rubbery bone, swearing under her breath, every damn four-letter word she knew. She grasped handfuls of dirt and grit and let it sift slowly through her fingers and felt a little less lost and forlorn with the assurance of touching something so basic. Dirt was dirt. Dirt was home, part of a world she thought she knew. She dusted off her hands, the sting of broken fingernails barely registering.

She tried to stand and the photographer was there, an arm around her waist, a hand on her shoulder propelling her urgently and none too gently to the meager shade of a nearby building. He propped her against the wall and guided her as she slid slowly to the ground. The rough bricks scraped her back, but she didn't mind the discomfort. It made her feel connected; to what she wasn't certain, but connected and not so lost and alone.

“Voici, madame.”

“Merci.” She accepted the man's handkerchief, dried her tears, and blew her nose. She hadn't realized she'd been crying. “I must look a mess.”

“Oui.” He stared at her, mouth open. “What you did was ... *incroyable.*” He reached out and

placed his hand on her shoulder as if to see if she was real. The warmth of his hand, the pressure of its weight made her feel real.

“Who are you? How did you get here? Where did you come from? How do you know their languages? *Mon Dieu*, you stopped them. *C’est incroyable*. You stopped them! *Comment? Comment est-ce que vous l’avez fait?* How on earth did you do that?”

Her stomach dropped. She couldn’t answer any of his questions. “I don’t know. I don’t know. *Je ne sais pas*.” Tears flooded down her face. She pressed her eyes with the heels of her hands.

The Frenchman looked stricken. He fumbled for words. “*Madame, madame, s’il vous plaît*.”

She sniffled, blew her nose again, and struggled to talk over the catch in her throat. She needed to divert the photographer and give herself time to think. “*Vous êtes incroyable, vous-même.* Taking pictures here can’t be the safest of career choices.”

He grinned. “No, but then I am a Frenchman.”

A small strangled laugh escaped. “I’ve met a few like you in my time. Brave and crazy.”

“François Durocher, *à votre service, madame.*”

“Why are you here?”

“I came many years ago as a reporter on assignment for a European news magazine.”

“Years ago? You don’t miss France?” She half listened to his response. Her mind raced furiously.

“Sometimes. I came to Raftan; fell in love with the people and the country. This is my home now. I have survived and have been able to live modestly working freelance.

“But, *madame*, what you did ... here ... for the people.... I mean, I’ve heard of you, of course—”

“You have! What? What have you heard?” Her heart pounded. Now she’d have some answers.

Chapter 3

“They said it was nothing more than the wild ravings of primitives—”

“What? Who said?”

“The natives in the South Pacific. Three days ago, they said you ended the jungle battle. Called you Miracle Madame.”

The heavy ring on the second finger of her left hand vibrated. She looked down into the stone and saw brilliant green, marred by slashes of red.

“Then, in Guatemala, two days ago they said you stopped a corrupt trial, saved many lives.” François’ hands flew wildly as he spoke as if they too could talk.

“They called you *la señora de los milagros*. And now. Here. Madame, what you did... The

square was empty. Suddenly you were there. And then the Spinda charged. I thought you would be killed. I was sure you would die.”

So, this was the third journey so far. What would come next?

She looked past François to the bleak town square. She'd been transported to this desolate pinhole somewhere in Asia. So like her beloved Sahara; but not. Key elements—the primal savagery, the welcoming embrace, and the prehistoric origins of man drawing her close; all that she associated with Africa was missing here. Nor would there be smiles in this country; none like the heart-wrenching wide warm smiles of African children.

What did she know of Africa, anyway?

Stupid, the places her mind took her. She swallowed back tears. The oppressive heat pushed down on her, made breathing difficult. The air tasted stale, heavy with dust.

The broad unpaved streets beyond the square were lined with dull brick buildings, old and dilapidated, interspersed with piles of rubble. A country so poor that there weren't even signs of garbage or remnants of plastic bags snagged in the debris. Not even the soft light of dawn or dusk would relieve the harsh edges and dismal atmosphere. Such a sad, sad place to live. Did she live in a place like this? Her whole body shuddered at the possibility.

She stood, took a few shaky steps towards the center of the square, and turned full circle. She spotted a mosque, and despite being partially blocked by other buildings, she knew it was not like any she had seen before. The mosques in Istanbul dazzled with life and color, the ones in West Africa profound with character and dignity in the humble mudbrick construction. This mosque was square and sharp and stark; a harsh betrayal of the people who worshipped in it.

There were no signs of life under the midday sun. Even the scurrying insects had taken refuge from the heat, burrowed into the sand, and found cool crevices in the bricks and mortar. Night would be another story. How did she know that? Had she

travelled here before? She closed her eyes and let her mind wander.

Woken in a strange room by scratching and scurrying sounds, rising to flip on the light switch to see moving walls of insects, all sizes and shapes, feeding on each other. No netting to build a fortress, to tuck securely around the mattress. Wild scramble for pagne, sandals, blanket; relief of cool night air. Snatched traces of sleep curled up in a chair on the terrace, enveloped in the blanket. Burrowing out from under a dune of sand in the morning, ears, eyes, nose, every body crevice, and pore plugged with grains of sand. Little dunes of sand in the bottom of the shower stall for days after.

Attempting to grasp and build on these flashes of memory was futile. They evaporated into wisps of air that floated high in the sky.

François spoke, in little more than a whisper. “*Madame?*” His voice, human and soothing, and here and now, calmed her. She was thankful for his presence and concern. “What are you going to do now?” he asked.

What do I do next? I need an instruction manual, damn it. And you, Francois, can damn well stop looking at me like I have all the answers.

Step one: Stop the Spinda.

Step two: Order everyone to gather tomorrow.

Step three: What would the magic manual say? Surely there was a manual somewhere for this sort of thing.

François touched her shoulder. “*Madame?*”

François was the answer. Yes, of course.

Why hadn't she thought of that sooner? She'd tap into his knowledge of the country, his ideas, anything he offered. She'd use him to hold her focus and get the job done. “You've been here for some time. You know the situation much better than me. Do you have any ideas?”

He shook his head slowly, despairingly, she thought. *No, François, don't tell me you haven't any ideas. You must have something you can tell me, something I can hang on to.*

“*Madame*, I have lived with the people here through poverty, war, the communist occupation, and now the Spinda. I have taken pictures, reported to the world, begged for help. You will do the right thing.”

But, what?

François opened his mouth and closed it several times. He was a reporter. He must have had hundreds of questions, and didn't know where to start or if he should at all. She prayed he wouldn't for she had no answers. She closed her eyes as her mind started to roller-coast again.

Chapter 4

I needed Elspeth. Now. She hadn't responded to my signal. Painting again, if I knew her, and oblivious to everything else. I opened my receptors and scanned the park. Ah, yes, there she was.

“What do you think?” Elspeth waved her brush at the canvas. I jumped back narrowly escaping a smear of red across my sleeve. As usual, paint splattered her robes, just as when we were children. Mother had long ago given up trying to keep her clean.

I tilted my head and considered her latest effort. “It's a little bright.” Swirls of red bled across the canvas.

“You don't like it?”

“No, not really.”

Elsbeth studied the painting and then gazed around the park. “How can you not?” she asked, “when everything out there is so ... so bland?”

Bland? The shining green leaves, the sparkle of the sun on the white pavilions, the dots of colorful flowers.... “Our world is beautiful.”

She plunged her brush into a jar of purple and attacked the canvas. “Dull. Boring. Dreary. Mind-numbing. Monoton—”

“Elsbeth! Stop.” I’d heard this litany many times. Her brush came maddeningly close to my robe again. Almost as if she’d waved it my way on purpose.

“What do you want, little brother?”

“It’s about Earth.”

Elsbeth dropped her brush, wiped her hands on an old rag. “I’m all yours.”

I cleared my throat. “I want you to see what’s been happening down there.”

“Am I allowed?”

“No one has actually said not.”

Elsbeth’s tinkle of laughter assailed my ears. “But no one has actually said yes.” She grinned and rubbed her hands together. “Why do you need me?”

Need was the word. How did she know?

“You’ve always been ... ah ... you’re not....”

Another tinkle of laughter. “Oh, Yves, you can say it. I’m emotional.”

“Well, yes.”

“Like those creatures on that planet of yours?”

“Good Guardian, no. Not like them at all.
Nowhere near as bad.”

“And that’s what you need my help with?
Humans and their emotions?”

“Yes.” I blinked and an image of Earth shimmered before us on a plane of air. Elspeth’s intense interest aroused by curiosity; mine because my future depended on how well I did my job down there.

“Oh!” Elspeth squealed and clapped her hands. “There she is. Can we hear too?”

I adjusted the volume with a flick of my wrist.

“Oh my,” Elspeth whispered more than once as the woman I had chosen fought through the jungle, stormed the courtroom, and then faced the

Spinda. “Oh my. Her emotions... Yves, does she not have any idea?”

“Very little.”

“You’d think the Guardians would do something about that. Show themselves.”

Elsbeth was right, but then what did we know about the Guardians? Precious little. You’d think they would have done more to make their existence known in the Universe. But, even here no one ever actually saw them. Maybe the upper class communed with the Guardians. We Drones certainly didn’t. We didn’t even commune with the upper class.

“Can’t you do something? Use your powers to help her understand? I would if I were you.”

“I’m not sure what to do. Don’t forget this is all new to me,” I said. “I am trying to send her messages.”

“Telepathically?”

“Yes, of course, what did you think? A cell phone? Ha, ha.”

“No need to be sarcastic.” Elspeth shook a finger at me. “You’d better figure out a way to show her how she can survive this. I think you’re mean to dump her into such dangerous situations.”

Elspeth turned her attention back to the Earth image. “And yet, your messages are getting through. Some of them at least. She knew when she swore at you that someone was controlling her.”

“Have you ever heard anything like it?” I asked.

“Mom says that bad language exists here too, or used to, but I’ve never heard those kinds of words before.”

“Humph, you’ve been known to use a few yourself.”

Elspeth glared at me. “Never like that.” She squinted at the scene on Earth. I adjusted the light. “What is the human saying now?”

“She called me a magic manual. If only it was that simple.”

“She’s right, Yves. You should be doing more to help her.”

“She has nothing to worry about. I’ll take care of her.”

Elspeth tapped her foot. “And just how is she supposed to know that?”

I had set the ring to vibrating, sent her images. She looked at them, but the swirls of color meant nothing to her. My sister was right. I'd have to find another way.

“All that emotion, the fear, the uncertainty, the tears, it boggles my mind,” Elspeth said. “Are humans always like that?”

“It seems so.”

“I may be a little emotional at times, but if we were like that, up here ...”

I shuddered at the thought.

Chapter 5

François studied her intently, then reddened and looked away. He shuffled his feet, looked at her again. “You know what I am thinking.”

“I can pretty much guess. You’re a reporter and this story will make you famous. *Monsieur*, you’ll retire a wealthy man if I can pull this off.”

“*Madame*, the fame and money will be nice. How do they say in English—the icing on the cake? But the real thrill will be working with you.”

François was such a sweetie. Just the touch of gallantry she needed. “Okay then, let’s get going. Hopefully, we’ll have a big crowd here at noon tomorrow.”

“People will start coming at the break of dawn to get the best spots.”

“Won’t they be afraid to get too close to me? I’m a woman and look at this dress.” She held out the skirt with both hands and gave it a little shake. Were those sparks of light floating up from it, dancing like fireflies around her?

“The dress won’t matter.” François’ tone was dismissive. Hadn’t he seen the sparks? She was afraid to ask, but he was speaking again anyway.

“When word of what happened today spreads, everyone will be here. You must understand that no one has stopped the Spinda before.”

“They’re not vanquished, only derailed momentarily.”

“You will succeed. I am sure of it. How can I help?”

“I need some sort of platform or stage. Do you think one of these buildings would do?”

They had an audience as they searched. Small dark forms scurried between the buildings, peeked out from hiding places, undoubtedly driven by curiosity that overrode their fear. Or possibly they had been sent to spy. Either way, it didn't matter. The tales the boys told would build and grow to serve her purpose.

She and François climbed over and around piles of bricks and broken cement and the carcasses of wrecked and burned vehicles. Stymied by blocked and barricaded doors, tired and frustrated, she stood in the middle of a deserted store. The shelves were layered with dust, the floor littered

with shards of broken glass. She swore under her breath and looked around for François.

“*Madame, venez ici,*” he called from outside. “*Je l’ai trouvé.*”

“Where?” She ran out to join him in the square. He pointed to a narrow three-storey structure squeezed between two larger buildings. On the second floor, a mini balcony protruded a few inches from the wall of the building with a wrought iron railing. A perfect little stage.

They entered an empty but relatively clean room. She clung to the railing as she followed François up the stairs. Suddenly it gave way.

“*Attention!*” François’ warning came too late. She stumbled, fell forward, and almost took him down too. He righted himself and helped her

regain her balance. “Keep one hand on the wall.
Don’t use the railing.”

On the second floor they found two worn
and battered divans, several faded carpets, and a
lidless chest.

“*Alors?*”

“Yes, this should work.”

François stared out the broken window into
the stark empty street. As she watched him, she was
overcome by melancholy. Would she ever know her
home? Would she ever be able to lose herself in
memories, good or bad?

Her mouth flooded with the taste of
raspberries eaten ripe from the vine and her nose
tingled from bubbles of homemade root beer sipped
on a hot summer day. She heard sleigh bells ringing

under the moonlight, and horses' hooves squeaking on hard-packed snow, shivered at the sight of the headless body of a butchered rooster leaping wildly across a field, and felt a thrill of fear at the garter snakes coiled together basking in the sun. She saw little girl arms attacked by thorns as the gooseberry bush protested raiding.

“*Madame*, what is it?” François asked. “You look—”

“Nothing ... memories, I think. Of ... of my other life. Nothing.”

“*Mais—*”

“Nothing!” He was wise enough not to push and she was grateful.

“*Eh bien*, now we eat.”

“A Frenchman never forgets his priorities.”

“But of course not, *madame*.” His tone was all serious. Only the twinkle in his eye gave him away. “Come, I will take you to my home. Fatma, my cook, will have prepared a simple meal and there will be enough for two. She will have heard about you by now and will want to meet you.”

“My dress will scandalize.”

François looked at her dress as if seeing it for the first time. “It is beautiful, yes, but the legend of you will overshadow the dress.”

“Legend? Surely you’re not serious?”

“You will see. You are *la madame des miracles*.”

*

“So theatrical, what the Frenchman says to her. Of course, she thinks it gallant, but really...” I

had to admit, though, that François was good for her. With him, she felt less alone, less stranded.

“Well, little brother, I wouldn’t mind a bit of that chivalry up here. I like it.”

“Humph! We’re fine just as we are. If you saw more of Earth, you’d know that.” But maybe Elspeth was right. The courtliness was nice.

“Seeing herself reading the paper, doing the crossword, saving the comics for last, isn’t that dangerous for her?”

I wished Elspeth hadn’t voiced my fears. I felt... was that anger? If so, anger at whom? “She has to stop all the maudlin nonsense. She has a job to do. This other life of hers creeping in is too distracting. Could be dangerous if it happened at the wrong time.” *But, it’s not her fault her mind is so*

*strong and isn't that one of the reasons I chose her?
It's my responsibility. I'll have to come up with
better blocks.*

“Her dress...” Elspeth sounded shocked, but was that a note of wistfulness I heard too? “The Spinda aren’t the only ones scandalized by it. She is too, a little. So am I.”

I thought I’d done a good job picking it for her, feminine in an Earth kind of way, but sexy too by their standards. I liked it.

*

The main room of François’ house served as living area with a small square wooden table, three chairs, a divan, and a vinyl armchair sporting a spider-web of cracks. A communications system

and two cell phone chargers sat on a low chest. A generator hummed somewhere in the background.

François directed her through his bedroom to the bathroom beyond and went to fetch their lunch. She stared at herself in the small faded mirror for a long time, and then went in search of him.

“How old do I look to you?”

“Thirty-four. Thirty-five.”

She returned to the mirror and stared again. The face looking back at her was certainly not as young as he said, but perhaps not as old as she felt either.

In the mirror she could see the scoop neckline of the dress and the skinny spaghetti straps. God! To the Spinda, she might as well have been naked. The dress, fitted to the waist, flared

gently to her ankles, with billowy pockets on each hip. She checked. One crumpled Kleenex. Nothing to give a hint of the “me” she knew had to be there somewhere.

She ran her hands over the dress, luxuriating in the exquisite texture of the rich fabric. She felt a glimmer of shock at feeling so comfortable with the sensuality of it. Would the dress glow in the dark igniting both her and the air around with its power?

Where did it come from, this provocative dress? Was it real? Was she? A wave of panic washed over her. She grabbed the edge of the sink and took several deep breaths. She stripped and considered washing her clothes, but they were spotless. Stepping into the shower, she found the

water, warm from the sun-heated exterior pipes, soothing and refreshing.

The threadbare towel caught on the ring as she dried herself. She'd been aware of the weight of it, heavy on her hand, but comforting too. She reached with her right hand to pull it off her finger and hold it up to the light. Something stopped her. A little voice in her head issuing a warning?

The ring seemed to have been carved from a single piece of crystal. A multitude of facets refracted sharp edges of light. She ran a finger over it and found that it was not sharp to the touch. Twenty tiny star sapphires surrounded a large blue translucent stone set in the ring; a stone that sucked her in, threatening to drown her. She felt dizzy again and a wave of nausea washed over her. She

steadied herself, dressed quickly and went back to the main room.

The homey scent of warm bread welcomed her and made her mouth water. The unleavened bread and the fresh cheese were delicious, as were the nuts and dried fruit that served as dessert. She and François ate in companionable silence. For a few delicious moments she relaxed and felt worry free.

“How is it that you, a single man, are able to have a female cook?”

“I offered refuge to a widow, Fatma, several years ago. She and her three children live in the shed behind my house. Her sons run the errands and do the shopping. She never leaves the compound. No one knows she exists.”

“In effect, a prisoner.”

“*Oui*, but a prisoner who is not starving or threatened or beaten. A mother who can provide for her children. You would like to spend some time with her?”

“Yes.”

“You will not need a translator. *Madame*, you speak French and the local languages so well and in the earlier reports of you, they said you spoke their languages with ease. How is it you are able to do this? How many languages do you speak?”

Yet more unknowns. No matter how bad something was, she'd rather know. Besides, how bad could it be? *Oh, God...*

“When will you file your report on this?”

she asked.

François muttered under his breath, the reporter in him obviously frustrated as hell. Publicity about her actions didn't concern her in the least. She figured whoever was running the show was taking care of that. Taking care of everything. Taking care of her?

Chapter 6

Fatma and her children lived in a walled off square in a corner of the tiny courtyard behind the Frenchman's house. A small hibachi, two cooking pots, and one lonely dilapidated green plastic lawn chair sat in front of the opening to the home.

Inside several faded rugs stacked one on top of the other served as beds. A small chest covered with another old rug, was the only bit of furniture she had. François helped, by the look of it. Tins of food poked out from under a rug in one corner along with a couple of boxes of medical supplies. T-shirts and jeans hung on nails protruding from one wall. It was crude, but it had a warm homey feel.

Shrouded in her burqa, Fatma rose slowly, holding her children protectively behind her. The

children whispered and giggled as they peered out from behind the protection of their mother's body.

“This is a dream,” Fatma muttered under her breath. “A dream.”

“But—” The taller of the boys began a protest. Fatma hushed him with a stern look.

“You're too perfect to be real, too ... your clothes ... no burqa.” Slowly she reached out, and then let her hand fall.

Fatma stared. The children whispered.

“The boys were in the streets today,” Fatma said. “I didn't believe the wild tale they brought home. But Monsieur Durocher said yes, it was true. He even promised to show me pictures. And now. You are here.”

Fatma gestured for her guest to sit on one of the piles of rugs. She removed her burqa and signaled to her children to sit with them. She was a short woman, solidly built with a broad face warmed by a quick, genuine smile. The children huddled close to their mother, their eyes round and large.

Conversation with Fatma personalized everything about conditions in the country. Questions erupted unbidden, many that only a woman could answer. Answers from Fatma that chilled to the bone. Yes, people were arrested for having foreign visitors in their homes. Yes, women doctors had been shot after operating and saving the lives of Spinda soldiers; fine for a woman to save their lives, but to be in the presence of a man not a

relative ... Yes, even in an operating room. Yes, women stoned and beaten to death. Yes, acid thrown in the faces of unveiled women. Yes, limbs chopped off for theft or less. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Fatma was a doctor specializing in pediatrics. She feared for her sons. Mohamed was ten, Faroud eleven, and both would soon be targets for recruitment in the Spinda army. The boys looked glum as she spoke.

“Your daughter?”

Alyia was sixteen and wanted to be a doctor like her mother. With no hope of formal education, not even the basics, this was a dream that would never come true. She, especially, had to be kept hidden from the Spinda lest she be forced into marriage with one of them. Alyia shivered as her

mother spoke. The beatings and atrocities committed by some of the Spinda on their wives were often much worse than the stories. Fatma knew. She had attempted to treat a number of the victims.

She gulped back tears. If Fatma didn't cry, how could she?

“I do not worry for myself,” Fatma said. “My worry is for my children. Without Monsieur Durocher they would have died of starvation long ago. Yet, living in hiding, in this limbo with no chance for education, is almost worse. What will become of them?”

The silence stretched until it seemed the very air would snap.

“What will you do next?” Fatma asked.

“You stopped them today. Will you be able to stop them forever?” Her voice was low with suppressed emotion.

“I have a plan and I could use your help.”

“Me!? What can I possibly do?”

“You can come to the square tomorrow with your daughter and lead the others.”

“How?”

*

“The things humans do to each other boggles the mind. No wonder the Guardians want something done.”

Elsbeth shivered, moved closer to me and gripped my arm. She wasn't cold. It was never cold

in the Guardian world. “I don’t understand why they waited so long.”

“I’m there now with my Little Soldier. We’ll clean up the place.”

“Does your Little Soldier have a name?”

“She will have many names. I call her M.”

“She’s strong. Forcing herself to be so for the others. For herself too. I hope her plan works.” I noticed Elspeth cross her fingers behind her back.

“It will.” My poor Little Soldier was in an agony of anticipation. What if her plan didn’t work? What then? Surely she knew by now that any plan of hers would work. Hadn’t her first experiences taught her that? I mean she was intelligent and clever; she should have known... But, then she hadn’t met me—yet.

*

“I know there are pockets of resistance to the Spindas in hiding. How do I contact them?”

“Leave that to me.” Fatma smiled for the first time. Her eyes shone. She looked hopeful, and beautiful. “We women have an effective network system. I’ll get a message to Mustafa. He was steadfast in his fight against the communists and still is in the struggle against the Spinda. He is the most respected leader in hiding.”

They studied the sketchy map François had spread out on the table. Fatma pointed out the general area of Mustafa’s camp on the fringes of the Northern Plain, and traced the route with her finger. Winding narrow roads. An eight-to ten-hour drive with a reliable vehicle. Did they have such a

vehicle? No, but there would be one at the Spinda outpost. Could they get word to the men? Yes, Fatma said. Had she not explained the communication system? She sounded a bit put out. M stumbled through an apology.

“But, will they come?” François asked.

“They can’t refuse my request.” M said it like it was the naked obvious truth, but Lord only knew what would happen. She paced the room, her mind churning for ideas. “At least, I don’t think they can.”

M turned to Fatma. “This is what I want you to tell them. They must—”

“It won’t work. They won’t come based on a message alone; it is too dangerous for them. And even though they will have heard about what

happened here today, they will need to see you for themselves.”

“But we’re running out of time and I need Mustafa here by noon tomorrow.” M looked at the map again. If François could find her a truck... If she drove all night... “Please prepare the men for my arrival.”

Fatma’s eyebrows rose. “Nothing, could prepare them for the shock of you.”

François grunted. “*Ca, c’est sûr!*”

“Maybe a plane or helicopter?”

Fatma shook her head. “They will hide at the sound of approaching craft and it will alert the Spinda at the outposts.”

“Fuck! There has to be a way.” M slammed her fist on the table. Fatma jumped back, her eyes wide.

M patted Fatma’s shoulder awkwardly and returned to pacing.

“I need those men here tomorrow. I have to get to them.”

Her feet lifted a fraction from the floor and she was in mountainous terrain. Transported from there to here. She looked around wildly, terrified and thrilled at the same time. “Good God! I control the travel? What did I say? What did I do?”

*

“Wow!” Elspeth clapped her hands. “Yves, this is so exciting.”

“Yahoo!” I shouted and punched the air.

“Look at you.” Elspeth grinned. “My little brother letting loose.”

I hooted and hollered. Yes, I admit freely that I lost my cool, made a whole lot of noise, jabbed the air with my fist and held my hand to Elspeth for a high-five. Undignified and unacceptable behavior of course, but hot damn, M was good. She’d figured it out.

Chapter 7

A volley of rifle fire snapped M to attention. A forward roll brought her up behind a large rock. She kept her head low and waited. She counted to a hundred, then a hundred more and again. She peered around the rock, crept out of hiding and studied the forbidding landscape littered with the remnants of battle; empty shells, machine parts, burned hulks of vehicles, even an old tank lying on its side. In spite of the devastation, the view of the Northern Plain from the craggy heights was spectacular, nothing but desert for miles and miles.

Behind her, the rocky landscape exposed little, but ten minutes of determined searching revealed the entrance to a cave. Odors of ashes told her it was inhabited. Ducking low to avoid hitting

her head on outcroppings of rock, she entered the cave cautiously. The setting sun provided enough light to see threadbare carpets and small bundles of clothing piled to one side. Two dented cooking pots, and a few metal plates, cups, and utensils sat neatly at the side of the cave nearest the fire pit. A few embers glowed in the ashes. No evidence of food. What did they eat? Perhaps there was enough wildlife to hunt. She couldn't picture berries or greens in this mountainous terrain. Then again, she couldn't picture animals either. She went back and poked a knife into the ashes. Small bits of bone. Mice? Rats? Snakes? Could be.

She rubbed her eyes wearily, left the cave, found a relatively flat rock nearby, and sat.

“Mustafa, I know you are there. Come out.”

A dozen men emerged from hiding and circled her, fingers twitching on the triggers of their rifles. They looked wary and rough wearing an assortment of grimy, baggy pants, shirts, long vests, and sandals. None had socks or boots. A couple wore military camouflage jackets, three had blankets slung over a shoulder. Their turbans were grubby, but bound neatly.

The men gaped at her. *Damn, I should have borrowed some clothes from Fatma.*

She studied them and they stared back, hostile and unrelenting. She waited. They circled. She waited. They watched. She waited. Hell, this could go on forever. “Please, sit.” Her words

sounded thunderous and seemed to echo across the plain. “We must talk. I need your help.”

“You are the one from the square?” The voice was rough and challenging. Mustafa made no effort to hide his censure.

“You know, gentlemen, I’d like to know what’s going on here too,” she muttered under her breath. Then louder, “Yes. I’m the one from the square.”

“How did you get here?”

What could she say? *I was transported... I transported myself... There’s some force that... controls me... tells me what to do... makes me do the things I do... controls people’s reactions to me... I know what to do... instinctively... Maybe if... It’s like this Mustafa, I have no idea how the hell it*

happens or why. You'll just have to trust me on this one. As if! She chewed her bottom lip searching for the right words.

“You must come with me and take your rightful place as leader of this country.” Oh, Christ, how lame was that? She groaned and buried her face in her hands.

The circle of men tightened.

“Tell us what happened in the square.” The words snapped crisply, a military order. She related the events briefly. Mustafa’s stony expression didn’t change. The air crackled with tension. The men scowled and shifted, looked to Mustafa then back to her. They played with their rifles; they could and would kill her. Mustafa just had to say the word.

She sat motionless and counted as she forced her breathing to slow and the muscles in her neck and back to relax. Finally Mustafa spoke and the men let their rifles dangle by their sides. She sagged with relief, yet she had not truly feared for her safety.

She shivered in the cool mountain air. One of the men held out his old woolen blanket. It stank of campfire and sweat. She didn't dare speculate on what might be crawling in it, but smiled thanks, and drew it tightly about her.

“What can we do?” Mustafa gestured almost helplessly to the few men around him. Even the young among them looked old, worn, tired, and in desperate need of food.

She outlined her plan. “I need you in the city by tomorrow morning. Do you have a vehicle?”

“No, but the Spinda have a nice Land Rover at their camp a few kilometers from here. You will help us steal it.” Mustafa grinned and appeared a dozen years younger. Hope made them all look younger and eager.

She couldn't help grinning back, but her stomach dropped at the thought that the whole damn thing could fall to pieces. She could be leading them to their deaths. She gritted her teeth and crossed her fingers.

*

“Hiking boots, that's what I need,” she muttered as she tramped along the trail behind Mustafa. She excused herself from the group. They

were polite about leaving her alone, probably thought she had to relieve herself. What she really wanted to do was to test her theory about the travel/transport/beam-me-up-Scotty thing that was happening to her. She thought maybe she could control it, and the flimsy sandals were sufficient excuse to try. She attempted a transport back to Mustafa's camp. She wasn't about to go too far in case she had to walk back.

“Yes! It worked!” She danced and spun and hugged herself and punched the air. “Yahoo! It worked.” She tried a transport up the trail. That worked too.

She rejoined Mustafa and his men a few moments later and settled in to the walk again. Her sandals—so very pretty—magically provided

traction on the steep trails and she didn't have to struggle to maintain balance and keep up with the men. Still, she really shouldn't be hiking in the dainty things. Too bad she couldn't use her new found skills, but she didn't want to cause more suspicion and fear. She laughed inwardly. Who was she trying to kid? She was already an abomination, or a miracle, depending on one's point of view. How much worse could it get? She told Mustafa and his men she would meet them at their destination and did the transport thing again.

Standing beside Mustafa, looking down from their vantage point, she studied the outpost and the terrain around it.

“How many?” Mustafa asked.

“Those two are patrolling, but I counted seven in all.” A battered and rusted Land Rover sat beside the hut that served as outpost. Rumor had it that Land Rovers never died. She hoped like hell that rumor was right.

Mustafa pulled out an old pair of binoculars from a worn case and meticulously polished the lenses with a scrap of soft cloth. “Two spare tires and four jerry cans of fuel in the back. Hopefully, they’re full.”

“The keys are in the ignition,” added one of the men who had his rifle scope trained on the jeep.

Mustafa turned to his men and issued instructions. “We will go,” he said indicating four men behind him. “Ali will drive.”

“I’ll go down first and distract the Spinda,” she said. “You can then take over.” Whether the Spinda died quickly or died horribly was not something she wanted to contemplate. Sometimes “not knowing” might be a *really* good thing, she decided.

Mustafa studied the cliff. “We’ll have enough cover for our descent.”

“But after that, it’s open terrain,” one of the men said in a tone that told her he was stating the obvious and how stupid could she be. “How do we cross it without being seen?”

“We’ll all be killed,” another said.

“You’ll be okay, honest.” She could have done it herself of course, disarmed the Spinda and

herded them into the hut, but these men needed a victory, small though it might be.

Mustafa studied her, brows narrowed, forehead furrowed.

“You can do it,” she said. “I’ll help.” *Man, this ‘stop the Spinda’ thing I have going had better work or we’re all screwed.* Her throat was thick with fear.

“Like you did in the square?” Mustafa asked.

What if it didn’t work again? She could only nod.

“We’ll do it,” he said. There was no further protest.

Thirty minutes later she was watching the dust whorls as Mustafa and his group sped away.

It had been ridiculously easy. She had transported to the Spinda camp just as the men reached the bottom of the cliff. She sashayed out from behind a land rover, twirling her skirt around her calves, and then froze. *Oh my God, what am I doing? Taunting them like this.* Two patrolling Spinda screamed and raised their rifles. More men spilled out of the hut. M raised her hand to stop them. Sunlight glinted off her ring, momentarily blinding them. More shouting and curses.

“Tsk, tsk,” she said. “That's not very nice language. What would your mommas say?” *Jesus, what's wrong with me?* More curses from the men. She waved her hand again and the ring sent out sharp shards of light that had the Spinda squinting and covering their eyes. When they dared to peer

out at her, she swished the skirts of her dress. Light danced off it, bounced along the sand and seemed to climb the men's clothes. They cried out and dropped back. She giggled. *Christ, I've got to stop this.*

By this time Mustafa and his men had crossed the kilometer of open plateau and wasted no time securing the outpost and locking the Spinda in the hut.

A grinning group surrounded her. Mustafa clapped her on the back. The others joined in. She was astounded. She would never have thought they'd dare to touch a woman. They almost knocked her over in their enthusiasm. They pumped her hand, crushed it in their energetic grips, and shouted messages of encouragement. Little kids really. It was nice to see them so excited.

Now, if only she didn't fail them.

*

Elspeth danced and clapped her hands. "Oh, Yves, I love what you did there with the ring and her dress. Clever."

"And fun."

"And I love your M. She's so brave."

"Yes, but..." I frowned. "She really shouldn't have teased them like that. It's dangerous. I'll have to put a stop to that."

"Little brother," Elspeth said, with a hand on my arm, drawing my eyes away from the earth scene to look directly at her, "everything you have her doing is dangerous. Let her have some fun too."

Chapter 8

“Hey neighbor. You okay?” Jimmy called from his front door.

“Yeah, sure, why?”

“Thought the cold had gotten to you. You were frozen to the spot there for a minute.”

“Just thinking.” *God, I’m such a liar.*

“I’ll be out to help in a minute,” Jimmy said.

“No, it’s okay.” Her protest was too late.

Jimmy had closed the door on her words and would be dressed and out with his shovel in a couple of minutes. Not that she minded the help, but she needed time to think and he’d chatter as they worked disrupting her thoughts.

Back in the house twenty minutes later, M settled on the sofa, wrapped an afghan around her

legs and sipped a Baileys. Mustafa? Fatma? François? Did they exist? She would have liked to chalk it up to imagination, or dreams, or even hallucinations, but the wound on her leg from the machete five days ago—was it only five days?—served as a grim reminder of the reality of her travels.

The television was muted. She wanted to think, but she also needed to see the news. François had taken pictures. What would she do if her face filled the screen? She'd be recognized. It was one thing to explain away a momentary lapse of attention, a foreign word or two coming out of her mouth, but pictures of her blasting out to the world would be a whole other story.

And that was another thing. How could she be in Raftan, messing about in their affairs and be here at the same time? She took another sip of the Bailey's. The warmth of the liqueur spread through her and she felt herself relaxing.

There she was on the screen. She sat bolt upright. Yes, it was her. François' pictures captured her perfectly, damn it.

*

Morning came much too quickly. She dreaded facing the students and staff. Playing hooky would only delay the inevitable. She crawled out of bed, showered and dressed. Over her bowl of cereal and banana, she rehearsed the responses she'd come up with during the sleepless night. "Looks like me? You've got to be kidding." "Looks like me? Tom,

you need new glasses.” “Looks like me? Ha, ha, flattery won’t work; you still have to do your report card comments.” “Looks like me? Well, they say everyone has a double somewhere in the world.”

“Morning,” students said as she walked down the hallway to her office.

“Morning.” The teachers she encountered en route greeted her.

“Morning, Boss,” Tom called as she entered the staff room.

What’s this? Didn’t anyone watch the news last night?

“Did you see the news last night?” Sue asked as she filled her coffee cup.

“Isn’t it amazing, what that woman did?”

“If it’s real.”

“Ah, you’re such a skeptic.”

“Well, what can you believe these days?

You know what the media is like.”

“I for one would like to believe it’s true.

Stopping the Spinda. What a breakthrough.”

“Time will tell.”

*

Elsbeth frowned. “I don’t get it. Why don’t they know it’s her?”

I chuckled. “Simple. What’s happening in Raftan is so far from their daily experience that they don’t think anyone they know could be M.”

“So, no matter how much they see of her on the news, they’ll never make the connection?”

“Nope.”

“But what if someone does? That Tom is sharp.”

Elsbeth was right again. I couldn't take chances. “Hum, I'll put up some barriers just to be sure.”

*

On her way home from school, she sat at a red light tapping her steering wheel. *Why am I not afraid?*

*

François Durocher returned home late that afternoon to find M sitting in the center of his courtyard, head on her knees. The children looked at him helplessly.

“She has been like this ever since she came back half an hour ago,” Mohamed said. “She does not look at us or talk or anything.”

“Where is your mother? She’ll know what to do.”

“She went out,” Faroud said.

“What! But she never goes out.” François looked at the fearful children and immediately regretted having stated the obvious. “Did she say where she was going?”

“No, but she did say she would be back soon.” Alyia wiped frantically at her tears.

“She will be back.” François patted Mohamed’s shoulder. “Now, let us see what we can do to help Madame.”

“Try talking to her,” Alyia said.

François spoke softly, “Madame, what is it? What has upset you so?” He spoke louder.

“Madame, you must tell us. We can help.” Not a flicker of recognition in her eyes. He panicked, shouted at her, grabbed her by the shoulders, and shook her roughly.

“No! no!” The boys cried as they scrambled to pull him away. Alyia covered her face, and then peered between her fingers. None of them saw Fatma enter the compound.

“Leave her. She will speak when she is ready,” Fatma said. “We wait.”

The boys pressed close to François, one on either side. Alyia clutched her mother. They sat a respectful distance away, eyes averted. None of them wanted to see her pain. Hearing was bad

enough. The torrent subsided to sniffs and hiccoughs and eventual silence. Fatma brought a cool damp cloth and gently washed Madame's face and neck.

“Can you tell us?” Fatma asked.

“I saw ... I saw ... the dead ... the villages in the south. I saw ... the refugee camps. I saw the roads. I saw the gate at the border ...” She began to cry again.

François picked her up and carried her to his divan. The others followed. Mohamed patted her shoulder awkwardly. Alyia stroked her hair.

“How can this be?” she cried. “There can be no God.! I have seen poverty, lived in some of the poorest countries in the world, but never have I seen anything as devastating as this. The children

reduced to... to... worse than begging, run over and killed in the crowds stampeding for a few grains or seeds, a few bits of clothing, a few coins. I can never do enough. Never!" Her sobs verged on uncontrollable again.

"Madame, what you have done already has begun to awaken our people," Fatma said.

"You must think of yourself as the catalyst for change," François said.

"Madame, it will be up to us to finish what you start." Alyia's mouth set in a determined line.

"Please Madame, do not cry anymore," Faroud held one of her hands in both of his. She reached out with the other and ruffled his hair.

Fatma held out her hand. "Come I will prepare you a warm bath."

*

A car honked. She glanced in her rear-view mirror. The driver gestured angrily. She checked the lights. Green. How long had she sat there lost in another world?

*

I watched my Little Soldier and fretted. That was a new feeling for me. I tried to explain it to Elspeth. I think she had some understanding for she seemed to be worried too. But, there was nothing I could do for M. What was the point of being a Power if my hands were tied by all the damned rules? Don't do this. Don't do that. I mean, what was a Power to do?

I fretted now, too, waiting for my first meeting with Mentor. She ruled the Powers. Of

course, as a Drone, I'd never had dealings with her, had never even seen her up close. But, I'd heard plenty. And none of it was good. My friend, Exelrud, insisted she was a termagant. One tough cookie was how he put it.

An aide showed me into Mentor's chambers. She sat on a high-backed chair on a dais. I stood humbly before her. I had no idea why I was the first Drone ever to be appointed a Power. For the sake of all Drones, I had to succeed.

"Why all the drama?" Mentor asked.

"I don't know. What she saw... seems to me the earth is pretty much all like that."

"She's too soft to do the job."

Okay, I wasn't off to the best start here.

"One of the reasons I chose her is because she has

travelled and seen the realities of her world. I don't know why the conditions in Raftan are so shocking to her.”

Mentor blinked and we saw M again and François trying to soothe her. “That man does go on.” Mentor shook her head. “The children are a little more understandable.”

M's sobs, great tearing sounds, echoed in my ears. I'd never heard anything like it. Shocked me, I tell you. I felt all knotted up inside and there was a funny catch in the back of my throat.

Mentor closed the view. “I'm disappointed with her weakness.”

I felt a wave of dizziness sweep over me. Similar to the feelings I had felt in M as she worked

for me. I think she called it panic. “She’s not weak,” I said. “It’s how humans release tension.”

“Humph!” Mentor raised her chin and her eyes narrowed. “And what did you do to help her?”

“I used the ring. I sent pictures, clear ones, not the ambiguous swirls that she couldn’t read. But she didn’t hear me. I set the ring to vibrating. Still she didn’t look.” I had shouted too. I’d never raised my voice before. The loud sounds had reverberated in my head. My body had grown hot and then cold.

Mentor cleared her throat drawing my attention back to her. *Oh Guardian, how much of this does she know.* Her tight smile was not comforting.

“Very well,” she said. “Continue.”

Chapter 9

M found François standing at his door watching men, women, and children tread softly as they headed to the square. They spoke in hushed whispers, with many warnings to be quiet. She left him and transported to the road north of the city to meet Mustafa and his men. Thankfully, the rusty old Land Rover had proven reliable and they had arrived only a few minutes before. They were cold and weary, but for safety she insisted they walk. Blending in with the crowds moving to the center of the city would be the best disguise. Mustafa agreed.

François and his neighbors had cleaned the second-storey rooms, and provisioned them with water, towels, soap, food, and blankets. There were even a few pieces of clean clothing. It must have

looked like a little piece of heaven to Mustafa and his men

While the men devoured the food, washed, and rested, she had François help her suspend an oval-shaped metal tub from the balcony. She had brought one of the jerry cans from the Land Rover and poured the little bit of leftover gasoline into the tub swishing it on the sides; greasing a cake pan. Images of a woman baking at an old woodstove flitted at the edges of her conscious thought. She didn't try to capture them. She knew that was futile.

She fingered the box of flimsy matches from China that François had given her. She'd used them before, but she couldn't remember where—Mali maybe. They flared up nicely and would suit her purpose.

She stood just inside the balcony doors. Nervous tension emanated from Fatma and Alyia who stood behind her. Mustafa was somewhere behind her too, muttering words and phrases that she couldn't quite hear. Practicing his speech? His men, further back in the room, shifted from foot to foot. Ali wiped sweat from his upper lip and then rubbed his palms on his pants.

“Sixty seconds, Madame,” Ali said quietly. He had François' watch.

“Thank you.”

Mustafa opened the makeshift doors the men had put up, but she did not yet step forward.

The square was packed, but with little color and none of the usual restless shifting of waiting, warm bodies. Men and boys hung motionless and

silent from every available window. The rooftops were as packed with people as the square itself. The old buildings seemed to sway and threatened to collapse under the weight.

“Thirty seconds.” The men tensed. She was edgy, anxious, and tense herself. She had experienced everything from panic and despair to moments of the wondrous joy of play as she experimented with transporting. She had reacted instinctively, made wild guesses, schemed and worried. All of that came down to this moment and doing it right.

“Twenty seconds.” Mustafa shifted. She heard his rapid, heavy breathing and felt puffs of air on the back of her neck each time he exhaled. She turned to face him and impulsively threw her arms

around him. He went rigid but she didn't let go and then he was hugging her back—fiercely.

They broke apart avoiding each other's eyes. "Eight, seven, six...." Saved by Ali's final countdown.

She was calm now and had time to wonder only briefly about where that came from. She stepped out at the exact moment Ali said zero.

"I have been sent to bring you a message. Life here must change immediately. You will listen to me and do as I say." Rumbblings of anger and dissent rose to the balcony. She could see the Spinda shifting, raising weapons, while the citizens moved out of their way with fearful glances. *Oh great, what the hell do I do now?*

“All persons with weapons of any kind will take them to the building directly across from me.”

No one moved. Slowly the armed men began a surge forward. “Now!” She shouted. The word reverberated around the square as if carried by a will beyond this world.

The Spinda lost momentum. Halted. Slowly, as if pushed by unseen hands, the Spinda wove their way through the crowd of citizens to do as she said. The people shifted and parted to allow the Spinda through. When all weapons were placed inside, François and two helpers closed and bolted the doors.

M sagged with relief. What made the men obey? Surely not one little word from her. She looked at the ring. It was maddeningly blank.

“From this day forward, women and girls will not be forced to wear the burqa.” She knew that removing the burqa in public would be too shocking for most of the women, but she hoped some at least would act. She beckoned to Fatma and Alyia.

The two came forward and remained motionless for such a long time that the crowd began to stir and murmur. *Oh God, we've come so far, please don't back down now.* Alyia moved first. Slowly, ever so slowly she raised her burqa above her head and let it slide to the ground. Her mother followed hesitatingly and then with more confidence. Fatma looked grim, but determined as she placed both burqas in M's hands.

Fatma and Alyia stepped back clutching each other. It seemed that the world stood still. M

waited to prolong the dramatic moment, then dropped the burqas into the tub hanging below the balcony. The Spinda roared their rage and surged forward, ready to rip the three women apart with their bare hands. When the first of the Spinda were just steps away from the tub M lit three of the fragile matches, tossed them into the tub and backed away. The gasoline caught immediately and flared. The stench of burning wool filled the air. When the flames and smoke had died down she stepped forward to see the Spinda encircled, trapped by the crowd.

“All women who wish to may remove their burqas.” No one moved.

“I’m crazy, fucking crazy. This won’t work. How can I possibly expect the women to throw off

generations of subjugation here, in such a public place?” Mustafa, standing behind her, grunted agreement.

Alyia stepped forward. “Do not be afraid.” She waved and smiled widely at the crowd, urging the women on. M could hardly believe it. Neither could Mustafa judging by his sharp intake of breath. “Bless the young and foolhardy,” she whispered. He nodded, his face a mask of astonishment. She wondered what he was thinking, whether he approved or was as horrified as the Spinda were.

Some of the women and almost all of the young girls removed their burqas. Something out there.... She looked up to the sky. Something out there....

Fatma, taking the example from her daughter, led the women in a loud ululating cheer. When the noise died down, M spoke again. “One more surprise.” She motioned Mustafa forward. His beardless face was almost as shocking to the crowd as the women removing their burqas had been.

At first no one recognized him. Then one lone voice cried, “Mustafa!”

“Mustafa! Mustafa!” the crowd chanted. Mustafa raised his fist in salute, holding high the beard he had so recently cut off. He dropped it into the tub with the still smoldering burqas. The stench of burning hair rose in the air.

Mustafa turned to her and bowed. The crowd went wild. “You will stay?” he pleaded in a voice so low that only she could hear.

How could she tell this man, his eyes desperate with hope, that she didn't know? "They are waiting." She gestured to the crowd and stepped back. Her left hand tingled. She looked at the ring and saw an urban slum, a young man calling for help, sirens blaring...

*

She astonished me in so many ways. I hadn't suggested the hug and I didn't push Mustafa to hug her back, but I could almost feel that hug. Her arms around me, mine around her. It soothed, warmed... My heart pounded. Damn, I couldn't go there.

And, I was dumbfounded by her actions—the tub, burning the burqas. I knew why she wanted to put the spotlight on the women, but I had been

sure it would fail. It seemed my Little Soldier was developing powers separate from mine. It was as if she didn't always need me. I wasn't sure I liked that. *Be honest*, I told myself. *You don't like it at all.*

Of course, I was the one who controlled the Spinda, made them give up their weapons, and herded them into a tight circle bound by the citizens. I puffed up with pride. I could move millions.

Chapter 10

I transported her. Three little words that said so much.

I was a Power. A Power! Impossible to believe, but true. My chance to bring honor to my family, to advance our caste; all my dreams about to come true. Sky, the dreams of all Drones about to come true. The weight of responsibility hung heavy.

I'd probably never know why the Guardians of the Universe chose me. But that didn't matter. I now had a position of prominence unheard of for a Drone. The look on my mother's face; that would stay with me forever.

I knew the story of my grandparents' capture, had heard it many, many times. They had been gathered, along with others, from across the

universe to serve the Guardians. They were not slaves in the Earth sense of the word. In fact, they were well treated, but their lives were forever limited to prescribed roles and they were never allowed to return home.

From the time I was a small child I dreamt of vindicating them. I had even resorted to the three wishes of humans; wishing to be a Power, wishing to become an exalted judge of the Grand Council, wishing to have the authority to send my family home. Stupid, I knew. Wishes hadn't worked any better for me than they did for humans. Except for my Little Soldier of course. I was making her dreams and wishes come true. The fulfillment of my dreams would be determined by what happened on that little speck called Earth and how I handled it.

And, how she handled it.

Guardian, help me. If I haven't chosen the right human, I'm in big trouble.

Earth, sir? I remember vividly my meek protest when I'd been given my first assignment. I had studied the earth ever since I started school, my knowledge of the planet was vast, greater than that of any of the viable candidates, but.... And that was another thing. It wasn't like I had applied for the job. New powers were always appointed from the offspring of the Grand Council or members of the transport forces. So, why this unprecedented breach of protocol?

And, why me?

My mother thought it only natural. After all, wasn't I brilliant? No Mom, my friend Exelrud is

the smart one. He always did better in school. In fact without his help... And what about Elspeth, my older sister? She was pretty sharp. She should have been chosen. Elspeth grinned and said no, it would cut into her painting time, not to mention her social life. Exelrud slapped me on the back and offered condolences when I told him. Hell of a job, he said. You can have it. Well, I had it and I wanted it. But, Earth?

Sky, who was I to think of questioning the Grand Council? I told myself to shut up, count my blessings at being appointed and get to work.

Really it was a great assignment. There was so much work to be done and if I could pull it off...

I found my Little Soldier and it didn't take me all that long either. It was her dreams that drew me. I knew right away that she was special.

Then I had to decide where to start. So many conflicts made it simple. Close my eyes, point my finger, almost any spot on the planet would do.

And, in five short earth days, the world had its Madame of Miracles.

I transported her away from Mustafa; a small but urgent job in a ghetto, then a bit of a break before South America.

I sighed. It was time to see Mentor again. Above all show no emotion, I reminded myself. Emotion had no place in the scheme of things as the Guardians saw it.

My parents had always cautioned us to be cool, not to laugh, or cry, or even frown outside our home. I had become pretty good at playing the stone face, but not Elspeth. I think my parents worried about her. I know I did. But, had we Drones become so good at suppressing emotion that we had long since ceased to feel? And, was that a good thing?

Mentor's secretary gestured. I took a deep breath and entered the conference chamber.

"She's terrified," Mentor said.

"Only on the surface. Under that she's thrilled."

Mentor's eyebrows rose ever so slightly. I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't been watching closely. I shivered. "She is intelligent, I grant you

that, but not the smartest person on the planet by far.”

“True,” I said. “What makes her good is her open-mindedness. She’s virtually free of prejudice and she’s honest. She acknowledges the possibilities of life on other planets, of life after death. She’s not tied to confining religious dogma, yet she has faith, in life and in herself. She knows her shortcomings but has the confidence to move ahead anyway.” I stopped. I was babbling. That would never do.

“Surely there are others with those qualities?”

“Of course.” Why was Mentor pushing? Couldn’t she see? I searched for words to convince her. “It’s a matter of having the right degree of

qualities,” I ventured, “in the exact right combination.” Mentor’s didn’t speak, just stared at me with those beady little eyes. Guardian, she was a bitch. I love Earth words. So evocative.

“Most importantly, she is blessed with an ability to see all sides of any issue.” I was sure this would convince her.

“Don’t you mean cursed with?”

“But surely,” I said, taken aback, “surely she needs to be able to see all sides to do the tasks that are set before her.”

“On the surface it would seem so. That ability could also make it difficult for her to decide what is best, to act quickly and safely.”

“But, she’s doing all the right things.”

Again, Mentor said nothing. I shifted under her steady gaze as I considered her words. I had chosen my human with care. I wasn't wrong. And, I was there to support her.

“She is the right one for the job. I'm sure of it.” I spoke with much more confidence than I felt.

Chapter 11

Elsbeth's big sister stare unnerved me. As if Mentor wasn't enough. "What?" I muttered.

"Can't you do something about the media? They're relentless."

"They have glommed on to M, that's for sure."

"Humph," Elspeth huffed. "As if she belongs to them."

"But, don't you see. It suits my purpose. I need my Little Soldier to be the subject of endless speculation. The more they talk about her, the more I—"

Elsbeth's eyebrows rose.

"Sorry, the more M and I will be able to accomplish." Sometimes I thought it would be so

much easier if I could go down there myself and slam a few heads together.

“Oh, look. There she is.”

M staggered to her car carrying two heavy boxes. She stumbled and fell. Papers flew out of the boxes and scattered in the wind. “Damn it!” Tears ran down her face. She pushed herself to a sitting position in the snow. “Damn it!” She watched the papers, some flying high in the sky, others plastered to the school ground fence. “Fuck!”

“Yves, do something.”

“Nothing I can do.” I felt like a heel. I could protect her from the Spinda, but I couldn't even pick up one little piece of paper for her.

M slumped in the snow and cried.

I closed the earth view and leaned my head wearily against the back of the chair.

“Yves?”

I waved Elspeth away. Her caring and concern, her censure and fretting were too much. She tiptoed out of the alcove.

I blinked M back. She was still sitting in the snow. Still crying, and unaware that she was speaking Pashto. What had I done to her? Could I protect her from herself?

And there'd be many more meetings with Mentor. I had practiced so many versions of explanation that I didn't know any longer which might be the best to use when I saw her. Why was I so worried? “Because I'm a Drone and I don't think I'm good enough?”

“What did you say?” Elspeth stood in the alcove entrance holding two cups of tea.

I jumped up, set the tea cups down and hugged her. “I’m so glad you came back.” I held out a chair for her.

“What’s wrong? You look worried.”

“I am. I’ll have to meet with Mentor again of course—”

“So you’re sitting here brooding, trying to anticipate her questions and plan your answers.” I nodded. “Well, let’s get your mind off Mentor. Is M okay?”

“Are you trying to divert me or satisfy your own curiosity?” I grinned when Elspeth blushed. I blinked Earth into view.

“Who’s that?” Elspeth asked.

I frowned. “I have no idea.” Why had this lump of lard come into the picture? He hadn’t been on my radar at all. Why were we seeing him? Some two-bit actor, not even good looking—now if it had been Pitt or Depp....

*

It was well past midnight when Ron Conlin slipped into the house quietly so as not to wake Gram and the kids. Wound tightly from the day’s work, he poured a generous scotch, and sank into his armchair.

He flipped on the TV and the screen filled with images of foreign lands, war-torn and impoverished. He punched the control repeatedly trying to find something light. More of the same. He tossed the control onto the table, leaned his head

back and closed his eyes. A shift of the announcer's tone drew his attention back to the television.

Ron's heart pounded. He gulped the last of his drink, watched a few minutes more. "Not again! I'm too old for another fucking obsession." He swore, grabbed the control, hit the off button, and tossed it into the basket by his chair.

He went to bed, tried to put her out of his mind, tried to get some much-needed sleep. An hour later he lay wide awake, her face imprinted on the ceiling.

Ron kicked at the offending tangle of sheets, struggled out of bed, and went back to the TV.

He caught a glimpse of her and then a headshot of the news anchor, Richard Peters, who

spoke in the clear crisp tones of neutrality as he recapped.

Ron fumed with impatience as Peters droned on about the events in central Asia, about the network's news team, about Durocher, the foreign correspondent who had seen it all. He talked about the mystery woman's first appearance in Indonesia. Madame of Miracles, the natives called her.

“Now,” Peters said, “we return to our interview with François Durocher. Fortunately, Mr. Durocher had his camera with him and had the presence of mind to take these pictures.”

Blessedly, for Ron, the screen was once again filled with images of her standing, arms spread wide with a look of wild anticipation, then bending to talk to a small child, and another of her

scowling into the bright sun. Concentrating on her, Ron was barely cognizant of the commentary as François spoke.

Ron paced furiously in front of the TV as the camera switched from François to the newscaster and back again. He flipped to other channels searching for more shots of her, and finding none, switched back, forcing himself to be patient. François was speaking again.

“... after sunset is unheard of. As morning approached, people began moving in groups to the square.”

Tia, Ron’s daughter, found him in the darkened room asleep in his chair, clutching the control. Gently she wrested it from his hand to turn off the TV.

“No.” He opened his eyes and stared at her.

“Dad, are you okay? It’s almost noon.”

Ron scowled. “Skipping school?”

Tia laughed, informed him it was Saturday, and reminded him that Brad was at soccer camp for the weekend.

“Where’s Gram?”

“She’s having lunch with her ladies’ group and getting groceries. She said she wouldn’t be back till late but that she’d make supper with you. Don’t forget, I’m staying over at Tracey’s. You okay?”

“I was watching the news.”

“Pretty amazing, eh? If you believe it, that is.”

“You don’t?”

“Brad and I watched last night until Gram made us go to bed. Brad thinks she’s cool.”

“And you?”

“He’s just a kid. What does he know?”

“Tia!”

“Come on Dad. She can’t be real. It’s just some kind of gimmick.” She kissed him goodbye with a “see ya tomorrow.”

“You’re probably right,” he said. But, in his heart, he knew otherwise.

*

Elsbeth watched, enthralled, but I didn’t need to see this. The whole world was captivated with M and that was just as it should be. But, this idiot? Obsessed with her? No way. She was mine. Mine!

“Oh,” Elspeth cooed. “That’s so sweet.”

Sweet?

“We should have more heart, up here,”

Elspeth said.

“Are you nuts? That’s their problem. Damn weak hearts. If they’d use their heads, they wouldn’t be in such a mess.”

Chapter 12

Grinning and waving madly, boys pushed and jostled to be with François in front of the reporters and camera men. A burly man stared into the camera and blurted, “Words are not enough to describe the joy in my heart today. *La madame des miracles* has liberated our future. We owe her everything.”

“What my husband says is true,” the woman standing slightly behind him added. She hid the lower half of her face with her scarf and kept her eyes down. “Madame has saved us, saved our children.” By the time she finished speaking she still had her face half covered but had raised her eyes and was looking shyly into the camera.

“There is much work to be done and now we are free to do it,” her husband said.

Emboldened by the first two speakers, others spoke up. Their words came in a flood.

“She has made my dreams come true.”

“I can go back to school now.”

“We must not forget Fatma and Alyia. What they did took great courage.”

“You have taken the pictures. What do you think?”

“I am not a citizen. It is not my place to comment.”

“You protected Fatma and her children,” a woman said.

“You knew!?”

“We all knew,” a small boy told him
gleefully.

“But, the Spinda?”

“They did not need to know everything.”

“Now, they are saying it is God’s will,”
someone else in the crowd said.

“Who is saying this?” François asked.

“The Spinda who are brave enough—”

“Or stupid enough—”

“To be out tonight.” A whoop of laughter
rose from the crowd.

“Durocher, tell the world that *la madame
des miracles* has given us the chance to rebuild our
country,” someone called out in English.

*

“I did that!?” M sank back on the sofa. “I did that?” It hardly seemed credible. Little things told her it was true; the flavor of Fatma’s bread that lingered on her tongue, the stench of burning hair and wool that invaded her nostrils, along with the bits of dirt and sand she’d had to dig out from under her fingernails. And the foreign words that came out of her mouth unbidden, startling her almost as much as they startled those around her.

But to think she had done it? To hear what people said about her? That was too much to live up to. “*Eh, bien. Je regarderai plus les nouvelles.*” Decision made, she turned off the TV. It would sit unwatched for many months.

*

Miracles..., madame..., madame of
miracles..., miracle madame..., M..., M..., m...,
em... I love you, Em. I love you, Em, I love you.

Jolted awake by the screaming siren of a
police car shooting past the house, Ron wept. He
had been with her, holding her, touching her...

A long cold shower later Ron was back at
the TV.

Richard Peters, tie askew, suit rumpled, and
dark circles under his eyes, still anchored the
broadcast.

“We take you now to our panel of experts
linked via satellite, who will attempt to answer
some of the questions. One moment please.” He
frowned as he fiddled with his earpiece.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have just received word that Madame was in South America today and left only moments ago.” Peters’ voice rose in excitement as he spoke. “We take you now to correspondent José Garcia.”

“Reports that *la señora de los milagros* has appointed an interim government and set a date for democratic elections have just been confirmed by the rebel leaders. Information is sketchy at this time, but we have been assured that government offices will be open as early as tomorrow.”

It was time to make dinner but Ron couldn’t tear himself away from the television.

“Ah, there you are, dear. You must be hungry. Have you been in front of that TV all day?”

At the sound of Gram's soothing voice Ron rose awkwardly, muscles stiff and sore.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Is she real?”

“I certainly hope so. The world needs her.”

“The kids aren't so sure. Tia says she's a gimmick.”

“Their generation has grown up on too much media hype,” Gram said. “I, for one, intend to believe in Madame unless someone proves we shouldn't.”

“Ah, Gram.” Ron sighed and enveloped her in a great bear hug.

*

Now, that Gram was a sensible woman. I liked her right away.

But Ron? How dare he love my Little
Soldier and caress her, even in his dreams? My
chest tightened and a surge of bile rose in my throat.

Chapter 13

Gram cleaned up after dinner while Ron listened to Peters introduce a panel of experts. Where, Ron wondered, would they find their answers; in religion or science or science-fiction or military intrigue?

“I heard bits of that from the kitchen.” Gram settled into a chair beside Ron. “Do they really think she’s an alien?”

Ron muted the commercial. “It’s all guesswork. Some guy named Saunders repeated what everyone already knows about UFO sightings, crop circles, and alien encounters.”

“I didn’t catch the all of the aircraft explanations. Sounded pretty technical.”

“It was, and in the end they came back to the fact that all eyewitnesses said she simply appeared. Commercial’s over. Let’s see what else they have to say.”

“Your research has taken you into the world of science-fiction writers. How many of those imaginings are in fact reality?”

“Ah, the question that piques our collective interest.” Dr. Patrick launched into detailed explanations of Terahertz cameras that could see through clothes, skin, and even walls without X-rays, and an invisibility cloak that bent electromagnetic waves such as light to travel around objects and returned them to their original paths. But, he acknowledged that he didn’t know of any

developments that could explain Madame's sudden appearances.

Peters asked about her apparent invincibility.

“The scientific community has been in heated debate for the past few days, discussing that very question,” Patrick said. “Perhaps Miracle Madame has been able to create some sort of force field around her. This is of particular interest to me as our research team has been studying molecular transfer.”

“The beam-me-up-Scotty phenomenon?”
Peters joked.

“In the vernacular, yes.” Here, too, he had scientific theory but no real answers.

“Even if she were to tell us of herself could we trust her to tell the truth?” The words were spoken coldly, accusingly by Col. Romanoff, attaché to the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Gram scowled. “I don’t care for that woman.”

“Me either,” Ron said. “Would you like a Baileys?” Ron came back with the drinks just as the panel launched into a discussion regarding Em’s ease with languages. Dr. Margaret Wiggins, linguistics expert from Oxford, argued that many people were multilingual but the languages they spoke were usually not so disparate. Nor did she think Madame used an electronic translator. Peters

said that detailed examination of film footage had revealed nothing of that nature.

“On the surface, what she is doing supports the tenets of the United Nations and all who wish to see peace,” Col. Romanoff said. “But, I suggest we look deeper for her true motives.”

“Maybe she hypnotizes her audience,” Anderson said. “Maybe she uses some sort of nerve gas. The possibilities are endless. She could be out for control of the world.”

“For her own nefarious ends?” The idea evidently pleased Col. Romanoff. Her smirk said it all.

Gram snorted. “She’s a nasty one.”

“The military and peacekeepers are not likely to embrace her.” Col. Romanoff sniffed. “If she continues to end strife, she will put us all out of business.”

Gram snorted again. “That’s the whole point, dear girl. You just don’t get it, do you?” She turned to Ron. “Someone needs to give that woman a talking to.”

Ron raised his glass in a salute to Gram.

“Some are saying that she is interfering with the divine will of God—”

“Maybe she is the divine will of God.”

“That, Dr. Patrick, is precisely the moral issue that we religious leaders are grappling with.”

Rev. Marson looked pained. “Has she been sent by

God? Is she trying to play God? Should we be idolizing her?"

"She's not out to harm us, damn it. She's here for our good, that's obvious to anyone with half a brain." Dr. Patrick half rose from his chair.

"How can you be so sure?" Col. Romanoff smiled condescendingly. "All, I'm saying is that—"

"Oh, good Lord, just listen to them." Gram rose. "I can't take anymore of this." She patted Ron on the shoulder. "Goodnight dear."

*

As we watched the panel, Elspeth grew increasingly agitated. "They're so far off the mark it's scary. Aren't you worried?"

“No, it doesn’t really matter what they think. As long as they talk and talk and keep Em the center of attention, I’ll be happy.”

“It’s funny, thinking she’s an alien.”

“Yeah, they always forget they’d be aliens themselves anywhere off Earth.”

Suddenly Elspeth chuckled. “That beam-me-up-Scotty thing was cute. Remember when you were in school and first started studying Earth, we used to watch that show. It was such a hoot. Didn’t have anything that much fun on my assigned planet. Exus was so boring.”

“Exus, wasn’t boring. You weren’t really interested. Back then, all you wanted to do was paint.”

Elspeth tilted her head. “Gotta go. My guy’s calling me.” She slipped away and I went back to watching Ron watch the panel. Poor sap. I could almost feel sorry for him but something nagged. Why did I keep seeing him? Of all the people on Earth, why him?

*

Ron awoke from a doze to see a guy named Smits interviewing Mustafa.

“You trusted a stranger and did what she said. Why? Weren’t you afraid? Did you not consider that she might be a ruse of the enemy?”

“Of course we thought of that. We’re not stupid. And no, we did not trust her. We did not want to listen to her. But, we had to. We were compelled to follow her. I can’t explain it, but there

was something pushing us, a force of some sort, almost like a giant hand reaching out to guide us.”

“A force?” Smits sounded eager. “What do you mean?”

What did he mean? Ron wondered. A force of some sort exerted on Mustafa by her or a force of some sort exerted on her? An outside control would answer some of the questions? But what? Who? How? And, why?

“Something,” Mustafa said. “I don’t know. Something made us do as she said. Besides, it was a way out, don’t you see? An opportunity to act. We wanted to take the chance. We accepted the risk. We had to.”

Maybe it was as simple as that, Ron thought. A matter of people wanting what she offered.

“Mustafa, do you really expect us to believe that this mysterious woman who appeared from nowhere can be credited with saving the world?”

“I cannot speak for the world, but I can say with certainty that she has saved our country. We are a people not used to victory. And that is what she gave us today—a victory.”

As Mustafa turned his back on the interview, the camera caught a fleeting glimpse of François’ sardonic smile before the anchor segued smoothly to a station identification break.

*

“A fucking feeding frenzy,” I muttered.

“Pardon?”

I spun to see Mentor standing to my right. Oh, Guardian! How to get out of this one? “It’s an

earth word,” I said. “A rude one. Please accept my apology.” I trembled and hoped I sounded humble enough.

Mentor inclined her head. “What’s troubling you?”

“I wasn’t really prepared for the reaction to her.”

“You know how they are.”

“Yes, but ... it’ s... they’ve given her a stupid name and are tripping over themselves attempting to analyze and explain her. They never tire of saying the same thing.” An ache enveloped my heart, something I’d never experienced before. I didn’t know what to make of it.

“Isn’t that what you need?”

“Yes, of course, but it’s so extreme.”

“You don’t like what you don’t control,”
Mentor scolded. “You’re very like her, aren’t you?”

I supposed I was.

“Over time, their fixation will suit your
purpose.” Mentor offered some reassurance and I
held those words close. “Can she cope with it?”

“I think so.”

“Watch.”

A television in a store window caught Em’s
eye. How it could still be functional in the aftermath
of the bomb blast was a mystery. Her face on the
screen, of course. Why would that surprise her? She
listened to various experts theorize about her. The
debate grew heated, voices rose, tempers flared.

“She’s wondering which, if any of them, are
right,” I said. Mentor nodded and shushed me.

They were breathless with excitement, tripping over their words as they attempted to describe the events, to describe her, to outdo each other with adjectives and boundless, effusive praise or a pretense of intimate understanding and knowledge and inside information. Only François, bless his heart, was cool, objective, and rational. But then, he had been there.

Em stared at the television, uncomprehending. How could they, how could anyone, possibly explain what she herself couldn't?

“You see!” I faced Mentor. “It’s so hard on her.”

“Then don’t let her see.”

Such a simple solution. Take Em away from the media coverage.

Chapter 14

Em followed the trail of dried blood, dark red-brown splatters scattered at random on the road. They led her inexorably on. Her sandals sent up little puffs of dust as she walked. The intense heat consumed the atmosphere and baked the land. But it wasn't nearly intense enough to eradicate the reek of burned flesh and rotting corpses that assailed her as she moved forward, that gagged and choked her and made breathing almost impossible.

She covered her mouth and nose with her hands in an effort to mitigate the stench and plodded along doggedly. She had to find them. She did not look up, not even once, to examine the countryside or to scan the horizon. She looked only

at the ground, her gaze never extending more than a few inches in front of her feet.

At last the blood trail ended in a large patch of freshly disturbed earth in the ditch beside the road. She dropped to her knees and began to dig, pawed at the ground with her hands like a dog searching for a buried bone, scooped handfuls of the soft, powdery dirt up and away behind her.

A few inches below the surface her hand encountered something. She continued to dig frantically, exposed an arm and then hair. She heard a young child cry and knew a deep desperation. She had to find the child. Had to.

She worked swiftly, ignored the nauseating odors, the blood and the rotting flesh. She brushed frantically at the maggots that crawled over her

hands and up her arms, and continued to dig. The boy's sobbing grew louder; transformed first to mournful cries of seagulls and then to bitter cawing. She looked up to a sky darkened with the wings of thousands of vultures. Ugly. Ugly. Ugly.

And still the boy cried.

She woke with a jolt, brushed her arms to rid herself of the maggots. Her stomach clenched spasmodically in revulsion. The silence surrounding her was broken a moment later by a dog as it shifted and yipped twice in its sleep. Reluctantly, she raised her arms and forced herself to look at them. They were insect-free and clean. She heaved a sigh of relief, reached down beside the bed to pet the dog. She gazed around her. Yellow walls, white window frames; outside the tree branches clouded with

gently falling snow. Large flakes sparkled in the moonlight. Clean. Quiet. Calm.

She pushed herself to a sitting position. Bare feet hitting the cold floor jolted her fully awake. She rested her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands and stared at the hardwood. Short media bytes played in her head, which didn't compute since she'd stopped watching the news a long time ago. Of course she couldn't avoid hearing what people said, the discussions that raged about her, in her own staff room, her own house, at the gym. Teachers, kids, neighbors, everyone had something to say.

Miracle Madame this, Miracle Madame that. What haven't I done? What will come next? Do "they" know what they are doing?

*

“Morning.” Sue, already at her desk, waved hello. “Hey, you look pale. Come, sit. Don’t move. I’ll get you some water.” Sue came back with a glass and hovered while Em sipped. “Better?”

She nodded. “Yes, thank you. Bad dreams is all.”

“God girl, what’s new about that? You always dream.”

Not like this. These dreams are tied to my new reality. And I don’t know if I can survive it.

She welcomed the warmth of Sue’s hand on her shoulder as she rested her head on the back of the chair and stared at the ceiling. She’d seen mass graves, heard the crying too damn often. She

thought she'd come to terms with it, but obviously she hadn't.

Two nights ago, was that the gray dream? High gray walls on all sides, as far as the eye could see. Gray skies above. The men facing her nearly indistinguishable from the rest with their gray faces, gray garb, and gray guns.

Simultaneous shots.

Her body had jerked back and folded in on itself as she absorbed the force of the bullets. Falling, all around her, bodies falling, blood spurting, bright red blots on the gray.

She had woken to the chill of pre-dawn air, slashes of red shooting across her line of sight. She squeezed her eyes shut. Still the red was there. She

covered her ears in a vain attempt to silence the echoes of the guns.

She opened her eyes and scanned the room searching for reassurance in the familiar.

Everything gray in the murky half-light of early morning.

Shades of gray.

Reliving, in the dreams, what she had already done. She'd been there, at the firing squad, and not a shot had been fired. The condemned men were free. *Thanks to me—and them.* She looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know if I can take much more of this."

"Of what?" Sue asked.

"Nothing."

*

I watched Em and worried. The desperately sobbing boy she saw in her “dream?” Her son when he was little. The job was too much for her and I didn’t know what to do.

I would have liked to discuss my problem with other Powers, but asking questions would reveal my weakness. We Powers met regularly in the Grand Council lounge for debriefings with Mentor. I said as little as possible, but the others were confident and voluble. They were from the upper classes. I was a Drone. Enough said.

Clouds of fine silvery dust rose from the pages as I gently closed the ancient tome. I heard Mentor come in. Great. Just what I needed—her seeing me here in the library, knowing I was second guessing myself.

“Why the heavy research?”

“I do not want to overlook anything.” I tried to keep my voice casual.

“She is doing well.”

Surprisingly, this was not a question. “Oh, yes, even better than I had hoped.” Damn, too much excitement in my voice. I had to stay calm, stay rational but it was so hard. Em was so good, so wonderful. I couldn’t praise her enough.

“The right combination of qualities?” Oh, my Guardian, was Mentor teasing? “And she always has you.” Now why wasn’t that reassuring? Because I was flubbing the support thing? I couldn’t have Mentor catching on. I’d have to shift the focus to my Little Soldier.

“Yes, but,” and here I know I sounded proud, “she is doing more and more on her own. Acting fast and making good solid decisions.”

Mentor nodded. “You are going to meet with her.”

“Not yet.”

“Why delay?”

“She needs more time to understand her strengths, experiment, make connections.”

“Ah, that’s what the dreams are for?”

Damn, damn, damn. She knew about the dreams. “Dreams have always been a part of her life. I don’t send them, but I think they are good for her. I think they help her keep an emotional balance. They’re an outlet of sorts.”

Mentor looked at me quizzically. “I suppose that’s an Earth thing, what with all that emotion down there.”

I nodded and then took a deep breath. “I’d like to ask you something.” I’ll never know how I found the courage to say that.

“Yes?” Ooh, boy, the tone of her voice, the arch of her eyebrow; no question I’d overstepped the bounds. I plunged on, helpless to stop myself.

“Why am I seeing this Ron person?”

Chapter 15

Ron could hear Gram humming in the kitchen. He sniffed appreciatively. Ah, her famous pot roast, a Sunday tradition. The kids would be home soon and it was almost time for dinner, but still Ron was reluctant to turn away from the television. Obsessed! Why did his heart take him through this hell? Ever since high school...

Knowing he would get no respite now, Ron stopped fighting, sank back in his chair, closed his eyes, and let the memories take him back, to relive it yet again.

*

Elizabeth. He was hopelessly in love with her. Beautiful, popular, always the center of

attention. He watched her for months, dreamed of her endlessly, and jerked off thinking of her.

He began to dial twice that God-awful evening, and a third time heard the ringing at the other end before he slammed the receiver down. He sat for a long time before reaching for the phone once more. After four rings,

“Hello.”

“Hello,” he croaked.

“Who is this?”

“Uh... it’s Ron. I wanted to ask you—”

“Ron who?”

“Conlin. Ron Conlin.”

“You’re the guy in the back of history class?”

“Uh, yeah. I wanted to ... that is ... um ... well ... uh.... Would you go to the dance with me?”

There were several moments of silence, excruciating for Ron, then some whispers and the raucous laughter of more than one girl. Ron dropped the receiver shaking with mortification.

Unable to face school, Ron played sick for several days, sat at home staring blankly at the TV, eating and eating and eating.

Salvation came through a scheduling error the next semester. Drama? No way. He asked for a change. Sorry kid, all the other classes are full. You'll just have to tough it out.

Drama saved his life. Engrossed in acting, he became the character; left his awkward, fat self behind.

Then Linda—popular, witty, kinder. “I like you Ron, but not that way.” Nancy—honors student, cheerleader; clever avoidance of answering with light laughter. Anne—homecoming queen, staring at him disbelievingly.

Why always the most unattainable?

College was better than high school, the artsy types more accepting. He was included and admired for his talent. The dancers were forever going to the gym. “Have to be strong to lift the girls, man,” his roommate Tony informed him.

Ron paused in his reminiscing to silently thank, for the millionth time at least, the gods, fate, lucky stars, or whatever the hell it was that had brought Tony into his life.

“You should workout with us,” Tony had said.

“I’ve never been. Wouldn’t know where to start.”

“No excuses buddy. Grab your sweats and get a move on. I’ll show you the ropes.”

Ron went, protesting all the way. Tony gave him some tips and left him at a universal machine.

Within minutes Ron’s legs began vibrating. “Go easy Ron. I’ve been at this a while,” Tony said.

“You’re in bad shape, man.” He laughed, slapped Ron on the shoulder and moved off to his next set.

By the time they were done, Ron hated the gym and everything about it, but Tony insisted he go back. To Ron’s amazement, he began to see a difference after a few weeks and, encouraged by the

changes, went to the campus medical center for advice on nutrition.

With time, sweat, and serious dieting, he lost weight, and gained muscle tone and definition. Tony talked him into taking a couple of dance classes and those, along with the movement classes in his drama program, brought a grace and elegance that belied his size.

And Susan. Oh yes, Susan. The cruelest cut of them all.

Susan, student council president, smart, articulate, and challenging. She antagonized many, but still managed to win votes, largely because she had the guts to say what many wouldn't, and because she was invariably amusing.

Ron asked her for coffee using the latest essay assignment as an excuse and soon it became their habit to go to the cafeteria or library after class and work together. After a time, it seemed natural to ask her to his place. By then he and Tony had moved out of residence and were living in a small basement suite a block from the campus. He made coffee or hot chocolate while Susan set up their books on the kitchen table. They were debating a scene in *Gulliver's Travels* one day when Tony came home.

“You in love with her?” Tony asked as the door closed behind Susan.

“Why?” Ron was wary.

“There’s something about her man. Can’t quite put my finger on it. My advice. Stay away from her.”

“How can you say that? You’ve only just met her.”

“Just be careful man. Don’t want to see you hurt.” He slapped Ron on the shoulder and added, “I’m good at first impressions.”

“Tony!” Easy for him to talk, he was constantly surrounded by women. Called himself the love machine.

“Gotta go man, late for jazz class.”

Tony said no more, but if he came home and found Susan there he made excuses to leave. Susan seemed to sense the animosity and insisted that they

go to her place even though it was farther from campus.

“Lord, look at the time.”

“It’s late. I should go,” Ron said.

“It is late, but you don’t have to go.” Susan smiled as she caressed his cheek.

“What do you mean?”

She turned off the lights and took his hand, pulled him up from the chair and towards her bed.

“I’d like some company.” Ron, delighted at the possibilities, stood helplessly as she began to undress him. When he was stripped to nothing but his socks she undressed herself. Susan pulled him down to the bed. He felt awkward as she guided him and it was over before it began as he came with a violent shudder on the fourth thrust.

“My God, you’re a virgin.” Susan laughed.

Ron was sure his whole body blushed. “Don’t worry kid. We’ve taken care of that. Now let’s really have some fun.”

In the next weeks, Ron was deliriously happy, in love and making love, almost daily. He wanted to shout his love to the world but Susan wouldn’t let him. She wouldn’t let him put his arm around her in public or hold her hand.

“Why not?” he asked.

“I’ve never liked public displays.”

“But I just want to hold your hand. I like to feel you close.”

“I’m just not comfortable with it.”

“But everyone holds hands and no one thinks anything of it.”

“No.” She was adamant.

Ron was chosen for the coveted lead role in the school’s annual senior production. Each year the play was written, produced, directed, and cast solely by students. Over the years, the school had earned a respectable reputation with these productions and word had it that talent scouts from both Los Angeles and New York would attend. Ron was proud and excited, but disappointed that Susan didn’t share his enthusiasm for the production. She dismissed it as amateur, but promised to come see him opening night.

He saw little of Tony during those months and when he did, Tony’s only comment was a succinct reminder. “Be careful man.”

A few weeks later Ron and Susan were sitting at the table studying for exams.

“Sue, when exams are over let’s go to New York.”

“For a holiday?”

“Yeah.”

“Why New York? Why not somewhere closer, less expensive?”

“I’d like you to meet my parents.”

“Why?”

“Well...” Ron was flustered.

Susan looked up from her books. “Ron, this isn’t the meet the folks before the wedding thing is it?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Ron, grow up. I have a fiancé, for Christ’s sake. He’s coming home in a couple of months.”

The air filled with unbearable tension.

“You’re engaged!”

“Yeah. Have been for almost a year.”

“When did you plan to tell me?” Ron’s voice cracked.

“After the play. I wanted you to have a good opening night.”

“Well, thanks so much. And, just what the hell am I?”

“I was lonely and you seemed like a nice guy.” He was too stunned and hurt to storm and rage at her, but she wouldn’t have noticed anyway as she launched into a description of the fiancé’s virtues and their marriage plans.

Ron stumbled home in the dark. For hours he did nothing but stare at the wall, thoughts of suicide swirling in his head. Tears came, then sleep when emotional exhaustion got the best of him. He crawled around campus for two days, bought a huge bottle of painkillers, took them home. Standing at the kitchen sink with a tall glass of water he took one, two, three, poured out a handful and tried to gauge how many he could swallow in one gulp, how quickly he could do this.

“Ron!” Tony called, startling him into action. He scooped the pills back into the bottle and turned to face Tony. “What are you doing man? They’re all frantic backstage waiting for you. Come on!” Tony grabbed his arm and dragged him, at a full run, across campus to the theatre.

“Thank God!” The director’s relief was palpable when he saw Ron. “We’ve got eight minutes. Get moving.”

The makeup and costume crews worked on him furiously. They muttered audibly about “temperamental actors” and “stage fright” but nothing touched him through the thick haze of his hurting.

The pain of Susan’s betrayal, of his own naivety, swirled through him and bled into his performance. He received standing ovations and rave reviews, reviews that brought him the attention of the New York agents. He burned with the irony of it and thanked whatever gods of theatre there might be that the play hadn’t been a comedy.

And now, this woman... Another fucking obsession. Ron felt helpless as he turned back to the TV.

*

“Ha. Ha. Geek! Nerd!” I called out. I loved those teens and their wacky way with words. We had nothing like it up here.

“That’s Ron,” Elspeth said, coming up behind me as I watched the Earth view.

“Yes, when he was younger, suffering teenage angst. He was such a dolt. Thank the Guardians that we don’t have that sort of nonsense up here. Loser!”

She glared at me. “Yves! Stop it. Those are derogatory Earth words, aren’t they?”

Elsbeth's words made me feel... bad somehow, but I couldn't figure out why.

“What's he doing now, 'reading' people? That's kinda cool. I didn't know humans could do that,” Elspeth said.

“They can't. He's just making judgments based on his observations. He's damn good at it though. It's a game of his.” Made me wonder if anyone played it up here. Thought I might give it a try myself. Try it with Mentor. Ha, ha.

Elsbeth settled herself on a sofa to watch the scenes with Ron's girlfriends play out. “I don't like this,” she said. “That Susan is a real bitch. Ron should have listened to his friend's warning.”

I had to admit that I felt sorry for Ron, genuine sorrow, but only for the merest instant. He

had no business being obsessed with Em. She was
mine.

Chapter 16

Wind-whipped waves flung the boats about as they broke free of their moorings. Masses of dark storm clouds scudded by overhead, dragging clear blue sky and sunshine behind them. Good. If the weather settled it would be easier to find them. She wondered, for the thousandth time, why she was out, alone in a sailboat, in this impossible weather. She knew nothing about sailing. She looked at the unmanned helm, which held steady in the fierce winds; the sails billowed out fully, the boat tilted at a crazy, impossible angle, the spinnaker unfurled itself and the boat shot ahead.

She clung to the dinghy as it rose and fell with the wild swells of the storm. At the crest of each wave she searched for the sailboat but saw

only a huge cargo ship. It filled the horizon as it chugged slowly through the rough sea. Each sway of the waves pushed the dinghy closer until it bumped up against the hull of the ship and came close to capsizing. She reached out to touch the ship. Flecks of rust stuck to her fingers. Groaning ropes and crates, as they shifted with the movements of the ship were barely audible under the pitiful human moaning. She pushed against the hull with her hands, tried to force the dinghy away from the ship, looked for a way to climb up or to alert someone that she was there.

Suddenly, she hovered in the air about forty meters above the deck where at least four hundred people huddled in small groups. Her eyes burned and she flinched from the stench of urine, feces, and

vomit that rose to the skies. She clamped her mouth shut tightly and held her stomach to squelch the bile rising in her throat. A woman in childbirth screamed; women around her tried to soothe, tried to help. The men averted their eyes and kept the children as far away as possible. The cargo groaned again. In sympathy to the human plight?

The wind tore at the sails. The thin nylon jacket she wore provided no protection whatsoever. She tried to shield her eyes from the droplets of salt water that made them tear and sting painfully. Her cheeks stung too, lashed by strands of her hair as the wind whipped it about her face. She blinked several times to clear her eyes and scanned the horizon. Nothing but waves.

The storm ended, the seas calmed, the sails lowered and she woke to the sounds of sirens as three fire trucks raced past the house.

*

“I say, send ’em back.”

“Come on, Carl. We’re all descendants of immigrants.”

“Who came to this country legally, don’t forget. These guys arrive on some rusty old boat and expect us to welcome them with open arms.”

“And it’s not politically correct to say what we really think, so we keep quiet and they keep coming.”

“They come from terrible conditions—”

“They’re terrorists, for Christ’s sake.”

“My father-in-law has been on a waiting list for his surgery for months, but they opened a bunch of hospital beds for these guys.”

“Did you hear they were complaining about conditions in the intake center. Clean beds, flush toilets and three meals a day; that’s gotta beat the hold of a rusty old ship and day and they have the nerve to bitch about their treatment here.”

“Did you see the woman they interviewed who said she came here twenty years ago, through the proper channels and felt these guys should too?”

“I don’t know. It’s so hard to say what’s right or wrong...”

“Australia’s got the right idea with Christmas Island.”

“We’ve got a shoreline of islands. Why don’t we do the same thing?”

She left the staffroom feeling slightly nauseous. She’d seen the “rusty old ship” and knew how bad it was. Still she had some sympathy for the arguments against letting in boatloads of illegal immigrants, when those who applied through the proper channels waited years to be processed.

Of course it wasn’t just the immigration issue that left her feeling sick, it was everything she did. How could she possibly know if her actions were the right ones? She wasn’t God. Did God, if there was one, even know? Did the guys controlling her know?

*

“The rusty old ship bit is because of her latest assignment. The horror of the conditions preying on her mind.”

Elspeth's mouth fell open. “Are you telling me that humans relive their days at night? That’s too weird.”

“I know.” When I’d first observed humans dreaming I was astounded. I have no idea how they ever get a peaceful night’s sleep?”

“I understand the rusty ship part, but why did she dream about a sail boat and a dinghy?”

“Well...” I launched into an explanation of humans' dream analysis. Em’s dream likely meant she was frustrated—sexually.

I didn’t tell Elspeth that I’d been having water dreams too.

Chapter 17

Everything was so damned normal. “Hi, guy, how’s it going? Did you hear about Shane's new movie?” “Hey bro, meet me for lunch Friday?” “Yo, buddy, you’re on. Step up to the plate, man.” “Ron? Jamie calling. Have to cancel our dinner date. Sorry.” “Dad, can I have ten bucks for the field trip? And you need to sign this form.”

Routines unaffected. Days sliding by. But, he knew no peace, no relief from the desire and wanting. Fantasies of Em filled his days, his nights, his life. Would that they be real.

Obsessed! With Miracle Madame, no less. He’d need a miracle all right to survive this.

*

“No.” I wasn't about to give Ron that miracle he wanted. No way. Not a chance.

“But—” I held up my hand to stop any words that might spring out of Elspeth's mouth. She clamped her lips together, crossed her arms, and tapped her toe.

My conscience pricked me a bit, but I wasn't about to admit it to Elspeth. Why should I help him? Mentor hadn't answered my question so I still didn't know who he was and why I was in his life, so to speak.

*

And then Sandra found him. Ron participated in a question-and-answer session after a performance one night. The questions were the usual banalities from a group of drama students

spending a week in New York. When it ended, he was tired and deflated.

“Excuse me, Mr. Conlin?”

“Yes?” He didn’t try to mask his impatience.

“Could I buy you a coffee?” She was a big woman, almost as tall as he was, and substantial; although that impression was undoubtedly heightened by the heavy coat and scarf she was wearing.

A long silence stretched between them.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you.”

She made a move to leave.

He felt a surge of empathy.

“No, wait,” Ron called. She turned back. “I didn’t mean to be rude. Yes, I would like a coffee.”

What the hell, he thought; this was the best offer he

had had in months. “Come this way.” Ron indicated the steps at the side of the stage and held his hand out to her. He collected his coat and led her out the stage door to a nearby coffee house.

“I’m Sandra Hartt,” she said as they slid into the booth.

“Are you with the drama group?”

“No, I’m a New Yorker. I go to as many plays as I can afford and I always stay for the question sessions.”

“Do you always ask actors for coffee?” The words came out cynically and it was too late to remold them into something gentler.

“I never have before.” Her bottom lip trembled.

“Why did you ask me?” He was softer now, sensitive to her hurt. Lord knows, he thought, if anyone can understand rejection it should be me.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you’re honest at least.” He laughed lightly.

“Do you get asked out often?” She asked the question with open curiosity and Ron was relieved to see that she seemed a little more at ease.

“No, you’re the first.”

“Well, you’re honest at least.” She grinned and the ice was broken. Sandra asked intelligent questions about the play. She said that she had seen him in other productions and admired his talent. They discovered that they had similar tastes in theatre.

“I’m a librarian and a frustrated playwright,”

Sandra said.

“Are you writing anything now?”

“Not at the moment. Everything I’ve submitted has been rejected.”

“You shouldn’t give up.”

“Easy for you to say. Look where you are.”

“I’ve had lean years,” Ron said. “Very lean. For a while I quit going to auditions.” He played with his coffee cup remembering those times.

Sandra did not interrupt. “For three years, actually. I drove a limo, worked as a security guard, and as a telemarketer, and briefly considered going back to school.

“No waiting tables?”

He made a face at her and she laughed. “I just couldn’t stay away. I started going to auditions again and eventually landed a couple of decent roles.”

“And now Broadway. Glad you stuck with it?” Sandra asked.

“Tough as it is, yes. There are still lean times but this is my life. You should keep trying.”

It was almost dawn before they realized it and he made sure to get her phone number before he put her in a taxi and waved goodbye.

Over the next few months they saw each other as often as their jobs permitted. Ron was cautiously optimistic that their friendship might lead to something more. Lord knew this wasn’t another obsession. Maybe there was a chance.

He and Sandra arrived at his apartment early one Sunday evening after his matinee performance to find Tony sitting on the doorstep. “Hey man, how the hell are you?” The two embraced warmly, then stood back to study each other. “Looking good, Ron. Still hitting the gym?”

“Yes, and still hating it.” Tony laughed. Yet again, Ron thanked the gods for their friendship. Tony made reality bearable.

“It’s good for you,” Tony said. “Now, introduce me to your lady.” Ron did and the three went inside. “I need a place to crash. Thought you might be willing to put up with me.”

“Of course. What brings you here? I thought you were in the big time in L.A.”

“Doing okay there, but I have a couple of auditions for musicals here and that’s really what I’d rather be doing. So what’s for dinner?” They ordered Chinese and spent the evening catching up. Sandra excused herself. Ron got his coat to walk her to the subway.

“No, stay and visit. I’ll be fine.”

“Nonsense,” Tony said. “We’ll both walk you.” He wouldn’t take no for an answer. Coming back from the subway Tony asked, “You in love?”

Ron’s response was slow in coming. “I think so, yeah.”

“Between the sheets?”

“No, not yet.”

“What are you waiting for man? She’s a keeper.” Tony slapped him on the back and, typical

Tony, was off on six other topics of conversation in as many seconds.

They were compatible and had a good marriage. Ron would have liked to see more of the world, to have had some adventure in his life. Sandra preferred the security of home. Their routines revolved around the children. Ron missed the stage but the money in movies compensated and he enjoyed the California climate. Sandra didn't seem to mind his long days on the set. If something was missing in their relationship, Ron wasn't prepared to examine it too closely.

He never did see her plays. He wondered now if she regretted not following those dreams or if she had written more after they married. He didn't know, had never asked.

There had been nothing out of the ordinary the morning Sandra died. He found her behind the kitchen island. He called her name, thinking only that she must have fallen and banged her head. He shook her, remembered too late that he shouldn't have moved her, and dialed 9-1-1. But in the end, none of that mattered. She had suffered a massive stroke. She was gone and there was no gaping hole in his life, no heart-stopping grief. God, Sandra deserved better.

After Sandra's death, her mother had come to help and ended up staying.

Ron often worried out loud that the house and kids were too much for her. Each time, Gram patted his cheek and said, "My dear, the cleaning

service does most of the work and the children keep me young.”

Then there was Tony. No women trailing behind this time. He showed up within hours of Sandra’s death and took over, uncharacteristically quiet, helping to soften the shock for Tia and Brad, working efficiently to arrange the funeral, saying little with words but everything with actions. During those first few days, when the kids weren’t glued to Ron, he found them with Tony, hanging on to his hand or curled up asleep beside him on the sofa.

And Jamie. She brought love and gentle reminiscing to the dark hours of funeral arrangements. She was an actress he had worked with and liked enormously. Sandra had liked her

too. She had taken the five month pregnant Jamie under her wing when her husband left her.

On the first anniversary of Sandra's death Gram took the kids to New York to visit his parents. Left alone, Ron brooded and paced. Then Tony showed up with two bottles of scotch. The usual voluble Tony was quiet as he listened to Ron pour his heart out and cry. "I don't think I ever really loved Sandra. Not enough anyway." *She wasn't an obsession.*

"Listen Ron, I'm no expert, but I do know you. You loved Sandra in your own way and made her happy. Mourn her, but don't pile on unnecessary guilt."

Tony poured another drink and another and eventually put Ron to bed.

For the last couple of years Gram and the kids had joined Tony and Jamie in encouraging him to date. Tony was always trying to hook him up with one lady or another. The most recent was an actress named Rita. She had a bit part in a daytime soap. She was serious, too intense at times, but generally easy to be around.

And now, there was Em.

Chapter 18

“It’s been seven Earth months now,” Mentor said.

“Yes.” I wondered just where this conversation was going.

“Is their world changing?”

“Slowly.”

“Will it be enough?”

“For a renaissance?” I asked. “No, but—”

“A step in the right direction, at least?” I was rattled. She always did that to me. Were all Drones so easily intimidated, or just me?

“I think so. I hope so.” I paused, took a moment to try and calm my voice and stop shaking.

“I need more time.” I wished I didn’t sound like I was begging.

“Your Grand Council review can’t be postponed.”

I stifled a cry. Everything depended on that review. Banishment, that’s what I faced. I’d lose my career, have no hope of advancing to a position where I could release my family from bondage and send them home. Unless I could pull off some sort of miracle.

I felt hot all over, and then suddenly shivered. My chest tightened until I could hardly breathe. Oh no. I was having one of those attacks. What did humans call them? Panic attacks. That was it. The unfamiliar dread grew and threatened, then subsided only to swell again. We were much better off up here without emotion. Much better off.

Mentor must have sensed my fear for her tone was gentler. “So, she’s not the right human after all?”

What could I do? It was too late to find a replacement. Besides, Em was good and the world loved her.

“She does what she has to. She’s smart and quick to learn. She uses the power I give her wisely. And, she’s doing things I wouldn’t have thought of. Effective things.” I knew I was protesting too much.

“You have decided her reward?” Reward? Did that mean Mentor thought Em was the right person after all? Why didn’t she just say so?

“Well?”

I didn't answer. My mind was spinning. So much to be done. Where to move next? What would be most effective, most impress the Grand Council?

"Well?" She snapped out the word.

Impatience? She wasn't supposed to feel emotion any more than I was. Oh Guardian. I'd obviously annoyed her no end.

"Em worries all the time," I mumbled. "I don't want her to suffer so."

"You have a soft heart." Mentor's voice was harsh.

Oh great, I obviously shouldn't have admitted that, shouldn't have let my "human" side show. I paced, shifted my gaze from Mentor to Earth and back again.

“Help Em and you help yourself,” Mentor said.

“How? What exactly am I allowed to do?” I hated the pleading tone in my voice.

“Whatever you deem necessary.” And, with that, Mentor was gone.

I stared at the spot where she had been. *Think, you fool. Think!* Maybe Em’s natural instincts could provide some answers. I looked to Earth, searched for her. A flutter of my eyelids brought the planet into focus. Another flutter enlarged the area I wanted to see—her home.

“Hi,” the little boy from next door called out.

Jolted from her daze, Em called back, “Hi Noah.”

“Me and my dad are power washing,” Noah said.

She chuckled as she watched him. Clad in a T-shirt, shorts, rubber boots that reached his knees, and a yellow hard hat that fell over his eyes, he struggled doggedly with the garden hose.

“Boy, your dad sure is lucky to have such a good helper.”

And that’s how I found her. Sitting in a wicker chair on a small front porch, her feet propped on the rail of a long tile bench. A half-empty beer mug with a wedge of lime perched on the rim in easy reach. A newspaper dangled from her left hand and she chewed absentmindedly on the arm of her reading glasses. Worrying. About the world, about the things she had seen and the things

she had done. Wondering. Where she would be sent next, if she would succeed? Wondering if she could ever recapture the joyful optimism of youth.

I watched as the burden of her “job” crushed her natural joy. I had chosen her; put her in the untenable position of savior. I’d had to do it. My career, my life, depended on this assignment, but that didn’t make me feel less guilt. I liked her too much to let her struggle alone.

Whatever you deem necessary, Mentor had said.

Em dropped the paper and glasses, clutched at her head as if in great pain. I had to do something.

I wished... Ah, damn! I wished I’d never heard of wishes.

Now I didn't know if I had been right to open her Madame life to this one. And I still hadn't decided if, as Madame, she should know about her real life. Could a human possibly bear the weight of two existences?

Chapter 19

“Dad, phone for you.”

“Who is it?” Indifferent shrug of teenaged shoulders.

“Hello. Ron speaking.”

“Ron, Allan here. Listen man, you have to meet me Friday night. Seven p.m. sharp.”

“Sorry, Allan. Rita and I are taking the kids to the Lakers’ game.”

“Can’t take no for an answer. Get Gram to go in your place. You have to be there. Trust me on this one. It will be the most important night of your life.”

“Can’t do it Allan, and don’t exaggerate. It doesn’t become you.”

“I’m deadly serious, Ron. Be there. Here’s the address. Write it down. Gotta go buddy. More calls to make. And Ron, dress for this one.” The line went dead.

Great! The kids would be disappointed and Rita would be pissed. “This had better be good, Allan,” Ron muttered to the phone as he hung up. Gram, at least, would be pleased.

Ron arrived that Friday night cursing Allan under his breath. The restaurant had been hard to find, a small family-run business in an obscure part of town and he was mystified as to its choice. It certainly wasn’t one of the finer dining establishments that Allan insisted on or that he himself was used to.

Men and women chattered in Spanish while young children played hide-and-seek between the tables or followed the waitresses, imitating their moves. A group of young people at a corner table were having a heated but cheerful debate and helped to hide the youngsters when parents came looking for them.

The garish pink walls were plastered with old photographs, battered sombreros, faded posters, a few woven wall hangings, and one large vividly colored picture that caught his attention even though it was much too rustic for his tastes.

The place had a certain cozy charm, he thought wryly, and the smells from the kitchen were mouth-watering. They would eat well, at least.

A youth directed him to the lonely table in the back corner next to the kitchen. Allan, Vicky Warren, and Ian Martin were already there as well as Jamie, who shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes in Allan's direction, eloquently communicating that she too was in the dark. Shane Robertson came in right behind him.

Vicky, Ian, and Shane were fellow actors. He and Jamie had done a pilot with them for Allan—a quality television drama that proved to be short lived. They weren't stars in the Hollywood sense of the word, but they were all steadily employed, with decent investments, no longer starving or doing commercials, and waiting tables a mere bad memory.

They greeted each other with the casual warmth of good friends. “Okay, Allan, give. What’s this all about?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, why’d you insist I delay my flight to London?” Ian asked. “This had better be good, Allan.”

“And why did I have to ditch my date?” Ron knew Jamie was annoyed although she kept her tone level.

*

Em took a deep breath. *It's now or never.* “I can answer that.”

They turned en masse at the sound, mouths gaping when they saw her. It was always like that and she still hadn’t become used to it. She didn’t think she ever would. The startled oh of their

mouths, the widening of their eyes, the hands raised to ... do what? Hit her? Hide from her? Embrace her?

“Miracle Madame!” Vicky slapped her hand over her mouth as if she had committed some crime simply by saying her name. Just as she had seen so many do.

“I’ve heard that’s what I’m called. Miracle Madame, Humph. Sounds like I should be running a brothel in the Old West.” She laughed lightly hoping her little joke would ease the tension. Not even a hint of a smile on any of their faces. They just stared. *Damn.*

She heard Ron suck in air. He had a sort of sickly look about him. *Christ, is he that scared of me?* No, that wasn’t it. She watched closely, felt a

tingly ache in her heart. They had a connection, a link to each other, so strong that she thought she should be able to see it and wondered if he did. She berated herself for playing the fool, but the feelings were too powerful to be dismissed.

He must have sensed something because he looked at her quizzically; an eyebrow rose, and then, coward that she was, she turned back to the others.

“My God, you really are you and you’re here.” Ian, like so many others when they first met her, hardly daring to speak, and then blurting out the first inane thing that came into his head. No doubt she’d have done the same in his shoes.

“You are so beautiful and your dress is...
It’s really....” Jamie blushed and fumbled for more
words.

Em laughed. “The Spinda were impressed
too, just not so favorably.” With those words they
seemed to relax a little. “Let’s do this properly,
shall we?” She shook hands with each, thanking
them for coming on such short notice.

They sat and Raûl came to take drink orders.
He had a Sol with a wedge of lime for her, well
chilled, just the way she liked it. He bent for a hug
and they chatted a moment in Spanish.

Drinks came, orders were given and
conversation began. She asked about their families
and careers. She knew about their spouses, about
Gram, the names and ages of their children, what

projects they were working on. But she asked anyway. It was another attempt to put them at ease, and to unlock the confining bonds of being Miracle Madame.

There was a pause in the conversation when Raül came with a second round of drinks. Ian broke the ensuing silence. “May we ask about your work?”

“I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“But, there is so much you could tell us,” Shane said.

“How do you know where to go and what to do?” Jamie asked.

“Where did you learn to speak so many languages?” Vicky asked. “And how do you travel?”

Brittleness settled over her and she was far away, in a world she didn't want to see, in a world she wanted to escape. She forgot where she was just then. All she could see was horror and fear and hunger and devastation. All she could hear was crying and sobbing and yelling and sighing.

“Stop.” Ron spoke quietly, but she heard and the others must have too, for silence settled around the table. She tried to smile at Ron, but didn't quite succeed. He looked grim and happy at the same time. Happy that he'd done her a favor? Little did he know.

Allan jumped in with a quip about his current movie and, thankfully, the easy flow of conversation resumed.

When their plates were cleared away, they turned to her, upright in their chairs like good students, eager expressions on their faces, ready to pay rapt attention. Of course they were dying with curiosity. Em was surprised they lasted as well as they had through the meal.

“I would like you to consider making a movie for me. I have already discussed some of the details with Allan.”

Oh God! She'd done it. It was too late now. She couldn't take the words back. Why? Why did she have this insane urge to make a movie? And, why with this group? They were good people, down to earth, not famous enough to have been warped by media attention. If they agreed to make her movie,

they'd be forever hounded by paparazzi; everything in their lives would change.

More to the point, she'd control them.

They'd be hers.

“Why a movie?” Ian asked and she had to scramble to find a reasonable answer.

“Movies are a powerful communication tool.”

“They can be. But why don't you just do some interviews, make some speeches, tell people what you want them to know?” Vicky asked.

“Wouldn't that be a lot simpler?”

“Easier? Likely. More effective? Not necessarily. Besides, I'm not allowed to work that way.” *Not allowed! Not allowed? That's what the message in the ring had said. Why the hell am I not*

allowed? You're allowed to put me in all sorts of danger, to scare the bejesus out of me, but I'm not allowed to talk to people. Man, if I ever get a chance to talk to you....

“Madame,” someone called softly and she was back with them, shaky and mad, but back.

“From what you said earlier, you don’t seem impressed with what Hollywood produces so why make the movie here?” Shane was not so overawed by her that he wouldn’t speak out. Refreshing.

“I’m a realist. I know the power of Hollywood, and how far-reaching something made here can be. I’m not unaware of my clout. Because of my involvement everyone will want to see this movie. It’s a way to spread my influence more widely than I do now.”

“But you do influence people,” Ian said.

“My God, you’re changing the world.”

She shook her head, dismissing his protest.

She would never believe that what she said and did carried that much weight. In spite of everything she had done, she still didn’t believe it was real.

“I don’t expect you to answer right away.

And I will understand if you say no.”

“Of course we’ll do it.” They all spoke at once.

She fumed. How could they agree so readily? Didn’t they know what her movie would do to them? How could they just say yes like that without due consideration? *Don’t be stupid*, she wanted to yell. *Think, damn it. Think*. She wanted

them to say no. She wanted a way out and now it was too late.

Fuck! I'm the one who needs to think. I'm the one who wants the control. Because someone controls me. I'm the one who wants the fame. Because I've fallen into the trap. I want some of that Hollywood mystique. And Ron? How does he fit in all of this? Do I want him? Is it too late to get out of this mess? Maybe I can make them see reason, make them say no.

“You need to think about this. You must weigh the pros and cons.” Oh, yes, there will be cons. “Working with me will change your lives. Think of that. Consider carefully. Carefully! You will need to be prepared for a barrage of world-wide media attention.” *Not to mention that I will have*

*taken over your lives. Just as mine was taken over.
Revenge! Oh, God! I'm wreaking revenge on these
poor innocents.*

“We’ll do it.” Ian spoke firmly.

She sighed inwardly. If that was the way they wanted to play it.... Well, they were adults. “Thank you.” Oh God, this was good. She’d get to see Ron again. As often as she wanted. “The media attention will start as soon as we leave.”

“We can handle it,” Jamie said.

And maybe she could do something for them, something to atone for her sins. “You’re agreeing to do me a huge favor. Is there something I can do for you?”

*

I watched as sparks flew between Em and Ron. I felt a heaviness in my chest, a hollow empty feeling in my stomach, such as I had never before experienced. I reached out to snatch her back, but I knew it was too late. I didn't understand then what it was too late for. I didn't understand then why I felt so ... so bereft.

As for Ron. What I felt coming from him was beyond understanding. His heartbeat thundered in his ears. He clenched his fists holding them rigidly at his sides, forcing himself to be still, feeling at once the light and sublime ecstasy of possibilities and the harsh dark reality of what could never be.

What possibilities? What could never be?

I'd seen him watching her on TV enthralled. I'd seen him moon over her like a lovelorn teen. He fantasized so many things, and laughed heartily at himself to hide his flashes of embarrassment but he hadn't stopped.

At first he thought meeting her would be enough. "Madame, such an honor to meet you." Courty bow, light kiss to the back of her hand. Only it wasn't enough, not nearly enough.

His fantasies carried me with them, allowed me to see and feel things heretofore unknown. They always ended in the bedroom and I was there with them in those fantasies of his.

I guessed that is what love was; the way they thought about it on Earth. We had no words for love up here. It was an emotion beyond us. Even

Drones, like my family, didn't talk about love although I believe it existed. I think my parents loved each other and loved Elspeth and me.

Ron was last to shake her hand. Her grip was firm, her hand cool and dry. Her smile warmed him. He locked eyes with her in an agony of desire. He wanted to bury his hands in her mass of unruly curls, make wild passionate love to her. His response would have frightened him if he had had the capacity to examine it wholly and rationally.

Hell, it frightened me. And sucked me in.

Sparks flew wildly about them—bright, colorful, happy sparks. I held my breath, clenched my fists, and lunged toward them. Mentor's iron grip on my arm stopped me. I forced myself to

relax. She let go then but didn't take her eyes off me. I tried to look away.

“Watch!” Mentor ordered.

Em was falling for Ron and didn't yet realize it. She was falling for him and I was falling....

“Watch!” Mentor said again.

Ron would have given anything, anything to know what my Little Soldier was thinking of him. Then he mentally kicked himself for being a complete ass. This was la madame des miracles, la señora de los milagros, the world's savior, for Christ's sake, and he was being a fucking idiot to think she might have any interest in him, any feelings for him. But, oh God, the dream was so sublime.

Dream on, you stupid ass. Mentor's grip on my arm tightened.

Ron's ability to read people was non-existent with Em and he missed his skill, afraid of what it might mean. He dodged away from the recurring voice nagging at him unmercifully that it meant she wasn't human. Lord knew that question had been raised often enough in the last eight months.

Suddenly, he panicked. His lack of sense of her had to mean she wasn't human. He watched closely, eyes narrowed, looking for clues, looking in vain for anything to help read her.

You idiot. As if I'd let you "read" her. As if I'd let you get that close.

He was puzzled by her hands. Unlike everything else about her, they were not perfect. Most of her fingernails were broken badly enough to have caused bleeding and those that weren't broken, were filed unreasonably short. He searched for an explanation but the only thing he could come up with was manual labor and that hardly seemed to fit. He had no understanding of why such a seemingly trivial detail had taken on such significance.

I didn't understand either. What was he on about?

I didn't want Em to be a player in the media circus and lose her mystery. Let them talk about her, not to her. That's why I agreed to let her do the movie. Actually, with me, the movie thing went

way back to a school party. In my studies of Earth and humans I'd happened on Hollywood and was showing my friends some flicks. We laughed ourselves silly watching the action films. Futuristic stuff like *The Terminator* series especially tickled our funny bones. But, I explained to my friends, the power of Hollywood was astounding. Remember *War of the Worlds*? So, when Em broached the possibility of a movie her idea seemed like a good thing.

Wait a minute. Offering to do something for them? Now, what was she up to? I hadn't sanctioned this. Wanted more time with Ron, that was clear. Damn her.

"Tsk, tsk," Mentor said. She was actually grinning—devilishly.

Chapter 20

“Fucking bitch!” François shook his fist skyward. “Damn you to hell.”

He shook his fist again, then let his hand drop limply to his side as his flare of anger subsided. “*Merde!*” He sank to the bed and dropped his head. Miracle Madame. What a farce. She was a self-centered bitch, out for the glory.

“Tell me.” Her gentle voice mocked him. He sighed wearily.

“Tell me.” The command, repeated softly, startled him to attention. There she was, standing before him. He snorted. *Mon Dieu*, now he was hallucinating.

Waves of nausea washed over him. Always thin and angular, he was now so gaunt that he

avoided his reflection. He did not want to see his sunken cheeks, his hollow eyes ringed with blue-black shadows.

François was near breaking and he knew it. His family had urged him to come back to France and retire. Why didn't he? Why not buy a nice little chateau, find a woman, take a life of ease? His reporting of Madame had made him rich enough. Why did he stay in this godforsaken place working long hours with Mustafa? Was that Madame too? Was he trying to live up to some unvoiced expectation of hers? He cursed her, cursed the country, and cursed himself.

Mustafa had been right. The people here needed help. They got plenty of it at first. Emergency food relief followed by military

personnel sent to build roads and repair buildings.

Doctors and educators arrived with their enthusiasm and optimism to set up free clinics and start schools.

Satisfied the country was well on its way to recovery, they moved on to other continents, other projects, following the media following Madame.

“Bitch!” He almost wished she had never been.

Non! How could he say that? Without her, nothing would have changed. But where the fuck was she now? Who knew without watching the news? She moved so fast, flitting here and there across the globe, moving proverbial mountains, grandstanding, showing off.

Merde! He heaved his glass across the room, watched it shatter against the wall, watched the

glass shards hit the floor, and juice stain a trail downwards. His head sank to his knees.

“Tell me, François. Please.” It was her voice, saying his name, whisper soft. He groaned and muttered darkly, fearing for his sanity as he feared for his physical health. “François.” Louder, demanding.

He jerked upright and stared at the apparition before him. A full minute passed. He stood and reached out tentatively and she took his hand between both of hers.

“Madame. You are here?” He pulled away and took a step back. “You are really here?”

She was wearing the same dress, the dress she had been sure would get her killed; the dress he thought just might have some magic in it.

She moved away from him and propped the pillows against the wall at the head of his bed and gestured for him to make himself comfortable. He sat down, took off his shoes and swung his legs up on the bed, wiggling until the pillows felt right for his back. Exhilaration restored his energy. Madame slipped off her sandals and sat on the end of the bed, her legs curled under her. “Tell me,” she said.

Where to start? *Eh bien, elle ne sera contente qu'avec la vérité.* He took a deep breath and plunged in. “No real government, no public services, no infrastructure, unemployment, ethnic tensions; good men and women attempting to rebuild and failing.”

Agitated, he rose from the bed and paced as he spoke.

“The conditions in the country are even worse. There is some hope for agriculture in the south but the north is devastated by drought.

“Young girls are setting themselves on fire to avoid forced marriages,” he said. He watched as he spoke, saw the color drain from her face. He was sure he had said more than enough, but he couldn’t stop. “It is even worse if they don’t succeed. They end up in the understaffed, under-equipped hospitals surviving painfully.” He struggled in vain to hide the tears. “I saw one of those girls only a day ago.” He glanced at Madame and quickly turned from the heartbreak he saw there.

“The people were angry. Now they are bitter.” François stopped abruptly. He closed his

eyes, let the tears flow, and then blurted angrily,
“Rien ne changera jamais! J’avais tant d’espoir...”

“Is there nothing of the good?” she asked
bleakly.

He hesitated. “*Oui*, life is improving in
small ways. Hearing music and seeing children
going to school, girls too, is heartening but....

“This is a crisis.” His voice rose at this last
and cracked sharply, like a whip, alive and
punishing.

Em had risen soon after he started speaking,
and now stood staring fixedly at him, her body
rigid. She flinched at these last words.

“I didn’t see it coming and I should have. I
have seen enough all over the world in the last
while to know better. I’ve been so blind, so

thoughtless,” she said, her voice low and infinitely sad.

Mon dieu, qu'est-ce que j'ai fait? What had he done? Blamed her for everything. That was the way she would see it—his ranting. “*Non, Madame, non. S'il vous plaît.* It is not your fault. Mustafa said ... we promised Before you left, we promised we would change things, finish what you started. It was our job, not yours.”

She shook her head. “It is my fault. It’s my job and I deserted you.”

She crossed the room to stand before him. She leaned over and kissed him softly on the cheek. “*Merci, monsieur.*”

He stared up at her. “You have found someone,” he said at last.

“Yes.”

“I knew it wouldn’t be me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“*Eh, bien.*” He shrugged. The classic Gallic gesture masked his distress.

“Rest now,” she urged.

She rose and picked up her sandals and walked to the door. She paused, turned to look back at him, “Fatma and the children?”

“They still live out back. I asked them to take over the house itself as I am here so seldom. I offered to use the little shed when I am in the city, but Fatma refused. I had the shed fixed up got them some decent furniture.”

“She is working?”

“Yes. She started a small clinic with the medical supplies I have been able to get from France. She and Alyia keep my house clean and cook for me. The boys have gone back to school although the shortage of teachers frustrates them.”

“Alyia?”

“She learns, working with her mother. I will try to get her accepted to a secondary school in Europe—”

“But she won’t have the basics.”

“Do you ever wish you were not Miracle Madame?” François blurted. He saw that his question startled her.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I like the power.” She paused.

“And the fame.”

“But the responsibility is so *énorme*. It must weigh heavily.”

“*Oui*.” She paused and then turned away.

Her back still to him, she added, “And I am obliged to deal with it.” She left.

François stared at the door and decided that in his fragile state of fatigue and failing health he had imagined the encounter. He lay back, closed his eyes and slept fitfully. He woke six hours later tired and restless, showered, ignored the plate of food Fatma had set out for him, and went back to meet Mustafa.

It was not until some days later that he heard of the renewed efforts of aid agencies and most

importantly the intervention of the UN. That did not surprise him at all. He knew Madame was convinced that only a strong and viable UN could accomplish what was needed.

Within weeks all tribal skirmishes had stopped, an international team of political experts led the country; construction crews worked on roads and housing, and irrigation systems were restored. Education and health care began to improve, employment opportunities grew, and flowers bloomed.

François reported it all, gleefully. He became a fanatic, watching avidly for reports of her.

*

My Little Soldier let François rant, and bore the brunt of his accusations stoically. And it wasn't

her fault at all. I'd assumed the Raftans could take care of themselves after Em left. I sent her off on other missions. I was careless.

“Yves, where are you?” Elspeth's cheery voice did little to soothe me. I wasn't all that upset about Raftan. That I could fix. Only when François admitted his love for Em did I begin to understand my feelings—that hollow empty ache I felt when I thought of Em and Ron.

Chapter 21

They sat around the table staring at the empty chair that had been hers.

Shane looked around the group. “Hot damn! We ... us! We just had dinner with Miracle Madame. And we ... us, we are doing a movie for Miracle Madame. Can you believe it?”

His excitement was contagious. They all began talking at once, discussing every detail of the evening. No one mentioned the broken fingernails. Maybe they hadn't noticed, Ron thought, keeping that little observation to himself. *God, I'm truly fucked.*

“She's awesome.”

“So beautiful.”

“Can you believe she picked us?”

“Man, are we lucky or what?”

“Great sense of humor.”

“Easy to be with.”

“I still don’t understand why she can’t do interviews or make speeches. Doesn’t make sense.”

“She really is perfect, just like the reports claim.”

“God, yes!” Shane and Ron spoke in unison then glanced at each other and quickly looked away.

“She’s this world-wide heroine, but she’s so down to earth and warm, sort of motherly.” Vicky sounded amazed.

“I wonder,” Ian paused as if searching for the right words. “I wonder who takes care of her. She provides for everyone, finds all the answers. Who supports her, who answers her questions?”

Shane didn't think she had questions. He was sure she was omnipotent. He professed to be madly in love, holding his hand over his heart, sighing dramatically, and pleading with them to not tell his wife.

“There has been so much speculation about what she really is—robot, alien, human. What do you think now?” Allan asked.

“Can you love a robot?” Shane asked.

“If she's an alien, she sure knows how to come across as human,” Ian said.

“I don't know,” Vicky said. The others looked at her questioningly. “Well, I don't think anyone could do that good a job on a robot, and could any alien life form impersonate a human that well, unless of course they look just like us. Oh

God, I can't believe we're even having this conversation. I just don't know."

The fingernails! She had to be human, Ron decided. No robot would have broken bloody fingernails and no alien would think to add that kind of detail.

"Ron!" Jamie poked him in the ribs. "You haven't said a word. What do you think?"

"I think she's perfect." What he didn't say was that the love he had felt for her at a distance was now alive and personal and dangerously close to breaking him.

"Okay, Allan. Tell all," Jamie said. "How did this whole thing come about?"

“Why did you bring us here?” Ian asked. “I don’t think I’m a snob, and the food was great, but this little place isn’t exactly our style.”

“She chose the restaurant,” Allan said, “but I don’t know why.”

“Because she is a friend.” The answer came from Raül who was clearing away the last remnants of the meal. He set a bottle of Kahlua and six glasses on the table and poured coffee. “Would you like anything else?”

“Answers,” Vicky said. “How is she a friend?”

“She helped us in Guatemala. She was there for a trial. My father had been arrested and thrown in jail because he would not cooperate and tell lies. We thought we would never see him again because

so many people had already disappeared—forever.

But *la senora* changed everything. She got my father out of jail and she helped us to get here.”

“We heard about that trial. It was one of the first things she did, but we heard nothing about your family.” Shane tone was challenging.

Raúl shrugged. “My father is alive. We are here. That is proof enough for me.”

“Why haven’t you told anyone of this?”

“She asked us not to.”

“That’s all? She just asked you not to talk about her and you kept quiet?”

Jamie reached out and put a hand on his arm. “Shane, relax.”

“Do you see her often?” Ian asked.

“Yes, she comes to eat sometimes but mostly to visit with my grandmother. They are great friends. My mother says they like to tell each other dirty jokes. I do not know if that is true but when they are together they are always laughing. I think waiting for *la senora*’s visits is what keeps my grandmother alive. She is with my grandmother now.” Raül disappeared behind the kitchen door.

“Christ.” Ian expelled a gust of breath. “This is mind-boggling. There is obviously way more to Madame than what we hear in the news.”

Jamie’s eyes were wide with wonder. “What would people think if they knew what we now know?”

Vicky balanced dangerously on the edge of her chair and shook her finger at Allan. “Okay, spill.”

“I was alone at home last Saturday morning working on a script when the doorbell rang. I didn’t answer right away hoping whoever it was would go away. But the ringing was persistent. I yanked the door open ready to tell whoever it was to fuck off. Politely of course.” The others groaned. Allan was not known for polite, especially when he was angry. “You can imagine my shock when I opened the door and saw Miracle Madame standing there.”

“What did you say?” Vicky asked.

“Nothing, at first. I just stood there staring. I’m sure my mouth was hanging open and she probably thought I was an idiot. She introduced

herself and asked if we could talk or did I want her to come back at a more convenient time. I managed to collect myself enough to invite her in. I took her to my office and offered her a coffee but she only wanted a glass of water. I reached to light a cigarette. She asked me to please not smoke or if I really wanted to, could we go outside. I put my cigarettes away. After a bit of chit chat, mostly to make me feel more comfortable, I think, she presented her movie idea.” He paused. “You know, I think the scientists are right when they say she is protected by some sort of force field.”

“Come on, that’s too Hollywood, even for you.” Vicky laughed.

“I’m serious, damn it. When I saw her standing at the door I was afraid she would

disappear so I reached out to put my hand on her back and guide her in. I wasn't able to touch her."

"What do you mean?" Ron leaned forward, feeling sick and eager at the same time.

"My hand stopped about two inches from her body. It was like I was touching something solid but when I looked down there was a definite space between us." The others shook their heads in disbelief.

"Maybe it's the dress," Vicky said. "I mean it does look sort of magical. All those colors, it's like nothing we've ever seen."

"I tested my theory tonight. I reached out to put my hand on her back and the same thing happened."

“But, we shook hands and it was definitely skin to skin contact,” Shane argued.

“I know. Maybe she has to initiate the contact to break the field. Or only uses it when there is the possibility of danger. She must control it somehow.”

“Good Lord! This conversation sounds like something out of Star Trek. Maybe she isn’t even real. Maybe this is just a dream.” Jamie looked sad and bewildered.

“Maybe,” Ian said. “We’ll have to see what happens tomorrow.”

*

“I like them.” Elspeth said. “She’s chosen well. But, that one, Ron? What did he mean when he said he was fucked?”

Yeah, buddy, we are. “It’s a bad Earth word meaning he’s in trouble.”

“How is he in trouble?”

Because he doesn’t think of Em as a mother and neither do I. Elspeth tapped her foot and I knew I had to come up with an answer that would satisfy her. “He’s obsessed with Em.”

“You mean he’s fallen in love with her?”

My sister blushed at her words and tilted her head. So, there was something to the rumors about her and a boyfriend. Elspeth giggled. “That explains the goofy expression on his face every time he looks at Em.”

The guy had it bad. Trouble was I probably wore that same expression when I thought of her.

Chapter 22

Gram poked her head in the door of Ron's den. "Tony, are you hungry? We've eaten, but I can easily fix you something."

"Thanks, love, but I ate on the plane."

"You call that food."

Tony laughed. "It wasn't that bad." Gram made a face. "Okay, yes it was, but I was hungry so I ate it anyway."

"If you're sure...? I'm off to my dance class. See you two later. Don't stay up too late."

"Gotta love her," Tony said as Ron closed the door behind her. "Okay, pal, give. I want every damn detail."

"Hey, it's not my fault you were incommunicado. I called every number I knew that

morning. Didn't want you to miss the lunch of a lifetime. Where the hell were you? Off somewhere with your latest fling? Hope she was worth it."

Tony wagged his hand in a so-so gesture.

"Talk!"

"We met at Jamie's for lunch. The kids glommed onto Em like little magnets." Ron shook his head. "You would have been amazed. You know how sullen Tia can be sometimes?"

"Oh yeah. The joys of having a teenager in the house. Don't envy you, man."

"Well, you should have seen her, and the other kids—animated philosophers, I tell you. Comfortable with Em, no question. As if she was one of them. She knew a lot about them, and they liked that. Just as she knew a lot about us."

“Didn't that feel like an invasion?”

Ron considered the question carefully. “I hadn't thought about it that way, but no.”

“Part of her magic?”

“I guess.” Why, he asked himself, why did she have that effect?

“So what did she and the kids talk about? Sex? Drugs?”

Ron laughed. “What didn't they discuss would be a better question.”

*

“What happened to your hand?” Cole was the first to speak after the introductions. Typical kid, direct and honest. Em chuckled. The first two fingers of her left hand were bandaged together.

“I’m pretty much a klutz. I mashed my fingers between hand weights working out this morning.”

“You can’t be a klutz,” Tia said. “Not from what we see on TV anyway.”

“Oh, but I am.”

Cole snuggled up beside Em on the settee. She put an arm around his shoulder and asked, “Who is the person who has most influenced you?”

“My dad.” Judging by the look on Ron’s face, Tia’s answer had surprised him.

“Why?”

“No matter what happens he stays calm. Even if it’s something really upsetting, he doesn’t panic. He gets all quiet and you know he’s thinking it through. I admire the way he looks at all sides

before he decides what to do. I think it drives Gram crazy though because her style is to take charge and attack the problem right away.” Em looked over at Gram to see her nodding in agreement and glaring at Ron who grinned widely at her.

“What do you look for in a friend?” Em was always curious about teens’ thinking. So often the reality didn’t match the stereotype that many adults had of them.

“There’s a term that I think comes from Asian gangs, but don’t quote me on that—solid,” Adam said. “To me it means being a friend one hundred percent. Someone who is not going to cheat me or back-stab me. Someone completely reliable. My best friend would be the first person to

bail me out and not do it because he expected something in return.”

“Loyalty, honor, and respect are important too,” Amy said. “Respect has to be earned, not bought by material giveaways.”

“How do others earn your respect?”

“By not being judgmental or condemning about my political views, or how I dress, or how I go about things.” Tia had obviously given this a lot of thought.

“And adults?”

“By allowing us to find our own path.” Amy shot a meaningful glance in the direction of her parents.

“Amy!” her mother hissed.

“What?” Amy's tone turned belligerent.

“You don't want me blabbing family stuff?”

“There's such a thing as discretion,” Ian said.

“Right, Dad. Only Mom doesn't know what that is. Ask her what she discusses on bridge night or her book club or her golf dates.”

Her mom's face reddened. “Amy, please!”

Em put a hand on the girl's arm. Amy ducked her head. Her body trembled a little. An age old battle, Em thought. She'd talk to the two later, for now she needed a diversion. “What would you be willing to do for a friend?” she asked.

“Anything,” Adam said.

“Even something illegal? And, would you expect him to do something illegal for you?”

“It would depend on what kind of illegal,” Brad said. “Moral illegal would be different than law illegal. I wouldn’t do it just because a friend asked me to, like run drugs or something, but I would drive without a license if I thought it was necessary.”

Em glanced at Ron. His expression told her that his children were surprising him. They were great and obviously had a lot of respect for him. Didn’t he know them, listen to them? She was disappointed in him.

Amy had a question. “I’m finishing high school this year and my parents are insisting I have to go to college, but I don’t know if I want to.” Amy’s resentment simmered dangerously close to the surface.

“We'll talk later,” Em said.

But Amy wasn't ready to let it go. “What do you tell your kids? You do have kids?”

Em reached over and squeezed Amy's hand. *God, I love kids.* That thought and the feelings coursing through her heart unhinged her. *That must have come from my real life, the life I had—or have—apart from this one. Please, someone tell me.* She glanced up at the sky. *Why? Why look up?* She felt like such a beggar just then, but she didn't care. She wanted answers.

“We watch you all the time,” Jennifer said. “You do so many dangerous things. Aren't you scared?”

Em sighed inwardly. No answers for her, but maybe she had some for the kids. “I’m always petrified I’m not doing the right things.”

“Why do you do it then?” Cole asked.

“It’s my job.”

“Do you really think you can stop war?”

Adam asked.

Em froze. Her heart hardened. A mere touch and she would crack and splinter and sink away.

Adam reached out as if to comfort her, and then let his hand drop with a helpless look to his parents.

“Are you okay,” Cole asked. His voice, so full of concern, warmed her. He was still beside her on the settee, but had pulled away and was looking anxiously up at her. “Madame?” Cole put his hand on her cheek. “Mom! Do something,” he called to

Jamie. “Do something.” Her icy heart began to melt. She hugged him tightly and smiled wanly at Adam.

“To answer your question, Adam, I must or I wouldn’t keep trying.” Her tone was light, but she couldn’t stop the trembling, the aftershock of the feelings the question had roused in her. *War. God damn fucking war.*

“Most adults are uncomfortable with teens. How come you’re not?” Jennifer asked.

“I spend a lot of time with kids. They have been my best teachers.” *So that’s what I do in my real life? Work with teens. Why is it these answers come when I’m not thinking about it, but if I consciously try to catch my real life it always eludes me?*

“Do you like babies and little kids too?”

Cole asked.

“Yes, of course.” She ruffled his hair and he grinned up at her adoringly.

“Did you learn stuff from us today?” Brad asked.

“You taught me to be careful with what I do or say because I don’t always know who I may influence and how.”

“But adults are supposed to influence us, teach us,” Tia argued.

“Of course. But the most important part of the process of growing is to learn to think and decide for yourselves. Dig for information, get informed, ask questions, demand answers, and

make your own decisions. Never believe it just because someone said so.”

“Even you?” Amy grinned

“Oh, yes. I’m a product of media hype too. Don’t agree just because it’s me.”

*

Mentor gestured with her finger for me to approach. The scowl on her face scared me.

“What is she doing with all those little human kidlets?”

“Just spending some time with them. As a favor to their parents.”

“You mean it’s not part of her job?”

“No-o.” So, I let Em do it her way and I was in trouble again. Ah well, what else was new?

“So, she’s just talking with them?”

“Yes.”

“Why is that little one sitting so close to her?”

“I guess because he likes her.”

“Hum.” A sad, wistful look flitted across Mentor’s face.

I wanted to tell her I thought the kids were pretty cool. Not like up here. We’re all so ... conservative, I guess is the word, or maybe reserved is a better way to describe us. A conversation like the one Em had with the children wouldn’t happen up here. We keep things bottled up. Formal and staid, we are, especially the young around adults. I thought about that a lot after watching this scene. I spied on groups of human children to see how they behaved without adults. Pretty scandalous some of

the time, the things they discussed, the things they did. Our ways were definitely better, I thought. Definitely.

“Solid ... interesting word,” Mentor said.

Another great kid word. I rolled it on my tongue. Solid. Em was solid. Exelrud was solid. So was my sister. I think I was too.

*

“Wowza! What a day you guys had.” Tony grinned.

“Yes, but—”

“No buts about it, you lucky bastard. Did she spend all of the time with the kids?”

“Pretty much. Not that she neglected the adults, understand. It just seemed she was more comfortable with the kids or maybe understood that

their needs were more urgent than ours.” Or maybe the need was hers, Ron realized with sudden insight as a vision of the kids hugging her goodbye filled his mind’s eye. Maybe she needed their energy, their enthusiasm, needed their need of her. “It was a magical afternoon for all of us.”

“Everyone says she’s beautiful. They even call her a golden goddess. She looks pretty damn good in all the pictures we see. What’s she like in real life?”

“Tony, she’s amazing. Her green eyes sparkle with fun and mischief and love of life. She has a great figure, curvy and—you’ll love this—very fit, and a beautiful golden-toned skin that is flawless. Her hair gleams blond, gold, red. She has a wonderful genuine laugh, sees the humor in all but

the gravest situations. That is where her beauty comes from. Yes, she is beautiful, inside and out. The most beautiful person I've ever met."

"Hey buddy, sounds like you're in love with her."

"Of course I am. Aren't you? Isn't everybody?" Ron laughed. "Let's be honest, we all want to park our shoes under her bed."

"Oh, yeah. You got that right." Tony laughed along with Ron. "How did the women react to her? Were they jealous? What did Jamie say?"

Ron sighed. How to explain? "How could anyone be jealous of her after all she's done?"

"Yeah. Gotta respect her, that's for sure. So, if you had to sum her up in one word, what would it be?"

“Thanks Tony. Ask the easy questions, why don’t you?” Dozens of words came to mind. Motherly. Sexy as hell. Confident, bordering on arrogant. Scared, sometimes for her personal safety, but also for the consequences of her actions.

Tony wanted one word. A whole dictionary wouldn’t suffice.

Chapter 23

Em floated far above the clouds, Earth appearing smaller and smaller as it receded into the vast blackness that was the sky. The sensation of a weightless eternity was a balm to her heart. Soaring. Soaring.

“You are not dead. You are not dreaming.” I kept my voice deep, calm, and soothing. “We have transported you here. Do not be afraid.” She wasn’t. “You believe in aliens.” This was not a question. I knew.

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you believe in gods?”

“They’re nothing more than mankind’s way of explaining our existence. It’s much simpler than that.”

What? Me? Simple? “How so?” I asked.

“We happened by pure accident in the evolutionary process.”

Accident! I chuckled. The Guardians wouldn’t like to hear that. “What do you believe happens when you die?”

“I had a near-death experience once. It was like this. Flawless calm.”

Now she was catching on. “And after death?”

“Nothing. Or maybe we become ghosts. Maybe we live another life somewhere.”

Really catching on. “Do you know who we are?”

She looked down to an earth no bigger than a pin point. “The controllers.”

“Yes. We are Powers. We work for the Guardians of the Universe.”

“Sounds suspiciously like talk of gods to me.”

“Not gods. But we do keep an eye on things, so to speak.”

“And interfere when you decide things aren’t going right. Use people like me to do the dirty work.”

Her words, her snarky tone; I should have been indignant, would have been with anyone other than my Little Soldier. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this at the beginning, before I started flailing about Earth on my little errands?” Again, the snarky tone. She

really was gutsy or just so angry she didn't care what I might do to her.

“Experience has taught us it is better for an aboriginal of a planet to learn about the powers we bestow in their own way. You have already learned much. You will continue to learn.”

“Please tell me you are guiding me.”

“All the time at first, yes. Less often now. You have an innate understanding of the complexities of your planet. You, acting on instinct, are ultimately more efficient and effective than our directives could ever be.”

“Christ! Isn't that putting a little too much faith in a mere human? Not to mention it's a hell of a burden?”

“What you do weighs heavily, I know.”

“You control my transports. At least you did at first, and still do most often, the locations, the timing.”

Her mind jumping like that scared me. Was she ADHD or something? No, no, I assured myself. It was just the strangeness of it all. I had to reassure her. “Of course,” I said. “You can’t do it all by yourself.”

“How can I be so sure that I am doing the right things?”

“You have always questioned, considered, thought, and wanted more for the world.”

“What do you mean, always? I have no knowledge of a time other than this, of a life before the jungle bloodbath.”

“You are two halves of a whole.”

“I do have another life.” She was ecstatic. The answer made her feel less disconnected as I knew it would. “Why don’t I remember?”

“You already remember some things. More will come to you when the time is right. The relationship of Miracle Madame—silly name they gave you—to your regular life is also better discovered on your own in your own time.”

She looked down; the speck that was Earth even tinier now. She took a deep breath, and then blurted, “How can you be sure that, through me, you are doing the right things for Earth?”

Oh Guardian, the very question I asked myself constantly. She wasn’t supposed to ask it. She was supposed to be my reassurance, my safety net. I had to do something, and fast.

“You worry too much, but that, too, makes you more effective.” My effort to soothe her succeeded only in riling her again.

She threw up her hands. “Now isn’t that just jim-dandy. Obviously, there’ll be no relief from the grinding stress of this hellish role you’ve given me.”

Sometimes she knew too much. And, though she desperately wanted to press the issue, she shifted topics. I sighed with relief. She’d be strong enough—for both of us; do the right things—for both of us.

“But, if I have a real life somewhere else, how is it that I can be gone so much? Doesn’t anyone notice?”

“We control time. To them you’re never gone.” I don’t think she heard my answer. She had so many questions whirling in her head.

“They say I’m perfect, that everything I do is miraculously right.”

“It works best if they think that.”

“Why don’t I—?”

“Do you think war can be stopped?”

“I wish!”

“We know what you wish. The question is— do you think war can be stopped?”

“Under the right conditions, yes.”

“Do it!” *If you can*, I muttered sotto voice; for even I wasn’t sure we could stop war. I’d do my damndest of course. She didn’t hear my last words as she watched Earth rise to meet her.

*

“Do you think war can ever be stopped?”

She played with her empty water glass, rolling it between her hands across her desk top.

Tom reached out and put a hand on hers.

“You okay, Boss? You seem a bit spooked.”

Spooked? Now there's a fine word for it—him—them. The deep voice still reverberated in her head. Do it, he'd said. Yes, but how? And is it even possible? “I'm fine. Just a little tired is all. About war....”

“Oh, God, ask the easy questions why don't you? We've been studying the WWs in class. The kids are convinced war is a given. They think WWII is looming.”

“They do?”

Tom fidgeted in his chair. “Sometimes I hate my job. Should'a been a phys ed teacher. As it is, I get into too many moral issues and heavy discussions with my students for my liking. I know our kids have good lives compared to so many in the world, but no kid should have to worry about war.

“So, can wars be stopped?”

“You mean all wars? Forever?”

She nodded.

“In your dreams, girl.”

Chapter 24

Em stood in the dark narrow alley waiting; shivered in spite of the tall boots and the long heavy coat she wore over her dress. She blew on her hands and shoved them into her pockets, found fuzzy pink mitts there and put them on. Who knew the desert could be this cold? She wrinkled her nose and breathed through her mouth to avoid the pungent odor of rotting food. She tried not to think of the rats and mice and most of all the cockroaches she could hear scurrying through the garbage.

The meeting would end soon; the door would open slowly but reveal no light as they left the back room of the restaurant one by one searching out the shadowed corners and slipping unnoticed from the alley into the street. She waited

for two in particular, one of them young, idealistic, malleable. She would dismantle the bomb, redirect him. The ring told her so.

She needed the second man, the one who would stay behind, to get to the leader. The ring told her that too.

She was baffled by the growing self-assurance that came with each job and wondered for the hundredth time if that bizarre encounter with the voice was more than a dream. That visit had to be as real or unreal as her life as Madame, she finally decided. She prayed that the messages in the ring were coming from that voice, not at all sure why she trusted it. But what choice did she have? The messages in the ring, telling her what to do ... they

had to be right. The alternative didn't bear thinking about.

An aboriginal of the planet, he'd said. That was her. Since that conversation, she found herself watching everyone, trying to determine who was real and who might not be. After meeting the voice.... Well, the idea of aliens had more substance now, more appeal.

She played with the ring, twisting it on her finger, sliding it partially off and then back on. It felt natural to play with the ring like that. A reflex action from her "other" life? She hoped so. Made her feel a little more whole, a little more real.

She made a mental note to begin staff performance reviews and contract recommendations on Monday. *Wait a minute. What reviews? What*

contracts? Oh my God! That's my real life creeping in? It has to be. Of course when she tried to build on those fleeting thoughts they disappeared. So fucking frustrating and not a damn thing she could do about it. She wondered if she'd ever get her life back? Would she want it back, after all this? No. Don't go there. Think of something else. She managed to talk herself out of a deep funk.

She shifted to Mr. Austin and the movie she'd asked him to make. The voice had said her movie idea was okay; told her he'd help—as a little reward. Told her it suited his purposes. She felt guilty, indulging her Hollywood fantasies when she had such important work to do. But then, the movie was part of her work, designed to impact viewers the way the voice wanted.

Her thoughts careened to a halt as she realized she was accepting the idea of a superpower controlling her. Was she certifiably insane? She shifted uncomfortably as shivers that had nothing to do with the chill of the night coursed through her. *Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!* She could feel the rising panic. Scraping sounds brought her concentration back to the task at hand. She surveyed the building and moved a few inches to her left to get a clearer view of the doorway. The air was still, the city quiet, the small creatures still rustling. She waited.

Her thoughts wandered yet again, to the dinner meeting with Mr. Austin and the others. She was baffled, as always, by people's reactions to her. She felt so very ordinary. Allan had winked at her

smugly from his position behind his friends. Shane had looked like a kid who had just been granted full access to the cookie jar. Vicky's eyes had widened, her hand clamped over her mouth. Jamie, standing beside Ron, had stared openly. Ian looked flummoxed and unbelieving. Ron...? His reaction had been much more complex, a blend of disbelief, awe and....

He was an unhandsome man. His hair was spiky and unruly, likely with a mind of its own and his features were at odds with each other, mouth too wide, chin too long, but he had the most incredible eyes she had ever seen. Eyes that she could easily get lost in and not mind if she was never found again, eyes that could see her soul. The same piercing depth and brilliance as her ring. Her heart

thudded for a moment. Had the voice sent Ron to her?

Ron was attracted to her, she knew; there was no question about that. The only question was how she felt about him.

Attracted? The touch of his hand—a heart-stopping jolt. If that was any indication.... She had looked into his eyes and enjoyed, for the first time, the luxury of leaving the world for a moment and indulging in wild fantasies—fantasies she suspected matched his, though she had no understanding of why this particular man took her on this flight.

She'd met so many men in the past months, had had fleeting attractions to a great number of them—François for one—but none had affected her as Ron did. She didn't want to be attracted to him

this much, didn't want to obligate him, didn't want to be obligated to him, and definitely didn't want to want so much to be held by him. She didn't understand it and she didn't like it. Just one more manifestation of the unbelievable turn her life had taken, another manifestation of her lack of control. *Over my own life, for God's sake.*

She was glad she had the movie as an excuse to see Ron again. His eyes, those incredible eyes, had spoken volumes and she felt an almost tangible connection to this virtual stranger. Maybe Powers had sent him to help her with her work. She laughed at herself before that thought was even completed. She definitely didn't want Ron's help with her work. She wanted.... *Stop it! Keep your mind on your job, girl.*

All thoughts of Ron vanished as the door opened slowly. Nine men slipped into the alley and disappeared in the darkness. Her finger tingled. She glanced at the ring. Two men still in the darkened room. Her turn. She entered and pulled the door closed.

“Give it to me.” The youth gaped at her. The older man scowled but didn’t move. “I won’t say it twice.” The younger man lifted his bulky sweater over his head, dropped it by his feet, and began to unwind the bindings from his torso. She held out her hand. He passed the explosives to her. He squatted down to pick up his sweater, hugged it to his scrawny chest and backed away from her. He put one hand behind him, felt for the wall and sidled along it to the door. He never once took his eyes off

her. “No more,” she said. He nodded twice, then twice more, and startled away like a deer escaping the headlights.

The older man growled and lunged at her. “Oh, no you don’t,” she said and raised her arm to block his swing. “You can stop right now.” He did. “Take me to your leader.” *Pretty lame, but fun.*

The man slumped, accepted his defeat, and gestured for her to follow.

*

Feeling full and relaxed, Elspeth and I sat with our parents after dinner. We didn’t have a lot of family time. I often wondered if the Guardians had ulterior motives in keeping Drones so fully occupied.

“That’s a clever little device you’ve described to us, son.” My father was intrigued with gadgets and thought the ring I’d given Em was one of the best.

“I found it in the antiquities room at the library. It was one of the first attempts at communication, but apparently was discarded as unusable.”

“Why did you choose it then?”

Why indeed? The stupid ring had caused me no end of grief trying to communicate with Em. All those swirls of light and color that refused to reform into messages she could interpret. And yet, I’d stubbornly stuck with it. A ring fashioned from a single piece of diamond was somehow most fitting

for my Little Soldier. Elspeth had accused me of being a romantic, whatever that meant.

I glanced at my father who was waiting for an explanation. “There was something about the ring that seemed perfect for Earth. And,” here I puffed my chest out with pride, “I found that if I focus my thoughts to the very center of the ring, I’m able to send clear pictures that she can understand. It’s working marvelously.” I didn’t mention that Em loved the feel of the ring, the weightiness of it. Made her feel connected to me. I liked that.

“How did you—”

A tingle in my ear signaled an incoming message. “Sorry, Dad, I’ve been summoned.” It was time to report on my meeting with Em.

Mom held up my cloak and hurried me on my way.

*

“She was certain that I was ... we were ... guiding her. I used my voice when I spoke with Em, but I always spoke in the plural.” Mentor’s eyebrows rose ever so slightly. “Not in a royal sense.” I rushed to explain. “In a collective sense because we Powers have you guiding us and we have the backing of the Grand Council, at the directives of the Guardians, so our work really is collective and I thought—”

“Yes, yes.” Mentor waved a hand dismissively. “Is he there?”

She meant Ron, of course. “Yes.”

“And?”

I shifted uncomfortably. Watching Em, I'd seen that my desires mirrored hers. Was I inadvertently transmitting to her? Was she then directing them to Ron instead of to me? What the Sky was going on? I hadn't brought Ron into her life but there he was, damn it. "She's falling for him." *Unhandsome*. She was too kind. "And she thinks I sent him."

"Perfect." Mentor smirked.

The bitch was up to something. No doubt about it.

Chapter 25

“God-damn-it!” Allan threw the phone in a desk drawer and slammed it shut, which served to muffle the incessant ringing slightly.

“Can’t say she didn’t warn you.” Ian grinned.

“I know. I know. But every Tom, Dick, and Harry wants a piece of this movie, even guys who wouldn’t know a camera from a projector. High-powered money, all of it. I don’t need this grief.”

Jamie rolled her eyes. “Unplug the damn phone and let us get to work.”

“Okay.” Allan led the way from his office to a conference room. “Here’s the scoop. I’ve met with Madame twice since our dinner. She’s given me an

outline of her concept for the movie. Joe and his team are working on the script now.”

“What kinds of demands did she make?”

Shane asked.

“None. This is our baby.” Allan closed his eyes, then opened them just enough to squint. “Oh, yeah. One more thing. She said you guys could help develop the script.”

“Yahoo!” Shane wasn’t the only one jumping with glee. Script control was an actor’s dream.

Allan sighed and sagged lower in his chair.

“Lord, Madame, do you have any idea what you’ve condemned me to?”

Jamie laughed and tousled his hair. “We’ll go easy on you.”

Allan rolled his eyes. “Sure you will.”

Why did she leave them to develop the movie on their own? Was that because she thought she had given Allan enough input, or because she chose to trust them? Or, Ron wondered with a flash of insight, was it because she controlled what they did in the same mysterious way she controlled everything she was implicated in? He sat up straighter. If she did control them, did she control him too? Were his feelings for her his own or fabricated by her? Tiny flames of anger flared.

“She wants a movie dependent on a strong storyline and strong characters, not on special effects. She made it very clear that it’s to be a love story, not just love between the hero and heroine, but love for family and friends and fellow man. She

wants people to go home from the movie taking love and laughter from it to their own homes and lives.”

“A tall order.” Vicky looked worried. “Love conquers all.”

“How do we do it without sounding clichéd?”

“I’ve made some notes, and here’s an early draft of Joe’s outline. I think he’s made a damn good start and we’ll make one hell of a movie.”

Ron studied Allan. Did he really believe that? Didn’t everything belong to Em—the idea, the success, and the credit? Wasn’t this just like everything else she did?

*

Day one of a shoot was always filled with excited anticipation that soon wore off with the “hurry up and wait” of actual filming. The cast and crew were gathered for one of Allan’s famous opening speeches.

There was a ripple of activity and a rise in tension from the back of the group. Then laughter. Ron’s heart lurched when he spotted Em. She was shaking hands and chatting with crew members. With a wink at Allan, she told them to have fun and asked that it be a truly closed set. Ron almost cried when she turned to leave. She hadn’t acknowledged him at all, hadn’t even seemed to notice him.

*

Em shook hands with Allan and headed for the exit. She hadn’t dared look at Ron. Everyone

would know how she felt just by looking at her face. She sighed with relief when she saw him headed her way.

“Allow me to escort you, Madame.” He sounded nervous, gave a slight formal bow and offered his arm. Em glanced up at him and after a moment inclined her head and slid her hand through the crook of his elbow. He placed his other hand on her arm. His touch burned and she wanted to prolong her time with him, but didn’t know what to say. The silence held no awkwardness, but rather a tingling of anticipation. At the door, she gently disengaged her arm from his and held his hand in both of hers. She turned to face him directly and smiled. Thank you, was all she said.

*

I groaned as I watched. I was glad Elspeth wasn't around. I needed to be alone, for there was a glow around Ron, a sort of halo of happiness and fulfillment, a halo with a sexual edge that set my teeth to grinding.

*

Allan raked his hands through his hair. He was tired and cranky. "Damn. This just isn't working." They were watching shots of the rescue scene. "It sounded so damn good on paper, but on film it looks fucking stupid." Allan frowned and muttered under his breath.

The argument started all over again as they tried to resolve the pivotal scene.

"You're making her sound like a wimp," Jamie said.

“Come on Jamie, be reasonable. At this point your character is afraid for her life and the life of the man she loves. Of course she would plead,” Shane said.

“But everything we know about her says that she is strong and would stand up to these guys.” Vicky was sticking to her guns on this one. Jamie agreed.

“God, what was Madame thinking? She must never have worked with actors or she wouldn’t have insisted you all be part of the creative process.” Allan slumped in his chair only half joking.

“We need Miracle Madame,” Ian said.

*

“You called?” Em was thrilled. They needed her. And Ron was there.

“I don’t know what Ian has in mind, but it’s good to see you.” Allan beamed.

“And why do you need me?”

“I think you should come to the rescue,” Ian said.

“Ian, you’re brilliant.” Jamie jumped up and hugged him. “We can rewrite the scene and have Madame come in just before Ron’s character goes to the police.”

“No, let’s have her—”

“See what you condemned me to, asking me to work with actors. I’ll be lucky if I’m not bald when this is done.”

She laughed and reached over to ruffle Allan's very thick hair. "I wouldn't start worrying yet."

Ron hushed the group and turned to her. "Will you do it?" He looked down at his hand, resting lightly on her shoulder. His eyes smiled.

"You really want me in the movie?" They nodded. "Mr. Austin?"

"I have to confess, their idea makes sense and what we have now just isn't any good."

"Have we got that on tape?" Vicky asked. "Allan admitting we're right. Wow." Allan glared at her.

"Will you do it?" Ron repeated.

She looked around the group and glanced up at Ron. He nodded encouragingly. “What the heck. Sure. When do you want me here?”

Those were the best days—those days on the set. Talk and laughter and ... well, worry free time, carefree time, is what it was. And there were moments when she had the great good fortune to be alone with Ron.

*

I hadn't sent her to that damn movie set. She went on her own. She was getting a bit too independent for my liking. I paced and fumed watching her with her *precious* little Ronnie, and jumped when Elspeth snuck up on me.

She chuckled. “Sorry.” Didn't sound the least bit sincere. Bratty sister. “May I watch again?”

“Sure.” Why not let her? She knew the whole story anyway.

“Oh, that’s nice.” Elspeth practically cooed. “Poor Ron was so nervous he could hardly talk to Em, but look at him now. Chatting away.”

I hated the comfort zone developing between them, hated the way he looked at her, the way she looked at him. Big moony eyes.

“Why does he keep frowning at her hands?”

“He’s speculating endlessly about her broken fingernails.” I couldn’t figure out why that was such an issue with him. Broken fingernails. Big deal.

“They really like each other.” Em, perched on a stool, put an arm around Ron’s shoulder and leaned closer to whisper something in his ear. He

leaned toward her to close the distance between them. Elspeth smiled indulgently as she watched.

Just how would that feel? I wondered. To have that touch, that closeness, that gentle intimacy.

*

As Em joked with Vicky, Jamie chewed on her bottom lip. Someone called Vicky to change her costume.

“What’s bothering you so, Miss Town?”

“He’s in love with you,” Jamie blurted.

“Desperately in love with you. He’s our friend. We care about him and don’t want to see him hurt.” Em stared at Jamie, her heart in her throat and beating faster than usual. *I’m not wrong. I’m not wrong.* She almost sang the words out loud. Jamie shuffled her feet and looked down at the floor. Em turned to see

Ron watching them. “Please let him down gently.”

Jamie said.

“Or, maybe not at all.”

*

“Shit, shit, shit.” I ran. As fast as I could, across the park, past the guards, smack into Mentor coming out of the Grand Council Chambers. I edged past her, ignored her call, and ran.

*

“So-o-o?” Tony stood in the doorway to Ron’s den, frowning at his friend. “In the doldrums are we? Pouting a little? Missing the glory of working with Em.”

Ron glared. Tony was always too damned perceptive.

Tony laughed and settled in the recliner beside Ron's, known as the UTBC, "Uncle Tony's Behind Comforter." Tony took a sip of the cognac Ron handed him. "Do you think she enjoyed filming?"

"Nah. She tried to hide it, but she's too impatient for all the waiting around."

"It's amazing that no one leaked the story of her on your set."

"She asked for a closed set and she got it." Controlled everything. Controlled me? Ron was in agony. If she controlled him, what did that make him? A fucking boy-toy, without the fucking?

"The movie's a bloody sensation. All the hype that Hollywood dreams of, but can never quite generate. Everyone's talking about it. As if one little

movie could change the world. Of course since it's her movie, it is changing the world. Have you seen the testimonials?"

Control, total control. Ron chose his words carefully. "I believe that no matter what we had done with the movie, it would have had the exact impact on viewers that she wanted."

"You believe she has that much power and control over the world?"

And of me?

"Ron? You with me, buddy?"

"For sure. You only have to watch the news to know that."

"Jesus! You really think so." Ron nodded.

"Well you got to be with her up close and personal, you ought to know. All the big guns—CIA, KBG,

UN—would love to say she’s theirs. Did she ever explain any of this to you?”

Ron shrugged. “No.”

“Makes sense. Can’t imagine her revealing too much. Your life’s gonna be a media barrage of hell now. Any regrets?”

“Hell, no!”

Tony laughed at the outburst. “None?”

“Working with her has been a gift.” In the core of his being he felt truly blessed.

*

They went to Raül’s to celebrate completing the film. Raül and his father greeted them warmly, brought several platters of food and numerous bottles of beer, and refused to accept payment.

“How are you surviving?” Ian asked Raül.

“Is all the attention from the media, not to mention the hordes of people lined up to eat here, driving you crazy?”

“It did for a while, but we asked *la senora* to stop it and she did.”

“Why?” Shane asked. “You could have made a lot of money. Moved to a bigger place.”

“We are happy here. My mother says what we have is enough. My father says we don’t need to get greedy like the landowners back home.”

“This is one very wise family,” Vicky said as Raül went to the next table. “I admire them.”

“Why do you suppose she never offered us the option of being free of the media frenzy?”

Shane asked.

“Would we really want that?” Allan asked.

There was a long silence as they studied their cutlery intently.

“We like the attention,” Ian said finally. “At least I know I do.”

Em’s sudden arrival interrupted whatever the others might have said. “I was visiting with Grandma, and Raül said you were here.” Soon the conversation was sailing along with hoots of laughter and good-natured fun.

*

There were times I wanted to reveal myself, let the cozy little group see me, let everyone see me, let them know it was me working with Em, and this was one of those times. To be with that cheery

group, talking and joking with Em ..., but of course that too, was against the rules.

Ron sat there like some sort of king. He was, I guess. Why Mentor chose him, I'll never know, but he was one lucky bastard.

Chapter 26

Clad in pajamas, she lay on the sofa, the book in her hand, open, but unread. *I've been in a movie.* Every little girl's dream come true. And, no one will ever know.

So many secrets to keep. Listening to those around her talk about Madame—most difficult when they asked for her opinion. “What do you think?” the students said, expecting her to have all the answers. After all, she was the principal. “What do you think?” the teachers asked, wanting her opinion. After all, she was the Boss.

What did she think? It would be so easy to believe it was a dream, so easy to dismiss it all as a mental aberration, so very much easier to pretend none of it was real. She snorted. Impossible to

dismiss the voice, the ring, the wounds she sometimes came home with—all self inflicted. Cuts and bruises from machetes and thorns and klutzy stumbles and.... Too many languages rang in her ears, too many voices reverberated in her head—especially his. That voice. The one that took her up, up and away.

The phone rang. She reached out to the coffee table, grabbed it, considered letting voice mail pick up, and finally answered after six rings.

“It's time for the party.” That voice again.

*

They were high on champagne and the success of the movie. This party was for the cast and crew, their spouses, and a few select guests. Ron had invited Gram but she had refused, saying

the evening was for him. She helped him with his tux and tie. The kids presented him with a red rose for his lapel and sent him off in the studio limo with advice to enjoy himself and bask in the glory.

The six of them had been circulating and now stood together chatting. Em joined them, but no one had seen her arrive.

“You were awesome. Thank you so much. Allan, I know this was a lot of work, but I’m convinced the final product is worth every minute. And you still have your hair.”

“But it is a lot thinner and grayer,” he protested as his wife rolled her eyes.

“Liar!” Em laughed. “Jamie, you were a wonderful heroine. Beautiful, kind, brave, like your true self, I think.”

“Thank you, Madame. That is the nicest compliment I’ve ever received, but the real me isn’t quite that virtuous.”

“Maybe not, but close. Vicky, you make a wonderful friend and your sense of humor was a delightful addition to the role.” Vicky blushed.

“Ian, I had no idea you could be such an old curmudgeon.”

“I did,” his wife said dryly and everyone laughed.

“Shane, I could easily have fallen in love with your character.”

“Not with the real me?” He pretended grave hurt.

“Yes, with the real you too.” Em winked at Shane’s wife.

“Ron, what can I say? You make the perfect hero.” She hugged them each in turn.

“Madame, I’ve been asked to speak on behalf of the group,” Allan began. “You gave me an incredible opportunity to make a movie with no constraints, no budgetary woes and no interference—except from actors that is.” The others groaned and rolled their eyes.

“Get on with it,” Ian ordered.

“We want you to know that if there is ever anything we can do for you, just say the word.”

“Thank you. Actually there is something. Ron, I would like to borrow you for two or three days.” There, she’d done it. Made her move. She felt tingly with anticipation. Soon. Soon, she’d be alone with Ron.

“Wh—?” Jamie began, but Ian nudged her to silence.

“Will you help me?” Em asked.

Ron stood there with a stunned look on his face.

Shane elbowed him. “Sheesh Ron, answer the lady.”

“I’m sorry,” he stammered. “Of course I’ll help.”

Chapter 27

Em fell asleep in Africa. I should have transported her home, but she was exhausted, so I watched over her as she slept on the open plains wrapped in a masai blanket. She didn’t stir as a cheetah and then a zebra sniffed at her still form.

An elephant snuffled at her and lumbered away and still she slept.

*

Everything was blanketed in deep wet snow that clung stubbornly to trees, weighing heavily to break branches or fall in small avalanches trapping whatever was unfortunate enough to be underneath. The same texture that trapped tires and created moving ruts in the road, but was perfect for snowmen and snowballs.

She tried desperately to keep her mobyette upright and moving forward and wondered vaguely why she was riding such a flimsy little motor bike in these conditions. She was subliminally aware that she wasn't cold with no coat or mitts or boots.

It was imperative that she get to the main drag. She could see it in the distance, sloppy wet with melted snow and sand, much dirtier but easier to drive on than the pristine white of the side streets. She checked the street signs looking for 100A. The signs changed each time she looked – 1,000,000 – 1,000 – 1,000,000,000. The numbers made no sense.

She looked for the main street again but it was no longer there. A maze of side streets, clogged with cars stuck in the snow, surrounded her. She looked again. The main drag was to her right, then to her left, and finally directly in front of her but miles away, so far that she could barely see the stream of traffic that flowed on it endlessly. She started to panic, sure she would never make it. Still

she struggled with the mobylette as she negotiated the ruts and dodged snow-laden tree branches that threatened to sweep her off the bike.

Birds chirping merrily in the brush, and the low rumbling growl of a lioness alerted her finally to the fact that she was awake. Her sense of relief was disproportionate to the dream that hadn't been particularly frightening.

*

Weird. I thought Em's dream came from various experiences in her life: winter from her childhood isolated on a farm and often snowed in, the roads and traffic and street numbers from the trauma of moving from the farm to the city and getting lost on her way home from school. As for

the mobylette, it was just like the one she owned when she lived in West Africa.

Mentor disagreed, told me I lacked perception and insight. She said the dream came from Em's search for self, from the disconnect between her life before and her life working with me. I grudgingly admitted that would explain Em's extreme reaction to the dream and her relief when she woke.

Chapter 28

Em heard the car pull up and Frank get out to open Ron's door. "Go right in, sir." His voice rang clear in the crisp night air.

What would Ron notice first when he entered? Her boots stood to the left of the door. Would he see them? Wonder at the military gleam?

He entered the living room, paused there. She pictured him in front of the television, watching for a moment and trying to puzzle out what language the rapid staccato was. If he guessed Arabic he'd be right. He walked toward the light she'd left on in the kitchen. He'd see her half empty glass of water on the counter.

She heard him return to the entrance and follow the hallway to the left. It led to a bedroom

and en-suite bathroom with a huge shower. French doors opened to a spacious pool deck.

She stood at the railing watching the ocean. Every part of her tingled. Giddy as a teenager on her first date, she gripped the railing and searched frantically for something to say for he'd find her out here any moment now. She turned slowly at the sound of his indrawn breath.

“I wasn't sure you would come,” she whispered.

“How could I not, when it was you who asked?”

“Still....” She shrugged. How to explain? That request could have been a command. She had the power to make him come to her, but she hadn't

used it. She had wanted him to want her, to come of his own accord.

Taut silence stretched between them. The air crackled with primal energy. She thought that only happened in romance novels. She reached up as if to touch his cheek and then, suddenly nervous, let her hand drop. He inhaled sharply.

Ron cupped her face in his hands then slid one around to the back of her head pulling her closer as he lowered his mouth to hers. *Oh, God, yes. This is what I want. This is what I need.* She reached up and wrapped both her arms around his neck. It was not a kiss, but a mutual assault, raw and demanding. They panted heavily as they broke apart.

“My God, I’ve never....” To her dismay he stopped.

“Never what?”

“Never felt anything like this before.” He looked stricken.

“How do you feel?” She asked the question softly, hoping he’d explain. She needed to know.

“I can’t explain. I feel so many things. Happy, of course—ecstatic—but sad too. I’m.... I feel.... I don’t know. Loving you—it’s all so mixed up and so complex.”

“And, that’s a good thing?” She studied his face. Less stricken now, but still scared. She prayed then, for a moment.

“Yes, yes, yes, it’s a good thing.” He smiled and never had she seen anything so beautiful.

“Everything about you, the taste of you, the smell of you, the fit of you. I love everything.” His voice cracked as he pulled her closer for another kiss.

Forever after she would have no memory of undressing or finding the bed. There were no gentle caresses or tender foreplay.

“Oh my God, Ron.” She moaned and gasped for breath. “I don’t need memory of another life to know that I’ve never experienced anything as incredible as this.” She felt tears flowing down her face.

“Sh-sh, it’s all right,” Ron crooned as he collapsed on top of her gasping for breath. “Sh-sh, it’s all right,” he soothed again. “It’s all right.”

Her sobbing eased.

“I’m sorry,” Ron gasped.

“Don’t you dare apologize.”

“But, I’ve never...” He stopped as if unable to find the words.

“Been so physical, so aggressive?” She supplied the words that worked for her.

“Yeah.” He blushed with the admission.

“Or so satisfied?”

“Yes.” It was a whisper, barely audible.

“Me too,” she said.

She didn’t know why Ron had come into her life. Maybe because the “voice” knew she needed someone? Whatever the reason, she thanked those beings up there that Ron was here with her and that she could let him into her life—to a point. She smiled up at him, happier than she had been in a long, long time.

Ron stroked her cheek with his fingers and kissed her nose. “The very first time I saw you, I wanted to love you, until you were blind to everything but my face, deaf to everything but my voice. I wanted to love you until the world ceased to exist except for me, until there was nothing for you, but me. I wanted to keep you with me, just me, forever.”

She pushed him off and shifted to lie on top. “You’ve come close to having it. As close as anyone could.” Her kiss was not soft or gentle. She lowered herself to join with him and the wild spiral of desire and gratification began again.

A long time later, when their breathing was more or less normal, Ron shifted out from under to lie beside her propping his head on one hand. The

moon cast light and shadow over their bodies. He traced the curve of her hip, the swell of her breast with his palm. He wove his fingers through the tangled curls of her hair. “I wanted to do this from the very first time I saw you,” he said. “So soft. I knew it would be. And the colors—”

“Not ready to embrace the gray,” she mumbled, almost asleep.

“You look so young and vulnerable it frightens me. You’re so small compared to me—delicate and fragile.”

“I won’t break,” she protested.

“I know. I know how deceptive appearances are. You’re strong in every way. But, still, I want to cradle you in my arms and protect you from all harm.” He raised her hand to kiss it, and traced the

ragged edges of her fingernails with the pad of his thumb.

“Em, why—”

“M?”

“That’s my private name for you.”

“M as in the letter?”

“E-m,” he spelled. “You don’t mind?”

“No one has ever called me that before. I like it.”

She reached to caress him and all thoughts of fingernails were gone.

*

I gloried in the sight of her out there on the deck. Her eyes shone, her hair glinted red-gold in the moonlight. She wore the black party dress still and her bare feet peeping from under the skirt as she

walked toward Ron were strangely provocative. Who would have thought something that simple could be so ... so ... I wondered if Ron could put a word to it, for his feelings seemed to match mine.

He needed to touch her, to ground himself with tactile proof of her. She needed his love. He needed to know she was real. She needed to know she was real. I realized with a heart-stopping jolt that they could do that for each other.

Oh Guardian, I can't do this. I can't. It should have been me. Me loving her, holding nothing back, giving her every ounce of my loving. Who, more than me, knew what she needed? Who? Ron? His love was nothing compared to mine. Ron, a mere mortal, loving Em?

I hadn't intended to watch, but it happened so fast, and I got caught up in the passion of it. I cursed and railed against the Grand Council. They gave me this assignment, let me fall in love with her, a woman I couldn't have, a woman I was supposed to feel nothing for. No emotion, remember. No emotion.

Strictly speaking of course, they didn't let me fall in love with her. I did that on my own against all the rules, against all the laws set by the Guardians, laws that were never to be broken.

Ron's voice, when he spoke with Em, was raw with the emotion surging through him. Emotion that should have been mine. Was mine!

I studied Em carefully. His aggression and passion had been so crushing. She should have been

mad. I wanted her to be angry, to push him away, to leave, transport herself. But, she wasn't angry.

Satisfied, yes, not angry.

I was the one who was angry. Infuriated.

She needed me. Not him! I had to find a way to stop all this nonsense with Ron.

Em, he called her and she liked it. Showed what love did. Overpowered good sense, that's what. Em. Such a little name for such a grand soul.

*

Ron woke alone the next morning, sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows. He pulled Em's pillow to his face and inhaled deeply. Her lingering scent aroused him again. He looked around for her. She wasn't there. He panicked, cursed, and flailed about.

“Em! Em!” Ron searched for her dress, yanked the bathroom door open. “Em!”

“What? What’s wrong?” She ran into the bedroom. He spun to face her.

“Where the hell were you?”

“Pardon me?”

“I thought you’d gone. I woke up and you weren’t here. I thought I’d imagined the whole thing. God, Em! Don’t do that. Don’t disappear on me.” He was almost shouting.

“Jesus, Ron. Stop it! Just stop it, will you.” She couldn’t handle his fears. She had enough of her own.

“Em, you scared the hell out of me. Don’t you see? I thought you were gone. I thought I’d

never see you again. I thought I'd imagined the whole thing. I thought—”

“Oh, for Christ's sake. I wouldn't leave without telling you. Don't you know me better than that?”

“No, I don't! Hell, I don't even know if you're real.”

“After last night? You don't know if I'm real?” She was furious with hurt. How could he say that, after the lovemaking, the intimacies they had shared?

Her anger dissolved at the sight of his stricken face. “Let's start over.” She walked out of the room, watched the news from three different countries; nothing to worry about at the moment. She took a deep breath. Time to try again. She went

back to the bedroom. Ron's hair was wet from the shower and he was wearing the red plaid robe she'd left for him. It matched hers. He was opening and closing dresser drawers.

“Good morning, sleepyhead.” She tried to keep her voice light but it wavered a little. “Throw me your towel. I'll add it to the load.” She returned from the laundry room with an armful of fresh linens. She showed Ron how to make the bed with hospital corners. He countered with army strategy. They decided they were both anal and collapsed on the bed laughing. They'd recovered nicely, thank God.

“Let's get something to eat. I'm starved.”
Em took his hand and dragged him to the kitchen.

He glanced back at the bed and she knew he was hungry for something other than food.

As they walked through the living room, Ron pulled her to a stop. “Em, this house, is it yours?”

“No, on loan.”

“The decorations and the furniture, are they what you would pick for yourself?”

She looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. “No, I would like a house that didn’t look so much like a showroom and the decorations would be family mementos or souvenirs from trips mostly.”

“What’s your favorite piece?”

“A small bronze statue of a goatherd from West Africa. He’s walking with a stick over his

shoulders, his hands resting on the ends of the stick. For me, it symbolizes everything about the remoteness and solitude of life in the sub-Sahara.”

“Your house is lived in, but neat and tidy. No clutter.”

“Um.”

“And not too big.”

“Smaller than this, I think.” Now why had she said that? Images of rooms, furnished as she’d described, floated in her head. Was that her real home? Something on the television cruelly interjected. Damn, she missed it. Oh well, if it was important the voice would do something.

She reached up and pulled his head down for a kiss, then opened the fridge and took out a carton of eggs.

Ron found onion and tomatoes and cheese.

“But Em, why me? I mean, the whole world is in love with you. Children idolize you and play Miracle Madame games of heroic adventures. Teens imitate you and are involving themselves in social issues. Women want to be your friend. As for men, they all want to get you in the sack.”

“Okay Ron, go ahead. Pull the other leg.”

“Em, it’s true. Don’t you watch the news, read the papers?”

“I stopped watching anything related to me after the first couple of weeks.”

“Why?”

“The reports told me nothing.” *Nothing that I needed to know.*

“Then you don’t know about all the speculation either? That you’re—”

“No, don’t tell me. I’d rather not know.”

“But how do you—?”

“It just happens.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. All I know is that I have a job to do. Powers gave it to me.”

“What do you mean, powers?” He spoke softly and held his breath.

She smiled grimly. *I guess he thinks that if he keeps me talking, he’ll have some answers.*

“Ron, I can’t explain. Powers is what I call them. They tell me so little. I don’t fully understand it myself.” That was true, but even if she did understand it, she wouldn’t tell him. She couldn’t.

She thought it would be the voice that would stop her from telling.

“Do they have a name? Do you see them?”

“I hear a voice, a deep soothing voice. It’s seductive, that voice. Sucks me in every time. Never answers all my questions.”

“Where are they?” Ron had his back to her, chopping veggies and slicing cheese while they talked. She could see the tension in his stance as he waited for her reply.

“Somewhere up there.” Em glanced at the ceiling and saw the earth spinning away from her. “Way up there.” She found bread and the toaster.

“I don’t know if you can understand this, but try to imagine huge holes in your life. You have a shadowy feeling of who you are and what you are

doing, but you know that you also have another self, a life that is apart from this one. Only you have no full conscious memories of that life. You don't know where you live, what you do, but you do know that life is there. You have no real grasp of either self."

"I don't understand." Ron turned to face her.

"You mean you're not Em?"

"Yes, I'm Em, but I'm someone else too.

No, that's not right. I'm me, but I have another life somewhere. A while ago you asked if my house was like this and I told you no. I know my house is different, but I don't know how I know that.

Remember at the restaurant, I told you all about my favorite movies, TV shows, what I like and don't like. Or the next day with the kids? I told them I

spent a lot of time with teens, never read Shakespeare and loved physics. That stuff just popped out as I talked so I guess it's from the real me."

"Do you mean that when you're not Em, you go *home*, but then when you are Em again you have no memories of that home?"

"Exactly. And what about the time before Em? And when I'm me, do I know about this Em half of my life?"

"God, that's like having amnesia or something. How do you handle it?"

"Not very well, most of the time. I've been having some bizarre dreams." She gestured helplessly. "I remember every single detail, yet,

they make no sense. I think maybe the dreams are trying to help me bring my two halves together.”

“But maybe if you watched the stuff about Em it would help, somehow?”

“I can’t.”

“Or won’t?”

Oh Ron, thank you for asking. That he dared to question made her proud of him and happy. She thought that meant he wouldn’t treat her differently just because of who she was and that was what she needed from him—some fragments of normalcy. “A bit of both probably. I’m too scared to watch.”

God, I’m such a liar. I wasn’t scared at all. I loved seeing myself. But, after the first couple of weeks something stopped me from watching the

news. The Powers guy, I'm sure. Probably worried I'd become full of myself. I don't think I would have.

“I can't imagine you afraid of anything.”

“I'm always worried that I've done something terribly wrong.”

“But if you watched the news you would know how successful you are.”

“Successful by whose standards, whose criteria? Mine? How the hell do I know what's right for the world?” She heard the hysteria in her voice and fought desperately to control it.

“The powers.” Ron seemed to be attacking the eggs with the whisk. If he kept that up, the omelet would be black and blue.

“You watch the news. What do the so-called experts have to say about me?”

Ron's movements slowed. "Some swear that you are God incarnate and saving mankind from itself. Others think you are the answer to all our problems and if only they could quiz you, they could write the definitive 'how to' book for living. You've been accused of interfering without the right to do so. There are even people who are convinced that you've been sent from another planet with the ultimate goal of destroying Earth." Ron stopped. "There's more, but I think I've already said too much."

"You see! Nobody knows, least of all me. Only history will show if what I've tried to do is right or not and I'll never know. Ron, I'm just this little person with a little life out there somewhere

that I can't even find and I'm playing with the world's destiny. That scares the hell out of me."

"But you never appear afraid of anything,"

Ron ventured.

"When I'm working I'm not afraid, but after, the memories of the things I experience, the things I see...." The images, ever so vivid, with complete camera cruelty. She closed her eyes, went silent and still.

Looting, pillaging, and plundering not confined to the middle ages. Skinny wild dogs, heads lowered, snarling and desperate guarding the dead—their dinner. Distended bellies, dull hopeless eyes, street-torn children. But then, wasn't everyone street torn? Decomposing bodies, blood-soaked blankets, mass graves, flies swarming. And the

stench. The unsanitized war of the real world. She understood now—how dogs could smell a person’s fear.

“The things I hear . . .”

The rote platitudes of those afraid to speak freely. The growls and grunts of war machines as they settled into their jobs with relish and satisfaction. The whines and screams of live ammunition. The silence of death, which wasn’t silent at all—the rustling and scurrying of souls departing, of insects and carrion feasting, the mewling of orphaned kittens, the pathetic peeps of baby birds, the whimpers of broken trees, bleeding leaves, and crushed grass; they sounded the same everywhere, were recognizable, understandable in any language.

“The things I do....”

Ordering, threatening, coercing, terrorizing.
Handling hundreds of photos attempting to help in the search of missing family. Consoling when they weren't found—and when they were. Entering torture chambers—modern dungeons; such a thin line between past and present. Cleaning blood, excrement, and maggots from countless bodies, those bodies; little more than pliable bags of water. Attempting to place them in some semblance of comfort and dignity.

Flashpoint, fly-over, crossfire, blue on blue, checkpoints, rendition, shock and awe, bombs away, bombs astray—smart bombs that weren't so smart after all.

In a rush, the reality of her memories erupted. “Not just in my dreams,” she gasped. “Not just in my dreams.” Her memories were grains of sand without the pearls, grown large and sharp, grating at her constantly.

She opened her eyes, saw Ron, his face a bloody gaping hole; his features reassembled on the dying echoes of her scream. He was her Ron again.

His face was white, his eyes wide. She had scared the hell out of him and she wasn't sorry. His fears absorbed and eased some of hers and she could breathe again.

“Ron enveloped her, closed his body around her as if the physical act of a mere hug could protect and shield her.

Thank God I found you,” she whispered.

“Thank God.”

Chapter 29

Elsbeth! I needed Elspeth. She was the only one who could help me. I sent a message for her to come, then cancelled it and sent another saying I'd come to her. We met halfway, in the central gazebo which was blessedly vacant.

“Yves, what is it? Your call was so loud my ear vibrated.”

I thought I'd masked my emotional unease, but it had obviously leached into my message.

“Elsbeth, this is very ... personal. You're the only one I can talk to about....” *Guardian, this was so hard.*

Elsbeth reached over and took my hand in hers. Her touch soothed me. “Take a deep breath.” I

did. “Another.” I did. Very calming, this breathing business. “Now, can you talk?”

I nodded. “I’ve been watching them, Em and him.”

“Her lover.”

I gulped. “Yes.”

“What do you need to know?”

“Everything!”

Elspeth appeared to stifle a smile. It wasn’t funny. “Like?”

“Well, you and your guy...? Do you know things about him without him having to tell you?”

“Often, yes. I can sort of intuit what he’s feeling or thinking.”

So Ron wasn't the only one. “Are you suffused with a warm glow when he plans something for you?”

“Yes. It's like we have a connection.”

“Ron and Em do too. But I didn't put it there.”

“No one has to ‘put it there.’ It happens with love.”

That was what I dreaded hearing. So, Em did love him. She would tell him things. But not everything. Ron was a pathetic fool to expect otherwise. *Her loyalty is to me. Me, first and always.*

The way she had turned inward, away from him, away from the world. She turned to me then, I think. At least that's what I hoped. Ron felt

momentarily bereft and alone. I knew those feelings, too. Feelings I'd never experienced before knowing Em.

Ron had stared at her while she was lost to him, trying to imagine the disconnect she described between the two halves of her life. He wondered what lurked beneath the surface of her calm. I could answer that. Me, Ron. Me. I'm here. I'm the one who keeps her sane.

“Yves.” Elspeth tugged at my sleeve. “Are you okay?”

“I think so. I just needed to know....”

“Love is hard sometimes,” she said. “But wonderful too.” She blushed. I hoped her boyfriend knew how lucky he was to have my sister's affections.

“If you’re sure you’ll be okay, I have to go.

My art class starts soon.”

I sat for a long time after she left. I had more to worry about than my feelings. Em had revealed much to Ron that I hadn’t been careful enough to see. And she had been right to confide in him for he heard not only her words, but felt the ominous dark colors of her emotions. They were heavy and sinister, those blacks and blues, like bruises on her soul.

The memories she had, diminished her somehow, made her appear smaller, tired, forlorn; a soul overburdened, less superhuman, contrary to everything Ron knew her to be. Contrary to everything I knew her to be. It scared me a bit and

yet I knew she needed to work through this—
without me.

*

“I had no idea. I never knew how deeply
she felt, the agonies she went through.”

“You weren’t attentive enough,” Mentor’s
words stabbed through my heart. “You didn’t delve
into her subconscious.”

“But that’s so invasive.”

“Invasive!” Mentor snorted with what could
only be termed disgust. “You’re too damned
emotional. I warned the Grand Council. A Drone!”
She snorted again. “It’s your job. What happens
down there and what will happen—under your
tutelage—is all that matters. One little human with
all her stupid fears means nothing. Got that?”

I nodded weakly. She turned to walk away.

“Wait!” I called after her.

Mentor froze mid-step and turned back ever so slowly to face me. “Yes?” One little word, but never had I heard her voice so caustic. I knew I should apologize, let her go, but I couldn’t. I had to know. I took a deep breath.

“That’s just it,” I said. “I’m a Drone. I mean I was a Drone, my parents, my grandparents, all of us. Why did the Guardians choose me to be a Power, to do their bidding on Earth? Was it because I had studied Earth since childhood and I knew the planet better than anyone else?”

“Oh for.... Anyone could study the planet and do your job—any of the other Powers.”

“Why me?” I persisted. I had to know.

“The Guardians are experimenting and you’re their guinea pig.”

I’m sure I stood there with my mouth gaping for she gave a snort of laughter. I guess I seemed pretty pathetic to her.

“But ... but....”

“Apparently they’ve been accused of being racist and they want to dispel that notion.”

“Guinea pig?” I stammered.

“Tag, you’re it.” I could have sworn I heard her laugh as she walked away.

*

Em stood in the circle of Ron’s arms for the longest time. Finally she dared to look up at him.

“My mind plays ‘what if’ relentlessly.” She gulped, swiped furiously at tears, and spoke slowly.

“I try to see things as right or wrong, black or white. But human dynamics are much too complex to be judged that way.”

“Are they really? I believe we’ve made life way more complicated than it needs to be.” Ron turned the burner on to heat the pan. “Perhaps simple is what the world really needs.”

Em stared at him. “Oh God, Ron. You may be on to something but how can I know it’s that easy? I know so little and the more I experience, the less I know. I know nothing about foreign policy, international relations, and the balance of power. I know nothing. If all the experts can’t agree, how can I possibly know?” *Thousands of years from now will war prove, in some horribly twisted way, to have been a boon to mankind? Maybe war is part of*

the natural selection process, a warped version of survival of the fittest.

Em took several deep breaths, fought against the steel-band feeling that encased her chest, and counted to ten.

Power. Control. Greed. Hitler, Milosevic, Idi Amin— dozens of names came to mind. No country was immune. Some were simply more subtle or more vicious, their weapons and strategies more elaborate, more sophisticated.

And, didn't countries, in some ridiculously perverse way, prosper during wartime? "Stocks climb with onset of war." "Explosive rally in stock markets as investors bet war imminent and inevitable." "There is no longer any uncertainty that

war is coming and as a result stocks rallied today.”

The headlines drummed though her brain.

What had Dallaire said? “Do you kill children who kill? And if the answer is yes, can you live with that?”

Put that way, how could there be *anything* good about war? “God damn fucking war!” She squeezed her eyes tight and tried again to control her thoughts. Everything stilled momentarily and then exploded again in terror. *Fuck!*

“Em?” Ron called urgently.

“What if...?” She kept her face averted.

“What if war is a good thing? Maybe humans aren’t doomed to kill each other. Maybe they are destined to.”

He pulled the frying pan off the burner,
grabbed her shoulders, and gave her a little shake.

“Em, no!”

“What if war serves some useful purpose?”

She persisted. “What if I’m actually making things
worse?”

“Em, you talk about the powers you feel
control you. Don’t they determine what is right?
Don’t they take that decision out of your hands?”

She paced, twisted her hands in an agony of
doubt. *What if there are no Powers? What if I’m
deluding myself? What if? There were too many
what ifs.* “If it is Powers, maybe they’re wrong.
Maybe they don’t know either. Maybe Powers don’t
exist and I’m using the idea of them as a ruse to
defend myself. I don’t know. I don’t know.” She

could hear the desperate edge in her voice. Ron held her tighter. She thought she would cry, but she didn't. She couldn't. If she started she'd ever stop.

She wrapped her arms around Ron's waist and held on tightly. "If war is necessary and I stop it? What will replace it? Something much worse?"

"Shush," Ron soothed. "It's okay." He repeated the words over and over until they became a lullaby. Finally, she relaxed and sagged in his arms. He guided her to a chair and knelt beside her holding both her hands in his.

"Em, are you okay?" He examined her closely.

"I think so. Yeah." She was shaky, her face flushed, and her breathing labored. "I'm sorry Ron."

“Don’t! Don’t ever apologize, Em. I’m glad you feel you can talk to me.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry Ron. I’ve spoiled our morning.” She put her fingers over his lips when he started to protest. “Ron, having you here makes all the difference. I can’t explain it. I just know I need you.”

“Miracle Madame needs me?”

“No, I need you. Me.”

She could almost hear his unspoken thoughts. *Who is “Me,” Em? Who is the woman I love?*

“I am what you see and who you have come to know. No more.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Em. You’re way out there compared to the rest of us. How can I ever hope to match that?”

“You don’t even have to try. I exist in two different halves, but I don’t change. Only my job changes. Both my halves need you. Please, Ron, you have to believe me.”

“Okay,” he agreed reluctantly and she knew he’d need more reassuring. “Em, there’s something I want to ask, but....”

“You’re afraid of the answer?”

He nodded. “Yes. Are there others?”

“You mean do I have a sailor in every port?”

She caressed his cheek with the back of her hand.

“No, just you.” She toyed with the belt on his robe.

Ron, however, was not to be sidetracked.

“Why me?” Ron asked. “You could be with anyone. Certainly someone much better looking, younger, more virile.”

“Not more virile surely? Three times last night.”

“I haven’t been this horny since high school.” He grinned widely. “In fact we could make it four.”

She let her eyes grow wide. “I have that effect on you?” He blushed. She reached under his robe to caress him, grinned wickedly and pulled him down to the floor.

*

Now, see that confused me. Em had met so many men and had let them flirt with her. Then

there was François. She really liked him but not “that way.” So, why was it different with Ron?

They made love. On the floor! They lay, panting, her head on his chest, her legs entwined with his.

“You are mine, all mine,” a voice deep inside him growled fiercely.

I recognized the voice. It was mine. I hadn’t known my thoughts could be transmitted like that.

“Be more careful!” Mentor snarled.

Chapter 30

“Sue,” Tom called. “You here?”

“In the supply room. Gotta check the back-up tapes. What do you need?”

“The Boss in?”

“Haven't seen her.”

Tom took a step back, and surveyed the office. “Her door's closed. Coast is clear. Listen Sue, what's up with her?”

Sue shrugged. “I don't know. She's been vague and forgetful lately. Not like her at all.”

“Loses her train of thought. Did you notice her struggling for words at the staff meeting? That's not like her at all. Normally sharp as a tack.”

Sue glanced out the door. Two teachers were passing through the office on their way to the staff

room. She waited until they'd gone and lowered her voice. "Do you think we should talk to her?"

"I tried. As diplomatically, as I could." Sue arched her brows. Tom chuckled. "Okay, so I asked her outright if she was okay."

"And?"

"I don't know. It was like she didn't hear me. Like she was someplace else."

"Do you think we should call her family?"

"Yeah, you should."

"Me!?"

Em didn't need to overhear that conversation to know she was slipping away. Away to that other world.

*

Em covered Ron with his robe and left him dozing on the floor. She un-muted the TV, concentrating first on a German news channel, then flipping to Canadian, to Spanish, and back to German again.

“God, Em, you’re perfect. Beautiful. Sensual. Seductive.” He leered at her from his position propped on one elbow on the floor. “You’re in great shape, obviously work out and your skin is perfect, not a blem.... What’s that?” He sounded alarmed.

“What?”

“Em, did I do this to you?” He rose and walked over to her.

“What?”

“The bruises.”

“Oh, Ron.” She laughed.

“Em!” His grip on her shoulders tightened, his hands rigid with the same tension that filled his voice. “This is no laughing matter. Did I do this to you?”

“No.”

“Then how did you get them?”

“Fighting.”

“Fighting!? What on earth are you talking about?”

“Sparring, ground fighting. You know, grappling.” He had a bewildered look on his face. “Jiu jitsu. I train regularly with a group that is mostly soldiers.”

“Soldiers! Em that makes no sense. You’re out there trying to stop war. Why on earth would

you do anything with soldiers, let alone learn to fight?”

His question shocked her. She closed her eyes and prayed for an answer. “I came to have a whole new respect for soldiers when I worked with them,” she said. “They choose to fight and die for us, often for the wrong reasons. Deliberate death at the hands of another human. What could be worse? Deliberate killing at someone else’s command? How can I not respect that?”

“And if you have your way, they will all be out of jobs.”

“Wouldn’t that be wonderful?” She beamed and her eyes sparkled.

“But, jiu jitsu? My God! You could get hurt. Badly.”

“Nah. The guys go easy on me. The older ones call me young lady and I remind the younger guys that I could be their mother. I’m training for my brown belt. Sensei says it will take five years. I say two, three at most. We’re negotiating.” Em grinned and clapped her hands. “See that’s what I mean about parts of my other life creeping in. It’s like I can answer your questions from my subconscious if I don’t think about it. Ask me more stuff.”

He seemed happy to comply. “Your fingernails?”

“No matter how short I file them, I always manage to break a few.” She laughed with the sheer pleasure of the conversation.

“Why jiu jitsu?”

“I kind of got into it by accident when I participated in a couple of self-defense sessions with a guy from the military. I started with his club. At first it was scary and intimidating. Not the people, they were great, friendly and welcoming, but the sport itself. But, I love the physicality of it.” That was true, she realized, not an exaggeration. “This is embarrassing, but I almost bit a grappling partner once, stopped myself just in time. I guess that means that I would do whatever it took if I was ever in a real fight.” She stopped suddenly. “Wow, did I just say all that?”

“Yeah.”

She threw herself at him and kissed him soundly. “Thank you, thank you.”

Before Ron could ask another question his stomach rumbled loudly. Em giggled. “More later. Let’s shower and eat.”

Em watched as Ron finished preparing the omelets, moving expertly about the kitchen, knowing instinctively where to find what he needed in the unfamiliar surroundings, handling the utensils with an ease that spoke of experience.

“You done cutting the fruit?” he asked.

“Excuse me a sec.” She ran from the room cursing under her breath. “Not now, damn it. Not now!”

Ron,” she called as she peered into the kitchen. “You there?”

“Back already? I thought you were going to check the laundry.”

“Uh, I...”

“Breakfast’s about ready. Have a chair, Madame.”

The television blared. “What the hell,” Ron said and headed to the living room to turn the volume down.

“United Nations forces took control of the army posts after Miracle Madame neutralized the junta leaders and their inner circle. She then appeared in the flooded areas and facilitated the entry of relief workers. We take you now....”

Em waited in the kitchen twisting her napkin into a tiny ball.

“Jesus, Em.” Ron stood squarely in the doorway, his face a mask of fury. “You were there at the same time you were here. Are there two of

you? Who am I sleeping with? You or an identical twin? Or an alien? Fuck! Do you have any idea how hard this is?"

"You think it's easy for me? I'm the one out there facing the bullets."

"Don't you think I know that? I see the news. I watch helpless to protect you. Helpless!"

Hell, this conversation is going nowhere but downhill. Em had no idea what to say. She didn't want to have to say anything. She wanted someone else to take the responsibility for a while.

Ron's face crumbled. She thought he was going to cry. He swallowed. "I'm sorry, Em. Please, come have breakfast." She released her breath and relaxed in her chair. "Do you own an apron?" he asked.

“No. Why?”

“You don’t seem particularly domestic.”

They were leaving the fight behind. He was fixing it. She said a little thank you under her breath. “I’m not. But you like to cook. I bet you collect aprons when you travel and you actually use them.”

“Yep.”

“What kinds of things do you like to make?”

“Antipasto, shrimp stroganoff, crab crêpes, cannelloni, beef Wellington. Stuff like that.”

“Wow. Gourmet. I’m impressed.”

“You might be impressed, but the kids would rather order pizza.”

“They’re too young to have an appreciation for the finer things in life,” she said. “But, what about spaghetti?”

“Never. Not even to impress a date.”

“Not even to impress me?”

“Nope. Stereotypical.”

“Will you make dinner for me sometime?”

she asked with no hint of teasing.

“Of course. What would you like?”

She thought for a while. “Surprise me.”

*

When Em stood naked in front of the TV, Ron had taken advantage of the opportunity to study her in full light, somewhat sheepishly, knowing that she was unaware of his scrutiny. I studied her too. Come on, name one man who wouldn’t.

Ron saw her not only as hard and determined, but at the same time as soft and yielding, and terribly vulnerable. Studying her, Ron believed there was more to his love for Em than filling empty spaces and finding security. It was the completion of one soul by another.

Guardian, humans went so overboard. It was sex, man, sex. Nothing more than hormones.

Bruises on her thigh and three angry red spots on her wrist as if someone had gripped her too hard; the words “abusive husband” flashed across Ron’s brain only to be immediately dismissed because everything in him revolted at that image. The image revolted me too as did her jiu jitsu training. I cringed each time I watched her in the dojo.

I sent her on a quick mission. I wished I could do more to keep her away from Ron, but too soon she was back. That's when I had the brainwave. It would blow Ron's mind to see the latest news. I turned up the volume on the television. And they had a beautiful colossal argument. A lovely little monkey wrench in the works. Maybe she'd see now that her darling little Ronnie wasn't for her.

“Or maybe not.” It was Mentor hovering at my left shoulder.

*

They chatted away the afternoon. Answering Ron's questions continued to fill in gaps for her. She told him that she'd gone sunbathing topless once, had been to a rifle range, and learned to shoot

a .38 Special, a 9mm Glock and a Ruger. She'd been such a sharpshooter that the owner offered free rounds with both a .44 Magnum and a .357 Magnum. Beginners luck, but it had been fun. She'd gone to the range to see what it was like and no, she could never imagine pulling the trigger to shoot either animal or man. From jiu jitsu, she had some idea of what she would do in a fight, but wondered what it might take to drive her to kill. She couldn't come up with an answer. Neither could Ron.

Ron confessed the hurts and frustrations of his life, admitted his bitterness at the judgments based on looks that limited his choices, and still prevented him from being considered for roles he prized. He even talked about his humiliation at Susan's hands.

“God, Em, I’ve told you things I’ve never discussed with anyone, not even Tony. I’ve never even examined them this closely myself.”

“Where did you find the strength to remain so positive about life in spite of all that?”

“I’d be dead without my sense of humor. For me, the only truly serious things are losing one’s health or being in a life-threatening accident. The rest of it; if you can’t laugh you’re truly fucked.”

Not to mention the strength of humor as a shield against all the hurts, Em thought.

“Are you married? Do you have kids?”

Oh God. Her mind went blank. A crucial question and she had no answer. *Why? Why don't I know?*

“I think you do. I saw tiny marks on your stomach and thighs. Stretch marks I think.”

“Show me.” He pointed to the faint lines. Her eyes filled with tears. “God, how could I not remember something that important?” She sobbed, tears streamed down her face. Ron held her, rubbed her back and wisely kept silent until the sobs lessened.

“Em, memories are coming to you slowly. The knowledge is in you. It will come back to you. It will.” Eventually she stopped crying. They lay on the patio divan and she dozed fitfully in his arms.

*

“Will you let her remember everything?”
Mentor asked.

“I don’t think so,” I hedged.

“Too painful?”

“Yes. She loves them too.”

“Well, then.” Mentor’s words carried neither censure nor approval. Shit, now what was I supposed to do?

“Stop using those bad Earth words, for one thing,” Mentor said as she walked away.

*

Em muttered and fumed as she flipped through the channels looking for the news.

“What’s wrong?” Ron asked.

“I don’t believe this. Some actor has been found guilty of assault and is being sent to jail but the judge is going to let him out every day so he can finish his film.”

“Makes sense to me. His absence would hold up the whole movie.”

Em glared at Ron. “I can’t believe you said that. Anybody else would simply serve his or her jail term. Are you condoning a double standard?”

“No, but a lot of money is involved.”

Money! The best argument he could come up with was money. Surely he wasn’t that shallow. “Don’t get me started on money. Money should not run the world and actors’ salaries are obscene.”

“I disagree. We actors work hard for our money.”

“For God’s sake, get real. If anyone deserves that kind of salary it’s the doctors who put you back together after an accident, or the teachers

in the classrooms with thirty plus kids, or the social workers trying to save families.”

“Of course they are deserving, but they have job security. Their careers don’t depend on the vagaries of public opinion and popularity. An actor might have only a few years to earn a living.”

“Well, break my heart. The big stars can make anywhere from hundreds of thousands to a few million a year times, oh, let’s say one year, and never have to work again. How does that compare with a social worker or a teacher? Talk about unfair. Then some sitcom starlet who trucks bundles of money to the bank each week is having ‘the hardest year of her life’ and ‘oh such a difficult time’ adjusting to marriage to Mr. Beautiful.”

“Just because she has money doesn’t mean she doesn’t have problems too.”

“I know that. But does she have to broadcast her woes to the world? Whatever happened to ‘discretion is the better part of’?”

“For some people, talking helps,” Ron said.

“Well, they don’t have to blab indiscriminately. Anyway, that’s not the really offensive part.”

“It gets worse?”

She should have heeded the anger in his voice, changed the topic, and avoided the whole stupid argument, but she was too worked up. If she didn’t yell about something, she’d explode. “She has a chat line to help young girls because she has gone through many of the same experiences.”

“What’s wrong with trying to help?” He sounded bewildered.

“Oh, come on Ron, it’s nothing more than an excuse to snag more bags of dough.”

“Aren’t you being just a bit judgmental?”

“But, she’s playing with people’s lives here. She has no training or credentials of any kind and she’s going to be counselor extraordinaire.”

“Lots of people do that sort of thing. They’re just trying to help. To make things better.”

“What you Hollywood types don’t realize is that you have so much influence and that influence carries a huge responsibility. Too many of you just get out there and say whatever. And another thing, who are you to decide what is right for others? Just because media promotes you as some sort of gods?”

She was on a roll and her tirade made her feel good in some perverse way that she thought she should have been ashamed of.

“There are even some celebrities who think they should be part of political decisions, attend summits, for Christ’s sake. Just because of who they are. What makes them think they have the kind of background or expertise needed to be part of those processes and decisions?”

“Isn’t that what you do?” he asked. “And didn’t you use us Hollywood types to get your message across?”

There was a dreadful silence. Em stared at him and then just crumbled. Fell to so many pieces that she didn’t think she’d ever be able to put herself back together.

*

Ron couldn't believe they were arguing again. Well really, what did he expect? I couldn't leave them all cozy and lovey-dovey forever, now could I? Mentor was off with another Power. I had a few minutes of free rein and I used it to my advantage.

As the argument grew and raged, I gloated at Ron's discomfort. Then something happened. Em, my lovely Em, lost control. I never wanted that. I never wanted Em to hurt. Their argument had gotten completely out of hand. I couldn't understand what went wrong.

"You see!" Ooh, boy, Mentor back already.
"You let your emotions rule and played with theirs

and look what happened. I know you're a Drone, but even so, you can't possibly be that stupid."

I felt like a worm.

Ron wanted to bite back his words, but it was too late. I wanted to take back the argument, but it was too late. Ron wanted to hold Em, to take away the horrible hurt. I wanted to hold her, to take away the horrible hurt. Ron was scared to move, afraid she would reject him.

I was scared too.

*

"Touché," Em's voice quavered.

"Oh, Em." Ron grabbed her roughly and pulled her close. He cradled her head to his chest, and circled her with his other arm. "I shouldn't have said that. Please, forgive me."

“But you’re right.” Em cried silently, soaking his T-shirt with her tears.

“No, Em. I was wrong. What you see and the terrible situations you walk into.... You operate on a level far above anyone else. I had no right to compare.”

“But I’m no better. I have no right to criticize.” He was trying to make her feel better and somehow she felt worse.

“Please don’t.” Ron didn’t know what to say, but he was smart enough to hold her close, caress her, and use his voice to try to calm her. A long time later she felt the tension ease slightly.

“Ron, I—”

“No, don’t say anything.” He picked her up effortlessly, it seemed, and carried her to the

bedroom and made her lie down. He undressed her and massaged her neck and back. Pampered as a baby, she felt limp and relaxed as the remaining tension released slowly and Ron made tender, sweet love to her. He had it right. It was the only thing to do.

Much later they showered and dressed for dinner. Ron wore his suit pants and one of the light sweaters from the closet. Em pulled on a pair of jeans and a black tank top and reached for a jacket. “Em, wear this.” He held out his dress shirt for her. She slipped into it. He did up the buttons and rolled up the sleeves several times.

“I can’t wear this. I look like a little kid.” The mirror said she was a child trying to play grownup. Mirrored her feelings exactly.

Ron stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders. “You do look like a kid with the shirttails reaching almost to your knees. Cute.” He kissed the top of her head. “Please,” he said. “It’s important to me.”

Em didn’t like the lost little boy look on his face. *For him, me wearing his shirt will be the only tangible thing he’ll have to represent our time together. Maybe if I wear it he’ll feel that he can hold a part of me after I leave.* She couldn’t deny him that. She nodded agreement.

They walked to a small restaurant, ordered beers, and sat on the terrace overlooking the ocean. “May I ask you something?” Ron said.

“Of course.”

He hesitated. “Em, are you real? I know we talked about your two lives and all, but...”

“Are you asking if I’m human?”

“Yeah, I guess. Sometimes, I think you must be a dream, or—”

“An alien?” She chuckled. “You’re cute when you blush.” He reddened even more at that and then laughed with her. “Why did you think alien?”

“I’ve been able to read people pretty accurately since I was a teen, but I can’t read you.”

“So what caused you to change your mind, the great sex?” She leered at him. “Of course, for all we know, aliens could be pretty good lovers too.”

“Your fingernails,” he said, ignoring her teasing. “Broken and bloody, not exactly robot or alien material.”

“The fingernails convinced you I’m human?” She gazed at her hands and then at him. “Okay, your logic makes a weird kind of sense so why are you still worried I might be an alien?”

“I’m going on spec here, but I’ve given this a lot of thought. And,” he blushed again, “we discussed it endlessly on the set. I figure you’re maybe like Super Girl or Wonder Woman.” He shifted forward on his chair. Em noticed that he tightened his grip on the beer mug, and his knuckles whitened.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I think that I’m a very regular person. I know that I even get cranky and bitchy, hard as that may be to believe.”

Ron suppressed a sigh, frustrated with her non-answers. He wanted to push, but something held him back. Fear of angering her and then losing her? She hoped it wasn’t that. She hoped they were beyond that by now. “I have seen you angry so I’ll believe the bitchy part too.” He reached across the table to squeeze her hand. “I love you Em, warts and all.”

“I know.” *And I can’t answer all your questions or completely satisfy your curiosity. I’ll never be able to.* “Ron, about earlier—”

“Em, please.”

“No, I have to say this. I’m sorry I blew my tensions on you. That wasn’t fair.”

“I’m the one who should apologize. What I said was unforgivable.”

“But you were right.”

“You know, Em, it’s easy to let the power of celebrity get out of hand. It would have been easy for me to fall into the trap of overestimating myself and taking a public stance in areas beyond my realm.”

“How did you stay as grounded as you are?”

“Fortunately I had people around me who put a stop to the grandiose attitude I was acquiring.”

“What about the salaries? Do you think they’re justified?”

“Do you?”

“No way!”

“The question really is should anyone make that kind of money?”

“Teachers should.”

Ron’s jaw dropped. “Why teachers?”

The prevalent attitude, she thought with a sigh. Teachers really didn’t count to most people. “Think about it. Teachers get the whole world started. Where would you be without public education?” Maybe all educators should disappear for a while, and then people would realize they’re more than babysitters.”

Could she do it? Send all the teachers on a holiday—somewhere warm, with a beach and no money worries or off to a ski hill. For six months or

so. Would the voice let her? Worth asking that's for sure.

“Em? You there?” Ron waved a hand in front of her face. She grinned and changed the topic. Ron argued that this was not another Middle Age. She thought it was. Their discussion took them around what seemed like hundreds of topics and veered back to issues of celebrity and media.

Walking home from the restaurant hand in hand, she asked Ron what sorts of things he worried about.

“Mostly stuff closer to home. Providing for my family. My kids growing up safely, not getting into drugs or being killed in a car accident. The usual, I guess.” They let the conversation slide as

they sauntered home enjoying the moonlight and each other's company.

*

Personally, I thought she'd look much better in my shirt. And then she said she loved him. The words were spoken so softly that Ron wasn't sure she had really said it. She had and I recoiled. It was too much to bear, hearing it like that.

They discussed so many things. I was jealous of that too. I wanted to be with her, talking to her, holding her hand, stroking her hair, touching her.... I heaved a sigh and looked around for Mentor. Nowhere to be seen, thank Guardian.

I understood Em's need to talk. I needed someone to talk to, too. I wasn't about to blurt out

any of this at our debriefings. Of course, Powers could confide in Mentor. As if!

Elspeth came over to my alcove. How did she always know when I needed her most?

“Watching Em? Of course you are. I needn’t bother asking. What’s she up to now?”

“Sleeping.”

Ron lay awake listening to Em’s deep and even breathing as she slept. He could feel her contentment. Suddenly he bolted upright. He had been reading her all evening, anticipating her desires and moods, sometimes even anticipating what she would say. He looked down at her, marveling. This had to be the connection he had imagined when he first met her. There truly was something between them, something so tangible he

could almost see it and this time he knew he wasn't kidding himself. He settled down beside her and pulled her close, happier than he had ever been in his life.

Ron was right. They did have a connection. I figured Mentor had given it to them and that drove me crazy. I wrapped my arms around Elspeth and let the tears flow.

Chapter 31

“Yo bro.” My friend Exelrud could be so exasperating with his casual demeanor. Watched too many of those Earth movies, that was the problem. “So, what's your girl up to now?”

“She’s here, there, and everywhere. Sometimes, she transports herself after watching news clips. But, usually, I send her on little errands.”

“Can I watch?”

“No!” Bad enough I was letting Elspeth see everything—well, not the sex bits of course. No way was I going to let Exelrud see any of it. He was too nosy for his own good.

*

She slumped on one of the sofas in the staffroom, toed off her shoes and swung her feet up. Thank God everyone was gone. She really should leave too, but was too fatigued to move. The day had flown by. Never a dull moment surrounded by teens. Today had been brutal. A fight at smokers' corner, an injury in the lab, thankfully not too serious, girls crying over a squabble that she hadn't fully understood and probably didn't want to, and a trip to the nearest clinic with a boy who had something in his eye. Turned out to be a piece of metal from working with his dad on Sunday.

“Did you tell your dad your eye hurt?”

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me to wait and see if it went away.”

The doctor didn't think there would be permanent damage.

But that wasn't what was bothering her now. It was the whole messy business of strange words coming out of her mouth at the oddest times. She'd taken to writing them down phonetically and trying to discover what they were. Some were easy. Spanish, French, Russian. Others were obscure. Urdu, Swahili, Javanese. And some she never did identify.

The words were the least of it. Had she really been the one to have the hostages in Columbia released unharmed? Had she met with the cartel leaders and the Mexican president to stop the

drug trade, or at least try to? Had she led police, over a period of twelve hours, to illegal arsenal stashes in one hundred and forty-two locations across the US?

It seemed she had. She hadn't turned on the TV for months, had canceled her subscription to the newspaper, but she couldn't avoid hearing the conversations around her, at school, in line at the grocery store, at the gym. The media had apparently reported that doctors were confident the hostages would regain their health. It seemed the cartels were curtailing their activities and drug users were flocking to detox clinics. Hundreds of thousands of people had come forward to turn in arms voluntarily.

Had she really gone to the soccer game in
Rio?

Without Ron?

And, there were the dreams, of course. One
almost every night. Last night's had been
particularly vivid and horrifying.

Huge tents filled with row after row of
makeshift tables hastily assembled from crudely
constructed sawhorses and pieces of boards or old
doors, anything that could be scrounged.

Each table piled high with remnants of
clothing, broken bits of bones, some with muscle
and sinew still attached, and human skulls as far as
the eye could see.

She picked up a skull and put her finger through the hole in the forehead. She picked up another to see the back smashed in at a crazy angle.

She put the skull down and held up a uniform jacket, picked up a thighbone, then part of a hand with a ring hanging loosely from the baby finger, and after that a tiny pink baby sweater. She put the sweater down, picked it up again and stared in horror. She was holding a baby with empty eye sockets, not just any baby—her own daughter. She dropped the body, screamed, backed away.

She woke up shaking so hard the bed shook too. She bolted for the bathroom, retched and vomited. Eventually the nausea eased and she hung over the toilet bowl clinging weakly to the sides. In due course she recovered enough to sit back on her

heels without falling over. She waited agonizingly for a return to normal. When her stomach finally stopped heaving, she levered herself up clutching the edge of the counter top. Leaning against it she bent over to splash her face and neck with cold water. The clock showed 3 a.m. She picked up the phone and dialed anyway, called her daughter, just to hear her voice, to know she was alive, safe.

*

“Kaya!” A bad word. Very bad. One of ours. And Mentor had just used it. This was not going to be good. “Isn’t it enough that she has to live it? Now you have her dreaming it too.”

“I don’t give her the dreams. They’re her own.” I felt feeble protesting like that.

“You could stop them. Save her the agony.”

“I tried. She’s too strong.”

“Guardian, have mercy.” Mentor looked up to the heavens. “Why did you give me such an idiot to deal with?” A string of bad words followed. I searched frantically for an escape. “It’s your responsibility,” she thundered. “Fix it.”

Chapter 32

Ron sank into the first class seat with a heavy groan. The months after the movie's release had been a constant round of travel and interviews. He and the gang escaped as often as possible to the Garcia family's restaurant, the one place they could be guaranteed a break from the scrutiny. They laughed and joked with Raúl and his parents and spent happy relaxing hours listening to him and his sister as they translated their grandmother's stories, most of them about Em's rescue of their family.

The movie he was working on now was partially completed and he was flying to yet another location shoot. He looked forward to time alone in the four days before the cast and crew arrived. This break was a concession to his celebrity status. He

was a Hollywood megastar now—offered his pick of roles—a status that he would never have had if not for Em. A status that was every actor’s dream and one that, for better or worse, he loved.

He closed his eyes and sighed again. It was a little over three months since he had been with Em. He assuaged his loneliness with his memories, reliving every detail of their time together. He missed the questions, the discussions, even the arguments. He missed her smile, her frown, her laugh, her face, her body. He felt the familiar erotic ache as his body responded to those mental images.

He had become compulsive. Hell, he’d been compulsive from the first time he saw her on TV, searching for every possible detail about her.

He could hear her voice now as he replayed their last conversation word for word. He had asked what the future held for them.

“I don’t think we can see each other again.”

“But Em—”

“No.” She placed two fingers over his lips.

“This time was special, just for us, but it cannot happen again. It was a gift.”

“Em, I can’t go back.”

“You can go back and you will. You have two wonderful kids, Gram, and a new relationship developing with Rita. You can’t give any of that up. I won’t let you.”

“And you?”

“Ron, it will be okay. Trust me.” And she was gone.

Ron sighed again. If he had an eternity to love her, it might be enough. *You will have*, a deep soothing voice reverberated in his ears. He laughed mirthlessly. God, now his head was playing games with him. Shit, he'd never survive at this rate.

Em had been right—partly. He had gone home to Gram and the kids. What Em didn't know was that he had already broken up with Rita.

Rita hadn't given up easily. She invited him out or to her place for dinner, including Gram and the children, making it difficult for him to refuse. There was no sex, but Rita professed understanding. After all, she was a fellow actor, she knew the strains of the creative process and intense publicity.

She met him in Allan's office, unannounced, and asked to take him for coffee. "You don't have

to explain,” she said. “I understand perfectly. I was good enough for you before, but now that you’re Mr. Big Shot, hobnobbing with Miracle Madame, no less, I’m chopped liver.”

Ron said nothing. Any explanation would sound feeble and only make her angrier.

His silence angered her too. “You fucking asshole!”

“Rita, please.”

“Stuff it up your ass, Ron. I ought to—” She stopped, interrupted by Jamie who had spotted them at the corner table and come over to say hi. Rita brushed past Jamie, causing her to lose her balance.

Ron reached out to steady Jamie and pull out a chair for her. “I’m sorry you had to see that,”

“No need for apology, Ron, but what was that all about?” Jamie glared at the retreating figure.

“I broke up with her several months ago.”

“I thought you were still seeing her.”

“Only when she’d invite Gram and the kids too. I thought by going I was being kind, but that was a huge mistake. She’s not taking it well.”

“No shit! Good riddance. Forget her.” Jamie grinned wickedly. “Tell me about your new movie.”

Ron was thankful for the distraction.

Gram, Tia, and Brad surrounded Ron at the airport the next day, bestowing hugs and kisses.

“Jeez, what’s she doing here?” The resentment in Brad’s voice startled Ron as he looked up to see Rita approaching.

“Oh, hell,” Tia grumbled under her breath, dragging Gram and Brad away.

Rita stood before him, studied him at length, and then reached out to hug him. Ron stood stiffly, hands at his sides. Rita ignored his lack of response and said simply, “Come back to me Ron.”

“Rita, it’s over. It has been for a long time.” She shook her head, turned, and walked away without looking back.

“I thought you broke up with her. What did she want?” There was an edge in Tia’s voice that he’d never heard before.

“She still wants to be with me.”

“You’re not going back to her, are you Dad?” Brad sounded scared.

“No. But I thought you liked her.” He looked from Tia to Brad with an eyebrow raised. They shook their heads.

“She was really rude to Gram at the basketball game,” Brad said. A slight shrug of Gram’s shoulders told him all he needed to know.

“Good God, why didn’t you say something?”

“It really wasn’t any of our business,” Gram said.

“Besides, we thought you were happy with her,” Brad said.

“You should have said something.”

“Dad, we couldn’t. Brad and I are growing up. We’ll be gone soon. We thought you liked Rita and we didn’t want you to end up alone.”

Ron looked at his kids in amazement, and then gathered them both in a huge bear hug. “When did you get so wise?”

“Must have had some reasonably decent parenting.” Tia grinned and winked at Gram.

Ron felt his eyes water as he looked over their heads to Gram. She looked near tears too. He reached out to gather her into the family embrace.

“Or, maybe we’re just the coolest kids in the world,” Brad said.

*

Longing? So that’s what this sensation is called. I’d been feeling it for an eon without knowing what it was. And those images of Em in Ron’s head—I felt myself responding just as he did. “Damn, this is so hard.”

“What’s so hard?” Mentor tilted her head slightly with a puzzled frown.

“Everything!” I waved my hand and Earth spun in the air before us. Spun faster and faster and faster as if all my worries could fly away with the centrifugal force.

Mentor snapped her fingers and Earth fell back into its orbit. “What are you trying to do? Destroy the whole planet?”

I hung my head. *No, not the whole planet. Just one man. The one you sent her. Yes, I’ve finally figured that out.* I was sure I was right. Mentor had given Ron and Em the connection, the passion, the love. She’d given Ron everything that should have been mine and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it—except suffer as I watched them.

And that voice reverberating in Ron's head?
Mentor making promises to Ron, using my voice. I
raged and paced and... *Well, it doesn't really matter*
how I behaved, doesn't change the story one bit.
Mentor had undoubtedly made all kinds of promises
to Em that I wasn't privy to.

I glanced up in time to see Mentor smirk
before she turned and sauntered away humming a
tune.

*

“Excuse me. I think that's my seat.”

Ron glanced up to see Em standing in the
aisle. He muttered and squeezed his eyes shut,
rubbing them wearily with his knuckles. “Shit, I
have to snap out of this or I'll be a fucking basket
case.”

“Excuse me.”

He opened his eyes again. He stared.

Abruptly, he reached up and pulled her onto his lap.

He kissed her and ran his hands all over her. Trying

to convince himself she was really there. Em

giggled, and kissed his forehead. “Ron, I really do

need to get to my seat. We’ll be taking off soon.”

She scrambled off his lap into the window seat.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I thought we could spend the next four days

together.” She ogled him suggestively. “If that’s

okay with you?” She peered at him from under her

eyelashes.

“Okay? God, do you have no idea?” Ron’s

grip on her hand tightened. “I thought I’d never see

you again.”

“I know. Ron, I’m sorry. I couldn’t stay away.”

“For Christ’s sake, Em, don’t be sorry.”

“You can’t imagine how badly I need to be with you.”

“Oh yes, I can. Do you have any idea how glad I am to see you? Glad? Hell Em, that’s such an inadequate word to describe how I feel.”

“But I thought by coming back I’d just be making it more difficult for you?”

“No.”

“Ron, be honest. Was it really awful for you after I left? I was so worried, but I had no choice. I had to go. And I never wanted our love to....”

“To what?”

“This sounds stupid. But, I never wanted what we have to interfere with your life, to spoil other opportunities. It’s not supposed to.”

“Em, there are no other opportunities. There is only you.”

“But Powers said,” she wailed.

Ron groaned. “The goddamn powers again. I never understand what the hell you mean when you talk about the powers.”

Em frowned and bit her bottom lip. “I’m not sure if I really have to keep so much a secret? The voice didn’t say one way or the other.” She brightened. “I know. I’ll ask them next time.”

“Em, slow down. What on earth are you talking about?”

“What happened after I left? Was it really bad?”

“Yes.”

“Oh God,” she moaned. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Something you said helps. You talked about two halves to your life; your regular life and your life as Em. I realized that I could think of my life in the same way; my regular life and my life with you. If I keep the two separate, I can live in each and not feel I’m betraying you.”

“Or Rita.”

“She’s no longer part of the picture.”

“What?”

“I broke up with her right after I met you.”

“Damn it, Ron. That wasn’t supposed to happen. I have to go.” Em undid her seat belt and started to rise.

“No!” Ron gripped her arm. The word was a plea and command at the same time.

“But—”

“You don’t understand. I would have broken up with her eventually anyway.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“It’s the truth, Em. Honest.”

Em studied him intently. “I believe you,” she said and he sagged with relief. “Can you live with the limited time we have and the secrecy?”

“Yes.” Did she know he was lying?

*

I was learning that's what lovers did. Lied to each other. Would I lie to her too?

*

“Okay then. Where shall we go?”

“Someplace neither of us has ever been so we can explore together.”

This flight was taking them to Rome. They decided on the Greek islands, a short hop away, as they fastened their seat-belts.

As soon as possible after takeoff Ron reclined his seat and pulled Em to him. Suited her just fine. She longed to feel the length of his body pressed to hers. She sighed contentedly and slipped her hand inside his shirt hugging his waist. There were only three other people in first class and the

cabin lights had dimmed. Ron had enclosed them in a cocoon of privacy with a blanket.

Em shifted to a more comfortable position pressing against him. Her hand brushed his erection. She undid his belt and zipper and reached lower. “Okay, now my panties are wet,” she whispered in his ear and disappeared under the blanket.

*

What she did then, on that airplane, with him, was beyond belief. Ron gripped the armrest with one hand and tangled the fingers of the other in her hair. He gasped and closed his eyes tightly, grinding his teeth together to stifle the moans of pleasure. He came with a sudden fierce burst of passion. He shuddered and shifted both his hands to hug her, his hold tightening on her convulsively.

I had closed my eyes, but couldn't shut out the sounds, or the feelings.

*

Ron floated on clouds of contentment as they walked to the beach hand in hand. He thought he could feel Em's happiness too. He glanced down to see her smiling. She looked happy and carefree. He hoped he could take some credit for that.

They rented an umbrella and two chairs a couple of rows back from the water. Ron tensed as he studied the crowds on the beach. Many of the women were topless. He was hugely relieved when Em took off nothing more than her skirt and told her so. Em told him she was there to get away from attention not attract more.

But it seemed she did—attract attention that is. The beach was crowded and Ron claimed the men were eying her with covert glances or lustful stares. His fine mood evaporated.

He had an insane impulse to cover Em with a beach towel or his T-shirt. He was furious as hell. “Damn it! Look at all those men. Drooling over you.” He gestured to include the whole beach.

Em looked around and then looked back to Ron.

“Oh, Ron, for heaven’s sake. Ignore them.” She chuckled and patted his cheek.

He pulled away. “Don’t patronize me.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“But, they’re just a bunch of guys on the beach, checking out the women. I’m sure you do the same thing.”

“It’s like I don’t exist for Christ’s sake. Like I’m not even here with you.”

“Jesus, Ron.”

“Don’t you get it? They can drool all they want. But I want them to know you’re mine. Mine!”

“You’re jealous?”

“Damn straight!”

“Fuck! I’ve got the weight of the world on my shoulders and now this.”

“Don’t try the guilt trip thing. I’ve got a right to my feelings.”

“And I don’t need your childishness. I need your support.”

“Well, I need support too, damn it.”

“I get jealous too. Did you ever think of that? When you’re not too busy wallowing in self-pity, that is?”

“Jealous? Of me?”

“Yeah, you’re tight with Jamie. You’ve got fans draping themselves all over you. Gorgeous little nymphets.”

“What about all the clerks and waiters and strangers you flirt with?”

“Just because I’m friendly and like to talk to people—”

“Oh shit, I can’t believe ... Em ... I can’t believe we’re having this argument. I...”

“Ron, there is only you.”

“No sailors?”

“None.” There was an uncomfortable pause, neither of them looking directly at the other.

“Look...” They both spoke at once and laughed shakily.

“Let’s just agree to make the most of our time together,” Ron said. Em opened her arms for a hug.

Em and Ron strolled to Old Town where they stopped for beer at a small taverna tucked away in a quiet corner. Then they ventured out again, poked around in the shops, and stopped to chat with little old ladies sitting in front of their homes. One looked to be at least ninety. Em translated for Ron.

Em giggled. “She says that we are obviously a couple very much in love.”

“Tell her, she’s right,” Ron whispered in Em's ear as the toothless old woman batted her nonexistent eyelashes at Ron and cackled gleefully.

They window-shopped. Em admired two bracelets that looked suspiciously like O-rings wrapped with gold wires. Ron wanted to buy them for her, but she would have none of it. She paid for them herself with no understanding of why the thought of Ron buying her something was so appalling. She should have liked the idea, cherished anything he bought her, but she feared that she would lose his gift in the transports and lose a part of him along with it. Or maybe anything he bought her would travel with her to her other life and she wouldn't know where it came from and she'd lose him again.

Ron insisted on a gift. She finally relented but only because it seemed so important to him. They agreed to meet back at the tavern in an hour.

“I’m sorry I’m late.” Em was breathless from running. She hugged Ron and he held on tightly. He seemed weak with relief that she was back. They ordered two beers and Ron presented his gift formally. An unconscious attempt to create rituals they would never share? They laughed to see they had bought each other almost identical amber worry beads.

“I know I’m a worrier, but I thought I hid it well.”

“You do,” she said. “But I know better. Why did you think I needed the beads?”

“Because you fidget and play with your ring or the cutlery or whatever else is handy. You need something to do with your hands.”

“And I can’t always have them on you?”

“Well.” He considered in mock seriousness. “That would be ideal of course but not always the best policy in public.”

On the second day they sailed to Lindos, climbed to the Acropolis and rode the donkeys down, and then rode the donkeys back up and walked down. Ron spotted a basket of little unfired clay donkeys labeled “Lindos Taxi.” Em thought they were cute and bought one for each of them.

That night over dinner, Ron said, “I’ve been thinking about our conversation last time. About what I could do.”

“What have you decided?”

“Prison reform.”

“What? Good Lord, isn’t that a bit of a stretch even for an actor?”

“Several years ago I toured a federal penitentiary in preparation for a role in an insignificant movie. The visit, however, proved to be significant—it made an impression that has haunted me ever since. It wasn’t until I met you that I began to think seriously that I might be able to have some impact.”

“What? Where? How?”

“I’m still trying to figure that out. I’ve been doing some research but so far haven’t found much that’s encouraging. Hell, from what I’ve seen so far I’m ready to advocate for bubble-wrap therapy.”

“Don’t forget sex therapy,” Em added with a mischievous grin.

“At the risk of starting another argument, I want to say I’ve been thinking a lot about the money thing,” Ron said. “Hollywood is an industry where excess is the norm, encouraged even. And when a star fails, every detail becomes part of the public domain.”

“I think,” Em said, “that failing has to be a lot harder when you’re a star. It’s a long way down from the top of the world.”

“Do you feel that way yourself?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Em, you’ll never fall.”

“There are no guarantees, Ron. And what if I’m doing the wrong things? What if...?” She

stopped abruptly terrified again by her fears. “But I have you to keep me grounded,” Em reminded him.

Ron slept peacefully that night, his head cradled on Em's breast. Wide awake, she stared at the ceiling, absently twining her fingers through his hair. Earlier she had allowed her worries to surface and now they reverberated painfully in the dark, dull hours of the night. She couldn't escape the thought that the evils she was trying to stop could have a good side, even benefit mankind in some perverse way, and that possibility chilled her to the bone.

*

Dinner had been different tonight. If asked to explain, I would have said the atmosphere was

more open, more relaxed than I had ever experienced. Mom and Dad teased each other and Elspeth, who hung onto her boyfriend's hand and teased back. Where had the formality of family dinners gone?

Elspeth cornered me, just as I was leaving.

“So, how is she?”

Worried. Scared. Burdened. That's what I've condemned her to. “Fine.”

I had given Em the task of changing the world and told her very specifically to stop war so why did she worry so much? Did she know something I didn't? I couldn't be wrong. Could I? I'd check the ancient Tomes—again, maybe even ask Mentor. Later. First, I had to help Em.

“Do you want to quit?” Her tension eased at the sound of my voice. That pleased me.

“Quit?” she asked stupidly.

“Stop, cease, desist.”

A thrill of trepidation ran through her. “No!” she blurted. Then more calmly, “No.” And it was the truth.

*

Dressed for work, she reached into her jewelry box and her hand closed around the bracelets as if drawn there by a magnetic force. Two black rubber circles twined with gold threads. She rolled them over her hand onto her left wrist and then slipped the gold elephant hair bracelet on and tightened it. The three looked good together, no question. She patted the little clay donkey sitting on

her dresser for luck and reached for her purse. Time to go. Teachers, kids, and a million little crises were no doubt waiting.

*

Em slept little and fitfully after that visit to the voice she called Powers, or whoever the hell he was, tossing and turning with nightmare images, and woke feeling lonely and abandoned, saved only by the comforting solidity of Ron's love. She greeted him with false cheer, trying to keep the demons well hidden.

“What's wrong?” Ron asked sleepily.

“Nothing.”

“Em! I know better. Don't shut me out. Please.”

She had already discussed war with him.

She would not spoil this time together again. “Ron, it’s okay. I didn’t sleep well, that’s all.”

“One set of worry beads just doesn’t cut it, eh?”

“Not nearly.” She laughed shakily. “How did I ever get so lucky as to find you?” She hugged him, arms wrapped around his neck. “Thank you.” He would be there, always, when she needed him.

Over dinner, Em asked, “What is the most striking difference you see between Greece and America?”

“Before I met you, my answer would probably have been fairly superficial. I would have talked about the language or climate or food but now I would say history.”

“What do you mean?”

“In the short time that we have been here I’ve seen that this is a country shaped by periods of enlightened civilization and learning along with periods of occupation. I think Greek pride and integrity come from that history.”

“You think then that the wars and occupations they have experienced here have strengthened them?”

“Terrible as wars are, yes.”

“Can countries not find easier paths to pride and integrity?”

“Em, it seems to me that you are in a better position to answer that than I.”

“Another of the things I’m trying to figure out,” Em said. “They’re always pushing me to clarify my thinking.”

“Who? Those elusive powers you’re always referring to?”

She sat in thought for some time and then muttered, “I’ll have to ask them.”

“Em, what do you mean when you talk about the powers? Can you tell me?” Em pretended to not hear his question.

*

Ron gave one last wave from the tarmac and then could no longer see her in the crowd standing at the windows of the airport. Em hadn’t promised to come again, but she hadn’t said an outright no either. He could always hope.

The conversation of fellow passengers as they waited for takeoff startled him to attention. They were discussing her latest exploits. Ron leaned across the aisle.

“Excuse me. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I heard you mention Miracle Madame doing something.”

“You haven’t heard the latest news then.” Ron shook his head. “She stopped two prison riots, one in the U.S. and the other in Russia. Got the authorities in both countries to agree to look at alternatives to mass incarceration.”

“When?”

“A couple of days ago.” Impossible! They were in Greece and had been together the whole time.

“What time of day?”

The woman looked at him quizzically and shrugged. “I don’t know, middle of the night, early morning I think.”

Ron did some rapid calculations. Would have made it early evening in Greece, about the time they separated for the gift shopping. And before he told her about his work on prison reform. She wasn’t stealing his thunder, but they were on the same wavelength.

Then he sat bolt upright. What the hell? She had been gone for an hour and a half. Take out time for shopping and that left maybe an hour. Greece, Russia, the US—in an hour? It was just like that time she had worked in Burma while he was making her breakfast. She hadn’t been gone then

and yet she had. Fuck! He had no answers to the mysteries of her and didn't think he ever would.

Maybe, he thought, maybe she didn't know either?

Chapter 33

“Ron,” one of the crew called, “someone to see you.”

“Frank! She’s here?” He scanned the set looking for her.

“No, but she will be later tonight. I’m to bring you to the house if you want.”

If I want? Yes, I want! “Just tell me when.”

“I’ll pick you up at your place at six.”

Ron entered the house calling her name but she wasn’t there. He hung his shirt on her side of the closet hoping she would wear it again. He slipped off his shoes and socks and padded barefoot through the living room to the deck to wait, tense with the need to see and touch her.

*

“Ron!” He turned. Em burst through the patio door and threw herself at him, wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, her legs around his waist. He closed his arms and hugged her close. She laughed with the pleasure of his touch, the joy of his love, the warmth of his body against hers.

She let go with one hand to caress his cheek. Within moments they were making love, wild, intense, desperate, and oh, so satisfying.

She wanted to cry with the beauty of it, but more with the sadness of it, for she was sure it couldn't last. She tried not to worry about their future, but she had a deep sense that their time together would be ending soon. She snuggled against Ron and gulped down her tears.

Later, he watched her dressing for dinner and burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“You.”

“Me?” She looked down at herself. “What?”

“Look at you. Little bit of a bra and thong panties. What would the world say if they could see you now?”

“They’d want to know about stuff like this?”

“Em, they want to know everything about you.”

“What kind of things?”

“Anything. Like, you don’t drink coffee or pop but love beer, or that you always have mangled fingernails, or that you love chocolate but hardly ever eat bread, or that you recycle gift-wrap, or that

you always close your eyes and count out loud when you do sit-ups.”

“The counting helps to breathe properly,” she said.

“Or that you use reading glasses, or that you’re a neat freak, or that you do have a couple of grey hairs.”

“A couple?” She raised her eyebrows. “Now I know love is blind.”

“Or that you crack walnuts with your teeth, or—”

“Do not!

“That is the sort of information the public would eat up and they would emulate you.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Don’t be naive. You know how celebrities are treated and you are the biggest celebrity of all. The reporters will never give up.”

“I should have known. I’m sorry. I’ll take care of it.”

“No Em. Leave it alone. I can handle it.”

“But Ron, that’s way more than you asked for when you agreed to the movie.”

She frowned and bit her lip.

Ron grinned at her. “Another one of *those* conversations in the works?”

“Hey!” Em slapped his shoulder. She was sure her mind shifts amused him, but drove him crazy. Hell, they drove her crazy most of the time and hard as she tried to stop, her mind kept jumping. Powers pushing her. Always pushing.

“Boorstin defined a celebrity as someone who is famous for being famous. In *The Image* he wrote that society is developing an unprecedented need for stimulation and that we expect the media to quench it.”

“Em, it’s okay. I’m not about to tell them anything. Please don’t worry. Now, hurry up and dress, woman, or we’ll never get to dinner and I’ll be so weak there won’t be any more sex.”

“If you’re trying to motivate me, it’s working.” Em pulled on her jeans and reached for his shirt. He helped her button it and roll up the sleeves. He seemed enormously pleased that she had chosen to wear it.

Over dinner Ron asked about her work. Em didn’t want to talk about the blood and gore but she

did expound on her political thinking. What was worse—organized religion or tribalism? “People hold grudges for centuries and the worst of it is they don’t want to change.”

“Change is hard for most of us,” Ron said. “We’re all creatures of habit and don’t like to be pushed out of our comfort zones, not even in small ways, so how do we break the patterns of lifetimes?”

“That reminds me of a story.” Em chuckled. “True I assure you. Once, several years ago, I was standing in line waiting for the elevator to go to the top of the Eiffel Tower. It was about four in the afternoon on a cold December day. I know. I know. Who the hell would visit Paris in December? I was on my way to Bamako and had stopped over for a

couple of days. Anyway, everyone huddled together trying to keep warm while we chatted and waited. Finally the elevator came and as the people got off on the other side, we all surged forward, anxious to get warm. A British woman standing next to me with her two kids, about ten and eleven, said to them, in quite a huff, ‘The French are so pushy.’ I pointed out that we were all tourists and there were no French people in the crowd. She looked at me, looked around at the others and then told her kids, ‘The French are still pushy.’”

Ron chuckled. Then tensed. A story from her past. Did she realize it? Should he say anything?

“Explains the Hundred Years War, eh?” Em said.

“No kidding.” Ron opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. “Um, Em...”

*

“Good Guardian, Yves.” Elspeth's grip on my arm tightened.

“He won't say anything.” I said.

“How can you be so sure?”

“He won't want to raise her conscious awareness of what she said. He doesn't want to risk losing her to her other life.”

“But, he's a good man,” Elspeth protested.

“He'll want to help her find herself.”

“Yes, but he won't be able to make himself do it.”

I saw disappointment and sorrow wash over Elspeth's face. “He's a coward then.”

“Can’t say as I blame him for chickening out.”

“Then you're a coward too.” Elspeth stalked away and didn't look back when I called out to her.

*

“Yes? Ron?” Em gave him a little poke. “You started to say something.” His face reddened. “Ron, are you okay? You're not sick or anything, are you?” Still he didn't speak. “Ron!” Em shook his shoulder.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I'm okay.”

“You sure? A minute ago you were beet red. Now you're white as a sheet. Let me get you a glass of water.” She waved the waiter over. Ron drained the glass. “There, you look better now.”

“Thanks.” He squeezed her hand. “You were saying?”

“Pushing people to change—that’s what I have to try to find an answer for, according to Powers.” Em snorted. “Operation essential harvest. Can you believe it?”

“God, Em, you’re an expert at shifting gears. Sometimes, I feel like I can never keep up.” Em started an apology, but Ron held up his hand and shook his head. “It’s okay. Really. I love the challenge of it. You take me places no one else ever has.”

“Now, who wouldn’t love a man who said things like that? Ron, babe, you are smooth.”

“What do you think people will say five hundred years from now when they look back at our century?”

“What do you think they'll say?”

“I think our times will be considered a Dark Age.”

“Like the Middle Ages?”

“Yep, but let's change the subject. I need to go see some people. Would you like to come along?” Em had never invited him before and she worried that Powers would be mad, would interfere somehow, but the words were spoken and she couldn't take the invitation back.

*

I fumed. Mentor told me to cool it. Said Em had the right to take Ron along. Humph! Not to my way of thinking.

Of course, Ronny boy was thrilled. Considered it his lucky day. *It sure as hell is, buddy.*

I mumbled some excuse and left to find Exelrud. Maybe shoot some pool with him. Take my mind off Em for a bit. Who was I trying to kid? Nothing would take my mind off her.

*

Settled in the car, Em asked, “How is everyone?”

“We meet regularly at Raül’s. The family always joins us for part of the evening. Raül senior and his wife Ana practice their English while Jamie

works on her Spanish. Raül and his sister Marta translate for their grandmother.

“At every visit Grandma shares jokes, some pretty raunchy, but she never tells us which are hers and which are yours.”

“They’re all hers.” Em tried to say it with a straight face and pretty much failed.

“She’s so tiny and stooped. It’s painful to watch her with her canes.” Ron sounded distressed. He was likely comparing her to the good health of Gram, Em thought.

“Marta told us she has great difficulty with stairs. At the end of our first evening together I offered to carry her upstairs. She refused with a sharp shove of a cane in the center of my chest.” He smiled ruefully. “That’s a mistake I didn’t make

again, believe me. She's too damn independent to mess with."

"Oh, that I know."

"Learned the hard way too, huh?"

"Yep. Felt that cane myself."

"Fortunately her temper cooled as fast as it rose and she forgave me with a benign gap-toothed smile and a joke Marta refused to translate."

Ron stared at the floor, then seemed to gather his courage and raised his head to look Em in the eye. "The family puts us to shame. They're always up on what's going on in the world and their understanding of the implications is so superior to ours."

"They've had to be hyper-aware to survive."

Ron grunted agreement. “We’re so damn fortunate to have been born here, in the ‘have’ part of the world.”

“Boy, have you got that right.” Em thought of the children she’d just rescued from the cocoa plantations and the women she was working with, trying to set up cottage industries.

“But it wasn’t until Grandma asked questions about how we lived that we truly examined our own lifestyles,” Ron said. “We made a pact then to downsize, and gradually we have. We’re trying to convince others to do the same.”

“Dinners together are also catch-up time, a chance to discuss the pros and cons of current projects, commiserate over the raising of teens, and trade strategies on dealing with the media.”

“And talk about me?” Em knew she sounded wistful. She wished she had someone she could talk to about Ron.

“Of course.” He gave her hand a squeeze. “At first I worried that the others would treat me differently, be jealous of my time with you. To my great relief, that didn’t happen.”

“Well, of course not. They’re your friends.” Em sighed inwardly and wondered if she had friends like that in her other life. Friends she could trust so completely. God, she hoped so because if she didn’t ... well, what would that say about her?

“Amy phoned me a few days ago asking about colleges. She hasn’t said anything to her parents yet, but she wants to be a journalist. She has a favor to ask of you.”

“Of course.”

“She wondered if you could arrange for her to meet or talk to François Durocher.”

“I’ll check with him. What about you? What are you doing now?”

“Tia, Brad, and I are campaigning for water conservation and preservation. We’ve had some positive results and are slowly gathering a solid following. A UN group is trying to prevent future shortages and regional friction that could erupt into water wars.”

Em sighed. “There’ll always be an excuse for war.” She glanced out the window. “Oh good, we’re here.”

Chapter 34

Em hopped out of the car almost before it came to a complete halt. Frank opened the door for Ron who stood and looked across the roof of the car, his mouth hanging open in astonishment.

A sea of people of all ages crowded around Em. They called out to her, and reached for handshakes. She greeted each by name, firing off questions, “How’s your grandma’s health?” “Did Juanita have her baby yet?” “Is Marco doing better in school?” “Did Janice get the job?” Young men wearing gang colors, waited until the commotion subsided and then moved in to greet her, some with salutes, others with intricate handshakes that melded into engulfing bear hugs. Finally, she motioned for Ron to join her. The look on his face

said it all. He'd never been exposed to a community like this one, never experienced being the minority. He looked scared spitless, but intrigued too.

“It's Ron Conlin,” someone said. The crowd rumbled a welcome, closed in on Ron and Em and moved en masse towards a restaurant just down the block. Ron ended up at the bar with some of the older men and women. The bartender hastily cleared away the ashtrays.

Em saw that Ron was accorded his fair share of attention from the men and women around him. He seemed surprised when they asked about his life and his work, respecting him as an individual separate from her. *Way to go, guys. You are true friends.* She blew Ron a kiss.

Em sat in her usual spot at the center table along the back wall. Sam passed her a beer. Etta put her baby in Em's lap, a cutie trying to shove both her fists in her mouth at once. A group of little kids hovered around her chair. A young girl twined her fingers in Em's curls trying in vain to straighten them.

The restaurant wasn't big enough to accommodate everyone and many stood outside the door or opened the windows to lean in. Questions flew at Em, but most people didn't wait for answers and within seconds it seemed that everyone was talking at once. A number of the younger children and pre-teens had run home and now came over to show off report cards and school projects.

Suddenly the crowd went silent and all eyes focused on the door. A giant of a man stood in the entrance, glaring at Em. Someone whisked the baby from her lap and the children backed away. She set her beer down, rose, and very slowly moved around to stand in front of the table. She could hear Ron groan, but didn't dare glance in his direction. The crowd parted to allow the giant to advance toward her.

“What you doing bringing your skinny white ass to my hood?”

“Hell, the idiots let you out of prison again.”
The crowd gasped.

“What you gonna do about it, bitch?”

“Kick your black ass right on back there.”

“You and whose army?”

“I’ve never needed help to take care of you, Jake.” Em moved towards him. Jake advanced, fists raised menacingly.

Ron tried to go to her but the crowd in front of him closed ranks. He pushed against them, determined to work his way through. *No, Ron. Don't. Stay where you are. Please.*

“Don’t!” Em heard a low voice from behind Ron hiss in his ear and saw hands clamp down on his shoulders to hold him back. He tried, unsuccessfully, to shrug them off. He was scared, but there was nothing she could do about that. She turned her attention back to Jake.

Em cracked first, her lips twitching before breaking into a huge grin. She opened her arms for a hug. In two strides Jake was there. He picked her

up off the floor in a huge embrace. “You never could keep a straight face,” he complained as the crowd cheered and clapped.

The big over-muscled teddy bear lifted Em up and set her on the table. She glanced at Ron and saw him heave a sigh of relief.

“Why you wearing this big shirt?” Jake flicked the collar with his finger. “Trying to hide your scrawny little body.”

“Scrawny nothing, you big lump of lard.” She poked him in the stomach.

He doubled over and held his stomach. “Ooo eee, that Pee-la-tees of yours must be doing some good. That hurt.”

“Good. Maybe if you’d listen once in a while and take my advice you’d be half as good as me.” She pushed up her sleeve and made a muscle.

Jake tested her bicep gingerly between his thumb and forefinger, and then held his own arm, which was at least four times the size, up next to hers. He shook his head sadly. “Woman, you are pathe-tick. Pick on someone your own size.” Jake gestured to a youth who came over eagerly. “Hey, Danny, think you could take this puny little thing?”

Danny studied her bicep speculatively and nodded. Moments later he and Em were setting up for an arm wrestling match. Jake checked the positioning of their arms, made sure their wrists were straight and muscles relaxed before they started. Danny winked at his buddies and the match

was on. He won and the crowd hooted and hollered their approval.

“Best two out of three,” Jake ordered. Em won the second match and Danny won the third, but not easily. Money passed back and forth between numerous men and women. Danny and Em shook hands formally and then hugged, falling over each other with laughter. Em returned to her seat and Jake motioned for the gang leaders to join them.

“Time to go,” Someone announced and everyone filed out calling goodbye. Five young men and two girls sat with Em and Jake. Em waved Ron over. Jake stood and examined Ron as Em introduced them. Few people could tower over Ron, but this man did.

“This the little guy who helps you?” Jake asked.

“Yes. And I kinda like him too.”

“You do!?”

“Be nice.”

Jake looked Ron up and down critically, frowned and finally shook Ron’s hand. “You’ll do.” He gestured for Ron to sit with them and took his own seat.

The young men and women relayed the gang news assuring Em that there had been no deaths or fights since her last visit. She asked about specific families and jobs and housing.

“The shuttle buses are working out well,” the girl named Anny, said. “The ride makes a long day longer, but it beats no job.”

Jake turned to Ron. “One of the greatest frustrations of the inner city bro is the lack of job opportunities in the hood.”

“Plenty of jobs out there, but miles from where we live,” Anny said.

“And without wheels, how can we be expected to get out there and hold down a job?” One of the boys wearing a Nissan shirt with his name tag said.

“So, what's happening with the kids at home?” Em asked.

“Set up day-care and after-school care for them. Most of the grannies help out so doesn't cost the parents much.” Anny looked proud as she spoke.

“Situations not ideal,” Jake grouched, “but it does provide incomes, stabilize families, and most importantly, keeps the men at home.”

“Exactly where we want them.” Anny high-fived the other girl at the table.

“Man, you guys are good,” Em said.

Everyone seemed to sit a little taller at her words.

Business concluded, they went outside.

Frank was waiting by the car with a group of men.

It was great to see the repairs that had been done since her last visit. Window boxes full of herbs, green onions, lettuce, and flowers added color and life, and the street was clean. It even smelled fresh. Becoming livable.

“There was a proposal at city hall once,”

Ron whispered in her ear, “to change the name of

this community in an effort to change the image. No name change, however well intentioned, could have accomplished this.” Em tried to stifle a sinful little welling of pride.

*

Ronny boy got to be with Em at work, his hand on her thigh. Sky! Why couldn't that have been me? Ron watched and learned that Em didn't offer answers or solutions. Instead, with questions, she directed the conversation subtly, leading the group to discover the solutions that would work for them.

Well, duh, what did he think? That Em bullied her way through her job? Well, I guess ... maybe ... it would seem that way to anyone watching the news.

The irony of the situation did not escape Ron. Had to give him credit for that. For years he had participated in celebrity events to raise money for gang intervention programs, but he had never thought of going to the areas his circle pretended didn't exist, except as an excuse for the golf tournaments, of course. Yet, there he was feeling safe, comfortable, and welcome. All because of my Little Soldier. She set the tone for everything she touched.

Lying in bed later, Ron wanted to ask how everyone had recognized her when she wasn't in what he called "Madame clothes," and how many times she had been there and why they had never heard about that work on the news, and how many other things she did that no one had heard about, but

Em was already asleep. Her answers would be, at best, vague and oblique. She was a master at evasion when she wanted to be. In the end he knew he wouldn't ask at all.

And my darling, Em? She was relaxed at that moment—in *his* arms—her worries at bay, her search for her other life forgotten for a moment. My job now, was to find a way to keep the memories of her other self from intruding in this life she led with me. I'd go to Mentor for help, butter her up by asking advice. Maybe that would soften the old bat. Humph! Who was I trying to kid?

Chapter 35

Em was an astronaut without a spaceship again. A sense of perfect calm washed over her. She felt her muscles relax one by one and sighed with the heady sweet pleasure of feeling loose and carefree.

Too bad that feeling was to be so fleeting. She deserved better. But she needed this meeting with me, needed answers.

She tensed when she sensed my presence. She knew too that my deep soothing voice would seduce her yet again. I wasn't above being flattered that she thought of me that way. Seduce. Seduction. Seducer. Seducing.

“It’s not fair you know,” Em said before I could speak. “I have so many questions and you always cut me off. Why me?”

The same question I had asked when told I was to be a Power. Yes, I had excelled in my education and training but so had countless others. Why me? Why not Exelrud, my best friend, who always outdid me, and always lorded it over me, grinning and teasing and helping me to do better next time? Why not my sister, who was wiser and wittier? Why not one of the hundreds of eager candidates, all of whom came from more privileged backgrounds, some the offspring of Grand Council members?

“Why not?” I said. The same answer I’d been given—an offhanded dismissal. I knew now

that the Guardians chose me as an experiment. They'd been accused of racism, choosing novices from the ranks of the elite only. I wasn't just a Drone to them, I was their guinea pig.

“I'm serious, damn it. Don't mock me. There are billions of people on Earth. Billions more intelligent, more qualified. I'm so ordinary. Why me?”

Why not you? I felt a pang of guilt at my flippancy. I'd give her a better answer than I'd been given, something she could hold on to. “You made three wishes. And once you developed those wishes you never wavered.”

“Pfft! Those were nothing more than childhood fantasies. I only played with them to put myself to sleep.”

Her wishes were much more than that. They were the desires of a profound soul. How to explain to a mere human, what we in the Guardian universe understood instinctively?

“Have there been others before me?”

“Yes,” I said. “And, like them, you too will be remembered.”

“Please not as a religious figure.”

“You don’t want to be a god? Sorry, goddess?”

“No! I just want to be me. Miracle Madame. Please.”

“Silly name they gave you. Sounds like you should be running a brothel in the Old West.”

“Hey, that’s my line.”

Em chuckled and relaxed a little as I'd hoped she would. If only I could do that for her all the time. If only I could tell her everything, how I really felt. "Em, my dear—"

"Please let me just be me," she said.

I sighed. What would I have said if she hadn't interrupted? What could I have said with Mentor no doubt hovering? "If you insist," I agreed. How could I deny her anything? "More like you will follow."

"Unless people destroy the earth first."

"That was a possibility."

"Was?"

"Less likely now because of you."

"I've been doing the right things then, stopping wars?" She should have sounded relieved.

I felt a shiver of alarm. “You still have doubts?”

“Lord yes,” Em said. “What if war is...? What if war...?”

I waited for her to say it.

“What if war is a good thing?” she blurted. “Maybe human beings aren’t doomed to kill each other. Maybe they are destined to.”

An eternity of hell in the question. I had to calm her. “Do not fear.”

“Don’t use that damn soothing tone with me. I’m not a child. And cut the crap. I have a right to worry. You should too. We’re messing with everything. Hell, fear is all I know.” She took a deep breath.

I held mine.

“I fight always, always to appear calm, to provide the assurance people need, to be perfect.”

She was perfect. She was doing everything exactly right. I knew it, but she didn't. “My dear, my dear, don't fuss so.”

“Oh, for heaven's sake. Don't you see? There is no end, damn it, no way out. I'm trying to hold back the flood with one tiny finger in the dike. And, what if my interference only makes things worse?”

“You have acted as we expected and you have done well. Very well.” She'd done her work so well, in fact, that I was more confident than I had ever been about my review.

“I have done nothing that really matters. And if that is as you expected, then you haven't

expected nearly enough,” Em said. “We’re being tested, you know,” she added, almost as an afterthought.

Tested! What did she know? Mentor? The Grand Council? The Guardians? In direct contact with a human? “Tested?” I felt sick.

“History, time, other worlds—they’ll all judge us and we’ll be found wanting, negligent, ridiculous.” She laughed, on rising hysteria. Embracing the edges of madness. She knew it, but couldn’t stop. Perhaps welcomed it?

“You asked the questions,” I said.

“But you didn’t answer them. You with all your power and insight and wisdom, you didn’t answer.”

“No, even we don’t do that. Beings must find the answers themselves.”

“And if they don’t, you send someone else.”

“Eventually.”

“So I’m the colossal failure.”

My knees quivered and I felt the familiar chill of fear. She wouldn’t be able to finish her job with that mindset and where would that leave me?

“You must never think that.”

“Then you’re the colossal failure.”

Guardian, this was worse. “No!” I almost shouted. “Stop and think.” There was a pause so long I thought I had lost her.

Finally she spoke. “I’ve come to realize that everything is interrelated, a complex tangled mess

of a web. The problems we're dealing with must be seen in the global context."

"And solved in the global context."

"Yes. But how?" Another unbearably long pause. "One little step at a time, girl, one little step."

I sagged with relief. She was thinking, theorizing, looking for solutions. She was back. "We'll work it out together."

"Thank you."

"Why are you thanking us?" My voice rose alarmingly. "We made you do all the work, often left you to your own devices, put you through the agony of not knowing."

"But you gave me a gift." She sounded very much like a small child. "You let me make a movie. You helped me. That was okay? Making the movie

I mean. It's being seen around the world you know. What we did was right? Of course it was right, or you would have changed it. Your message is spreading just like you wanted." She stumbled to a halt. "You're okay with it?"

"Yes. Stop fussing. You have another question."

"I don't want to ask it." Her voice trembled.

"We did not make him love you," I said softly, my voice almost a caress. "We did not control that. Your love is your true destiny." *Oh, oh, oh. I didn't know I could be such a liar.* But Ron had lied to her too. That's what love did then, made liars of us all?

Her breath came out in a ragged rush that ended with a harsh sob. “But I don’t understand why. What did I ever do to deserve Ron’s love?”

I wanted to say it was my love, my love she deserved. I took a deep breath. “Keep it clinical.” Mentor’s voice sounded in my head. Hovering. Always hovering. The bitch. *Yeah, right, Boss, that’s the way we operate.* I took another breath.

“You are too modest. Because you go beyond yourself. How old were you, ten or eleven, when you began to wish for the magic to save the world? Even as a child you used your Aladdin wishes for others.”

“Those were wild imaginings of childhood, irrational dreams.”

“Not so irrational after all, eh?”

“But—”

“Stop! It’s all for you—no one else.”

Pointless to argue. She must have realized that for she shifted gears.

“May I tell Ron about you?”

Oh, dear Guardian, the one question I dreaded. The question that forced me to tell her. I hesitated.

“Say it!” Mentor's voice hissed in my head.

Still I hesitated. There must be a way out.

Surely the Guardians wouldn't force me to—

“Get on with it.” Mentor said. She was right beside me. There was no way out.

“There are some things you need to know about your future. Listen carefully.”

Mentor said I had to tell her the bad news. Tell what I had decided in my rage of jealousy. I pleaded and begged, down on my knees. Told Mentor I wasn't myself when I said it. I didn't really mean it. I was just venting. I didn't mean for Em to pay the price. I implored Mentor, asked her to intercede with the Grand Council. Offered myself as sacrifice. I even cried. Real tears. To no avail. It was a done deal and now I had to tell Em.

Chapter 36

She woke with a start, sat up, and called frantically, “Ron!” But he wasn't there. *Oh God, I'm at home, in my own room. I was with Ron. I was!* Jake's booming voice rang in her head. She sank back and pulled the covers over her head. Maybe she could go back. Maybe, if she closed her eyes and wished hard enough she could leave this life. Run away. Go back. Be with Powers and Ron forever.

*

“What shall we do today?” Em turned off the TV after checking the news.

“I'd suggest golfing but it looks like rain.”

“Frank could take us to the gym for a workout. I haven’t had time to go for days. Would that be all right with you?”

“Sure, but I don’t have any workout clothes with me.”

Em could have told him not to worry. The stuff he needed would be there. “Let’s check the closet.”

Ron found shorts, T-shirt, socks, and runners. Em put on spandex tights and a navy blue T-shirt with “dos” on the back and “devant” on the front in large fluorescent orange letters. She tried to explain the word play to Ron but the subtlety was lost in the translation. Just as they were tying their shoelaces there was a knock on the door.

“How does he do that?” Ron asked.

“Frank? Mental telepathy. Come on.”

“We’re near the bar we were in last night, right?” Ron said as Frank pulled up to the curb.

“It’s just a couple of blocks over.” Em led the way to a door under a small sign that read simply, “Jake’s.”

“It figures,” Ron muttered. “Mr. Muscle doesn't even need a proper sign.” Em liked that he was a little jealous. She felt warm and loved.

A trio of old guys and two young women, whose babies slept peacefully in their strollers, ran on the treadmills. They greeted Ron and Em with waves and then left them alone.

Em worked with free weights and a stability ball doing exercises a policeman had taught her.

Ron watched her do flies with twenty-five pounds in each hand. He laughed.

“What?” Em wasn’t sure if she should be offended.

“Remembering my first workout with eight-pounders. My arms shook uncontrollably and Tony laughed, called it muscle fatigue.”

“I know that feeling. I was a body of flab when I first started working out.”

Jake came in midway through their workout. He watched them for a while and made suggestions. No kibitzing.

At the end of the workout, Ron and Em lay side by side on the mats, stretching. Em laughed at some silly pun of Ron’s.

“God, Em, I love that I can make you laugh.” Rita’s scoffing had taught him to curb his quips. Sandra had enjoyed his humor at first, but after a time the wit and word plays slid off with little or no acknowledgement. Em seemed to genuinely enjoy his repartee; another reason to love her, he thought.

Jake sauntered over and suggested drills. Em agreed. She took off her runners and socks and stashed them under the bench that held their towels. She removed her ring and asked Ron to hold it. He studied it carefully. The large stone had a flat dull gleam, which he realized was a contradiction of terms, but nevertheless a true description. Ron was still studying the ring when it winked at him.

He started and almost dropped it. “Em, your ring...” He shook his head in disbelief and looked almost stricken. Em didn’t even try to explain. How could she? All these months later and even after the visits with the voice, she didn’t really understand. The ring was as surreal as the rest of it.

*

Played with his head, there. Couldn’t resist. Elspeth huffed and defended Ron. And Mentor gave me hell of course.

*

Ron shook his head again and slipped the ring onto the end of his little finger. “Go.” He waved Em away. “I’ll watch.”

Em joined Jake in the center of the gym. They practiced footwork and sparring, both punches

and kicks, working their way back and forth across the room.

“It’s a drill, called lines,” the elderly attendant, James, explained to Ron.

Jake and Em alternated making offensive moves while the other provided a moving target. Their moves were slow, flowing, and controlled. Then they went to the mats by the ring to do some light sparring.

“Empty hands. No gloves,” James said. Ron winced

Em didn’t stand a chance against Jake but neither did she back away. Ron groaned each time a punch connected. He pictured new bruises he knew Em wouldn’t even notice.

Finally, Jake called time out. James gave them each a towel and a bottle of water. Between gulps Jake gave Em additional pointers and they played out certain punches and blocks over again. Em seemed proud to be able to show him a trick or two. Then Jake handed her her gi pants and top and a white belt. She took them and her face fell. She held up the belt. “White?” She looked at Ron, her face a mask of confusion. “I’ve a blue belt in jiu jitsu now.” He moved towards her, but Jake was there first. Her training session wasn’t over yet.

Jake called out to the young guys who had come in about half an hour earlier. There were six of them, high school students, loaded down with backpacks and team jackets. They were strong and fast with the agility and quick reflexes of youth.

They circled Em and took turns attacking, ambushing her, some with plastic knives, and others with sticks or mock guns. She used every takedown she knew to defend herself.

*

If what came before shocked Ron, this made him physically ill. Shocked me too even though I knew she'd be okay. I hated watching her in the dojo. Why she insisted on martial arts for her workouts baffled me. What was wrong with yoga, or Pilates, or running?

Elsbeth puffed up at that moment, ending her run with a good sprint. "Hey, Bro, how the heck are ya?" She punched my arm.

My mouth fell open. “Elsbeth!” She giggled. “You’re seeing entirely too much of Earth life, if you’re talking like that.”

“Gotta admit it’s kinda cool.” She jogged on to the gym, waving a hand over her shoulder at me. Big sister or not, she had no business dropping our traditions and ways. I’d have to have a serious talk with her.

*

Em backed away from an armed attacker, hands raised, as if pleading for mercy. An instant later, she was on her back on the ground, toy gun in hand, aimed at her assailant.

“Just where did you learn that?” Jake demanded.

“From the soldiers.”

“Soldiers?” one of the boys asked.

“They know everything.”

“Show us,” Jake said. Em broke the move down into its component parts and had the guys practice. Then she showed them two more ways to face an attacker with a gun.

Soon they were back to what Jake called the “circle of love” and she was attacked again. Jake watched as she grappled with whichever of the boys had been able to take her down, encouraging her to use strategy rather than brute force.

Over and over again Ron watched Em defend herself. He was both torn with a desire to turn away, but held in a trance that kept his attention glued to the scene. By the time it was over

Ron's whole body ached and he felt slightly sick to his stomach.

Finally, Jake seemed satisfied with the training session. He examined Em's hands and sent her off to cool-down and stretch. He came back with an ice pack for the bruised and swollen knuckles of her right hand, said he'd launder her gi and put it away for next time. Ron winced when he heard that. Jake walked Ron and Em to the car, hugged her and shook hands with Ron.

Em groaned as she lowered herself into the car slowly and gingerly. "I'm too old for this," she said.

"You could always give it up," Ron said encouragingly.

“No way!” She stifled a yawn and groaned as she reached for her seat belt. “Ouch!” She rubbed her shoulder. “It’s too much fun.”

“Fun! God Em, that was brutal.”

“Actually, I like Predator and Prey better. It’s a game where—”

“No, don’t tell me,” he said. “I don’t want to know.”

Em closed her eyes and drifted off.

Ron slipped her ring off his little finger and studied it. *What do you see in the ring, Em?* He'd asked her about it once. “It tells me things,” she'd said. “Tells me where I'll go and what I'll have to do. What to watch out for.” He looked at the ring half expecting another wink but the stone was flat and dull. He slipped it on her finger.

Such an enigma, this woman he loved.

*

Ron went back to the gym some days later with Tony. Jake met them as they entered, greeted Ron cordially, and looked Tony up and down critically with his usual scowl.

“Cool space you’ve got here, man,” Tony said as he checked out the gym. He headed to the far wall and chatted with three youths working out. Ron watched Jake, wary of his reaction. He wanted Jake’s approval of his best friend. Ron hoped to work out here regularly, another way to stay closer to Em, and he wanted Tony to come with him. Jake glowered. His gaze never left Tony. Ron’s attention was diverted by a burst of laughter from the youths with Tony.

Tony eventually returned to join Ron and Jake. “You’ve got good equipment,” he said to Jake. “Having trouble with my back. Acupuncture and massage help but not enough. What would you suggest?”

“You a dancer?”

“Yeah.”

“Lifting the girls?” Tony nodded. Jake turned to Ron. “He’s okay, but don’t bring no others.” He took Tony by the arm and Ron could hear bits and pieces of a medical discussion. From then on, they went to Jake’s regularly and before long felt comfortable with Jake and the crowd who worked out there. Tony’s back improved steadily and Ron got stronger and leaner.

*

Wasn't that just jim dandy? I pounded the arm of my chair. Em would probably think Ron looked sexier than ever now.

“Oh, look at Ron.” Elspeth cooed. I swear she was drooling. “Hum, maybe I should take my honey to the gym with me.”

I was so mad I wanted to spit.

*

It was late afternoon by the time Ron and Em arrived back at the house after their workout. In spite of a mad dash through the pounding rain they arrived in the foyer soaked. Ron dried off and started a fire to ward off the chill while Em showered. After his shower, they curled up in front of the fire. Em had brought over a bottle of Muscat, two glasses, and a plate of freshly cracked walnuts.

Ron helped himself to some walnuts raising an eyebrow quizzically.

“With my teeth.” Em laughed and handed him the bottle to open. She also had a pile of books by Nick Bantock. “These are so clever. Look, they have envelopes with letters on some of the pages. Others are postcards and Bantock's art is amazing.” They read aloud, playing the roles of Griffin and Sabine, pulling the letters out of the envelopes, unfolding them with care and stopping often to admire and discuss the art.

By the end of the third book, Ron was convinced that Sabine was a figment of Griffin's imagination or that she was the other half of Griffin's split personality. Em believed that Sabine

was real and did exist. Ron accused her of being an incurable romantic.

“And you’re not?” Em's eyebrows rose.

“No one has ever accused me of being romantic.”

“What about us?”

“Are you suggesting we’re like Griffin and Sabine?”

“Aren’t we?”

“But we’re real.”

“So are they.”

“You win!” He grinned. “Are you sure you’re not a lawyer? Don’t move,” he said as he rose and went to the bedroom. He came back in a few minutes and settled beside her. “Em, I have something for you,” he said hesitantly. She hadn’t

wanted to accept any gifts from him in Greece and he hoped desperately that she would accept this.

Ron handed her a small box covered in faded blue velvet and seemed to brace himself, as if expecting her to hand it back. Em gasped as she lifted the hinged lid. “Ron, these are beautiful.”

Ron had marshaled all of his arguments as to why she should accept his gift in one compelling speech rehearsed over and over again, even in his sleep. He rehearsed it yet again as he waited for the inevitable no, but it never came.

*

Guardian and damn. She was going to accept it. A gift! From him! The man who had taken my rightful place in her heart.

She removed the earrings carefully from the box and put them on. Diamonds. A girl's best friend. She liked them, no question. Why do you think I chose that ring from the Antiquities room? Solid diamond.

My heart ached as I watched her reach for Ron's hand and lead him to the bedroom. She stopped in front of the mirror where she could admire the earrings. Ron stood behind, his arms wrapped around her waist.

She'd accept his gift this time. She felt she had to. She understood his need for a tangible connection. She understood because she needed that connection to him too. She prayed that she wouldn't lose the earrings in a transport or in her other life, but she had no intention of taking them off, ever.

Hopelessly outmaneuvered by an oafish human bearing a little gift. I felt hollow. I gulped tears and then let them flow for there was no way I could go down to Earth and give her a gift to show my love.

The diamonds sparkled in the light. Their gold settings shone dully. Like her wire bracelet.

“These are old, aren’t they? Have been well loved? Where ever did you find them?” Em said.

“I searched for a long time. I found them in a small shop in London.”

Don't look so Guardian damned smug, buddy. Mentor found them for you.

Ron shivered and glanced around the room fearfully.

“What's wrong?” Em turned from the mirror and placed her hands on his chest. “Your heart's beating a mile a minute.”

“I felt ... something.”

That something was me of course, I wanted to throw him off balance, disrupt his smug pleasure with Em, but Mentor snuck up from behind just then.

*

Em looked at Ron worriedly. “I’m okay,” he said. “Really.” He scanned the room again as if looking for someone or something, and then shook his head. Em wondered if Powers.... No, surely not. He wouldn’t bother with something like this.

Chapter 37

Em wrinkled her nose. Stale beer, cigarette smoke, sweat, and the musty smell of sex. What a seedy little joint to be stuck in. And stuck she was—to the chair. She shifted and tried to stand, grabbed a fistful of her skirt and jerked it towards her. The skirt came free. She lost her balance and slammed into the floor face first. She tasted blood. *Fuck! All the dangerous situations I'm in and the only time I get hurt is when I do something klutzy.* She wiped her mouth with the edge of her skirt and ran her tongue around her teeth. None seemed to be loose, but she had cut her lip. *Damn!* She muttered and rolled to a sitting position.

“Here. Let me help you.” A hand appeared in front of her face. She looked up to see a woman in white smiling down at her. The beautiful face ...

she half expected to see angel wings, a halo.... “He never should have left you here. I'll have a word with him about this.”

“No. Please. Don't say anything. It's alright. Really. I'll be fine.” Em accepted the helping hand and rose in one fluid motion. She brushed her skirt with her hands, and then ran her fingers through her hair. “Thank you.” She looked up. The woman was gone. The bar empty. She didn't stop to think who it was she'd been defending.

*

She picked up the phone, dialed Tom's room. “Can you come to my office please?”

“What's up, Boss. You sounded worried and I don't mind telling you, you look like hell.”

She took a deep breath. “Do you believe in extraterrestrial beings?”

“Whoa, girl. Where did that come from?”

She shifted in her chair. “I ... nothing. Sorry. It was a bad dream I had last night. Spooked me is all.”

Tom frowned. “Are you sure you're not sick or something?”

She nodded. “Yeah, sorry to have bothered you.” She waved a hand at him. “Now get out of here. Back to the kidlets.” Her grin was wobbly.

Tom grinned back, but felt like cursing. He found Sue refilling her coffee cup in the staffroom. “She's not okay, is she?”

“No, and I don't mind telling you I'm worried sick. She asked me today if I believed in

aliens and then seemed heartbroken when I said no. I thought she'd burst into tears then and there.”

“So what do we do?”

“I've called her family like you suggested last time we talked. Waiting to hear back.”

Tom squeezed Sue's shoulder. “Let me know as soon as you get word. I'll go with you to talk to them.”

*

Ron entered his dressing room weary but elated. This afternoon's matinee audience had been particularly responsive and the cast performed on a high. The play was scheduled for a move to the Lincoln Center. There was talk of Tony nominations. It wasn't until he sat down to remove his makeup that he saw her in the mirror behind

him. She was sitting on the cot studying him intently.

“Em, you’re here.” Ron’s eyes lit up and his smile was wide and warm. “Brilliant Ron,” he mocked. “But I’m too happy to feel as stupid as that sounded.”

“I came to see your performance.”

“Did you like it?”

“You were wonderful as always, but I confess I didn’t understand the play at all.”

He laughed. “You know that most people would never admit something like that. You’re so honest.”

“Refreshingly or brutally so?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Can you stay for a while? I’ve got tomorrow off.”

“I know. That’s why I came tonight. If I go incognito, would you show me the sights?”

“I’d love to. Let me change and we’ll go to some trendy spot for drinks. Have you got something else to wear?”

“Em looked down at the dress that glowed. She often wondered if it cast a halo around her. Christ, she hoped not. That would make her look like some sort of religious figure. She gave the skirt a little shake. Tiny sparks flew off it and danced around her.

Ron laughed. “That sort of defeats the incognito, doesn’t it? We’ll fix that tomorrow. Here put my coat on for tonight. Shame to cover such a beautiful dress.” Em did as he asked and he looked her over critically. “I don’t think anyone will

recognize you and you just might make a new fashion statement.”

Em studied herself in the mirror. “I hardly think so. It’s a clever disguise. I’m not sure I want to look this frumpy though.” Em could have told him she didn’t need a disguise. With the blink of an eye, she could make them invisible if she wanted to. Caught once between warring cartels with no apparent way out, the ring had shown her how. But, Ron was having too much fun.

“Wait here. I have a better idea.” He was back moments later. “Try this.”

“A bit skimpy don’t you think?” He had found a dress belonging to one of the costume girls. It was a bit of nothing held up by the skinniest of

spaghetti straps and barely long enough to cover her tush.

He leered and lunged at her, picked her up and swung her in a full circle. “Perfect for the New York hot spots. Very sexy.”

“Wow, I like the effect.” Em kissed him on the cheek and twirled in front of the mirror eyeing him over her shoulder. “But Ron, if the press take pictures of us how will you explain me?”

“I’ll say I was asked to entertain the producer’s daughter and I’ll try my best to keep my hands off you in public.”

“The producer’s daughter? The producer’s mother maybe.”

“Honey chil’, you are wa-a-a-ay too sexy to be anyone’s mother.”

Em felt tears prickling the corners of her eyes. *But I am someone's mother. You showed me the stretch marks.*

“Now put my coat on and go out the front.”
He rolled up Em’s dress and put it in his carry all.
“I’ll use the stage door and try to lose the reporters.
Meet me across the street about half a block down
to the right.”

They stopped for drinks at the Hudson Hotel
and had a late dinner at Mooza’s in the Lower East
Side.

They rose early the next morning to go to
Ellis Island. Em cried when she saw all the
suitcases. “Imagine all of your life packed up in one
little case and leaving all that was familiar for the
unknown. The courage it must have taken.” She

read out loud the one quote that, in her opinion, neatly summed up the whole immigrant experience.

I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. I learned three things after I arrived. The streets were not paved with gold. The streets were not paved at all. I was expected to pave them.

They were browsing in ABC Carpets, Em caressing the wonderful old wooden furniture when it happened.

“Yo, buddy, how the hell are you?” a voice called from behind them. Ron froze.

“Tony,” he muttered. “It’s too late to avoid him. What the hell do we do?” He turned his back and shielded Em from his friend’s view.

Em moved around Ron, smiled and extended her hand. “Hello. You must be Tony. Ron’s told me so much about you.”

“All good of course,” Tony quipped, grinning and ogling her at the same time, still holding her hand in both of his.

“Paws off,” Ron growled.

Tony looked at him sharply and then back to her. “I still don’t know your name beautiful lady.” He oozed charm.

“I’m Miracle Madame. Call me Em.”

Tony’s mouth dropped open and he let go of her hand so fast she almost lost her balance. Ron looked at her quizzically. “He’s your best friend,” she whispered.

“Still...”

“It’s okay, honest.” She mouthed the word lunch. Ron nodded agreement. Em turned back to Tony. “We were about to go for a late lunch. Would you like to join us?”

Tony stared. “I ... uh... if it’s okay....” Tony fumbled and looked to Ron who nodded assent.

*

I watched and fumed when Tony took them to a small restaurant in Harlem. Once he relaxed he was entertaining, interesting, and fun. Em laughed heartily at his wit. It wasn't fair. I could be funny too—for her. Then she jumped into her probing questions, even accepted some of his opinions. What did a dancer know about anything? Oh,

Guardian! It was time I went to visit my parents or something.

I saw Ron puff up with pride because he thought he helped Em clarify her thinking through their discussions. Did he really think she couldn't do without him? Hadn't she mentioned me often enough? My parents were waiting. I'd sent a message that I would stop in, but I couldn't leave Em high and dry with these two bumpkins. She might need me for something at any moment.

Tony made a great fuss, bowing and kissing the back of her hand gallantly when they parted.

Still Tony was a good guy and after all she was Em.

*

Ron opened the door to his hotel suite for Em, eyeing her curvy bottom as she passed in front of him.

“Tony's a hoot. Critical thinker. I can see why you like him so much.”

Ron grinned. “He's a good guy, no question.” He slapped her on the bum. “Enough about him. Time for a quickie before I have to go back to the theatre.”

“One sec.” Em flipped on the TV looking for the news.

Ron came out of the bedroom half undressed. “Hustle your buns, girl.”

Em stood frozen in front of the TV, her face a mask of horror and anger. “I don't believe it. What the hell are they thinking? I told them, damn

it. Fucking idiots! How can they be so fucking stupid?”

“Em, what the hell?” She sounded like a stevedore. He turned to the TV. The scene was familiar, bombing in the early hours somewhere in the Middle East. “... at each other again in yet another of the attacks and counterattacks that are making a mockery of the ceasefire.”

Ron held his breath. His heart beat wildly as he watched missiles exploding in flashes, lighting the night sky, illuminating the mangled wreckage of cars and buildings strewn with bodies and blood. Combat helicopters blasted the top floors of a building sending rubble flying in every direction. Clouds of tear gas floated in the street, tanks roared

past crushing everything in their path. A car exploded spewing metal fragments onto the street.

The incessant pinging of gunfire drummed at his brain and there Em was, striding down the street—smack in the middle of it all. News reports had always shown Em in dangerous situations but never, never like this. Her dress was a beacon in the dark night air making her a perfect target. “Oh, Em!” Ron moaned. Unable to tear his eyes away from the screen, he cried out to her. “Oh, my God, Em! You’re going to be killed, be killed, be killed....” The words echoed ominously, endlessly.

The usually dispassionate voice of the BBC reporter bristled with tension. “Bloody hell! Miracle Madame has appeared out of nowhere, her dress a brilliant target, beckoning through the dark patches.

My God! She is walking directly into the lines of fire. She's going to be killed.

“Oh noooo!” The announcer's wail echoed in Ron's ears. “I can't see her. Is she still there?”

The reporter gulped, mopped his forehead with the back of his hand, then suddenly recoiled and staggered back as if shot. “A man just exploded. His severed head bounced across the street; bloody bits of bone and flesh splattered in every direction. Nails and pieces of shrapnel too, I think. God, I can't see. Where is she?”

Another bomb exploded and set a car on fire bringing unwanted illumination. The cameraman, having found her in those moments of light, moved to a close-up. She stopped in the center of the street and raised her arms. Slowly, very slowly, she made

a full turn. The gunfire and missiles ceased, their thundering echoes reverberating, dying slowly, the howl of war dissolving into shards of silence.

Ron could see that she was speaking. He collapsed on the sofa and watched intently. Men poured out of the buildings on both sides and flocked around her. She spoke again and the crowd dispersed, absurdly peaceful, almost like a group leaving a stadium after a game.

Suddenly she was back, beside him, hugging him, demanding he hug her tighter, and tighter still, telling him she loved him, babbling incoherently, on the verge of hysteria.

*

Okay, this was a bit much even for me. I had to use all my power to protect her. She was reckless,

acting without thinking. I'd have to have a little talk with her. Set some ground rules. Damn, she'd be dead before I could talk to her, if she wasn't more careful. I used all my power and pulled her from the scene. Sent her back to Ron. Made me mad to have to do so when all I wanted was to have her with me.

I turned my attention to Ron for a moment. He felt brittle, on the verge of breaking with the pain and distress. Mentor was beside me, watching; plotting a way to make Ronny boy feel better, no doubt. That made me even madder.

*

“Em, I was so afraid. Oh God, so afraid. I've never been that scared in my life.” Ron's hold on her tightened. He felt her body shudder and fold in on itself. He held her up and massaged her back and

shoulders. as he spoke, the words tumbling out on top of each other. “I thought you would be killed. I thought you would die.”

“That was the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done,” Em said. “But you know I can’t get hurt.” The quaver in her voice, the thin tinny sound didn’t convince him.

“Even so. Oh Em!” He held her even tighter, but she didn’t protest.

A long while later she said she had to go back.

“Em, you can’t. It’s too dangerous, even for you.”

“The fighting has stopped now. I’ll be okay. I promise. I’ve set up some meetings. I have to go. It’s my job.”

“No! Em, please. I’ve been fool enough to think I understood what you go through. Now I’ve seen, firsthand, the toll. How much more of this can you take?”

“As much as I have to. Ron, I have to.” She was gentle and chiding at the same time.

Ron sighed. “When do you have to go? Jeez Em, I hate sounding like a sulky child.”

“Soon, but I don’t want to leave you yet.” Ron called in sick, knowing his understudy would be thrilled to go on for him. They ordered room service, but the food went untouched.

“I have to go.” Em said.

Ron rose reluctantly and held out his hand. She took it and moved into the circle of his arms.

“I have to go.”

“I know Em, and I’m making it harder for you.”

*

Yeah, he was and she should have been angry with him but instead her heart softened. Women! But, would I want Em to be any other way. I liked that she was strong and soft at the same time. I liked that she was sensitive to his moods and needs. I wanted that for myself. That's what I wanted.

*

“I’m sorry,” Ron said. “If I had an eternity, it wouldn’t be enough time to love you.”

“I know.” She moved away from his embrace and took his hand. “They’ll wait for me,” she said, and led him to the bed.

Afterwards, in the blink of an eye she was gone. She had been standing, naked, smiling sadly down at him. Then she was gone.

*

“Man, you're one lucky bastard,” Tony said when he and Ron met at Jake's the next day. “Not to knock you or anything, but what the hell can you do for her? I mean she's Miracle Madame for Christ's sake.”

Ron closed his eyes. *I am privy to her thought processes. I help her clarify her thinking. I help her bring the two halves of her life together. I am her refuge from her fears. I am her love, her heart, her soul.*

*

Who did the bastard think he was? Me?

Then I heard Ron tell his friend that he felt blessed that Em had chosen him. *Huh, Mentor chose you, you idiot.*

I clamped down on that thought immediately, but Mentor didn't seem to notice. She was focused on the two humans.

"Everything we see and hear about her paints a picture of perfection," Tony said. "Is she really that flawless?"

"She says she gets cranky and bitchy but I've never seen it."

"Have you seen her angry?"

"Oh, yeah!"

Mentor's eyebrows rose. "She gets angry."

"Yes," I muttered.

“Good for her.” Mentor sauntered away
whistling a jaunty tune

Chapter 38

The slow lumbering gait of a caravan heading south attracted Em's attention; over one hundred camels loaded carefully and precisely with blocks of salt, trekking for months to reach their destination. The camels refused to move if the load wasn't packed exactly the same way each day. Historically there had been huge wealth in the trade of salt for gold from Ghana. Now the men earned a mere pittance. What did they live on? What motivated them to travel the far reaches of the desert? Genetic memory? The habits of lifetimes? She'd never been able to figure it out.

Waiting for the caravan, she scanned the horizon. She had always wanted to see the world, but never as a tourist. She snorted as she thought of

the “job” she had with Powers. She was certainly seeing the world; plunked now in this vast barren landscape that captured her heart. *Be careful what you wish for?*

She played idly with the ring on her left hand as she waited. Many months ago she had decided it was relaying messages from Powers, guiding and advising her, but she hadn't always had clear signals. Or, perhaps the signals were crystal clear and she lacked the wisdom to read them. Either way, the ring with its iridescent stone screen brought comfort with a sense of Powers' presence protecting her.

She looked into the ring but there were no images. The caravan was not her job then. Nevertheless, as it approached, she rose and walked

with the men and boys for a time, catching up on desert gossip and giving them news of the outside world. Eventually she waved goodbye and made her way back to the meager shade of the lone baobab tree.

She sighed heavily, wishing away the memories of what she had seen on TV. She cursed softly wondering at the sudden curiosity that had compelled her to watch the documentary even for a few moments.

Miracle Madame's strategy... The results have been astounding... a complete ceasefire...

*

Mentor turned from the earth view to ask, "Why did she see that?"

“I don't know. I took the media reports away from her a long time ago. I thought maybe you—”

Mentor's scowl silenced me. She was mad. Perfect Ms. Mentor showing emotion. Made me wonder what went on behind the facade. As a child, I don't remember feeling anger, or joy or anything like the emotions I'd learned from humans. Growing up, I'd always thought that meant we didn't feel or at least didn't feel deeply about much of anything, but now I wondered if we had simply become adept at submerging our feelings. And did years of suppression kill emotion?

Or? New thought! Was Mentor, like me, picking up on this whole laughing/crying/yelling thing that humans had going for them?

I wondered what the Guardians would think of all this? No way of finding out of course. They didn't deign to converse with anyone. Sent cryptic messages to the Council Chair. At least that's what I'd heard. The general belief was that there were three Guardians operating like a tribunal. But who knew? No one had ever seen them.

I watched Em seeking solace in those heartbreaking branches reaching for the sky. The ugly, beautiful weathered survivors tore at her heart. Standing alone against the harsh horizon they quite simply demanded love.

“Those trees are a good analogy for life down there,” Mentor said. “They're a jumbled mass, defying all definition of order, but still they manage to function.”

“Beautiful in spite of the ugliness. Isn’t that what life is?” Em’s words following on Mentor’s seemed a direct answer.

Mentor scowled, apparently as startled as I was. “Surely, she can’t hear us.”

Suddenly Em bolted upright and paced furiously. “Those damn documentaries claim perfection. And there’s the real danger. Nothing is perfect. Nothing should be. True beauty isn’t found in David but rather in the unfinished pieces, the figures struggling to be free of the stone.”

“Who’s this David she’s muttering about?” Mentor asked.

“A statue by a long-dead artist of note.”

Em kicked at the sand as she stormed back and forth. “God!” she cried. “And you!” she shouted as she swung her fist skyward.

I knew she meant me.

“She means me.” Mentor said and I saw a tear roll down her cheek. “But we have to do this. Doesn’t she understand that?”

“The news she saw reminded her that her critical successes could well be colossal failures. All assurances from the Powers—me, that is—haven’t truly convinced her.”

“Hum.” I waited for more, but Mentor was watching Em, her eyes half closed, head tilted slightly to one side. I wished I could read her mind. What would she do if she felt Em wanting? A chill wound its way around my heart.

Em continued to pace and curse until, drained of energy, she collapsed under the tree, gasping for breath. “Oh God, Ron, how can I go on?”

Mentor didn't move. I dared not speak although my soul ached for Em. I feared Mentor's next move.

Mentor sighed and closed her eyes. “So much emotion. How can that possibly be good for anyone?”

Em sniffled. “Damn. No water to wash my face. Where's an oasis when a girl needs one?” She dug in the pockets of her dress, even though she knew they'd be empty. “You'd think a Kleenex at least.” She pulled the hem of her dress to her face and wiped the tears as best she could.

She let her mind wander. As usual her thoughts turned to Ron. She missed him dreadfully. Their time together was so limited. It was only the intensity of their love that carried her from one visit to the next. And it had to be worse for Ron, she thought. He didn't know what the voice—she meant me—had promised for them.

What Mentor had made me promise.

*

All thoughts were driven from Em's mind when her hand tingled with the vibrations of the ring. She saw a very different caravan this time. A truck approached in the ring. She looked up to see an oversized prairie farm truck—now where had that 50's image come from?

Typically overloaded and tilted at an impossible angle, it looked like a lopsided apple crate covered with wriggling maggots as it labored over the trackless sand. It crawled with human cargo. Desperate men clung to the sides; the luckier ones perched precariously on top, fingers and feet hooked into the ropes that bound the cargo, frantically fighting to maintain a place on this perilous journey from one country to another in a futile search for work.

Em was barely aware of the hot grains of sand invading her sandals and the heat burning her feet through the thin leather soles. Rivers of sweat ran down her back and between her breasts. Knots of tension rode her shoulders. She clenched and unclenched her fists, took three deep breaths, and

counted slowly and silently as she expelled the air until the tension dissipated. Time to get to work.

The gears grated as the driver shifted down. Em signaled him not to stop, grabbed the arm of the rear view mirror with her left hand and swung up onto the running board. The cab had no doors and she found herself mere inches from the driver who was crowded to the edge of the seat by the five men who shared the cab with him.

“Madame,” one of them shouted. “You're back.”

“Bakary! How are you? What are you doing here?”

“Food for the refugees,” he said, gesturing to the load behind.

“Just one truck?”

“No. Five a day. The others are a little behind.” The driver smiled a wide toothy grin. Em chuckled to herself. A chance to show off superior driving skills was always a source of pride in these poorest of countries. “Foreign aid,” Bakary said, “from Europe and the United States. Rice, millet, dried fish. We’re the first convoy.”

“What’s this?” the man scrunched against the passenger door asked. “We’re carrying this too, but we don’t know what it is.” He handed her a small box.

Strawberry pudding powder, she read. *Surely to God...* She opened the box, stuck her finger in and tasted it. Strawberry pudding powder. She didn’t try to explain.

She enjoyed the happy chatter of the men as she scanned the horizon.

They would come over one of the dunes.

In fact, the attack came from both the left and the right. Armed men on horses charged toward them. The driver cursed, ground the gears, and brought the truck to a shuddering stop. The men spilled out of the cab and those who had been clinging to the cargo jumped to the ground. They huddled together in silent groups, a few wielding their walking sticks as weapons. The driver swore again.

Em dropped down from the running board, strode to the front of the vehicle. The men called out, warning her to stay back. The driver grabbed

her arm. She shrugged him off. Bakary had seen her in action before. He grinned and offered a salute.

The rebels were closing in on them. She raised her arms, saw the horses brace their front legs, dig their hooves into the sand, haunches sunk low with the strain of the abrupt stop. The riders struggled to maintain their seats. Only a few succeeded. Most found themselves on the sand, weapons jolted out of their grip with the force of the fall. As they started to rise, Em waved them down. They hunkered in the sand, made no move to retrieve their weapons or horses.

To Em's delight, the men from the truck took over. They bound the rebels, seized their weapons and soothed the horses, leading them to

the truck. No need to cling to the cargo now, with these fine steeds to ride.

Em missed most of the grand celebration that ensued when the other trucks arrived. The ring vibrated again. She looked into the stone. “And, just where are you taking me now?” she asked.

Chapter 39

Watch me, Mom. Mom, watch me. She smiled as the toddler headed for the waves, momentarily brave, then came scrambling back up the beach to avoid them. Watch me, Mom, watch me, and the little girl headed out again.

She was immobile in the hospital bed, encased in plaster, right arm secured tightly to her chest, her body one mass of pain. Forty-eight hours now. Two days, two nights. How many more to go? Can I have a hug please? Are you sure it's okay? Well if you put one hand here and the other around my shoulder.... Long gangly teenaged arms reached to embrace her, head bent low, his cheek pressed next to hers. Oh, Mom, it's been so long.

Em woke with a start. The dream lingered in her mind. Where on earth am I now? She stared at the unfamiliar furniture, at the whorls in the elaborately plastered ceiling and she cried. Each fragment of memory an unwelcome jolt—since loving Ron.

*

Em took a deep breath. “Okay. You're Powers? Right? That means you can stop these memories. Right? If I don't want to remember, that is.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“I think so, yes.”

“But, before, you were devastated with the not remembering.”

“And now, I am devastated with the remembering.” Tears were streaming down her face, but there was no sound of crying. “I long ago stopped wanting to know everything,” she said. “The yearning for that life made this one too difficult. I have to forget them—forget my other life. Don’t you understand? It’s too hard. It hurts too much. You may be guardians of the universe but what do you know of the heart?” She took a deep breath. “I need to....”

“Yes?” I prompted.

“I need to think of this as a reincarnation. There is no going back.”

I let her go. Slowly she descended to Earth. I stared at the space where she had been. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

*

“Please.” I begged

“It's done.” Mentor's words lashed at me.

“It's done. I've taken away the memories. I've taken away the dreams.”

“Then—”

“Those little humans around her won't remember either. I've done it all for you.” Mentor's back ramrod stiff as she stalked away—so much emotion.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

Chapter 40

Ron picked Em up at the airport, wondering at the request to do so. She usually avoided crowds and the media, but this time she deliberately courted attention, allowed herself to be recognized. Hello, how are you? Oh, what a lovely dress. Where did you get the cool purse? Yes, of course you can take a picture. Ah, now here's a cutie. How old is she? Young man, that's the best question anyone has ever asked me. She squatted down to talk to the children, shook hands with the adults, and high fived the teens. All this from the woman who never acknowledged that she had an audience.

*

After dinner, Em sat with Ron in comfortable silence before the fireplace, leaning against the sofa, watching the flames dance.

“You’re tired Em.”

“Yes. Very.”

“You should quit.”

She jerked away from him. *What did he know? Had Powers told him? Surely not.* “Why did you say that?”

“I worry about you, that’s all.”

Em frowned, started to say something, stopped, started again, but then settled back without speaking.

*

For a moment Em thought Ron knew about my promise. The promise Mentor had made on my

behalf that is, using my voice, a promise made without my consent. But then, when did my opinion count for anything? At least I had convinced Mentor to stop all the dreams. Em would no longer suffer in either life from memories of her “other” self.

I heard Ron smother a sigh. It was all so frustrating for him, of course. He knew Em would do what she had to, despite his wishes. Still, he couldn't help but dream of a life with her, just as I couldn't help but dream of a life with Em.

“What's wrong with Ron?” Elspeth asked.
“He looks dreadfully sad.”

And how do I look? As bad? Worse? I sighed. “He's dreaming of what he can't have.”

“And Em? What does she dream?”

“Ron’s dream is hers. To be together. Sometimes. She used to dream of her own life, before Mentor took those dreams away.” My voice broke. “But, how could she ever return to the ordinary day to day world after what I’ve put her through?”

Elsbeth wiped a tear from her eye. “What will you do?”

I couldn’t tell her. The promise ... and, worse, what would come before it...

*

“Em, I know you’re tired, but before you fall asleep I have to say this. What you did at the Summit was....” Ron paused. “I don’t know how to describe it; it was just so different.”

“That may just be some of my best work.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that.”

“Why? Because it wasn’t particularly dramatic?”

“I guess.”

“But Ron, this time I was able to help others plan and problem-solve. It didn’t involve guns and blood and pain and death. Imagine that. These people will create a positive legacy for the future. It’s wonderful.”

“Essentially, you’re doing yourself out of a job.”

“That would be ideal wouldn’t it, for the world to have no need of me or anyone like me.”

“I’m still amazed that you were able to get bitter enemies to look after each other’s children. That was brilliant.”

“A spur of the moment inspiration I thought was harebrained, but it seems to be working. I’m kind of proud of that, I must admit.”

“You should be,” he muttered grudgingly.

Em shifted to look up at him. He loved her, but she knew too, that he often felt inadequate and envious.

“I couldn’t have done it, any of it, without you,” she said.

*

“He’s upset.” Elspeth said. “I don’t understand. What’s wrong with him?” Elspeth had seen Ron stiffen as Em spoke, felt the ball of anger that formed in the pit of his stomach. “He knows she’s lying. That’s it. He wants to believe she needs

him, but she doesn't really." Elspeth patted my arm.

"Not when she has you."

"He'll get over it."

We watched as Em pulled his head down for a kiss. He didn't notice the knot of anger dissolve.

Who could stay angry at her anyway?

Elspeth sighed. She was such a softy.

*

"The Summit can't have been easy," Ron said. "Do you think it will work?"

"I certainly hope so, but I can't control what happens now."

"You wish you could. Control more, I mean."

"Yes, I'm that conceited."

"I don't see it as conceit, Em."

“What then, arrogance? Do you remember how angry I was about the renewed fighting in the Middle East?”

“How could I forget?”

Em blushed, but made no attempt to avoid his eyes. “I was angry that they were fighting again, but more to the point, I was furious that they hadn’t listened to me. I had already been there twice and still they dared to defy me. Tell me I’m not purely arrogant.”

“Perhaps you are,” Ron said. “You know, I often wonder how surgeons are able to do their work. They slice people open and mess about with their insides, their spines, their brains and sew them up again. I think it must take supreme arrogance to do that.

“Are you saying I’m like that?” Em's voice rose.

“Sure, you slice open the ugliness of human activity and mess around putting it right and then leave us to heal.”

“But I could be making colossal mistakes.”
God this is so scary. Em felt bereft and fragile even with Ron right beside her.

“So do doctors sometimes, but mostly they do it right. And you do too. You’d realize that if you didn’t worry so much. You couldn’t do any of it without a level of self-assurance. Maybe that is arrogance, but if it is, it’s good arrogance.”

“You’re too kind.” Em patted Ron’s knee and stared at the flames.

Em shifted restlessly and Ron asked, “You have done so many things in so many places. Is there any one that stands out, that is the best?”

“Anywhere you are.”

“Ah Em,” Ron sighed. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“The Sahara. The vast nothingness forces me to see the truth. It allows no compromises, no avoidance of issues. It’s pure honesty.”

“Em, what you said before about war.” Ron hesitated. “I’m sure I shouldn’t ask this, but I feel compelled to.”

“I have come to believe that what I am doing is right or I wouldn’t have been given the clout to do it. I just hope that the Powers know what

they are doing and that I have used their wisdom well.”

“Powers, powers, powers. Jesus, will you ever explain?”

“Dear, dear Ron. I'd tell you if I could.” She paused. “I'll ask them next time.”

“About your regular life?” he ventured after a long silence. “How much do you remember now?”

She thought of the last dream she'd had before they stopped altogether.

Training conditions didn't allow for jewelry. She pulled at the ring, surprised when it released her finger. It glowed, shooting rainbows of light about the unarmed-combat room. After class, as she removed her gi and folded it, the ring fairly leapt at

her, demanding to be put back on her finger. The light faded. She felt faint and reached to the wall for support.

Her hand closed around a withered tobacco plant. Miles of the half dead plants to her right, rot-blackened corn to her left, untended wheat fields behind and wasteland in front. A tractor stripped bare, the carcass rusted and twisted, trees chopped haphazardly, barns and houses ransacked and burned. Brown bodies of both sexes and all sizes scouring the fields for food, grains, nuts, roots, and rats. Without looking up they began an undulating keening wail, the cadence rising and falling eerily. The tone changed gradually and she could hear one word only, repeated over and over; Ma dame, Ma dame, Ma dame.... She covered her ears and

screwed her eyes shut, clenching her jaw in a desperate effort to escape the magnetic pull of the chant.

“Em?” Ron shook her gently. “Em?”

“I am Miracle Madame. This is my life now.”

“But, before, you were so excited when you remembered.”

“I know. But, whatever my other life was... it's over.”

“Can you live with that?”

“I have to,” she replied shakily.

A wave of shame swept over Ron because he was infinitely relieved that she didn't remember, that he didn't have to share her and would have said

so if she hadn't been so tired, hadn't looked so bereft and vulnerable.

“Em, you always refer to the powers but you've never explained and always avoided my questions.”

“I asked if I could tell you about them and they said yes. Powers are beings that control the universe. They find people like me and give us the job of trying to better our planets. Heaven only knows why they chose me, but they did. They controlled what I did, and helped me to learn how to do the job they gave me.”

Ron pulled away from her. “Em, get real. Super beings? You make it sound like there are some kinds of gods out there running the show.”

He gestured wildly. You're the last person I would think would fall for a line like that."

"They said you wouldn't believe me. I said you would."

"How can I?" He rose and paced the room. "Jesus, Em. Beings that contact you, talk to you, control the universe? That's too sci-fi, even for Hollywood."

"I guess it doesn't really matter if you don't believe." It did matter; it mattered a lot. She wanted him to believe, to know what she knew. She waited for some sign of acceptance, a sign that never came, stifled a sigh, and swiped at threatening tears. She couldn't let him see how sad she was or know how alone she felt at that moment. "Would you do an interview for me?" she blurted out.

“An interview? Sure. Of course.” His tone said it all; angry, hurt, and frustrated but willing to do whatever she asked.

“I’d do anything for you, Em. But why not do an interview yourself?”

“What would I talk about? My favorite foods, my favorite movies?” She waved her hand dismissively.

“And what shall I tell them?”

A laugh choked by a sob escaped her.

“Anything but the intimate bits.”

*

The glare of the studio lights irritated Ron. He’d had about enough of this interview and wanted out, but he’d promised Em and it was almost over, thank God.

“Ron, can you shed any light on the three big questions: the variety of languages she speaks, how she travels, her immunity to harm?”

“She didn’t tell me much. She is not an alien or a robot. She is a real person with special powers.”

“But where do those powers come from?” Johnston asked. “Does she have access to special technologies? How does she do it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you asking us, then, to believe she’s a sort of wonder woman?”

“I guess. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You spent time with her, you must have some clues,” Johnston insisted.

Ron just shook his head wearily.

“I can’t believe you weren’t curious. I mean, how could you just accept without questioning?”

“Yes, I was curious. And, I asked. Believe me, I asked. And, yes, I accept that I will never know everything.”

“But, why? Why didn’t you push for answers?”

Because I love her, you idiot. Because she loves me. Because I’d do anything for her. Because my children love her too. Because that’s just the way it is. Because she controls me.

“Ron? Mr. Conlin?”

“I have no idea how or why she is able to do what she does.” *Unless I choose to believe what she said about the Powers.* “Does it really matter?”

“Yes, it matters,” Johnston almost shouted.

“We want to know.”

Suck it up, buddy. Ron caught himself. He knew directing his anger and frustration at Johnston was unreasonable. But really, they didn’t need to know everything. *I don’t need to know everything.*

“I wish there was more I could tell you,” Ron said.

“Sorry.”

“Do you even know where she lives?”

Johnston was almost begging. He seemed desperate for some tidbit to give the audience.

“No.” Had to be somewhere close to a military base though, she trained with soldiers.

“One final question, Mr. Conlin.” Johnson sounded tense, angry.

“You came here today prepared to talk about her. Can you tell us why she agreed and why now?”

Ron straightened with shock. *Jesus! Fuck!*
No. No, I can't. Why had she asked him to do this interview now? What did it mean?

Chapter 41

“Damn!” I heard my voice echo across the universe and slam back at me. “Damn. Damn. Damn.”

“What is it?”

I jumped at the sound and spun around to face Mentor.

“What is it?” she asked again.

“Look.” I gestured to the scene far below.

“Em has failed you?”

“Guardian, no! It’s my fault.” I turned away, closed my eyes briefly, and stole a sideways glance at Mentor. She was staring at me. Accusingly?

“How so?”

“I didn’t get her there fast enough. It erupted so suddenly. And now she has to fight.”

“And that’s a bad thing because...?”

I felt my mouth drop open. “Are you suggesting it’s good for her?”

“The physicality has to be liberating. Perhaps this was meant to happen. Perhaps your little human needs this aggressive outlet to maintain her balance and perspective.”

“All those years of training with soldiers....”

“Put to good use,”

“But, she will be hurt. She’s already taken a crushing blow to her shoulder.”

“She needs the pain.”

“To feel real.”

“To know she is real.”

Surely Mentor hadn’t engineered this. Even she wouldn’t put a human in the path of such

danger, would she? I studied her intently, but her expression didn't change. Of course Mentor's expression seldom changed.

“Look,” she said and I turned back to Em.

*

Genocide. Just a word with a dictionary definition, like any other, until you lived it, Em thought. Or, died it. She watched as the images in the ring told the brutal story. The ring never lied.

Machete-wielding madmen and hordes of young rebels marauded the jungle town. She had seen it before. Children transformed into drug-crazed killers, manipulated by the current ruling militia or rebel party. Isolate them from family and civility, create a false sense of belonging, slash the upper arm, pack it with cocaine, wrap a bandanna

around it—an innocent badge to the unsuspecting observer. The children, so unpredictable, were most to be feared.

The carnage was beyond obscenity, beyond words in any language—heads lopped off with machetes, limbs hacked off with dull scraps of metal, genitals severed, carried as trophies, hearts pulsating, ripped out of corpses, eaten warm, entrails spilling from abdominal gashes.

Tiny though the village was, it still managed to boast a church, the grandest edifice in the area. Em seethed as she stood in the midst of those seeking the illusive protection of church sanctuary. They were trapped like sardines waiting to be speared from the can and devoured. The stench of sweat and fear, the salty flavor of tears and fear lay

thick in the heavy, stagnant air. How much of it came from her? she wondered.

Along with the sixty or so cowering villagers—the lucky ones, mostly women and children, had long since fled or were dead according to the village chief—she listened to the wild rampage of the mob as their orgy of destruction continued to spiral out of control.

Enough! Come hell or high water, she wasn't about to cower helplessly behind the altar. She stormed down the aisle, threw open the doors, challenged the mob outside as they charged toward the steps of the church.

She held up her hands, palms facing outward, gestured for them to stop, called out to them, shouted orders. Nothing she had used before

worked. She felt as vulnerable as she had in the beginning, before meeting Powers, before any understanding of her role. Back to square one. With no magic manual to guide her and no understanding of why the regression, she cried out for Ron.

She closed her eyes and saw the dojo, sensei, soldiers.... Her scalp prickled and goose bumps rose on her arms. Did Powers want her to fight? Was he here? Now? With her?

Every nerve in her body vibrated as she faced the attackers. He was with her.

The leader lunged at her, a maniacal gleam in his eyes, machete raised high to strike a killing blow. The man uttered a crazed laugh as he loomed over her clearly expecting her to cower and plead for mercy. Instead she flowed into his attack,

blocked his swing with her left hand on his wrist, blended her body to his and used his forward momentum to throw him over her hip to the ground. He was a big man and her throw, though clumsy, slammed his head against the door jamb knocking him unconscious. *The guys I trained with should see this. Hell, they should be here with me. Jake too.*

The man's body blocked the one behind him. In her peripheral vision she caught sight of another man attacking from her right, with an arching back swing. She blocked his motion, grabbed his wrist with her right hand, his upper arm with her left and slammed his elbow against her raised knee. The blow was not strong enough to smash the joint but it did send the knife flying from his hand. He bent forward reflexively tucking the

injured elbow into his side and she hammered his head with a closed fist sending him sprawling across the church doorway.

She spun to face a third man swinging wildly at her, ducked, slammed her shoulder into his hip, grabbed his legs behind his knees, lifted and sent him back down the steps. His falling body flattened two of the men still pushing forward and momentarily slowed the advance. A man grabbed her from behind. She reacted with a head butt and knew she had broken his nose when she felt warm blood and snot splattering the back of her neck.

Blow, throw, blow. Blow, throw, blow. Operating well below civilized, at the primal level of fight or flight, she chose fight.

Again and again she defended herself, viciously attacking, favoring left hooks when she discovered the effectiveness of the ring as a weapon. Powered by adrenaline, with moves governed by muscle memory, her actions inspired the villagers. In moments the attackers were engaged in full man-to-man combat with the villagers.

Hours later her body was one big dull pain; under that, a grim pride in having used her training well. She sat on a patch of high ground holding in her arms, a man dying from his bloody wounds. Her heart bled with him.

“Mommy,” he called plaintively.

“Mommy.”

“It’s okay. I’m here. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.” She tried to shield him from the rain with her body and used the hem of her T-shirt to wipe his face clear of the blood, sweat, and dirt that mingled with her tears. She wanted desperately to take away his pain in his last dying moments, but could only cradle him, rock him, lie to him.

“Mommy, help me,” he cried again. “Help me.”

“I’m here. I’m here.” She held him tighter and uttered soothing sounds long after his last breath.

The rain had come in great waves, lashing the men and the earth equally, indiscriminate in its attack, dousing the fires of the torched huts, blinding attackers and defenders alike and driving

the last few combatants to shelter and her to this hillock. She inhaled deeply through her nose, let the air out slowly through her mouth. Clean and fresh, the richness of the earth revived faith and hope.

But, the silence hung oppressive. The village lay empty. Barely visible in the twilight, shadowed lumps of bodies sank into the blood-soaked muck that had oozed between her toes and long since swallowed her wrestling shoes. Or maybe she had been barefoot all along. She couldn't remember.

*

“It's time,” Mentor said, but neither of us moved as we watched the meager light fade into night until all we could see was the pristine whiteness of Em's gi pants and T-shirt shining obscenely bright and hopeful amidst the bloody

aftermath of battle. She should have been filthy, but I couldn't stand the thought of my Little Soldier soiled in any way. I kept her clean and somehow that was more obscene. Dirty and muddy, she would have blended into the landscape and been more ... more natural.

“It's time.” Mentor nudged my elbow.

“I know.” My voice quavered and I struggled to hide my trembling. My appearance before the Grand Council would begin in moments. The fight I had just witnessed was irrevocable evidence of my failure, but I'd stand tall, face the council squarely, answer their questions and prepare for banishment. *Dear Guardian, how?*

And then, when I thought things couldn't get any worse, they did.

*

That fight—it was appalling and thrilling, shameful and exhilarating. She had done it. She had proven herself in a most elemental way. Em tucked the sinful sense of pride close to her heart and reveled in the joy of triumph. If only sensei could have seen her.

She moved on to other small jobs, following the directives in the ring. She'd just finished cleaning up a village under siege, had done this job peacefully and was watching the mercenaries pack up to leave and the villagers creep out from hiding when a huge wave of guilt bowled her over. How on earth could she be proud in any way of fighting? Her? The one trying to stop conflict. The one given the power to do so. She had descended to the lowest

form of conflict resolution. It was then that she saw him.

Soft flab of flesh sagging over a belt buckle, erection straining against the fabric of too tight jeans, stench of cigarettes and sweat; enough to make her gag. An ugly horrible excuse for a human.

She blinked and looked again. He was neat and fit and maybe even handsome. No, he couldn't be. She didn't want him to be handsome. He had to be gross. Any man with that crazed sexually deviant look in his eye, with that leer that told her she wasn't a woman, simply an object, had to be gross. It was the stereotype after all. She blinked again but he was still good looking.

She'd been minding her own business, waiting for Powers to transport her when the creep

waved the picture in front of her face. She stopped to look. A young beautiful face smiled out at her from the page; smiled in spite of the bullet hole above her right eye.

“Why are you showing me this?” She growled. The look on his face raised her hackles. Desire and contempt and smug superiority. She’d seen that many times before, but now, with this man, she was enraged beyond reason.

“Girl. Young. Beautiful. Big boo-sums. Man like.” He spoke English with a heavy accent. Faked. She searched his eyes for signs of a mental challenge that would let her forgive, but they were clear and bright and mocking. “I make sex to girl. Shoot. Make sex again.” Oh Lord, he couldn’t mean that. But he did. He was boasting, swaggered back

and forth in front of her with a leering smirk waving the picture.

She snapped, slammed his chin up with a palm strike, knocking his head back. She hooked her ankle behind his, threw him down. *O soto gari.* Worked every time. She fell on him, pinned his arm with her knee and hit him again and again and again. He was long beyond fighting back before she stopped.

The picture? Where was the picture? She found it snagged under his foot, pressed it to her heart and then ripped it to a million little pieces. *No one will ever violate you again.*

She sank back, glanced at the inert body, the bloody face. Oh God, she'd done that. Her. Miracle

Madame. The world's savior. Had the jungle battle set loose the monster in her?

She vomited, looked for water to rinse her mouth of the foul taste and wash the sweat and tears from her face. The stream was only a few meters away. She crawled to it.

*

“What kind of a person is she?” Mentor asked. “To do a thing like that”

“I ... I ... She's never....”

“Was violence always in her?”

“No. No. Not at all. Maybe her life as Madame made her do this.” I couldn't fathom the passion of her assault on the man. Vile and disgusting, he was, yes, but for her to attack that way.

“So she’s not Little Miss Perfect after all.”

Mentor sounded inordinately pleased.

*

Cool water dripped from her chin. Her reflection shimmered in the shallow stream. She looked perfectly normal, but she didn’t think she’d ever be normal again. God, Powers, did he know? She vomited again.

And yet, she wondered as she dried her face with the hem of her dress, did she truly regret what she had just done? And if she didn’t, what did that make her?

*

“Em,” Ron called. “Where are you?” He came up behind her. She whirled to face him.

“My hands. My hands.”

“Em, what is it?”

“Look.” Ron reached for her hands but she pulled back. “No, don’t touch me.”

“What?”

“The blood. Don’t you see it? My hands are covered in blood. The man I... It’s his blood. I...”

She couldn’t say it. She couldn’t tell Ron she’d pummeled a man almost to death with her bare hands. Ron reached to hold her, but she wrenched away and ran from him.

*

She ran straight into me. Yes me. I broke the most sacrosanct rule of all and went down to Earth.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “You’ll be fine. Just give it time.

“NO! It’s not okay. What I did was so ...
so...”

“Human?”

“Yes! Human! The worst kind of human.”

“It’s okay.”

“Oh God.” She pounded my chest. Don’t
you see? It’s not okay at all.”

“It will be. I promise.”

“How can you...? Who the hell are you?”
she asked looking up at me for the first time. “And
her?” Em looked beyond me, pointed. Her hand
shook. I turned to see the outline of a woman in
white fading away. Surely it wasn't.... Before Em
could say more I was snatched away.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”
Mentor’s face was red.

“I...”

“Don’t say anything. Don’t make any feeble excuses.”

“I...”

“Another word and your life is over. Now get out of my sight while I fix this.”

I knew how she’d fix it. She’d take the encounter with Em away from Ron. He would remember nothing of it. That was simple.

As for Em? Mentor hadn’t said I couldn’t help. I’d force her attack on that vile man to slide into a shadow of a memory, but Em wouldn’t have to live with the guilt much longer anyway. I’d already taken care of that and what I’d done would haunt me forever.

Chapter 42

Review of Power 73-694,” the recorder announced as I came to a halt in front of the Council Bench.

“Is Earth a better place?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“There is less war, less killing, more caring, and more sharing of the planet’s wealth and resources.”

“She has maintained attention?”

“Oh, yes. Em is much more than a passing fad,” I said. “Each and every act is seen to be as fresh and as exciting as the first. I made sure of that.”

I had no way of knowing if my answers pleased or angered the Grand Council or if Earth was so insignificant to them that they were indifferent. I dismissed that thought as quickly as it had come. If they truly believed Earth was immaterial they would never have assigned the planet to a Power, not even to a novice like me.

“War has stopped?”

“Almost completely.”

“Isn’t that upsetting the natural order of things for Earth?”

“She’s already thought of that.”

“She has!” The voice rose. “You chose wisely then.” I glanced at Mentor and saw the slightest frown. I would have thought she’d be a little pleased.

Now I understood. The review was not about what happened on Earth; it was designed to measure my judgment and decision-making abilities as a Power. I would pass in spite of her assault on that odious being who called himself a man.

“You lied to her.” The voice of the Council Adjunct was deceptively calm. I squirmed under the stares of the Council members. There was no escape.

I lowered my eyes and my shoulders slumped. “Yes. Once.”

“Why?” The Chair of the Grand Council never asked questions at a review. My dreams of a grand and distinguished future dissolved. I swayed.

I felt Mentor's hand jabbing me in the center of my back. I straightened and took a deep breath.

"I had to."

"Why?"

"Her job was intense and complex. She obsessed about everything she did."

My words fell into a stony silence.

"I could not let her hurt. She never deserved that." Still there was no reaction. "She had such a consuming need for an end to her aloneness." I stopped babbling and took a deep breath attempting to center myself. "She was so alone."

"So, you gave her a lover," the Chair said.

"Yes," I whispered.

Of course it was Mentor who had given her Ron. I hadn't wanted any part of that.

“And let her believe their love was not manipulated.” The voice was low and soft but no less accusatory.

“It had to be.” A trace of defensiveness crept into my answer. I hadn’t wanted any part of Ron in Em’s life, but I knew that Mentor had done the right thing giving Ron to Em. I would thank Mentor when all this was done—before the ... end.

The Grand Council Chair cleared her throat. I realized the silence had stretched far too long. I started to say more, thought better of it, and hung my head.

“You cared about her that much?” And therein lay the problem, you see. I shouldn’t have felt anything for Em, much less, fallen in love with her.

“Yes.”

“Hum.” The Chair did not take her eyes off me. Mentor gave my shoulder a squeeze. I glanced at her in surprise. She smirked.

“Our first instinct was to banish you.” The Chair enunciated each word. “But...” Oh Guardian, execution then. I was to be executed. Visions of a guillotine, a noose swaying from a tree, a sword held high, a firing squad—all the horrific ways humans had of eliminating the unwanted swam before my eyes. What? What would they do to me? My mother’s face appeared as if through a pool of swampy water. No. Not water. Tears. Her tears. My tears. I moaned softly. Em, dear, dear, Em, my heart cried.

“But,” the Chair said, “Mentor has interceded on your behalf.” Mentor? Mentor ... my behalf ... What...!?

“Your lack of neutrality is a risk, we know, but Mentor reports that you have achieved the goals set for Earth. She recommends you be given a second chance. We have determined that her assessment is just and fair.”

Mentor? Spoke for me...? I looked at her. She smiled ever so slightly, tilted her head and winked.

“You will have your second chance. With conditions,” the Chair warned sternly.

A Power on probation. I knew the Council would be discreet, but word would leak out—the pitying looks from the other novice Powers, all of

whom had passed of course—oh , Guardian, this was so hard to bear. If only I had Em at my side. Em to hug me, console me, be with me. Em. Em. Em.

I felt a sharp poke in the center of my back. “Stand tall,” Mentor said. Mentor gripped my elbow as we made our way outside.

“Here's the scoop,” Mentor said. She told me what she had promised Em, making her wish come true, using my voice, she said. Told me she always imitated me when she talked to Em. *My voice* made the promise to Em that broke my heart. Mentor said I had to know—part of the conditions for my next assignment, she said. Make another life for Em, Mentor said. Let her love him again, Mentor said.

*

During the interview, Ron had forced himself to suppress his anguish about Em's control over him. Now, pushing his way roughly through the autograph seekers, he seethed with anger over the questions that had surfaced. The studio car was waiting for him. He asked the driver to lose the crowd and then let him out to walk. He needed to do something physical to dispel the insane urge to lash out. He was shocked at the intensity of his rage. He could not remember a time when he had felt such a violent need for physical aggression, such a need to strike out at another person. He didn't think he could live with the possibility that Em had manipulated it all, that their love was a farce. His

mind spun with a confusion of doubt and resentment.

Over an hour later Ron arrived at his hotel suite. The walk had not calmed him. In fact he was angrier at Em than he had ever believed possible. It was Em he wanted to hit, to hurt; it was Em who had played him for a fool. Nor was he oblivious to self-loathing for allowing it.

He opened the door and was bombarded by a whirlwind. Em threw herself at him kissing him everywhere and anywhere she could reach. He fought to stay angry but her mere presence overpowered all his questions, all his doubts. As always, when he was with her, she was his whole world; everything else melted away until there was only shining light and love. Anger, resentment;

forgotten. He was left with the raging river of desire.

He put her down and cupped her face in his hands. She was so beautiful and he marveled, as he always did, that she was his. He bent to kiss her thoroughly, then hugged her close.

She pushed away and in turn held his face in her hands. “My love,” she whispered.

Ron was enchanted. She didn’t use endearments. This was the first time. Again the world melted away and there was only Em. She closed her eyes and ever so gently began an exploration of his face, her fingers moving slowly over his forehead, eyes, cheekbones, nose, mouth, and chin. She seemed to be taking a sensory image of him, storing him in a tactile memory bank.

Without opening her eyes, she undid his tie, pulled it off and let it drop to the floor, unbuttoned his jacket, vest, and shirt, and slid them off his shoulders in one motion to join the tie. She continued her exploration running her hands over his chest and around to his back. Ron stood perfectly still, absorbing her love through every pore as her mouth followed her hands and began an equal exploration.

She reached his waist and undid and lowered his pants. Ron watched as she continued her loving. Unable to keep his hands off her, Ron slipped off his shoes and stepped out of his pants. He knelt before her, pulled her sweater over her head and undid her bra. She removed her hands from him, only for the time it took to wiggle out of

the clothing. He kissed first one eye, then the other. She pulled his head close and cradled it between her breasts. He looked up to see her eyes still closed, her expression sensual and expectant. He carried her to the bed where they made love, and even though it was slow and gentle, his climax was as sudden and urgent as that of youth. After all his times with her the power of it still stunned him.

They lay, arms and legs entwined, sleepy but not sleeping. As the afterglow of their lovemaking began to fade, the questions of Em's control came flooding back. She had bombarded him when he walked in the door, effectively banishing those doubts, and he had fallen into the usual pattern of adoration and loving. How the hell did she do it? The suspicions returned. He felt sick

at the thought that their love could be a complete mockery, that he was nothing more than a puppet on a string for her amusement. God, did he have no balls at all?

He pulled away from her and rose, found his pants on the floor and put them on.

“Ron,” Em called softly. When he didn’t respond she followed him. He was standing at the window staring out at the skyline. “Ron?” He turned to look at her, but he didn’t say anything. She picked up his shirt and put it on, wrapped it tightly around her body, hugged herself. He turned away, stared out the window.

“What is it?” She reached out with one hand on his arm. He stood rigid. “Ron, please, you’re scaring me.”

He spun to face her glaring so fiercely that she stepped back. “Em, did the Powers you talk of, did they control this? Did they make me love you?” He spit the words with more force than he intended but he wasn’t sorry. He choked off a sob as he turned away from her. He cursed. He didn’t want it to be this way. He wanted the blissful peace of belief.

Em held him, one hand on his back and one on his chest as if she could sandwich him in, make him safe, protect him from hurt. “You worried about that too?” she asked softly.

She stepped closer and reached for his hand. He didn’t resist but let his hand lay a dead weight in hers. She placed his hand over her heart, held it

there with both of hers. She looked into his eyes, her gaze never wavered.

“I worried about that too, Ron. I worried that they made you love me.”

What the hell did that mean? She hadn't wanted his love? She had been with him only to...? He glared at her in an agony of doubt and anger. She had taken him for a gullible fool. He had sat at her feet like a puppy dog, taking whatever crumbs she offered. “And you didn't want that?”

“No!” He jerked his hand away and turned from her. So, he had been nothing more than a distraction. A goddamned boy-toy. He stared out the window seeing nothing.

After a long tense silence, he glanced around at her. She came closer but didn't try to touch him

again. “I wanted you to love me all on your own. I was terrified of the answer, I didn’t want to hear that they controlled you, made you love me, but I asked anyway.”

“They said?” He held his breath, dreading the wrong answer.

“Powers said no. Our love is our destiny.”

“You believe them?” He was still incensed, unconvinced.

“They never lied to me. They had no reason to.”

Ron turned back to her then, scowling fiercely and asked the question that, for him, would be proof. “Em, would you leave everything and stay with me?”

“That’s not a fair question.” Her tone held a sharp edge of pain.

“Your answer would be?” He pushed anyway, tested her, knew he was hurting her.

“I can’t.”

Ron stared down at her. She had tears in her eyes as she watched and waited. He was amazed at her patience. “If I had met you in your regular life?”

“We would never have met.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“The Powers.”

“So we must be content with what we have?”

“Yes.”

“And make the most of it?”

“Ron that’s not a question. We’ve used our time together wisely and well.”

“No regrets?”

“None. You?” Ron shook his head ever so slightly. “Ron, look at me.” She spoke softly. “You must understand.” He nodded briefly, enough to encourage her to continue. “Our love is ours, Ron. Ours!”

“I’m supposed to believe the goddamned Powers had nothing to do with this.”

“Powers did not create our love. They did not control it. Nor did I.” She spoke slowly and steadily. “Our love is much too real for that.”

She would never know how comforted he was by her conviction.

He opened his arms. She moaned and flew into his embrace. He sighed. If she controlled this too so be it. He couldn't live without her.

“Ron, my job is over, for now.”

He was instantly alert. One of Johnston's questions had nagged at him. “Why now?” He had known her for over a year. They had been lovers for most of that time. Reporters hounding him had been a part of his life since they met. She had never suggested the interview before. Why now? A cold fear gripped his heart. “What does that mean?”

“I have done all I can. The world will be left to its own devices for a while. Miracle Madame will no longer exist.”

“You'll be the regular you?”

“No, I...” Her voice was so low he barely heard the words. He pulled away abruptly to look at her.

“You mean you’ll... die?” He would never know why he was so certain that die was the right word.

She didn’t deny it and he panicked.

“No. Wait. You can’t. You can’t. I need you. It’s not enough. We need more time.”

“Ron, I must. I’ve known for a long time. Powers said.”

“Nooooo. You can’t go. You are my life.”

“Ron.” She admonished him gently and her voice was filled with longing. “Please, Ron, don’t cry. We have been the most fortunate of people. We have had a true love. Our souls will always be one.”

“You are the other half of me, Em. I can’t live without you.”

“You can and you will. You will watch your children raise your grandchildren. You’ll go to weddings and funerals and live your life fully.”

“And then?” he asked dully, already feeling the gaping hole of loss and the torment of grief.

“We will meet again. When the world needs us.”

“Em, I can’t. I can’t do it without you. I need you. The world needs you.” He held her face between his hands and in her eyes he saw an ocean of pain and he wept.

“Yes, you can,” she sobbed. “You can.” She kissed him softly. “I have something for you.” She found her pants on the floor and searched in the

pocket and came back to him. She took his left hand and placed a ring on his index finger. It was a hunk of raw dull metal. It had the same unusual stone as her ring, the stone that had winked at him, surrounded by tiny diamonds. It fit perfectly. “We are in these rings and in each other. Wear it always.”

“With this ring, I thee wed?” he asked, his voice breaking. She nodded, her eyes full of tears. “Can’t we have just a little more time together? Please, Em. Please.”

“Oh yes,” she assured him. “We will have an eternity together in our next life, and the life after that, and the one after that. Now that we have found each other we are destined to continue our work, to be together forever.”

“How can you be so sure?” He wanted to believe her.

“Powers gave me a wish and that is what I wished for.” To her the answer was simple. Powers was never wrong. And she was gone, his shirt lying limp and empty on the floor in the exact spot she had been only seconds before.

“No! Wait!” But he was speaking to the air. “I never even got to cook dinner for you,” he sobbed through the tears that flowed freely as he collapsed to the floor, a blubbering heap where her clothes had been. A long time later the crying slowed and he dragged himself to the bed, pulled the covers to his chin and stared at the ceiling for hours. Finally he rose and showered, standing under the water, too numb now to feel anything. Drying

himself off he felt the ring. What had she said? *We are in these rings.* He looked down at the stone and to his amazement she was there, smiling wistfully through the tears streaming down her face. She blew him a kiss.

He blew one back. It was then that he accepted her words, with a certainty that settled deep in his soul. They would indeed meet again. More tears fell as he turned to the phone and dialed. “Tia? It's Dad. I'm coming home.”

The End

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