



ENDLESS
QUEST

SY THOMPSON

Endless Quest

By

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Epigraph

“Once, eons ago, I possessed the temerity to resist the will of man. My Creator discarded me, easily, completely and irrevocably. I have walked a path of excruciating loneliness, seeking the solace of an end to this unwanted immortal existence that shall continue for as long as the Earth endures. Some call me the child killer. Others call me temptress or demon. In truth, I am none of these. I am the first woman. I am sorrow. I am Lilith.”

Book One: Man's Cruelty

“Lilith of Plymouth Colony, thou hast been tried and pronounced guilty for the crime of practicing witchcraft.”

Lilith remained silent, watching the white-haired man as he proclaimed her fate. He had no right. As a woman, she had no power. Nothing changed. Someone in the community accused her of being in league with Satan, of being his consort. Lilith had in fact known Lucifer, many centuries ago, and he was not what these peasants believed him to be. If she thought educating the superstitious inhabitants of the New World would prevent the torture soon to ensue, she might have made the attempt. Instead, Lilith kept her peace as a villager with dank, lice-ridden hair strode forward carrying a torch. He looked up at her and winked before holding the brand against the kindling. In 1692, witch trials were common and a sham, often a poor excuse for a person to exact revenge upon an offending party or to explain the especially harsh winters. She wished his stringy black hair would catch fire. No luck.

Cotton Mather scowled at her over the heads of the villagers. “I hereby impose the sentence of burning at the stake. Thy ashes shall be interred in unconsecrated ground and sprinkled with salt. May God have mercy upon your soul.”

She clenched her jaws tightly together, holding in the screams by the thinnest of margins as her flesh began to sear. Lilith's long, midnight tresses singed from the heat. As the flames drew ever closer, she pinned the minister of the Plymouth colony with her Armageddon blue gaze. She could see the sinister delight in his eyes, the perverse enjoyment of authorizing the fiery death he commanded. Countless times since she'd arrived in the New World, Lilith had watched as he oversaw these gruesome scenes. Mather never appeared off-put by the torment he wrought. Rather, she could sense the sick fascination he harbored.

Lilith blamed herself for her current situation. She should have hastened away from here when this madness first began. No stranger to the cruelties of man, she should have instantly perceived this final, tragic outcome. Life in the Americas for the colonists was harsh, and it was far easier to blame witches for crops that yielded nothing than admit to their own inadequacies. In lieu of the rather wise idea to abscond from the area immediately, Lilith had stayed.

Finally, as the roaring blaze obscured her sight of the hated villain, Lilith closed her eyes. She silently prayed that this time the Angel of Death would take her. The flames licked her skin, more scorching than any lover's caress, though in a way she welcomed the heat. Her flesh blistered and melted as her hair ignited into a glowing halo. Somewhere, distantly, she heard Cotton Mather's harsh cry of exuberance. His cheer garnered those of the villagers, inciting mob mentality. Sadness coupled with rage filled her soul.

Once again, Lilith experienced the brutal reminder of humanity's depravity. Her mouth opened reflexively, in a futile attempt to draw breath or in preparation to scream. She was unsure which. Suddenly, the pain vanished and a healing glow surrounded her body. Lilith perceived strong, yet gentle, arms cradling her near the likewise powerful chest. Despite the living warmth of the being that held her near, there was no heartbeat beneath her ear.

When next she opened her eyes, Lilith found herself reclining on a bed of blue-green grass in a tree-sheltered cove. A meadow stretched out far behind her and led her gaze to a mountain in the distance. Clouds obscured the peak, but a burbling sound drew her attention. Water tumbled down a rock face not far away and crashed into a wide pool. The sounds of birds singing and water flowing caressed her senses, easing away the horrors endured only moments ago. She realized before she turned to look that the source of her rescue had stayed after securing her release. She was not alone in the sequestered place and she easily identified her celestial liberator.

"Samael, why did you save me from the flames?" Tears threatened as she wrestled with her emotions. While she felt gratitude for his timely intervention, she was also unaccountably furious.

The archangel silently appraised her from a few feet away. He cocked his youthful-appearing head slightly to the side and Lilith witnessed the sadness in his ancient eyes. As he knelt on one knee, with heavy wings folded, she could almost believe him merely a blond, curly-haired youth who happened upon her in the forest. Then he spoke, and the gravelly tones of a voice seldom used destroyed the image.

"Why did you not translocate, Lilith? You could have rejected the inferno without my aid. I know the sorcerer Merlin gave you this ability long ago. Do you somehow believe you deserved this punishment?"

It had been decades since last she encountered Samael and it took a moment for her ears to translate the old tongue. The language no longer existed upon the Earth, but Lilith adapted quickly and easily. She

responded in kind.

“Perhaps.” The word was gentle, reflective. Then her anger surged forth. “Or perhaps the good minister would proclaim my spirit took possession of another had I acted as you suggest. An innocent would take my place upon the pyre. Tell me that you obscured my disappearance.”

“There are no innocents among mankind, Lilith, but no one will take your place. Of this you may be certain.”

Lilith turned back toward the water, breathing deeply as she attempted to dispel the horrible memories of burning alive. The sight of calm waters helped soothe the remembered heat. She ground her teeth together, understanding the dangers of offending a cherub. Though childlike and innocent on the surface, such beings possessed tremendous power. Not expecting the discussion to continue, she flinched slightly when Samael continued.

“You comprehend that you cannot die. You would have suffered unspeakable torment only to awaken again as your body recovered. Your actions make no sense. Please explain.”

Lilith considered the question. Samael had existed for at least as long as she had, probably even longer. He’d been the first being she encountered after her banishment from the Garden. Yet, for all those centuries interacting with humans, in his somewhat limited fashion, he still couldn’t fathom their intricacies. He was not the pious guardian angel people seemed to believe. For that matter, neither was his creator. She knew the truth about the supposedly all-powerful deity responsible for humanity’s current incarnation. Rather than explain, she seized upon the first part of his comment.

“Not so, if you collected my soul.”

Samael’s head drew back and his body tensed in sudden wariness. She felt his resistance to the idea as surely as if it had originated from within. “We have spoken of this before. You know it is forbidden.”

“Are you not the Angel of Death, the vaunted Archangel Samael? Are you not tasked with relieving suffering?”

“You know that I am, but not for you. Our Lord has decreed...”

“Ha,” Lilith spat. “The same Lord who removed his own wife’s name from his written word? And what became of Asherah? Have you seen or heard of her since?”

Samael looked away in a manner that suggested he knew something but would not say. His soft blue eyes rested on the faraway mountaintop. “I cannot help you, Lilith.”

He stood to indicate the topic closed, spreading glorious, snow-white

wings. Lilith couldn't help but admire the thick fullness that arched above his head and swept down to the grass beneath his feet. Samael wore only white, loose-fitting trousers to display his lean, powerful body. At his waist, Lilith noticed his flaming sword, Azrael, where it resided safely in the sheath. She felt relieved he'd chosen this form in which to affect her rescue. He could just as easily assume the guise of a cloaked and cowed figure carrying a scythe or a monster with cloven hooves. Looking up at his ever-youthful visage, with sunlight haloed about his golden hair, Lilith tried once more.

“You've defied orders before.”

Samael smiled gently, the expression reminding her of that first meeting. Newly created and exiled from the Garden of Eden, Lilith had not truly understood his formidable nature. The smile deceived her then, but no longer. She ceased her futile attempts and turned her gaze back to the calming water. She heard his wings extend and expected him to take flight. Instead, he spoke once more.

“Where will you go now?”

Fair question, for which she did not have an answer. “Perhaps I shall sleep for a time.”

“You miss so much when you do that, Lilith. Centuries at a time may pass. This young world can be an amazing place, were you to take the chance.”

“Easy words to speak for someone with a purpose, Samael. I am but a human who cannot die, and I have seen much that cannot be unseen. Even though I have slept decades, I always awaken to find the world unchanged. Men hold ever more fiercely to their women, restricting their freedoms while warring over a patch of ground. Blood soaks this world as men kill their brothers and fathers their own children.”

“You speak truth, Lilith. Men are evil. Would that Yahweh had let me take every soul during the Great Flood, but then you would be alone.”

Lilith looked up at him again, feeling the moisture track down her cheeks. “I am always alone, Samael. You know that better than anyone.”

“Sleep then. When you awaken, perhaps you will have discovered a purpose.”

Chapter One

Lillian Primus sat quietly in the comfortable leather chair. Her elbows rested upon the rich mahogany desk's surface, her fingers steepled together. Darkness encroached on the room, seeming to flow in from the corners like mist. She had changed her name from Lilith long ago. The name reminded her of painful times that she could never truly escape. Her solemn blue eyes rested upon Sophie Gruber as she paced not far away. She granted the other woman her full attention. In addition to listening to Sophie's every word, Lillian inspected the energy shimmering around her body. Sophie's essence glowed like the light from an incandescent bulb, invisible to everyone but Lil.

"I really think this girl will be very important to our cause."

Despite the tattoos and the hard-edged veneer, Sophie possessed a tender heart, which she kept carefully disguised. Judging by her aura, Lil believed her. Sophie's enthusiasm and conviction were hard to deny. Still, this latest rant didn't make sense. Sophie had full discretion to decide whom to bring into the fold, at least in the European Sector.

"Then why have you not already indoctrinated her?"

"Huh?" Sophie appeared confused for a moment. Then her expression cleared. "You really should start talking like a real person, Lilith. Sometimes I can hardly understand what you're saying."

"I go by Lillian here, remember? Not Lilith. I'll rephrase. Are you asking my permission to mark her?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, I know you like to personally oversee anyone you see as especially important to the female cause."

Sophie made a gesture indicating air quotes over "female." Her tone seemed slightly condescending and Lil's proverbial hackles rose in response. Just as quickly, Lil realized that Sophie still felt a little silly discussing the fate of a human child. She hadn't been with Lil's crew long, and at thirty-four, Sophie was the youngest. Her spiked blonde hair shimmered in the manor's artificial lighting, illustrating one of the reasons Lil had chosen her to begin with. Sophie's looks allowed her to infiltrate and fit in with the modern crowd.

"Why do you believe this girl is so exceptional?"

Lil watched Sophie's expression freeze for a second as she considered the question. "I don't know. Just a feeling?"

Her energy seemed to waver and Lil sensed Sophie's insecurity. While she really believed the girl fit their criteria, it seemed clear that

Sophie wasn't sure how important the child would be to humanity. Lil maintained the silence between them, waiting for Sophie to tell her the true source for this requested meeting. She didn't have long to wait.

Sophie drew a hand through her hair, disheveling the locks even more. She blew out a frustrated breath before finally speaking her mind, her German accent growing stronger. "Fine, I'm just not sure I'm the right person for this job. When you first approached me, I thought marking pre-pubescent girls as lesbians was a wonderful idea..."

"Is that what you think we do?" Lil was aware her body had grown still and her own countenance had adopted an inscrutable cast. A rock-hard kernel of doubt took up residence in her stomach. Perhaps she had chosen poorly after all when she took Sophie into the house.

"Isn't it?"

"No, it is not."

Lil pushed away from the desk, her knuckles against the wood grain. The contact with the natural fibers helped settle her temper as she drew the wood's residual energy into her body. Reluctantly, she broke the contact and walked toward the full bar in the corner of her library. Lil took a moment to pour two fingers of aged cognac into a glass from the crystal decanter. She sipped the fiery beverage, allowing the heat to burn its way into her stomach as her eyes slid over the spines of shelved and ancient first editions. She'd read all of the books, many of them more than once and often found solace in the written words. Finally centered, she turned back to face Sophie.

"We search the world for those who will help shape a better future for women. The majority of them are in fact lovers of women, however not all. If you really believe I care only for turning women away from men, then you do not understand your purpose here and I do not need you."

Abruptly, Sophie's energy shifted from bright white to pale blue. The force rippled in obvious concern. Sophie had survived an alcoholic mother and an endless parade of foster homes. Rejection didn't sit well with her, but she tended to react in fear rather than anger. Lil could see the stirrings of that anxiety. Satisfied that she had the younger woman's attention, Lil continued with the lesson.

"Mata Hari was not a lesbian, though she was quite happy to utilize her feminine wiles against a woman. Queen Elizabeth, the first one, illustrated the greatness of a woman ruler. Rosa Parks began the modern Civil Rights movement by refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. All of these women and more were chosen by me and those who

have worked for me throughout the ages.”

Lil had taken on this self-assigned role as her purpose in never-ending life after awakening from her encounter with Cotton Mather in 1692. It wasn't the first time she had marked a woman with her kiss. Jehanne d'Arc had that honor before Lil's great sleep. After a hundred-year hibernation, Lil awakened to realize she could assist in balancing the power between men and women by continuing in her previous endeavor. She had the ability to sense when a young child would grow into a strong, independent woman who would aid in this cause. Her kiss, chaste though it was, imbued them with the will to realize their potential.

“What about Sappho?” Sophie's voice trembled, but Lil respected her for standing her ground.

“I'll not coddle you with tales of a woman-loving poet. The question here is whether you are capable of doing your job or not. Are you? Or should I wipe your memory, take the gifts I've granted and return you to Berlin? You can go back to living on the streets, begging for handouts.” Lil's voice had grown stone hard.

Rather than respond, Sophie's gaze slid away toward the corner of the room. Even darker shadows lurked there now, but Lil easily made out the golden orbs residing in the darkness. No doubt Sophie saw them also because Lil heard her nervous swallow. Lil found it amusing that she clearly wondered if termination from employment would involve that slightly dangerous entity. Lil did not intend to involve Pravde, but Sophie couldn't know that.

Lil's mind reached out to touch that of the powerful bird. Keeping a snowy owl as a pet was almost inconceivable in Maine, as well as in many states in the United States. Pravde, however, was no domesticated animal. As protector, companion and friend, she would carry out Lil's commands without hesitation. Fortunately for Sophie, Pravde sensed Lil's amusement and made a low hooting sound in response. Lil smirked as Sophie jumped. Clearly, she felt tense around the bird.

“No, ma'am. I understand.”

The words were hurried and Lil raised the glass of amber fluid to conceal her smile. She finished the drink and placed the crystal on the bar before returning to her previous position behind the desk. Her movements slow and deliberate, Lil didn't hurry. She took her time to allow Sophie to find peace with her decision to stay.

“I'm glad to hear it.” Having made her point, Lil allowed a little compassion to shine through. “I trust your instincts or I wouldn't have chosen you. Return home. Mark the girl yourself, but take care not to be

seen. Sometimes the target awakens when they feel the touch.”

Sophie nodded and closed her eyes. Her brow furrowed as she concentrated. Among the gifts Lil granted was the ability to translocate. Granted to her by Merlin centuries before, Lil freely shared this talent with the women who worked for her. She waited patiently as Sophie summoned the will and natural energies required. After several tense moments, Sophie vanished from sight. Simultaneously, Lil felt a small rush of air as it filled the sudden vacuum created by the disappearance.

As she grew more practiced, Lil knew Sophie would translocate more easily. Like the rest of her people, Sophie had a maximum distance that varied depending on individual abilities. That limited range was sufficient as long as the women remained upon their assigned continents. An increase in distance required more concentration, such as the one Sophie had just performed. Only Lil possessed the talent to travel anywhere she desired in a wink. Then again, she conceded, she had the benefit of a lot of practice.

“Come, Pravde. Let us see if Kaya has left us anything in the kitchen.”

Lil’s feet slapped softly on polished mahogany as she navigated through the manor toward the kitchen. Constructed in an ancient design of all natural materials, Lil remained aware that her home proved an oddity for the region, but she didn’t really care. The stone walls, raw wooden planks under her feet and rich greenery of living plants throughout the corridors comforted her soul. Lil drew strength from the natural world. For all that she adored nature, however, she still appreciated modern technology. Artificial lights chased away the darkness outside, created by heavy storm clouds. Warm air poured from wall vents as the central heat kicked in. Pravde preceded Lil through the modern-day castle, flying ahead of her down the long hallways.

Down long, winding stairs and across a rough-cut marble entranceway, Lil entered a kitchen that could easily accommodate a crew of twenty. Stainless steel appliances winked at her as she flipped on the overhead lights. Pravde entered the room ahead of her, lighting down on a large perch positioned near the island in the center. The island was topped with a large chopping block, a preparation sink and a rack of extremely sharp knives. There was nothing there to consume.

Lil moved directly to the walk-in cooler located in the rear corner of the room. She removed a small hank of beef that hung from a hook near the door. The cooler kept Pravde’s meat fresh, not frozen. She wouldn’t eat icy flesh. Fortunately, Lil employed people to ensure the bird had

plenty to consume. For all that her loyalties kept her bound to Lil, Pravde was still a wild animal. She would often hunt on her own during evening hours, but Lil kept the larder stocked for especially cold nights and just because she enjoyed caring for the owl.

Lil carried the treat into the kitchen and presented it to the bird, grateful for the specially constructed area beneath the perch. The easy to clean surface would keep the bird's waste and refuse from contaminating the house. While Pravde resided upon her perch and consumed her meal, Lil took her own food from the refrigerator and ate it standing at the island. Kaya Littlefoot, her woman handling the North American continent, appreciated food preparation. She took care of Lil's dietary needs in addition to her regular duties. Today, the Native American woman had created a chopped salad, and she had thoughtfully grilled slices of medium rare steak to place across the mound of greens.

Lil's mouth watered at the sight, but she stopped suddenly with the fork half-raised. Paused in mid-bite, not even her eyes moved as she sought the source for the disturbance she felt in the ether all around. Somewhere, a woman-child on the verge of coming of age commanded her personal attention. It happened so rarely in this world of a 21st century overcome by selfishness and mediocrity that Lil's heart thumped in anticipation. Pravde looked up from her meal and hooted, forcing Lil to reconnect to the moment at hand.

"Apologies, my darling. It looks as though we shall be traveling."

She glanced at the salad with regret and shook her head. Although Lil wouldn't perish from starvation, ever, hunger pangs remained distasteful. She would just have to eat it later.

Lil replaced the container's lid and put it back into the refrigerator. Normally, she would have finished her dinner without interruption, but she simply didn't have the time. Istanbul was in a different time zone than Eastern Maine. She had little time to act before daylight broke halfway around the world. Denoting a special being had to take place at a pre-ordained moment in the child's development, usually during a single night just before the on-set of puberty. If she missed that designated juncture, the world wouldn't stop spinning, but the girl would never reach the full potential with which she was born.

Leaving Pravde contentedly shredding her meal, Lil strode toward her private chambers in the manor's lower level. It was cooler down on the basement level, but Lil hardly noticed the difference as she stripped off her cashmere sweater. It landed unheeded on the bed as she took a black tank top from a dresser drawer. Her thick jeans would be fine, but

she traded her loafers for a pair of hiking boots. She paused momentarily to pull her long dark hair into a ponytail.

At eight o'clock on a Friday evening in Maine, Lil knew without having to check that the time at her destination was three in the morning. In addition, she had to contend with a difference in temperature. Maine's relatively cool sixty-nine degrees was nothing compared to the almost ninety she would face in Turkey. Despite this fact, Lil pulled on a lightweight black jacket. The garment would help conceal her identity in the darkness where she intended to lurk. She wasn't going to be there long enough to interact with the locals, but reached for her credentials and cell phone anyway. Things didn't always go according to plan and she had learned not to take anything for granted. For that same reason, she slid a long, wickedly sharp hunting knife into her boot sheath.

After dressing, Lil took a handful of treats from a covered bowl and slipped them into her pocket. Then she headed for the kitchen. Pravde seemed ready for her, already finished eating and busy preening her feathers. She looked up as Lil entered the room.

"I need you with me tonight, my sweet. Somehow, I think you'll be more inconspicuous than an automatic weapon." Istanbul could be a threatening place for anyone traveling alone, especially in the dark and more economically challenged areas. A woman alone would prove too tempting a target should anyone spot her.

Pravde hooted once before stretching her wings. She launched herself across the room and landed on Lil's forearm, carefully keeping her talons from puncturing the leather. Lil fed the owl a treat and waited as Pravde consumed it. Once finished, the bird hopped up onto her shoulder. She glanced over and Lil took that as a sign that Pravde was ready to go.

Sure that she'd prepared for almost any situation, Lil took a single long stride toward the center of the room. Mentally focused on her destination, she vanished from the manor only to reemerge elsewhere. Her pupils dilated, adjusting to the dark alley in an instant. Lil quickly muttered the words to an incantation, activating an intangibility spell. She smelled ozone on the air and a breeze ruffled her bangs. A storm brewed overhead.

"Stay here," Lil whispered. "I'll summon you if I need you."

Pravde took flight, heading for the nearby rooftops. Lil left the owl to her own devices, confident she would be there upon her return. Lil stalked down the alley, attempting to tune out the cacophony coming from the crowded streets nearby.

Contrary to what most Americans believed, Istanbul was a modern,

sprawling city. Electric lights burned inside the homes and illuminated the nearby streetlamps. From a short distance away, she could hear harsh and jarring traffic noises. The occasional blare of a horn from an angry driver reminded her why she'd chosen the relatively remote location in Maine to make her home, despite painful early memories of New England.

As she pushed away thoughts of a more inviting climate, Lil neared her target. Sweat beaded on her forehead and trickled into her eyes despite the stiff breeze that blew the smell of garbage and human waste toward her. A particularly pitiful looking *gecekondu* among a row of the shanty-style homes caught her attention. Here in Eastern Turkey, problems with unemployment and poverty had reduced millions to living in these slums.

Lil marched toward the weather-beaten structure, keeping her eyes pinned to the paint-bare boards so she wouldn't see the unfortunate people dwelling in the alley. She stepped through the edifice easily in her non-corporeal state and entered a small, crowded front room. Battered furniture filled the space and a small kitchen took up the far corner. Lil's ability to find special children also allowed her to see the environment surrounding them. She knew that there were two smaller rooms within the dwelling, one of which housed the sleeping parents.

After turning right, Lil walked through the wall and emerged into a tiny sleeping chamber. Two girls lay upon a lumpy mattress on the floor. Lil bypassed the older child and circumnavigated the pad to approach the much smaller sister. She knelt on the floor, inspecting the girl's precious features. Long dark hair flowed over the clean but tattered sheet. Her dark eyes were currently closed in slumber, but Lil still had an image of the determined fire in those same eyes far in the future. This girl, Elie Tanari, would be instrumental in ensuring the drive for women's equality in this part of the world.

Hands upon her knees, Lil bent low until only inches from Elie's face. She could feel the sweet breath upon her cheeks. Lil closed her eyes, mustering the energy she had learned over time to harness. She placed her lips lightly upon the tiny mouth and felt the transfer begin. There was nothing sexual in the touch. Feelings of tenderness and maternal concern coursed through her. Lil allowed some of the purpose she felt to make the world a better place travel through the link.

Samael had told her long ago that Lil needed something to keep her going in this life. Passing on her gifts had become that goal. With her kiss, she anointed future women with the determination to wrest the mantle of power from men and bring about a more peaceful and loving

world. She transferred that desire to Elie now, or at least a portion of it. What the child chose to do with the gift would be up to her. Free will still held sway and Lil would never attempt to take that largesse from anyone.

After a moment, Elie stirred. Lil pulled away quickly, but not far enough that she couldn't see the wonder in the dark eyes. Elie had felt her touch. She looked around as though seeking the source of the contact. Lil smiled, thinking that she had chosen well. This girl had sensitivity and great instincts. With any luck, those gifts would serve her well in her future travels.

Lil rose and left the humble lodging. She'd focused so intently on Elie that she didn't notice the sounds of an altercation until she returned to the alley. A scuffle took place at the far end and she glanced in that direction out of simple curiosity. Lil had no interest in becoming involved in such minor squabbles. Humidity caused sweat to roll down her temple and she reached to swipe it away. Hand part way up, Lil froze as she abruptly realized what was taking place.

A woman stood surrounded by three men who clearly displayed criminal intent. Nearby, the crumpled shape of another person lay unmoving upon the ground. Lil didn't sense any carnal desires from the men. The thought of mating with this woman was repulsive to them. They merely wanted all of her valuables and weren't above killing to realize their goal. Dressed in tattered rags, she understood their impetus to survive any way they could, but she couldn't condone the methods. The man in front held a weapon leveled at the woman. It was a handgun that didn't look to be in any better condition than these men were.

"I don't have anything," the woman practically wailed, her terror clearly audible from the length of the alley. "Someone already stole my purse. Please, just leave us alone."

Rage filled Lil's soul. As much as she disliked humanity, she would never turn her back on a woman in danger. She muttered the words to switch back to solid form and charged down the alley, calling to Pravde as she did. Lil noted the instant when the men looked up, startled by the commotion and her sudden appearance. The leader quickly focused on her and his expression turned to one of disdain. He apparently didn't see her as a threat.

His mistake.

Lil struck at the same instant that Pravde shrieked and dove toward the trio. One of the men attempted to strike at the bird with a long, rusty knife. Pravde avoided the thrust and Lil lost sight of the owl as she engaged the leader. The man was large, tending toward overweight, and

on the tall side. To an average woman he would pose a problem, but Lil was not average. She was the first woman created by God, brought to life by his transcendental breath. Over time, humanity had lost the original strength with which they'd been endowed. Not so for her.

A full yard from her target, Lil launched herself into the air. Her feet connected with the man's chest and she kicked him into a trash dumpster. When he hit the metal container, the thug dropped the small pistol. He landed upon his hands and knees with his head down. Lil hoped he would stay there. Instead, he shook his head and attempted to push back to his feet. A single strike to the top of his head ended the menace. She heard his neck break even as she turned to engage another attacker.

Pravde had disabled one of the men. He held his arms up to cover his face and head, but Lil could see the blood streaming down his left cheek. She was uncertain if Pravde had ruined his eye, but she didn't really care. The third assailant had evidently decided that discretion was the better part of valor. The last Lil saw of him was the flap of his shirttail as he left the alley and turned down the street.

Lil dispatched the remaining criminal with a chop to the side of his neck. Unlike his friend, she didn't kill him. She considered the matter closed and simply wanted him out of the way. As he dropped unconscious to the ground, Pravde ended her attack and landed onto Lil's shoulder. Lil turned to see what had become of the female she'd saved.

The alley seemed almost unnaturally quiet in the aftermath of the altercation. In the distance she heard thunder rumble and realized the storm wasn't far away. The woman rested on her knees beside the unmoving body Lil had previously noted. She didn't seem to care what had become of her attackers. Curious again, Lil walked over to see what she was doing.

"Francine, can you hear me?" She shook the fallen woman's shoulders in an attempt to wake her, but to no avail.

"I'm sorry, but your friend is gone." Lil kept her voice soft in an effort not to startle the woman.

"No, you're wrong! Francine, wake up. Come on, honey. It's time to go home."

Lil frowned as she concentrated on the stranger. Usually, she could get a sense of a person just from focusing on them, even if she couldn't exactly read their minds. This woman was different. Lil could feel nothing, not even the pain she knew the woman currently experienced. She reached out and touched the stranger on the back, thinking that the contact would help her connect. Nothing happened except that the woman

flinched away from her.

As frightened eyes turned up toward her, Lil held out her hands to show that she wasn't a threat. "I won't hurt you. What happened?"

"We were on vacation. Someone stole my purse and picked Frannie's pocket while we were shopping." The woman interrupted her story with a breathy sob, but then continued. "We were just trying to walk back to the hotel, but then those guys jumped us."

Unable to continue, she turned back to her friend. She tried several more times to rouse Francine until Lil convinced her that it wouldn't work. "I'm very sorry, but we must vacate this alley. It isn't safe here."

"I can't just leave her behind."

To quell the stranger's panic, Lil promised to call the authorities once they arrived at the hotel. Somewhere along the way, she had taken on the role of protector. She would see this woman to safety and ensure that her friend wasn't left unattended by the police. After much cajoling, she coaxed the woman to travel with her.

The stranger stood and met Lil's gaze fully for the first time. At the same instant, lightning flared overhead and thunder boomed. The flash of light gave Lil a brief but intense view of pain-filled eyes. Verdant orbs reminded Lil of wild, open fields. Flecks of yellow and, unaccountably, red completed the image and for an instant Lil forgot why she was there. As a tear rolled down a pale cheek, she abruptly remembered and struggled to focus.

Lil encouraged the woman to follow her as heavy rain began to fall. As they turned onto the well-lit street, the stranger apparently noticed Pravde for the first time. Rather than seeing fear in her eyes, Lil noted interest. At least she had some strength.

"What is your name?"

"Diana, Diana Reed. Thanks so much for helping us. I just wish you'd come before..."

Lil didn't respond to the comment, silently noting that the woman still referred to her friend in the present tense. Instead, she inquired as to where Diana was staying and walked with her toward the hotel. Lil would have hailed a cab, but didn't see any and it wasn't far to their destination. Along the way, she learned that Diana and Francine were childhood friends that had decided to take a vacation together. The trip had seemed a disaster from the start, first missing their flight from San Diego and then losing their credentials. Lil felt sympathy for Diana, which surprised her considering that she rarely became involved with the lives of mortals.

Reaching the hotel in a timely manner proved more difficult than Lil

had suspected. At times, Diana walked easily alongside her, appearing in command of her emotions. Alternately, she would begin to shiver uncontrollably and burst into tears once again as she fretted over her friend's recent demise. Lil kept one arm wrapped around Diana's shoulders throughout the journey, unconcerned by appearances. In this part of the world, even the prospect of being a lesbian could get a woman killed. However, strangely, it was perfectly acceptable for female friends to be in close physical proximity. Still, Lil kept an eye on her surroundings as she cared for the distraught woman. She thought Diana might be experiencing a mild version of traumatic shock.

Finally, they reached the hotel and Lil stopped at the lower step. "This is where I leave you. The hotel has a shuttle service that can take you to the U.S. Consulate. They can assist you in obtaining a new passport and arrange to get you home."

"And Francine?" Diana's lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears. A single drop escaped and tracked down a milky white cheek.

"I'll make the call as soon as I leave." Aware that Diana had no reason to trust a complete stranger, even one who had saved her life, she pulled a business card from her wallet. "This has my contact information. If Francine's body is not at the San Diego city morgue before you arrive home, call me."

It would take a lot of effort to ensure that she fulfilled her promise, but Lil couldn't leave Diana in such distress. She'd already involved herself too much to back out now anyway.

"Why are you doing this?"

Lil thought that an exceptional question. She didn't really have an answer. "I suppose I just like to meddle in the affairs of others." At least that was the truth.

She started to leave, but Diana seemed unwilling to let her go. "Please, tell me your name."

Speaking with Diana for the last few blocks had seemed so easy for Lil, reassuring her and helping her to seek shelter. She had enjoyed the interaction more than she cared to admit, despite the unpleasant circumstances. With a simple request, all of that changed. Lil felt the urge to speak the truth, to tell this woman who she really was. As surprising as that impulse was, she realized that she couldn't. Diana would never believe her and it wouldn't matter anyway.

Sadly, she responded, "Just someone who hopes you return home safely."

The rain had already stopped and Lil left Diana Reed standing alone

on the steps.

Chapter Two

Lil headed into a nearby nightclub and strode directly toward the back. The noise generated by pulse-pounding music and the heavy crowd precluded making the promised call. In truth, this location served another purpose entirely. No one reacted to the owl as Lil worked her way across the room. Smoke swirled in the darkness, obscuring the people. Lil wished the smoke worked as well to mask the stink of sweat. She spotted a sign near another, smaller door in a shadowy corner. The sign, written in Turkish, announced an exit.

Multiple thoughts and emotions generated by the patrons pressed in on her from all sides. Lust, anger, and jealousy hammered at her heart. Everything combined into a silent din that caused her to clench her jaw. Lil blocked it all out and shoved the door open. She gave a breath of relief as she entered the alley and the discord faded. A quick glance around assured her that save for a stray dog and the litter blowing on the wind, she was alone. The sun had just started to rise in the distance, painting the sky with streaks of red and yellow.

Lil wrinkled her nose in disgust at the stench of human urine as she pulled her cell phone from the holster. It wasn't her first time in Turkey or even her first occasion to call the U.S. Consulate. She dialed the number from memory. The switchboard operator answered. Lil didn't bother asking for anyone in particular.

"I'm calling to report a dead American tourist."

A startled pause met her comment before the female operator asked, "Did you say dead?"

"She is in an alley." Lil gave the address and requested the Consulate send a team to retrieve the unfortunate woman. The operator listened as Lil gave her all the information she could.

"I need your name and how you came upon the victim."

Lil ended the call and slipped the phone into the case before she addressed Pravde. "Are you ready to leave this place?"

A single hoot gave Lil her answer. She nodded sharply and stepped farther into the alley where the shadows lingered. The urge to conceal her activities was rote after all this time, generated by the desire to avoid prying eyes. As she entered the deepest recesses of the alley, she translocated and reappeared in the same room from which she'd departed. Pravde launched from her shoulder immediately and took up a position on a perch high overhead.

Lil sensed the owl's fatigue and empathized. Though she couldn't feel the same exhaustion of the body, Lil's soul carried its own ever-present weariness. She'd expected some of that feeling to dissipate once she returned home, but if anything, her limbs felt heavy and her mood melancholy. Her thoughts remained with the woman she'd assisted in Turkey, wishing Diana Reed luck in returning home with a minimum of fuss. Despite her concerns, Lil had no inclination to travel back to Turkey. All she wanted was a warm shower and a walk upon the open meadows around the manor. Perhaps Pravde would be interested in joining her. At not quite eleven in the evening, and situated in the less populated region of southeastern Maine, no one would be about to see an owl roaming the countryside with her human companion.

With her plans for the evening determined, Lil took a long, warm shower and then dressed for the cool weather. She grabbed a light jacket and almost left her chambers but stopped near the doorway. For some reason, she felt like she had forgotten something. The cell phone caught her eye and Lil frowned. She wasn't a child of the twenty-first century and often didn't even think of the phone. Yet for all that, she felt compelled to take the device with her. She had learned to listen to her instincts long ago.

Lil reached out to take the cell. Her fingers hadn't yet made contact when it unexpectedly rang. She felt sure she knew the identity of the caller before she answered.

"Yes?"

"Um, hi. This is Diana Reed, the woman you helped earlier?"

"Yes, Ms. Reed. I know who you are."

"Right, well, are you still in the city, Ms. Primus?"

Lil hesitated, not having expected the query or the sound of worry in Diana's voice. She knew immediately that she had erred by giving Diana her card. She had done so on a whim, never expecting the woman to make use of it. Lil had a feeling that her plans had just changed.

"I am...still available," she surprised herself by saying.

"Oh, that's great. Listen, I don't mean to put you out and you've already done so much to help me, but..."

"Ms. Reed, what is the trouble?"

"The authorities here knew about Francine and had sent someone out for her, thank you for that by the way, but I told them I was with her and now they won't let me leave."

Lil felt irritation and frustration wash over her in equal measure. She should have realized Diana would mention her friend and complicate her

situation. The woman's innate honesty shone all around her like a halo.

"What is it they require of you?"

"They say I have to contact Francine's next of kin and arrange for an emergency power of attorney. I have to take care of her things at the hotel and set up transportation for taking her bo...taking her back to the States. The problem is that my phone and money were in my purse when it was stolen."

Lil could see where this was headed without being told. Diana Reed had no way to contact her friend's parents, since she didn't have their number, or pay for the autopsy that Turkish authorities would need to perform. The Consulate would fill out a Foreign Service Report of Death, but it had to be based on a local autopsy. Had she kept silent, the U.S. Consulate would have taken care of all the arrangements and billed Francine's next of kin. Now it was too late and it fell to Diana to deal with the formalities despite her lack of resources.

For half a second Lil was tempted to leave the woman to her own devices. She had saved Diana from a group of thugs and taken her to safety. As far as she could see, that was the end of her responsibility. If she hadn't made a promise to ensure that Francine's body reached San Diego, she would have. Lil valued her integrity. More than that, she could still remember the sound of Diana's grief and terror. Those emotions above all others resonated within her.

"Do you know the names of Francine's parents and where they reside?" Once Diana told her what she knew, Lil said, "I will be there shortly."

She terminated the call and tossed the phone onto her bed. Now that she had involved herself in the situation, Lil intended to do everything she could to bring this fiasco to a conclusion. Her first impulse was to resolve things quickly so she could get back to her own business. Then she realized that she actually had very little to do on a regular basis. At least this would provide an unexpected diversion.

Lil stood in the center of the room and closed her eyes, relaxing her body as she reached out. Kaya Littlefoot answered quickly, though Lil knew she was currently on the West Coast. Their mental connection easily transcended the distance.

"I am here, Mistress. How may I assist you?" Kaya was always formal, something Lil found comforting.

"I require you to contact a couple living in San Diego and inform them that their child has perished while on vacation in Istanbul." Over the thousands of miles between them, Lil could sense that she had startled

Kaya. “Please see to it that they generate a power of attorney for one Diana Reed so that she may resolve issues related to transporting the body home.”

She gave Kaya the names and address of Francine’s parents and requested Kaya to arrange for a charter plane from Istanbul to San Diego International Airport.

“Once we are prepared to leave Turkey, I will contact you with the details. Please have the San Diego City Morgue prepared to meet the plane once we arrive.”

“You will be traveling by plane? No disrespect, but do you have a passport?”

Lil smiled. “Yes, it’s been a long time since I have flown, but I’m sure I remember how things work. I’ll also need a car service to meet us so that I may see Ms. Reed home. After that, I’ll arrange my own transportation to the manor.”

“Understood, Mistress. I will contact you as soon as I have what you require.”

“Very good. Would you mind checking in on Pravde as well? I anticipate this journey will be lengthy. The flight alone is almost thirteen hours.”

“Of course.”

With Kaya taking care of some of the critical details, Lil prepared for her return journey to Istanbul. She remembered her passport and took a small duffel bag with a change of clothes as well as a stack of cash she removed from the office safe. Mortals and bureaucracy moved slowly and, on occasion, she’d been required to grease the wheels. Once again, Lil ensured she had everything she might need. For the second time in as many hours, she strode into the ether between distances and arrived outside the club alley in Turkey.

This time, Lil eschewed entering the noise and barely controlled chaos of the nightclub and headed around the corner toward the main street. The storm had ended and she decided to walk to the U.S. Consulate. Dawn had broken some time ago and already she could feel the unpleasant heat. A trickle of sweat trailed down her spine, reminding her of the light jacket she’d donned in preparation of walking across the Maine countryside. She should have changed her attire, but it was far too late now.

Lil arrived outside the main building to the Consulate in less than twenty minutes. The huge structure sat at ground level, requiring her only to cross a small parking area reserved for dignitaries. Two United States

Marines in dress blue uniforms stood at attention outside the main doors. One of the men broke his stance to open the door for her.

“Thank you,” she said without looking at the man.

She entered a large marble-tiled entryway and turned down a hallway to her left. Although she still couldn’t feel Diana’s presence, Lil sensed the concern she had generated in the consulate staff. She honed in on their location, sure she would find Diana with them. She spotted Diana through the glass windows leading into a richly appointed office.

Diana sat perched on the edge of a vintage wing-backed chair with a floral pattern. She appeared nervous, her eyes darting around as she took in every detail. At the same time, she kept clasping and unclasping her hands. Suddenly, she turned her head and spotted Lil standing outside the office. A look of relief crossed her pale features and Diana quickly stood. Lil pushed the door open, meeting Diana halfway across the room. For a moment, Lil thought Diana would embrace her. Instead, she stopped less than a foot away.

“Thank you so much for coming. I’m sorry I had to bother you again.”

Lil noticed Diana’s exhausted appearance. Her green eyes were bloodshot and the medium length brown hair mussed. Tiny lines had appeared around her nose in the few hours since Lil had last seen her. As before, the woman’s internal thoughts remained a complete mystery. Lil was starting to become irked by this fact and turned to speak with a man who had just entered from an inner office.

The man was tall, very near Lil’s six-foot stature. He wore an expensive three-piece pinstriped suit. Lil would have thought him American from his appearance if not for the long, dark beard and kuffiyeh worn over his head. The scarf was secured with a braided rope and was the traditional red and white-checked color. He offered her a smile and held out a hand.

“Adskhan Tilki, at your service, madam. I am the attaché to the Consul General.”

Lil shook his hand briefly, disregarding the urge to wipe her hand off on her shirt afterward. She picked up on his carefully concealed oily personality and realized this man was a politician through and through. He sincerely wanted to help, if only to get them out of his office as quickly as possible. In this case, Lil agreed completely. She didn’t want to be here any longer than necessary.

“Lillian Primus. I have contacted the deceased’s parents. A power of attorney is being drafted as we speak. What else do you require to push

things along?” It wasn’t important to mention that someone else was acquiring the document at her direction.

“That is very fine,” Tilki assured her in heavily accented English, “however, a local autopsy is required. Unfortunately, local medical personnel rarely consider the death of an American tourist a priority. I’m afraid it may take several days to work through the details. Then of course, there is the matter of cremation.”

“No, I don’t want Francine cremated.” Diana sounded horrified by the possibility and the look of shock on her face was unmistakable.

Before Lil could respond, Tilki said, “I’m sorry, miss, but Istanbul does not embalm the deceased and I’m afraid other methods utilized will render an open casket funeral impossible.”

Diana blanched and Lil resisted the urge to break Tilki’s neck. Fortunately, Lil had already prepared for this contingency. “There will be no cremation. I’ve already made arrangements for travel once the body is released by the morgue.”

“I see.” Attaché Tilki clearly didn’t appreciate this news and Lil watched his eyes dart around as he searched for another way to stall them. “In that case, I will do what I can to speed things along for you, but you must understand that things do not work the same way here as they do in America. Here, officials work at their own pace and do not appreciate outside interference.”

Lil’s eyes narrowed. What Tilki said was true, but there was clearly a way to fast-track the process. Lil was perfectly capable of meeting that requirement. Living for centuries had allowed her to amass a vast fortune, which came in handy when dealing with greedy mortals. Normally, Lil wouldn’t support such a thinly veiled attempt at extortion, but as mortals liked to say, in for a penny, in for a pound. That she had prepared for such a contingency didn’t make her any happier about it.

“Ms. Reed, would you excuse us for a moment?”

Diana nodded and Lil walked away toward the far side of the room. As though sensing a handsome reward, Tilki rapidly followed. Lil turned back to confront him in time to catch Tilki rubbing his hands together in anticipation. She wanted to tear his head off, but thought Diana might take exception to the violence. Plus, all the bloodshed and the death of an attaché might create an international incident.

“How much?” Lil’s harsh, grating tone caused Tilki’s eyes to widen.

“I… I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sir, I assure you that greasing the wheels of diplomacy is not new to me. I’m sure you have contacts in the local hospitals as well as the

morgue. How much will it take to conclude this incident today?”

Tilki was genuinely shocked by the question. “Today? I do not believe such a thing is possible.”

Lil quickly calculated. While Istanbul was a modern city, the economy was poor. Money would help achieve her goals, but Lil didn’t intend to give this leech more than she had to. “Two thousand dollars and we have the death certificate signed by the local coroner before lunch.”

“Five thousand and it will arrive before the end of the day.”

The façade had dropped and Lil could see the avarice in Tilki’s brown eyes. His body had tensed in preparation of extended haggling, illustrating his familiarity with such negotiations. Lil was disgusted that he would engage in this selfish negotiation over the return of a dead American to her family.

“You will take four thousand and it will be here by lunch. If it has not arrived, I will speak to the local media and apprise them of your capitalistic tendencies.” Fury warred with greed, fighting for dominance on Tilki’s face. These were the hardest emotions for Lil to read and for a moment, she thought he would refuse.

He gave in with a single nod. “I will make the call.” Tilki walked away and disappeared into a rear office, all but slamming the door behind him.

As Lil turned back to Diana, she once again noted the woman’s haggard appearance. Her experience with grief told her that Diana had probably ignored her own needs during this trying time. As difficult as it was for Lil to relate to others, she felt compelled to make the effort.

“When was the last time you ate something?”

She could see she’d surprised Diana with the question. “Sometime yesterday, I think. I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Then I suggest we address that issue next. It will be several hours before we can proceed here. After breakfast, we can take care of Francine’s effects at the hotel and settle the bill.”

“I can’t,” Diana insisted. “I don’t have any money, remember?”

Lil had expected to cover the expense of the meal as well as the hotel. She found it refreshing that Diana hadn’t immediately leapt to the same conclusion. Most people in her place would happily have taken advantage of Lil’s generosity.

“Let us worry about that later.”

Diana shook her head and smiled. “Any other time I would refuse, but I really don’t have a choice. All I can do is thank you again. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Uncomfortable with Diana's naked gratitude, Lil couldn't respond. She led the way out of the Consulate and a brief stop by an international bank provided her with some local currency. Lil took Diana to a nearby restaurant and insisted they take their time with breakfast. She was just as hungry as her charge since she'd missed dinner the night before.

After Lil paid the check, they returned to Diana's hotel. At first, the concierge resisted the idea of allowing them access to Francine's room. All of that quickly changed once he learned of her demise. Without Diana's presence and willingness to take on this chore, Lil knew the hotel would lose several days with the room unavailable until the Consulate stepped in. Lil helped clear out Francine's belongings and then took care of the charge for both rooms. Once they finished, she had the concierge call for a car service. Dragging suitcases down the street and back to the Consulate wasn't exactly practical.

Diana had spoken little throughout the morning, but broke her silence as they waited outside for the car. "I want you to know that I'm keeping track of how much money you're spending. I promise that I'll repay every penny."

As she looked into the intense green eyes and listened to the words, Lil perceived an odd tingling sensation in her stomach. It had been centuries since she experienced such a feeling, but she recognized the tenderness she suddenly had for another human being. Breaching her personal barriers was a rare occurrence and Lil wasn't sure how to deal with it. Instead, she focused on the practical details required for their situation.

The car she had called for arrived at the curb, saving her from the necessity of responding. The driver helped load the bags into the vehicle and Lil climbed into the backseat with Diana beside her. Throughout the short drive, she was very aware of Diana's presence. Lil was confused by her reaction to this woman and refused to look at her. She recognized the unexpected attraction, but knew it meant nothing. Having a desire didn't mean she had to act upon it. She had learned a long time ago that becoming involved with a mortal was a bad idea, even if Diana proved open to the possibility.

Lil felt the contact of another's mind and realized that Kaya had reached out to her. She relaxed and silently answered the call.

"I am here."

"I faxed the power of attorney to the Consulate a few minutes ago, Mistress."

"Very good. How are the woman's parents handling the news?" She

hoped they were strong people who could provide emotional support to Diana once she returned home.

“As expected,” Kaya responded. “They are distraught. The woman fainted and the father cursed me for lying to them. I had trouble convincing them of the truth. Issuing a power of attorney was a difficult process, especially since they had to awaken their attorney so early in the morning.”

Lil sighed softly. “And the charter?”

“I contacted Imani since she is the closest to your location. She advised me that the plane is ready and standing by upon your arrival at the airport.”

Imani Bah was assigned to the African continent and rarely connected with Lil. Born in 1872, Imani was one of the oldest of Lil’s people and quite capable on her own. Unlike Sophie, Imani rarely required assistance. If she said the arrangements were already in place, then Lil believed they were.

“Thank you, Kaya. Hopefully the Consulate is as efficient and this will all be over soon.” Lil could sense Kaya’s deep curiosity, though the woman was careful not to transmit her questions. Lil was grateful she kept silent, unable to explain things fully even to herself. “I will contact you again once we are in the air.”

Lil leaned her head back against the seat cushions as the plane taxied from Ataturk Airport. The ordeal with Tilki and the U. S. Consulate had taken far longer than she wanted, even after having prepared for every eventuality. The Attaché’s contact at the Istanbul morgue had indeed delivered the death certificate before the negotiated deadline, but Francine’s body was another ordeal. It had required a trip to a local mortuary, the purchase of a casket and further arrangements to transport the body to the airport. On top of all that, Diana had balked when she learned Lil had chartered a plane to carry them back home. She insisted Lil was spending far too much money when the Consulate would arrange for the transportation. Finally, Diana relented once Lil explained that such an arrangement would take days and that Turkish officials hadn’t embalmed Francine. Diana had turned a little green at the pronouncement, but at least she’d stopped arguing.

Now, Lil planned to nap for a while as they flew across the Atlantic. She chose a seat in the rear of the private plane because Diana had taken the front. Lil wasn't accustomed to dealing with strangers and relating so closely to Diana over the last day and a half had her on edge. She felt confident that the attraction she'd experienced earlier had quickly faded. The only thing on her mind now was returning home to the secluded manor and her animal friend.

The plane leveled off and the hum of the engines lulled her into a light slumber. Lil felt her muscles loosen and the tension in her shoulders ease for the first time since traveling to Istanbul to grace Elie. Movement from displaced air disturbed her rest and Lil opened her eyes to see a flight attendant walk by carrying a tray. A soda and sandwich resided on the salver. The woman headed toward Diana near the front of the cabin. Lil blinked and turned her head to the side, looking out the small window.

It was dark again, night having fallen while they finished the arrangements. Lil couldn't see anything but shadows below the plane, yet she enjoyed the quiet time nonetheless. Ten minutes later, that pleasant solitude was shattered when Lil heard someone clear her throat.

"Um, do you mind if I join you?"

Lil gestured at the seat across from her, watching Diana carefully. She couldn't imagine what else the woman would possibly need from her now. Once they reached San Diego, they would meet the coroner's people on the tarmac. Additionally, Lil had already arranged transportation to see Diana home.

Diana settled onto the edge of the seat, leaning forward with her hands clasped between her knees. Her eyes fixated on Lil's face for a long, uncomfortable minute. "I don't know how I can ever thank you for what you've done."

"Please, there is no need..."

"Let me finish," Diana interrupted. "I've told you that I'll pay you back and I mean that, but it may take a while. I know you've spent a small fortune to smooth things over for Francine and me. Just tell me one thing."

"Yes?"

"Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why did you help me?" Diana asked, curiosity written on her features. "You happened upon a stranger in an alley and saved her life. That's one thing that I think most people, or at least most decent people, would do. The rest is something else. Anyone else would expect

something in return, but you don't. Do you?"

The way she phrased the question told Lil that Diana already knew the answer. "No, I expect nothing from you. As to why, I'm not sure I can account for my reaction to your dilemma. In truth, I simply followed my instinctive compulsions. Also, I made you a promise and I always keep my word."

Diana smiled and tilted her head slightly to the right. "You're not an American, are you? You speak English very well, but you have a slight accent. I can't quite place it."

Lil returned her smile. Sophie had said much the same thing to her a few days ago. After centuries of life, Lil thought she shouldn't have any accent at all. She was aware, however, that she still carried a formal manner of speaking. Still, it wasn't as though she could tell Diana that she had been around when this language first came into being or that America hadn't even existed then.

"No, I am not American, although I currently reside in Maine."

"That's a long way from San Diego. Well, I'll leave you alone. I'm sure you're tired."

Lil couldn't think of a good reason for prolonging this contact, yet she felt compelled to say, "No, please stay for a moment. We have spent hours together and I know nothing about you other than your name. You said you were in Istanbul on vacation?"

"Yes, we were diving Minnos Island." Diana seemed sad as she spoke about their activities in Turkey. "Francine had wanted to see the coral formations there for years."

"That is a very advanced dive, Ms. Reed. The coral is at least forty meters below the surface."

"Please, call me Diana. It only seems right after all we've been through together and yes, it is a deep dive. I'm a certified Divemaster and an oceanographer. I work at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego."

"Ah, well. In that case, I suppose you were in your element. You should take comfort in knowing that your friend realized a dream before her untimely demise."

Lil felt she'd made an inept comment, but Diana didn't seem to mind.

"Yes, at least there's that. There's one more thing." Diana watched Lil intently, as though gauging her reaction. "I want to give you my number. I know I don't have the resources you do, but if you ever need anything, all you have to do is call."

Lil didn't believe that would ever be necessary, but simple manners

forced her to accept the offer.

A more relaxed silence grew between them after that. Diana leaned back in the chair, closed her eyes and fell asleep. Lil's thoughts refused to allow her that release so she turned back to the window. The flight was long, but blessedly uneventful. They touched down without incident in San Diego. Lil ensured the transfer of Francine's body to the morgue van and turned over the appropriate paperwork.

The car Lil had requested for Kaya to arrange was already waiting for them before she concluded the unpleasant business. Within an hour of landing, Lil left Diana outside her Spanish-style San Diego home and took the car to a nearby restaurant where she dismissed the driver. She was hungry for dinner, but had no interest in eating here. Instead, she walked through the doors and made her way directly to the ladies' room. Lil entered and found herself alone. She sighed in relief as she took a single, long stride and translocated home, grateful her adventure had come to an end.

Chapter Three

Night fell before Lil arrived back in Maine. Upon returning to the manor, she took a deep breath and allowed all of the tension she'd built up over the last two days to fall away. With Diana Reed's ordeal finally settled and Elie's path set before her, Lil had no desire to leave the grounds again anytime soon. She stripped down and took another shower, lingering under the hot water and relishing the almost scalding heat that pulsated against her skin. She stayed until the shower ran cold and then dressed in a soft, diaphanous robe that flowed around her body and brushed gently against her shins. The supple material kissed her flesh gently. The white of the gown complimented the paleness of her features and highlighted the darkness of her hair. She enjoyed the sensual feel of satin caressing her skin as she walked barefoot toward the kitchen.

Pravde was nowhere in sight, but Lil noticed a stripped mouse skeleton residing in the tray that surrounded her perch. She felt the owl's presence on the grounds as she moved toward the refrigerator. As Lil removed the barely touched salad, she realized this was where she had started a few days ago. Lil stopped with her hand poised to remove the lid, images of Diana Reed flowing through her mind. Her thoughts weren't erotic; rather, she kept seeing the look of gratitude in her eyes. Lil could still see the way sunlight had reflected off the medium brown hair. She'd been surprised by the red highlights. In her mind, Diana's appearance harkened back to older ideals of an attractive woman.

Currently, society proclaimed that the thinner a woman, the more appealing. Lil didn't agree. She preferred more full-figured women. Diana wasn't overweight by any means. Instead, she was healthy, strong and solid. Regardless of her physical appearance, Diana also seemed emotionally stalwart and compassionate. She was just the type of woman Lil would have chosen to mark as someone with the ability to change the world. Not that it mattered. Lil would never see her again and she needed to put the last few days behind her to focus on the future. Symbolically suiting her thoughts to action, Lil tossed the container of salad into the trash.

She left the kitchen, heading for the side exit that would release her onto the expansive grounds. With a mental command, she called Pravde to her. She heard the flap of beating wings in response. In seconds, Pravde flew by overhead. The animal understood her mistress wanted her close, but not in contact. Lil needed to feel the life energy, the ecstasy of

Pravde's existence as she raced over the cool air currents. As Lil walked over the countryside, she inhaled the crisp night air and tuned in mentally to her totem as Pravde hunted. She felt the cool, rough ground on the soles of her bare feet. Her nipples hardened beneath the thin gown and gooseflesh erupted over her arms.

Lil relished the sensations as she let her mind drift in a cleansing exercise. Pravde hooted excitedly and Lil saw the bird rushing toward the ground in her mind's eye. Through their connection, she could see everything as though Pravde's actions were her own. Far below, a rabbit darted toward safety. He never made it. Lil left the owl to her dinner.

Lost as she was in Pravde's activities and the feel of the night air on her flesh, Lil gradually realized that she wasn't alone. She pulled her consciousness back to her own body in a split second, hyper-aware of her surroundings. Despite that fact, she still started in fear at the sight before her. The reaction faded rapidly as she identified her visitor, though the sudden burst of adrenaline left her heart beating a little too quickly.

"Samael, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

The monster before her bore no resemblance to the blond cherub-like countenance she'd last seen sported by the archangel. Eyes covered this creature's hulking mass. Eyes on his forehead and arms, eyes on his legs and one large orb in the center of his stomach. The irises of each eye were elliptical in shape and darted around in all directions as though reacting in desperate confusion or panic. Compellingly enough, there weren't any eyes where they should be on his face. Despite the lack of expression in the multiple orbs, Lil felt sure Samael wasn't surprised that she so quickly discerned his identity. The fact that he usually appeared to her in different guises in order to generate a reaction tended to inure her to the novelty.

"I've come with a message, Lilith."

She felt the words, rather than heard them, reverberating inside her head. There was only one that commanded Samael's obedience.

"Why now?" she asked aloud, refusing to play along. Aside from the verbal exchange, Lil sensed Samael's ire at her less than respectful tone. "Why after all this time? He's never had anything to say to me before."

Archangel Samael was not a being to trifle with, yet Lil had passed the point of bowing down. She hadn't seen her first companion in many decades but each time he appeared, it was to hold before her the prospect of an end to her immortal existence. Although he had never prefaced their interaction by portending a message from her creator, Lil had no doubt the encounter would end the same as it always did. In disappointment.

"I am merely the messenger. Mine is not to question why."

“Uh huh.” Lil rubbed her hands over her arms, no longer enthralled with the chill from the Maine evening.

Samael settled onto the grass, morphing into his cherub-like countenance complete with white wings and thick, blond hair. He plucked a piece of grass from the ground and brought it to his lips. Samael kept his human-appearing blue eyes pinned to Lil as he waited. Finally, she rolled her eyes and knelt down in front of him.

“What is the message?”

With the strand still in his mouth, he softly carried out the assigned mission. “I have come to tell you of an artifact that will end your current existence, if you have the skill to discern the clues to its whereabouts.”

“And here we go again,” Lil grated. “How many times have I searched for an heirloom with the same purpose? I have located the Necklace of Harmonia, the Spear of Destiny and the supposedly magical Book of Thoth. None of them accomplished my sharpest desire. Now you come to tell me of another relic?” Lil rose to stand over the seraph. “Go back and tell Him that I refuse to embark on another useless quest.”

Samael lunged to his feet, his wings spreading wide with a rushing sound. Fury radiated from his eyes and thunder boomed. The winds gathered and began to blow in a tumultuous, lashing blast as clouds quickly scuttled overhead. Samael reached for Azrael at his side, but stopped short of pulling the fiery sword. His movements reminded Lil that the Ancient Greeks and Romans had modeled their Gods of War in his image.

“You dare?” Samael roared in her head. “You, who were created of clay and filth? I am forbidden from taking your soul, but do not toy with me, Lilith. You believe your existence a form of torment, but I can show you an unending world of true agony.”

Lightning sizzled across the sky and struck the ground a short distance away, throwing debris into the air. The impact punctuated Samael’s statement and reminded Lil that he was a creature perfectly capable of carrying out the threat. Lil cringed and dropped her eyes from his burning gaze. She raised her hands in a supplicating manner, but that was as far as she was willing to go toward making amends. Lil refused to fall to her knees for any male.

“I meant no disrespect, Samael. I spoke without thinking. It is just that I have pursued this dream so many times that the prospect of doing so again feels like a nightmare. I am simply so tired of this never-ending existence.”

Samael’s silence lingered until Lil finally looked up at him. His hand

had fallen away from Azrael, though he still seemed angry. His clenched jaw warned her to tread lightly.

“Please, give me the message. I will listen.”

While Samael’s expression remained stoic, he did as requested. “The path to that which you seek can be found in Gobekli. Made from the Tree of Life, your prize will steal your breath away. Be sure of your path, your goal will bring death.”

He stopped speaking and Lil didn’t bother to prompt him further. These “magical” artifacts always carried cryptic clues. Many times, those clues did not mean what she thought. For example, just because the object brought death, no guarantee existed that the death would be hers. “At the risk of angering you again, do you believe this relic really exists?”

“I do. I would not have been sent to tell you of it otherwise.”

Lil paced a short distance away, thinking furiously. Every item she’d sought in the past had been the result of her own desperate search for anything that would take her immortal life. At no time had God shown any compassion for her state. After all this time, Samael had been sent to tell her of a way out. There had to be a catch. Her suspicious nature insisted that this was a test. If this artifact truly existed, why was she only hearing of it now?

“In Gobekli,” Lil mused. “Where do you believe it will lead me? Since I’m supposed to find the path there, Gobekli can’t be the end of the journey.”

Samael didn’t react to her question.

“Made from the Tree of Life, so it’s in the Garden of Eden? If it’s made of wood... a sword or possibly a staff.”

“Do you intend to seek out this device?”

“Of course,” she said in surprise. “That is why you told me of it, isn’t it?”

“Then you will need this to begin your quest.”

Samael held an empty hand out toward her, palm up. At first, there was nothing there. Lil waited and a second later, something began to take shape. The object appeared small in Samael’s large hand. In the darkness cast by the gathering thunderstorm, Lil had trouble discerning the details. She reached out and felt the hardness of stone under her fingertips. Approximately three inches in length, Lil could feel a relief carving over the face of the amulet. She closed her fist around the sculpture and dropped her hand to her side.

“What is it?”

“Have a care, Lilith. These artifacts always carry a price. Be sure it is

one you are willing to pay,” Samael said rather than reply to her query.

His wording caught Lil’s attention and she wondered if Samael attempted to warn her of something without being specific. It would be just like him. Before she could ask, he vanished from sight. Lil didn’t know if he was still around, sometimes he lingered, but she had other things to worry about. Lil strode toward the manor with the impromptu thunderstorm still raging around her. She sensed that Pravde had already taken shelter. Once she dried off, she had much to do and a journey to prepare for. Such an undertaking would require extensive research, resources and a crew.

Lil’s heart pounded, though she cautioned herself against becoming too excited. Still, she would spend her entire fortune for the mere possibility.

Twenty-four hours later, Lil leaned back in her office chair and stretched. Her back felt stiff from sitting for so long, but she had finished outlining her plans for the upcoming expedition. It would prove a long and harrowing journey and she needed to account for food, weapons, ammunition, camping gear and hiring a crew. She would set everything in motion from the manor with the exception of the team she required on the ground. Hiring locals once she arrived on scene would be the easiest way to tackle the manpower issue and there would always be people looking for work. Lil’s largest problem was in deciding where to start.

Samael had told her to begin in Gobekli to search for a clue leading to a device created from the Tree of Life. Such a weapon could be anywhere on Earth, but the best place to start was at the Garden of Eden. Unfortunately, she couldn’t just jump to that conclusion because she might be wrong. Someone could have found the weapon long ago and moved it. Besides, that she knew of, the Garden had ceased to exist thousands of years ago. Lil had attempted to re-enter the sacred oasis shortly after her exile. An unseen barrier had prevented her entrance while simultaneously inducing an agonizing shock to her system that took days from which to recover. She had never tried again. Over the course of time, topography had changed all over the world and sea levels had risen. Continents had separated and drifted. The Persian Gulf area had reached its current water levels around 4000 B.C.E. Lil had left the Garden

thousands of years before that.

While she easily recalled the general location of her cruel banishment, it would be extremely difficult to locate the exact spot. More importantly, scientists had searched for God's Garden as well and still couldn't reach a consensus as to its true position. Fortunately, Lil had something that modern scientists did not. Personal experience. She could narrow down the region, but if she were the slightest iota off in her calculations, she would not reach her destination. The Garden was carefully hidden. If she did somehow discover clues to its location, things could end badly. The cherubim with flaming swords were set in place once mortals were expelled and no doubt remained. They would protect it. At least Lil assumed they were still in place. That event had occurred eons ago.

Lil had no choice but to begin her quest in Gobekli as Samael had told her. Lil reached for the medallion Samael had given her. She ran her thumb over the carved lines of stone. The image engraved upon the relic resembled a squatted man although the details were vague at best. The rounded outline could have been anything if not for the perfectly carved circles depicting his eyes and the detailed fingers. It looked like something she'd expect to find on a totem pole. She didn't yet know what purpose it served, but she *would* find out.

Satisfied with her course of action, Lil reached for the telephone to begin making arrangements. She had just punched the first number when the manor's door chime sounded, echoing throughout the structure. Lil frowned and contemplated ignoring the summons. When it sounded again, she dropped the handset onto the base and stalked toward the front of the house, irritated at the disturbance. No one ever came to visit without first calling and she wasn't expecting anyone.

Through the glass panes adjacent to the front door, Lil caught a flash of color. Pink, white, and blue made the flesh tones of a male hand gripping a large, purple vase stand out all the more. Lil had been the recipient of flowers more than once in her many lifetimes, but the occasions were rare. Stunned, she thought perhaps someone was delivering flowers to Kaya. Kaya didn't live at the manor most of the time, but Lil was aware that she used the address here as a home base of sorts. Convinced that she had the answer to the small mystery, Lilith assumed a congenial, if not outright friendly, manner and opened the door.

Lil presented the blooms a cursory glance before she gave the delivery man her full attention. He resembled every other young, white

man with brown hair that she'd ever seen. The sole feature that distinguished him as other was the wide smile.

“Good morning. I have a delivery for Lillian Primus.”

Her smile fell away. In her experience, no one gave something without expecting a favor in return. She couldn't imagine anyone who would go to such lengths. Lil deliberately removed herself from society, interacting on only the most superficial levels. She recoiled from the flowers as though avoiding a serpent.

“Ma'am?”

Lil pulled away slightly and noticed the man's bewildered expression. She summoned a smile and reached for the bouquet despite her trepidation. “I'm Lillian Primus. I'm sorry, you just surprised me.”

“A good surprise, I hope. You have a nice day now.”

She hardly noticed that he'd turned away as she closed the door. Lil stood staring dumbly at the flowers, taking in the pink roses, daisy poms, alstroemeria, and monte casino in shades of pink and purple. Lil reached for the card, no longer wondering at the motives of the sender. A smile unwittingly graced her lips as she read the note.

Ms. Primus, these flowers are merely a small token of my gratitude for your generosity. I hope they brighten and ease your day, just as your kindhearted actions eased mine. All the best,

Diana C. Reed.

Lil lowered her head and inhaled the perfumed scent. The fresh clean aroma had already begun to fill the entryway. Feeling a little sentimental and foolish for being so, Lil placed the vase on a small mahogany table near the front door. The alstroemeria in particular caught her attention because of their bright purple color. She wondered if Diana realized that the lily-like flowers represented devotion and friendship. Lil shook her head and turned back to her study. She still had much to set in motion, but knew the flowers would remain at the forefront of her mind throughout the day. Considering the identity of the sender, Lil no longer worried about a hidden agenda. Diana Reed struck her as someone truly grateful for the assistance Lil had rendered and had merely gone about attempting to convey that sentiment. It was refreshing to find someone who was exactly as she presented herself.

As she entered the study, Lil headed directly to the phone. She dialed an international number and waited as the call connected. A deep,

gravelly voice answered in Turkish on the fourth ring.

“Merhaba?”

“Muhammed, this is Lillian Primus. I require your assistance.”

Chapter Four

Lil hopped down from the driver's side of the battered and dusty jeep. The vehicle had definitely seen better days. Dents and scratches adorned the exterior. Part of the passenger side front bumper was caved in. Lil felt sure nothing but spit and chewing gum held the contraption together. Her boots caused a small dust cloud to rise up in protest as she hit the ground. Lil barely noticed as she visually scanned the desert location. The Gobekli Tepe in Southern Turkey didn't inspire much confidence at first sight. She wiped her sweaty hands on the seat of her faded tan dungarees and walked around the vehicle as a hulking cargo truck rolled to a stop beside her.

"This really is a magnificent site," Professor Abraham Clayworth remarked, rubbing his hands together in delight.

Before them stood dozens of stone pillars arranged into twenty separate rings. The cleanly carved limestone soared high over their heads, joined together by low walls in between. Lilith estimated the height of the taller stones in the neighborhood of twenty feet. Most boasted relief carvings of animals to include snakes, gazelles, foxes and even scorpions.

"Did you know these ruins are estimated to be over eleven thousand years old?"

Lil smiled slightly, amused by the English archaeologist's enthusiasm and appearance. When she stopped in Istanbul to recruit a scientist who'd actually been to Gobekli, she hadn't expected a man straight out of an Edgar Rice Burroughs novel. A pith helmet covered Clayworth's white hair and he wore a monocle over one eye. In addition, he sported a bushy white mustache that took up most of his lower face.

In response to her silence, Clayworth pulled a dank handkerchief from his back pocket and mopped his brow. The gesture seemed habitual to Lil.

"Yes, Professor. I'm aware of Gobekli's historical relevance. You're here to see if there is a hidden passage that leads to a chamber under the ruins."

Clayworth shrugged in what Lil assumed was an apologetic manner. "As I've told you before, ground penetrating radar shows many more megalithic stones buried around the site, but nothing indicates an open cavern or pit."

"We'll see."

Lil found a thigh-high boulder a few feet away to rest upon. She had

barely settled down when Clayworth rushed toward her. “My dear Ms. Primus, you must be more careful. You could be sitting on history itself.”

He waved his sweaty handkerchief in an agitated manner, but stopped abruptly when Lil pinned him in place with her penetrating gaze.

“I’m sure you have a point, Professor, but this looks like a simple stone to me. Why don’t you go check with Muhammed and help set up the equipment? I think you can start with the ground penetrating radar over near the eastern ridge.” She pointed toward where the flat, barren plateau connected with the nearby mountain range by way of a promontory. Numerous excavation sites showed throughout the area.

Clayworth appeared hesitant. “You are aware that only about five percent of the site has been excavated? Considering how long scientists have known of the find, you must see how unlikely it is that we will actually discover anything of worth.”

Lil was beginning to run out of patience. She knew more than this old man could conceive. She was also sharp enough to realize that he’d begun to prevaricate. While in Istanbul, Lil had interviewed several senior archaeologists. Clayworth was only one among a choice of elite scientists. During the interviews, he had seemed eager to search for a possible hidden chamber that others had missed. It was far too late to change his mind. Lil prided herself on her composure and the simple narrowing of her eyes would have been a warning to anyone who knew her well.

“I am,” she responded in a low, dangerous tone. “This means that despite previous scans of the area, there could be a chamber that has yet to be identified. You assured me that if such a find existed, you would be the one to make the discovery. I am paying you handsomely to deliver on that promise.”

“Uh, yes. All right.”

Professor Clayworth started to say something else, but seemed to change his mind. He gave Lil one final, appraising glance before turning away. Lil watched as he approached the foreman assigned to the survey, Muhammed Yilmaz, and directed her crew of thirty to set up camp. The Turkish man currently spoke to one of the workers. He completed his instructions and turned his complete attention to the professor.

Muhammed was a gentle, soft-spoken man who commanded the respect of those with whom he worked. Lil had paid for his release from a Turkish prison decades ago and he’d been her loyal servant ever since. He never asked about her perpetual youth and Lil never explained. For him to do so would be the height of disrespect, though she suspected he had some idea of her true identity. Liberating a prisoner wasn’t high on her

list of priorities, but she didn't consider stealing food for a family's survival a serious crime. He had aged poorly since then, the lines deep around his eyes and mouth. He noticed her appraisal and gave Lil a small but courteous bow before he went back to work overseeing the camp's installation.

For the next week Lil endured the boredom, heat and unpleasant conditions of camp life in the southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey. Each day, Professor Clayworth and the workers searched the Gobekli Tepe beginning on the eastern side. Lil satisfied herself by checking the extensive piles of unearthed mammoth pillars and sundry broken stones. She had obtained a special permit from the Turkish government to explore the site. For a few months, tours and other excavations at the site were suspended. Lil hoped it wouldn't take nearly so long, but at least her crew had free rein to scrutinize the area without anyone looking over their shoulders. Lil traversed the entire perimeter of the ruins while Professor Clayworth directed the workers under Muhammed's guidance.

It seemed to Lil that the professor did little more than survey areas already extensively explored. He had yet to move more than a hundred yards from the position at which he'd started upon their arrival. As she kicked around the site known as Complex E, she cautioned herself to patience. Clayworth undoubtedly had a system and he had to start somewhere. She recognized that her impatience stemmed from an overwhelming desire to find something...anything...to end this interminable existence.

"I beg your pardon, Mistress."

Muhammed had come up from behind and Lil hadn't heard his approach. That he retained the capacity for such stealth at his advanced years was one of the many reasons Lil hired him. This region boasted many who would attack without warning. Muhammed's abilities illustrated that he could protect his people with the same cunning silence.

"Please, join me. What's our status?"

"We have plentiful supplies," Muhammed told her in Turkish. "My concerns are not about the state of our food stores or even security. So far, spotters have seen no one near our location."

Lil responded in his own language. "Then what are your concerns,

my friend?”

Muhammed’s eyes tracked to the professor. “This man you have hired wastes your good American money. He does not believe that we will find anything of use and therefore he does not look so hard.”

“You think he’s just going through the motions so that he’ll make more money before we give up here.” It wasn’t a question.

Muhammed merely shrugged and drifted away. He’d said his piece and would leave it to Lil to draw her own conclusions. She hadn’t really spent a lot of time with Clayworth, leaving him to his work. Muhammed dealt more closely with the men and heard things she wouldn’t. She trusted him, but realized that he was still as flawed as any other person. She had to consider that he was mistaken about Clayworth’s actions and intentions. On the other hand, Muhammed was also being paid a great deal of money for this job and his honor would require him to inform her if someone didn’t pull their weight.

Lil decided to give Clayworth a few more days. She didn’t want to lose time by trekking all the way back to Istanbul for his replacement, but she would if necessary. Shaking her head derisively, Lil kicked at some of the broken rocks under her feet. On the opposite point from where the professor stood, the site consisted of an incised platform with two sockets that could have held pillars at one point. The platform was surrounded by a flat bench, also considered by some as a temple of rock. The floor was hewn directly from the bedrock. Just northwest of where Lil stood on Complex E were two cistern-like pits. One of the pits held a table-high stone pin and a staircase with five steps that led upward to nowhere. Lil surmised that the steps once led to another structure that had long since crumbled to dust. A small bovine relief was carved onto the western escarpment. Unlike the rest of the region that contained numerous carvings, the bovine was the only relief in this area.

As she considered what Muhammed had said, Lil toed a pebble into the perfectly square socket. Since their arrival, she had wondered at the missing pillars. There were tons of stones lying around, many broken or shattered beyond use. The ones that fit into these sockets could be anywhere or smashed into powder so long ago that it ceased to matter.

The sun had begun to head for the horizon, signaling the end to yet another fruitless day. Lil turned away from the complex and headed back to camp. Workers lit the torches as she approached in the hopes that the smoke would keep the worst of the bugs away. As they did each night, some of the men began to sing. The music had a low, chanting quality to it that Lil found hypnotic. She settled onto a camp chair beside the fire

and stretched her feet out in the sand. She was glad she'd left the owl at home for Kaya to care for. The terrain here was barren and Pravde would have been miserable. She smiled thinking that the owl would also have terrified the workers.

“Eureka!”

The single, shouted word echoed throughout the camp, disrupting the ritualistic song. Professor Clayworth had moved over to the top of Potbelly Hill while she'd been speaking to Muhammed and he seemed extremely excited about something. He dropped down onto his knees and began furiously digging in the sand with his hands. Suddenly, he stopped and looked back toward the camp.

“I need diggers! Hurry!”

Elation sang through her veins and Lil stood as Muhammed rushed toward Clayworth with a handful of the workers. In the waning light, she didn't understand how Clayworth could have found anything, but she didn't intend to sit still for this. Lil jogged across the sand and up the side of the hill.

“What have you discovered?”

Lil noticed the Profiler coil system lying on the ground beside the professor. The four-foot electromagnetic coil system along with its accompanying PDA comprised the equipment Lil had purchased to radar structures beneath the earth.

“I don't know...something.”

Lil raised her eyebrows. “Could you be less specific?”

“Dig here, about fifteen feet down.” After giving these instructions, Clayworth stood to speak with Lil. “I owe you an apology.”

Overcome with emotion, Clayworth stopped speaking to clear his throat and wipe at his eyes. He removed the monocle and rubbed it with his spotty handkerchief, but still hadn't answered her. Lil thought she'd have to shake him to get any useful information.

“Never mind all that. What is it?”

After settling his eyepiece back into place, Clayworth waved abstractly toward the hill upon which they stood. “I'd just decided to call it a day and walked over here to get a view of the sunset. They really are quite spectacular from this vantage point.” Clayworth shook himself and refocused on briefing Lil. “I set the Profiler on the ground and started to have a seat when the data analyzer went crazy. Here, I'll show you.”

Clayworth picked up the dropped PDA and retrieved the data from the most recent inadvertent scan. Lil stood with her arms akimbo as the balance of her hired laborers surrounded Clayworth. She studied the

information with a little more patience as it popped up on the small display. The device connected wirelessly to the electromagnetic coils on the ground radar equipment. Lil could see the usual nondescript readout indicating the subsurface area. Interspersed throughout were more solid objects of various shapes and sizes. Lil assumed these were rocks and boulders. She could also see a few buried pillars. Not unusual considering Gobekli's history.

"Do you see it?"

Down a respectable distance below where they stood, something unusual stood out. Among the jumbled debris of rocks and broken pillars was an object with perfectly symmetrical lines. Upon first glance, the edges seemed part of another pillar. The differences between the two were most notable at the top and bottom sides. The megalithic stones scattered around the region resembled huge spikes or capital T's. These lines resembled the sides of a box.

"Wood?"

"No," Clayworth disagreed. "I believe it is still a stone object, but it's some kind of container."

Disappointment overrode her previous sense of excitement. Lil took one hand from her hips and rubbed her eyes. Pragmatism warred with thwarted desire. Although anything that stood out from the typical finds would prove invaluable in a scientific sense, this was hardly what she was searching for.

"Professor, there is no proof that you have discovered a container. It could be just a shattered piece of rock. Also, I should point out that I am searching for hidden chambers. Not a box."

Clayworth drew himself up to his full height, which was significantly shorter than Lil. He puffed out his cheeks and his face turned slightly red. "Ms. Primus, many discoveries in science lead to other finds. Until we determine what this is, you should not be so quick to discount its value."

"You make a valid argument," Lil conceded. She didn't have to like it, but she had to explore every possibility. If she failed to discover what she sought and someone later unearthed the artifact at this location, Lil would lose her chance to find it. Then again, perhaps the object she sought resided in a buried container.

"Muhammed, have the men set up lights and begin digging immediately."

Lil moved a few feet back to get out of the way. Within half an hour, bright lights stood erected on stands around the location. Generators fired up to power the lights. Diggers went to work with shovels and picks. The

tools weren't exactly subtle, but it wouldn't matter until they neared the object. Lil stayed throughout the entire process. The sun dipped below the horizon, setting off a kaleidoscope of reds, yellows, pinks and blues. If not for the tension that steadily grew within her stomach, Lil might have found the sight beautiful.

Time passed slowly, allowing her mind to drift. Lil looked out over the sand dunes and felt the dry heat against her skin, no less intense now that the sun had disappeared. Here, in these barren wastelands, the wind picked up after dark. It scoured them like a sandpaper kiss, but no one seemed to notice. Lil had first awakened into this world not far from this area. In fact, only a few hundred miles to the south. In many ways, she was home. Or at least as near as she could ever come to it. Her heart felt heavy at the realization that she could never truly go home again.

Her eyes drifted to the men. Some had removed their shirts and their backs glistened with the visible signs of exertion. Sweat reflected the artificial lights, beading the muscled workers. Men panted from exertion, but no one slowed their efforts. The pit they dug grew steadily deeper until a few were delegated to remove sand from the hole with buckets. Eventually, heads disappeared from view and the buckets were attached to ropes to save the men from climbing out.

Suddenly, a shout went up that focused Lil's attention. She stepped to the edge of the pit and looked over the side. Shadows cast by the workers prevented her from seeing anything of worth. Evidently, while she stood woolgathering, Professor Clayworth had entered the dig site. Lil spotted his usual white suit and pith helmet near the frenzy at the bottom. Not about to miss out, Lil slipped down the dirt wall of the recently created crater. Her boots sank up to the ankles in the powder-fine sand as she maneuvered her way over to where Clayworth knelt down.

"This is exquisite," he mumbled, his hands covering his face in his awe.

Lil knelt beside him and reached out to dust off the surface of the stone capsule. This definitely wasn't like the other artifacts. She scraped out around the edges with her fingertips. While she did, Clayworth cleared fine sand particles away from the object itself with a small paintbrush. With the removal of the sand, despite the shadows, Lil saw that there were no carvings of any kind upon the stone casket.

"Is it just another pillar after all?" Clayworth sounded so disappointed that she almost felt sorry for him.

"I don't think so. Professor, is that a crack around the sides?"

He peered closer in the darkness at where Lil pointed. She heard his

sharp inhalation. “Bring me a light!” he shouted unexpectedly, causing Lil to wince.

Muhammed moved quickly, stepping between Lil and the professor. He squatted down and aimed a high-powered flashlight beam at the stone. With the additional light, Lil saw that the “crack” was actually an opening. She reached toward it, but Clayworth stopped her before she made contact.

“Wait, we need to take photographs and measurements before we disturb the actual site.”

“Who cares about photos at a time like this?”

“Please, Ms. Primus. I know that you’re in charge here, but this is a very important artifact. No one else has found anything like this since the area was discovered in the early sixties.”

Lil kept from snapping at the wizened old man with difficulty. “Fine, but do what you need to quickly.”

Muhammed dispatched a man to bring a camera and measurement tools. They would have to wait until they brought the artifact up to weigh it, but getting these initial details as the object resided in its original resting place was crucial. Apparently excited to begin solving the riddle of how to open the box, Clayworth donned a pair of white latex gloves. Lil realized the gloves prevented the transfer of human oils and epidural cells, but didn’t know how he could stand the added heat. Even at night the desert was hot, and with the added warmth of the lights he had to be uncomfortable though he didn’t show it.

Less than a minute later, an assembly line of workers passed the requested gear to the professor. Clayworth took his time recording details such as length, width and height before snapping photos from every angle. Just when Lil thought she’d go mad from waiting, he set the camera aside. Her eyes were riveted on the scene as he reached for the caisson with trembling fingers. Just as he touched the stone casket, Lil had a horrifying idea.

“Professor, stop!”

He jerked his hands away as though scalded. His expression curious but unconcerned, Clayworth blinked at her. He didn’t speak, clearly awaiting an explanation.

“Aren’t these ancient relics typically booby-trapped?”

Clayworth smiled in a somewhat condescending manner. “You watch too many American movies. I assure you; I know what I’m doing.”

Lil nodded in relief and indicated that he proceed. Again, he prepared to open the container. Clayworth seemed more confident this time. He

grasped the box in a steady grip and attempted to raise the lid. No matter how he strained, it refused to budge. When his face began to redden from the effort, Lil decided to intervene. She brushed Clayworth aside and leaned closer on her hands and knees, training the strong flashlight beam upon the crack. Just as she suspected, Lil spotted a small catch locked inside the lid.

“Well, you didn’t really think it would be so easy, did you?”

“One could always hope,” Clayworth jested.

Tempted to remove the box from the ground, Lil suddenly halted. The stone container was a little more than three feet long and half again as wide, a perfect rectangle. If she easily hefted the rock from the pit, it would do more than raise a few eyebrows. Many of her workers were superstitious sorts and this casket was undoubtedly quite heavy. She didn’t want to scare her laborers off the site. More importantly, in this region the legend of Lilith wasn’t some obscure myth. She had experienced what fear and hatred could do first hand and didn’t relish a repeat performance.

“I suggest we have a few of the men bring it up to level ground. Perhaps we’ll be able to see the way to open it there.”

“Good idea,” Clayworth approved. “There may be a release mechanism on the bottom.”

Lil assisted Clayworth to his feet, sensitive to the arthritic pain he carried in his knees. She encouraged him to move back so that workers could get near the artifact. A man on each side utilized a pry bar and carefully slid the tools under opposite edges of the stone. Two more men knelt down beside the object, ready to slide their fingers under the box once free of the surrounding desert sand. Lil kept watch as the men on the ends of the box worked in tandem, carefully applying steady, yet gentle, pressure so as not to break the stone. The two on their knees scooped sand away from the edges to help loosen the prize from the ground.

Suddenly, the end nearest to Lil and the professor gave way. She heard the sound of angry hissing and scuttling before she saw the writhing mass beneath the container. Without a thought, she grabbed Professor Clayworth about the shoulders and shoved him behind her. She absently noticed that he lost his balance and fell against the recently excavated earthen wall. In front of her, the two kneeling men cried out in terror and attempted to scurry away from the death that awaited them.

A tangled throng of black adders, horned vipers and *Androctonus* scorpions lashed out at the intruders. All of the creatures were among the deadliest, most venomous creatures in the Anatolia region. The scorpion

name literally translated to “fat-tailed man killer” and one displayed the well-deserved nature of this moniker when it struck one of the Turkish laborers on the wrist. Immediately, the man curled up on the ground and went into convulsions. Lil sensed when the spark of life left his body.

The laborers Lil had hired proved their worth when they surged forth as one to rescue the unfortunate men. Utilizing shovels and kicking sand toward the nightmarish find, they drove the serpents and scorpions back. Like Moses parting the Red Sea, other workers moved aside to allow the snakes and scorpions to flow out of the pit, up the sides and into the night.

“Muhammed, get those men out of here. Have them transported to the hospital in Sanliurfa. I want that box out of the hole and up on solid ground now. Professor, are you all right?” Lil was embarrassed at how her voice trembled, but even she wasn’t immune to the effects of fear and adrenaline.

“I...” He swallowed and tried again. “I think so. I’m not bitten or stung if that’s what you mean.”

“Good. I can’t afford to lose you now. Let’s get topside and find out what requires such an unpleasant welcoming party.”

Clayworth’s mouth opened in shock. “You think that was deliberate?”

“Professor, I don’t know about you, but I’ve never seen snakes and scorpions clustered together more than fifteen feet below the surface.”

“But that’s impossible. No one could have set up such a trap. The creatures would have had to be in that hole for centuries. They would be dead by now.”

“If that’s what you choose to believe.” She refused to argue the point. If mortal beings had devised the ambush, she might agree. Unfortunately, Lil knew that supernatural traps set by demons and angels could be just as deadly and much more unexpected.

As she and the professor climbed out of the pit, Muhammed oversaw the transport of the injured and dead workers. Lil heard the truck rumble away toward the nearby town, but didn’t really expect the remaining man to survive even that five-mile journey. She wasn’t overly concerned as their families would be well compensated for the loss. It was more important to Lil to see if the object inside the casket would lead to her reward. She didn’t have long to wait before the bravest of her employees brought the stone box up.

“You two,” Lil said, pointing to the frightened group of laborers. “Come here.”

Clearly uncomfortable, they scratched their beards and looked around

at their compatriots. Lil thought they would balk, but after a moment they came toward her. As they stood near, she squatted down to peer at the locking mechanism once again. More cautious than ever, Lil rested her hand upon the stone. Experiencing excruciating pain wasn't her idea of a good time, but she needed to get inside. Lil noted the unusually smooth surface beneath her fingertips, a testament to the care taken in the container's creation. From what she could discern, there was a very minute gap between the lid and the box itself.

She pulled the hunting knife from her boot sheath and attempted to slide it between the two. With any luck, the blade could push aside the unseen latch. Unfortunately, even the very tip of the knife proved too wide and wouldn't fit into the small space. Lil dropped the knife onto the sand and removed her wallet from a hip pocket. She tried again with a credit card, but the locking mechanism wouldn't budge.

"Professor, I require something thin like a letter opener or something comparable."

Clayworth snapped his fingers and took off at a scampering jog toward his tent. While he went off to gather what she needed, Lil continued to inspect their prize. The men still waited close by, but she decided she could get away with rolling the container over and inspecting the rest of the surface. As long as she didn't manually pick the hulking piece of stone off the ground, she should be safe enough.

The task was harder than she thought it would be, even with her superhuman strength. Lil grunted slightly from the effort, but managed to flip the container up on the side. She eagerly peered around all sides, but still saw nothing that would give a hint to the secret of opening the artifact. Finally, she inspected the bottom surface and spotted something. With the underside of the container turned away from the nearby lights, it appeared to be nothing but a dark shadow or smudge.

"Lights," Lil called out in Turkish.

One of the men handed her a flashlight. She aimed the beam at the shadow and discovered it was really a depression carved into the stone. Lil touched the outline as she heard Professor Clayworth's running feet and panting breath. She kept her gaze trained upon the discovery as he stood beside her, holding out a letter opener.

"I knew I had one in my tent for opening correspondence. Do you think it will work?"

"Actually, I don't think we'll need it. I've found a lock on the underside. Now all I need is a key."

She spoke the words softly, lost in thought. Lil recognized the

outline. She had seen it before. The outline was the same as the stone pendant given to her by Samael. Lil had kept the medallion with her ever since and wore it around her neck on a thick gold chain. She removed the chain and grasped the stone carving in fingers that trembled from nervous anticipation.

“What is that?”

Lil barely heard Clayworth’s whispered question. She held her breath, though she wasn’t sure why, and reached out to fit the pendant into the receptacle. When she was less than an inch away, the stone slipped from her grasp and flew into the socket with a resounding *clack*. The unexpected response made Lil start away slightly before she stopped herself. The whole thing reminded her of metal’s attraction to a magnet. She released her breath just as the lid popped open, accompanied by a loud hiss and the escape of trapped gases. Too late, she realized that they had liberated yet another trap.

“Professor, look out!”

Instinctively, she lunged upward and tackled the old man to the ground. She felt the air whoosh from his lungs as they hit the sand, but was concerned about more serious injuries than knocking the wind out of him. She moved back quickly to inspect Clayworth for damage but a scream from one of the workers stopped her. Lil turned around to see a nightmare unfolding before her eyes.

A man was standing too close to the caisson when the trap went off. He had taken the full brunt of the pressurized salt acid in the face. Screaming in pain and terror, he dropped to the ground clutching at his face. His features seemed to melt and flow together as the acid did its work. Blood soaked into the ground and Lil could only stand by in horror, helpless to do anything but watch. Though he suffered terribly, the man’s death came quickly. Lil gave a tiny sigh of relief as his thrashing stopped and the screams abated. For a moment she could do nothing as another rush of adrenaline sang through her body.

When Lil could think clearly again, she turned to find that the others had backed away from their deceased comrade. They appeared terrified by what they’d witnessed and she really couldn’t blame them. In truth, Lil was more bothered by the worker’s death than she cared to admit. She had thought herself inured to the truth of mortal pain and suffering. It came as a rude awakening to realize she’d only been fooling herself.

“Professor, are you all right?” Her voice was huskier than usual.

Clayworth slowly stood. “I think so. If you hadn’t shoved me aside...” He couldn’t finish the sentence. Tears glistened in the artificial

lights.

Lil cleared her throat and called for some men to remove the body. They reacted slowly, hesitant to approach until Lil stepped around the artifact and knelt beside the victim. Her actions were intended to prove that the danger had passed. She counted on goading their male pride and it worked. Eventually, the workers did respond and carefully carried the dead man away. Lil had no illusions that they were merely following her orders. They did as requested out of respect for the deceased. Two dead in less than an hour. Lil would hardly be surprised if the morning revealed that some of the men had deserted the expedition. As it was, the other workers returned to camp along with the men carrying away their fallen companion. Lil was alone with the professor.

“Can you continue? I’ll understand if this is too much for you right now.”

Clayworth hesitated. “No, this damned thing has already cost lives. Let’s see if it is worth the price.”

Despite his brave words, Lil noticed that he was slow to approach. Since she already stood beside the open crate, she turned the flashlight inside. As she had suspected, it was another pillar. Stone seemed to be the only material that made up Gobekli. This one barely fit inside its container. The sides were perfectly smooth and square. It came to a point at the top in the fashion of an obelisk, but the end was different from any other column she had seen at the dig site so far. In this case, the pillar was recessed at the base. The rest of the column appeared approximately a foot and a half square. The far end was considerably smaller, perhaps three quarters of a foot. In addition to this odd characteristic, the pillar contained a single carving on all four sides.

“Do you see what I see?” Clayworth sounded breathless.

“Yes.”

“Do you think...?”

“Yes, perhaps.”

“Should we...?”

“Try it? I don’t see why not. We have little to lose at this point.”

“Other than a finger or an eye?”

Lil pretended not to hear this last comment. She took her medallion from the groove and slipped it into her pocket before she hefted the smooth stone pillar from its crate. While it was heavy, it wasn’t unmanageable outside the container. Lil rested the column on her shoulder and took off across the sand. She headed in the direction of Complex E with the professor hot on her heels.

The sun had just started to rise in the east, reminding Lil that they had worked all night to unearth this relic. She hoped it proved worthy of the sacrifice they had paid in blood. The rising orb provided them with enough light to navigate away from the work site and prevent them from tripping over debris. Lil's heart pounded as she approached the bovine carving she had stood near the night before. As she neared the relief, her eyes fixed upon the slot she had discussed with Muhammed. What were the odds that Professor Clayworth had discovered the very column she had pondered such a short time ago? They were about to find out.

Lil eased the column off her shoulder and across her forearm. She stood staring at the indentation, mentally assessing the size of the receptacle. Before she even attempted to slide the slab into place, Lil knew it would fit. The cut groove on the heavy pillar dropped inside without hindrance. The column and the repository were a perfect match.

Unable to express her emotions, Lil cleared her throat. She wasn't prepared when Clayworth slapped her on the back and she stumbled forward a step.

"You've done it, my dear. No one else has believed there was anything here but broken stones for decades. You have proved otherwise. Congratulations."

"The find is yours, Professor. You deserve all the credit. There's only one problem that I can see."

"Yes?"

Lil looked around the sandy expanse, pondering their next move. "We still have one more pillar to find."

She could see that she had shocked Clayworth. His eyes flew to their feet and the remaining, empty slot. Then he looked back at her with a question in his gaze.

"Something goes in that opening, Professor. What it will lead to, I haven't a guess. I do, however, suggest that this information remain between the two of us."

"I concur. If you'll assist me in carrying this artifact back to my tent, I'll see to its security."

Lil almost agreed. "I'm sorry, but I think I'll take care of this one myself. I understand you'll need to catalog the information and you'll have access to my tent while you're doing that. What about the container? Is that something you might also want to document?"

"Yes, yes of course. I'll see to it. I believe that we should set up a grid pattern to survey the remaining area for the other artifact."

"That's a good idea, but it can wait until after you get some sleep. I

don't want you to keel over from exhaustion.”

Chapter Five

While the rest of the camp enjoyed a much-needed rest, Lil cordoned off the region where Clayworth discovered the first pillar. Using rope and wooden stakes, she spent half of the day laying out grid squares. The sun and heat didn't bother her as much as the cold of most northern climates. Around midday, workers began to stir. A few self-motivated individuals joined Lil, and by early evening they completed the layout. She had yet to see Clayworth and assumed he stayed busy with their secret treasure.

Muhammed returned in the truck just before the evening meal. Lil saw his expression and knew he bore bad news. She left the workers to finish up and joined her foreman. He began to speak as soon as she drew close.

"Rafet did not survive his injuries." The outrage flashed in his brown eyes though he was careful to keep his tone respectful. Muhammed's voice trembled with the effort.

Lil rested a hand upon his thickly muscled shoulder. "I'm so sorry, my friend, but the news does not improve. Another died after you left camp last night."

Muhammed inhaled with a hiss. He spun away from Lil to hide his more emotional reaction and she wondered if the big, soft-hearted man fought tears. She knew she should feel sympathy for the needless loss, but in truth experienced only the hollow ache of emptiness. Objectively, she realized that ancient peoples protected their treasures with all sorts of devices. Intended to deter grave robbers and the like, they still remained as effective today. Coupled with her beliefs in the fleeting quality of life, Lil found it hard to dredge up any emotion but impatience. She burned to move on with the dig and all of these unfortunate happenings would create nothing but problems with the workers. She needed them to get busy and focus on something other than their bad luck.

"I wish we had time to mourn them, Muhammed, but word of our find will soon travel back to Istanbul."

"Is a stone box more important than the lives of my men?" he grated, turning back to confront her.

Lil realized he had missed their discovery of the pillar. She quickly filled him in and impressed on him that others would arrive in an attempt to find the matching column. He didn't like it, but Muhammed had given her his oath to help find the artifacts she searched for. After a heated discussion about the fate of the latest victim, Muhammed agreed to allow

one of his other men to take the body into the nearest town. He stayed at the site to coordinate the activities of his workers and soothe their fears. Muhammed promised Lil he would do his best to limit the number of deserters.

While he set to work, Lil went in search of the professor. She found Clayworth in her tent, cataloging the bovine column as they had agreed. “How can you still be taking measurements? It is almost time for the evening meal.”

Clayworth blinked and looked up. He still held a set of calipers, but appeared lost in thought. His eyes slowly focused on her. “Precision takes time. I’ve also removed a small piece to send to the lab for carbon dating.”

The comment disturbed her. “How small of a piece? Professor Clayworth, you could render the artifact useless out of simple carelessness. If you have irreparably harmed that relic, there will be a fourth death in this camp before the night is through.”

Although she didn’t really intend to murder the old man, Clayworth took the threat seriously. His eyes rounded and he sputtered for a moment before he spoke sternly. “How dare you? I have worked very hard since you hired me, Ms. Primus. I assure you that I am not so incompetent as to completely destroy the integrity of the piece. The sample I took is a simple scraping from the outer edge.”

Lil wanted to shout at him for speaking to her in such a manner, but caught herself. She could always hire another scientist and there was no love lost for Clayworth, but she stopped for selfish reasons. Clayworth already knew of the column. If she fired him, word would spread about the artifact that much faster. Lil would lose time employing someone else and bringing them up to speed.

“My apologies. I would never harm you. I’m just a little too excited over our discovery.”

Clayworth let out his breath and his shoulders sagged. “Indeed. I do understand. I’m a bit on edge myself. This column may lead to nothing, but on the other hand it may be the key to unearthing the secrets of Gobekli. At any rate,” he placed the calipers on the table, “I have done as much as I can with this piece for the moment.”

“In that case, may I buy you dinner?” Lil waved toward the tent exit.

As they left, Lil saw that the guard outside her temporary abode had changed while she spoke to the professor. She felt no concern that she didn’t recognize the man since there were many workers she had never engaged in personal conversation. Instead, she headed toward the

torchlight and the cooking fires with Clayworth in tow. Unless they worked on a find during the evening hours, Lil confined the camp to natural torches rather than the hot and overly bright incandescent lights that ran off generators. She found the torchlight more soothing and easier on her eyes.

The smells of olive oil, goat meat and vegetables assaulted her nose as she settled down onto her camp chair near the fire. Most of the men resided on the ground or milled around in groups. She rarely took part in their conversations, but felt it important to be near them during mealtimes so as not to appear standoffish. Also, the closeness allowed her to overhear conversations that might indicate trouble in the camp. Absently, Lil noticed that the previous guard outside her quarters wasn't anywhere in sight. She didn't really think much about it. Many of the workers grabbed a quick bite at dusk and then retired for private prayers or a little extra rest.

"What are your plans for the morning, Madam?"

Lil glanced over to Muhammed who had taken a knee beside her. He held a chunk of barely cooked goat in one meaty paw and took a healthy bite while awaiting her response.

"By morning, I intend to be finished with one of the grid squares."

Muhammed stopped chewing for a moment. "You intend to work through the night?"

"Along with anyone who will do the same. I don't want to waste any time and the lighted dial on the radar equipment will show up even better in the dark."

"Many of the workers will not agree to this, Ms. Primus. Their religion will not allow it."

Lil nodded. "That's fine. I'm not asking them to. Now when the sun is up there is no excuse and I will fire any man who doesn't pull his weight. That unfortunate soul will find himself walking out of the desert."

"Agreed. I will work with you. It seems only fair since I have lost a day taking my men into Sanliurfa."

"That's hardly your fault."

"Nevertheless, it is the right thing to do. When you become tired, I will take your place with the equipment."

Muhammed wasn't a scientist or even a person Lil considered technically inclined. Nevertheless, she could call up the scans from Clayworth's discovery on the PDA and show him what to look for. "I accept your offer. Thank you."

"*Gecirmek!*"

Lil lunged to her feet and ran toward the shouted alarm, instantly aware that it came from the direction of her own tent. Running steps behind her informed Lil that others followed to discover the source of the problem. As she approached, she noticed again the absence of the guard. Lil sprinted into the tent to find it empty. The column was gone from the camp table. She spun around and left the tent as quickly as she had entered.

The sound of a scuffle came from nearby in the darkness. A few men struggled on the ground, but she couldn't identify them among the tangle of robes, shirts and shadows. Muhammed waded into the tangle and shoved one of the men aside with a hand on his shoulder. Lil recognized the missing guard she'd left on duty when she went to eat. Nearby, she spotted the stone pillar. One of the men with whom he had fought began pointing and shouting. He spoke so quickly that Lil had difficulty following.

Muhammed translated. "Avni says that he found this one leaving camp with the stone. He shouted for Niyazi to stop, but the thief ran. Avni pursued him and they fought."

Lil recognized Avni as the man who stood guard before the treacherous Niyazi replaced him. She didn't ask where he'd been, just grateful that he had stopped Niyazi before he absconded with their find. She approached Niyazi but he refused to look at her, his eyes pinned upon the horizon.

"Who paid you to steal from me?"

He remained silent and Lil wasn't in the mood to attempt to extract the information. It could be that Niyazi simply took it upon himself to take the pillar in order to sell it on the black market. Unfortunately for him, this wasn't America. Stealing in this region usually cost the offender a body part. Lil would leave his punishment to Muhammed.

"Do what you will with him, but I want him gone. Please appoint your most trusted men to guard my tent."

Muhammed bowed his head and Lil walked away, catching his dangerous expression from the corner of her eye. She didn't envy Niyazi's fate, yet his disloyalty did impress the urgency of the situation upon her. Sitting around waiting for the dig to proceed would only allow opportunities for trouble. It was time to get to work.

Lil adjusted the strap on the Profiler, shifting it to a more comfortable position on her shoulder. She had worked tirelessly since Niyazi's betrayal, rarely turning the radar equipment over to anyone for the last three days. When she did, it was to check on the sentries and the pillar. The traitor had disappeared from the camp, though the small pool of blood near the edge of camp and the scream she'd heard that night told her that Muhammed had carried out her orders.

The morning of the third day after the attempted theft, the sky grew overcast. Light rain began to fall, made all the more impressive by its rarity in the southern Anatolia Region. Workers ran to fill containers with what little water fell in an effort to conserve their supplies. None of them had showered in days and the sweltering heat caused them to sweat heavily. The rain wasn't even close to enough for them to bathe and Lil thought it just made the smell worse. But at least the moisture eased the dryness from her throat.

Lil blinked droplets from her eyes and returned to work. They had eliminated three quarters of the grids and she intended to finish the rest within the next two days.

"I will relieve you," Muhammed said from near her shoulder.

"I'm fine."

He slipped the strap from her shoulder. Lil rounded on him, ready to lambaste him. The concern in his eyes was the only thing that stopped her, concern for her well-being. She gave up the coil scanner without argument.

"This is the last section of the grid. Let me know when you're ready for a break."

Muhammed nodded and Lil went for a drink of water. The rain tapered off as she tilted the canteen to her lips. She raised a hand to shield her eyes and looked toward the watery sky. The clouds had already begun to dissipate, spent by the extreme heat. Steam rose from the slightly mushy ground.

"Mistress Primus?"

"Yes, Muhammed?" He couldn't be ready for respite so quickly.

"Would you please look at this? I believe I may have done something wrong."

Worried that he had somehow damaged the expensive equipment, Lil dropped the canteen onto her chair and rushed over to him. They couldn't afford to stop now and replacing the ground penetrating survey equipment would cause the loss of several days. She hoped it was something simple,

like a loose wire or a problem between the wireless connection and the PDA.

“What seems to be the trouble?”

Muhammed slipped the strap from his shoulder and settled the coils onto the ground. He held out the data pad so that she could see the scan. “Have I somehow broken the display?”

A single perfectly straight edge stood out through the static. It ran from the top of the readout to the bottom of the screen. Lil frowned and took the device from his hand to peer at it more closely. The screen was not cracked. They had discovered many massive buried stone columns, but she could just make out the perimeters of something familiar.

“Muhammed...I believe you’ve found it.”

Lil almost couldn’t believe it. She called Professor Clayworth over to verify her initial impression. When he did, she could hardly contain her exuberance. Never had she been so close before. Muhammed shouted for workers and within minutes they were digging toward the all-important artifact. Now that they knew what they were looking for, it seemed to take much less time to reach the stone casket. Buckets on rope were lowered as before to draw the loosened sand from the quickly emerging pit.

A few hours later, Lil heard the ring of a shovel against a large stone. She bounded over the edge of the crater and rushed to the bottom. She shouted for the diggers to move away, motioning urgently with her hands to punctuate her orders. There was no way Lil would lose anyone else.

“Muhammed, have them bring in pry bars. I don’t want them within two feet of that box.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

He commanded the men into place with the long iron bars. They took up all four sides and moved as one when Lil gave the order. She heard the sound of cracking stone and winced, hoping the damage was contained within the outer structure. The heavy rock gave way reluctantly. The men strained as she urged them on. Suddenly, one end heaved upward and a fissure erupted up one long side of the container. When the outer vessel cracked, Lil noticed that the inside receptacle also broke. Simultaneously, the same pressurized acid that had killed the last worker hissed harmlessly into the sand.

Lil waited, but moved forward cautiously when nothing else happened. She moved a foot past the nearest worker and placed a hand on the prying tool. When the man released his grasp, Lil pressed her weight into it to lever the end of the casket upward. As before, snakes and scorpions poured forth in an angry, swirling mass. She dropped the pry

bar and leapt away as one of the deadly scorpions scrambled across the toe of her boot. The creatures disappeared, burrowing into the sand in their haste to vacate the suddenly too-crowded pit. Lil shivered slightly and dropped onto her knees beside the newly revealed jewel. She slid her fingertips down the length of the crack, judging whether or not the relic would survive the trip to the top. There was always the chance that they would damage it further as they hauled it upward and destroy the column inside. Lil decided not to take the chance.

“Hand me the bar.”

She held out her hand and someone pressed the tool into her palm. She didn't know whom since she never looked away from the caisson. It wasn't that she expected it to disappear like a mirage. Instead, she was keeping an eye out for any stray serpents. Lil set the tip of the bar into the breach and carefully pressed down. The opening widened and then suddenly split from top to bottom. Smaller cracks spider webbed all along the aperture. Chunks of rock fell away as it suddenly broke apart.

She glanced up to gauge Professor Clayworth's reaction. She expected to see the same euphoria she currently experienced, but instead noticed that he appeared a little green. He had a pen and pad poised, ready to take notes, but he seemed frozen in place.

“It's all right. We want what's inside the box. Remember?”

Clayworth nodded, but didn't seem reassured. Lil shook her head and dropped the bar on the ground with a muted thud. She dusted aside the loose debris and hefted the matching bovine engraved column from the box. It seemed to be in perfect condition. Lil grinned and lifted the pillar over her head, showing it to her men.

A cheer rang out though she doubted they realized the significance of the find. It was enough for them that Lil was pleased with the discovery. Muhammed reached out to relieve her of the weight, but Lil shook her head.

“This one is mine, but you can retrieve the other one from my tent. Meet me over there.” She indicated her destination with a lift of her chin.

Lil struggled up the dirt incline with the artifact resting on her shoulder. Her calf muscles burned from the exertion, but she reached the top without too much trouble. The laborers followed as she trudged across the ruins to Complex E. A great hush settled over the men as Lil slipped the cut end of the column into one of the two hollow receptacles. Just like the other one had a few days before, it dropped seamlessly into place. Seconds later, Muhammed lumbered up beside her, panting as he offered her the other pillar. Lil gratefully accepted and slid the second column

into place.

Nothing happened.

“That was a bit of a disappointment,” Professor Clayworth observed. He wiped at his sweaty face with the handkerchief and shook his head before slipping his notebook into a hip pocket.

Lil glanced back and forth between the newly replaced pillars and the pre-existing carving of a bovine. Somehow, she sensed the engraving held the answer. The carving faced east. Lil knew that many ancient civilizations placed great importance on astronomical events. The rising sun was as likely a candidate as any. With that in mind, she lifted and turned the columns so that the matching engraving on the pillars faced the same direction. Still, nothing changed.

An idea occurred to her so abruptly that Lil actually flinched. She covered up the movement by reaching out to the closest pillar. By putting her weight behind the stone, she was able to tilt it forward in the repository. Lil felt something click beneath her feet. Immediately, she shifted over to the twin column and repeated her actions. The region suddenly erupted.

The ground shook with a deafening roar and sand belched into the air, billowing upward and swirling all around as the breeze caught the miniscule particles. Lil grasped the lintel on the complex enclosure as the others were knocked off their feet. She barely avoided the same fate. Her eyes riveted to the narrow fissure that suddenly snaked across the ground, running from the unearthed pillars to the seemingly purposeless set of steps.

Men screamed and lunged out of the way as the earth quaked and the ground opened. While the erupting crack was jagged, Lil could see that was true only of the surface sand. Beneath at least six feet of dust, hard stone emerged and parted like the massive hold of a ship. The sand must have blown in throughout the ages and covered the original stone doors. The edges of stone fit together flawlessly, clearly chiseled by a long-dead master stonemason.

The rumbling ceased as abruptly as it began and for a moment, no one moved. Lil coughed and wiped at the dust covering her face. The others stood slowly as she walked hesitantly toward the steps. Scientists had theorized that the five steps must have led upward to a structure when first created. A glance into the gaping maw below told Lil they had things backward. The steps had led down, not up. In the dim lighting, she could see more chiseled stairs leading into the darkness.

“I need a torch!”

A man ran to do her bidding as Lil squatted down on the balls of her feet. Professor Clayworth was on his knees peering into the gap. He had a hand slapped over his mouth. She grinned at his astonished expression. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. Then he cleared his throat. “This is...wh...wh.” He shook his head and looked at her. “How did you know?”

Lil just shrugged. How could she say that an archangel had told her there was something here? The returning worker saved her from the necessity of telling him anything. Lil stood and took the lit torch. She headed around to the foot of the steps to begin her descent, but stopped when it seemed the entire troop would follow her.

“Everyone stay here. It could be dangerous. I’ll go in alone.”

“Not to be crude,” Clayworth began, “but the hell you will. I’ve never been involved in anything so exciting and I’ll not miss out on this discovery.”

“I will also accompany you,” Muhammed interjected. “If it is unsafe, I will be there to protect you.”

Lil adamantly shook her head. “No, I need you here to guard the location. I’d hate for someone to trip the pillars back into place and lock us inside.”

He scowled in response, clearly not appreciating her instructions. Nevertheless, he nodded and moved back toward the enclosure. Lil wanted to order the professor to remain as well, but couldn’t do so after looking at the excitement on his face. This man was only in his seventies, a child by comparison to Lil. Though he sported gray hair and a wrinkled visage, his energy matched his comparative age. This was his life’s work and Lil understood the need to see a dream realized.

“Stay behind me, Professor. Be very careful and don’t touch anything. Step where I step.”

He swallowed hard and nodded.

Lil held the torch aloft and started down the rubble-strewn steps. She stopped approximately four stairs down and bent low to peer into the chamber. The torchlight revealed little outside the circle of illumination, but she sensed a wide-open and cavernous space. Cool air brushed against Lil’s face, driven by some unseen force and made more acute in relation to the heat above. She swung the light to the right and the glint of something shiny caught her eye. A huge metal basin resided against the wall. It was the first object she’d discovered anywhere in the region that wasn’t made of stone.

Slowly, she eased down into the subterranean cavern. Before she

stepped onto the marble floor, Lil carefully inspected the area. Nothing seemed unusual except that the stones were arranged in a checkerboard formation of red clay and white limestone tiles. A red one lay directly in front of her. Lil set her toes against the red stone and pushed downward, keeping the balance of her weight on the steps. When the floor didn't collapse, she moved off of the stairs and turned toward the basin. Carefully, she stepped only on the single red stone.

From down here, Lil smelled petroleum. She glanced at Clayworth.

"Wait here. I'll see if I can get us a little more light."

Lil cautiously advanced across the space, stepping only on the red tiles. She wasn't sure that the light-colored stones were traps, but she saw no reason to take the chance. Eventually, she traversed the distance until she stood beside a copper basin. As expected, it was filled with some type of shimmering liquid. By hefting the torch aloft, Lil saw that the basin connected to another via a small trough, and then another, and then another.

Around the eighth century, the Chinese had invented something called *Meng Huo You*. It was a type of flammable substance created from liquid petroleum. Although the ingredients used here were probably slightly different, Lil recognized their intended purpose. She kept her face back as she lowered the torch toward the bowl. Flame burst upward, triggered by the fumes long before the fire touched the liquid. The conflagration started a chain reaction that flowed down the trough and set the petroleum in the next vessel ablaze. This continued all the way down the wall, around the back of the chamber and back up the far side. In seconds, the entire grotto was as bright as a sunny day.

"Impressive," she whispered. Lil shoved the end of the torch between the wall and the slender trough.

"Indeed."

Clayworth straightened and stepped down onto the floor with her. His foot landed on a white tile and it crumbled beneath his weight. Clayworth's foot disappeared from view as he fell, but he managed to catch himself with a hand on the adjacent red clay square.

"I guess that answered that question," Lil mused. "Stay on the red squares unless you relish a repeat performance."

"Duly noted."

With the light, Lil could see the finer details. Along with the checkered floor, holes of various sizes lined both sides of the wall. The concentric rings were carved directly into the stone. So, more of the same, she thought. Stone floors, walls and at the end of the room a huge stone

statue that could have been a twin to her medallion if not for the size. Everything in the chamber directed a visitor's attention to the statue at the rear of the cavern.

Lil hopped from stone to stone, maneuvering down the long stretch toward the statue. She had a feeling that after a certain juncture, stepping on the white tiles would be worse for her health than falling through the floor.

"Whoops," Clayworth muttered from behind her.

She turned in time to see him pull his toes back from a deadly square. Lil didn't have time to call out a warning as she heard the whoosh of something shoot from the walls. She reached out and yanked the professor toward her, heaving him onto a safe spot. She wasn't quite fast enough and Clayworth squealed in alarm. A dart drove into his butt and his hips jerked in reaction.

"Are you hurt?" Lil shook him a little to bring Clayworth out of his shock.

Rather than answer, he reached down and pulled the barb from his seat. "It hit my notebook. I think it saved my life."

Lil took the small projectile and sniffed the end of it. Her nose curled from the bitter smell. "A rather crude form of strychnine. I'd say you're probably right. Why don't you wait here professor? I promise you won't miss out on anything."

"No, no. I'm fine. I'll be more careful."

"Are you sure? Professor, I understand how excited you are about this, but you could get yourself killed. I can't always pull you out of harm's way."

"I'm not asking you to," he responded huffily. "I can take care of myself."

She dropped the issue and concentrated on reaching the end of the room. If Clayworth died it would be his own fault. She had warned him more than once and refused to coddle a grown man any more than she already had. They reached the far end without further incident and left the checkered pattern to stand on black marble. Lil figured they had passed through the booby traps.

Lil stood for a moment in front of the seated statue. Like the amulet, the figure squatted on its heels. The rounded head was an androgynous vision, neither male nor female. The mouth was rounded in an obscene manner and its hands were cupped together as though offering a gift to a supplicant. Lil peered into the cupped palms and spotted a hand-hammered copper bowl. The container had a straight, plain rim and

rounded gently at the bottom. It was decorated with three engraved bands; one at the top, the middle and the bottom. The bowl itself was unquestionably priceless.

“Is it safe?”

“I doubt it,” she responded honestly. “In any case, standing here debating the issue will not get us anywhere. We’ll have to chance it. Just get ready to run.”

Lil placed her fingertips on either side of the vessel. She held her breath and started to lift when Clayworth whispered, “Wait.”

He pointed to an etching on the effigy’s chest. It matched the one on the pillar container’s bottom. In hindsight, Lil thought their stone key also doubled as a warning.

“Thank you. If I had pulled the dish away, fire probably would have shot out of the statue’s mouth and incinerated me.”

“That’s a pleasant image. Perhaps we should just push on.”

“Good idea.”

Lil pressed her amulet into the carving on the statue’s chest to dismantle the security trap on the statue and removed the bowl. Other than the three crosshatched bands, they discovered a rosette of twenty-four petals on the bottom. The petals radiated from a double circle in the center of the container.

“It’s another key. But where is the lock?”

Cobwebs were very heavy down here, especially at this end of the chamber. They took up most of the back wall and Lil wished she had brought the torch to burn them away. Despite the heavy strands, she saw a low wooden table to the far right side.

“Do you find it interesting that everything useful down here is made of something other than stone?”

“What do you mean?” Clayworth asked.

“I mean that the metal basins contain oil to light our way. The copper bowl is a key. And the wooden table probably houses the lock.”

“What wooden table?”

“The one over in that corner.”

Lil led the way, brushing aside the massive webs with her free hand. Sand, pebbles and spider webs adorned the knee-high table, but she didn’t hesitate to whisk these away as well. As she had anticipated, a similar pattern to the one on the bottom of the bowl was arranged in the center of the table. Lil placed the bowl over the etching and prepared to turn the lock.

“Brace yourself. I don’t know what will happen.”

It took effort to turn the vessel. Lil thought it was probably wedged in place from centuries of falling sand. Fortunately, her strength proved more than a match for the obstinate mechanism. As had occurred above, a rumbling sound began that she feared would trigger another earthquake. Instead, a stone slab directly on the wall in front of her slid aside. Lil found herself staring into another dark hole. This one was approximately one foot square.

Despite the light generated by the petroleum cauldrons, little illuminated the inside of the compartment. Lil wasn't about to stick her hand inside a dark hole without knowing what was in there.

“Damn, I should have brought the torch.”

“Here, I have just the thing.” Clayworth pulled something out of his front pocket and offered it to her.

Lil took the lighter and cast the professor a speculative look.

“I like to have a smoke each night before bed.”

“Hmm.”

Lil flicked the wheel on the lighter and held it up to the dark opening. Web strands shriveled in the face of the heat and soon, Lil had a clear view. The only thing inside was a baseball sized crystal orb. The sphere was completely and impossibly free of dirt. She almost rolled her eyes.

Another mystery wrapped in an enigma and part of a conundrum. She didn't understand why these things couldn't just be straightforward. Why couldn't she just find a scroll saying, “That which you seek is hidden under the stone at X location. Oh, and by the way look out because lifting it will trigger an avalanche?”

Irrked by having to continue the fruitless scavenger hunt, Lil plucked the ball from the compartment without considering the consequences. The professor gasped and flinched away as blue static zipped from the orb and encompassed Lil's grasping hand.

Lil could feel the power in the object as the air shimmered around her. Strands of hair blew up from her bangs, lifted by a breeze that existed only in her mind. Energy coursed through Lil that caused her whole body to stiffen. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as visions flooded her, standing out inside her head and flashing across her eyes. As familiar as a memory and yet also newly realized, Lil viewed greenery, flowers and brightly colored birds. Trees of every variety in the world that bore fruit thrived in this oasis. Angels walked the hidden paths and splashed in clear, clean water that fell straight from a rock parapet.

In the center of it all, a magnificent tree stretched high overhead, its branches and foliage providing shade from the sun and shelter for all

living creatures. It was the one of the two trees in all creation from which man was strictly forbidden to eat. The Tree of Life itself.

In addition to the vision of the Garden of Eden, Lil saw a mighty river. The watercourse raged through a desert region, whitewater pounding. Lil followed the illusion down, through the river and toward the sandy bottom. The sights gained speed, whisking her along in this underwater scene until she spied a verdant meadow.

When the visions ended, Lil realized that tears coursed down her cheeks. She raised a trembling hand to brush them away, clearing her sight. The moisture created a trail of mud from the sand that already resided on her face. She looked down to find an innocuous glass ball residing in the palm of her hand.

“Are you all right, my dear?”

The concern in Clayworth’s voice failed to move her. Lil felt oddly numb, unable to respond verbally. She passed the crystal to Clayworth. He took it, almost reflexively, but nothing happened. His penetrating gaze never faltered. Apparently, she had drained all of the magic from the relic. Either that or Lil was the intended recipient all along. She found that difficult to believe since the orb had to have been here for centuries, since Gobekli’s original creation. Whatever the case, Lil had all the answers she needed.

“We’re done here.”

“But we’re just getting started,” Clayworth argued. When she didn’t respond, he tried another track. “What did you see? Where are we going?”

“I’m sorry, but unless you’ve been modest about your credentials, you are not going anywhere. Stay here and catalogue these finds, Professor. You deserve the credit and I no longer require your services. I do, however, have need of a qualified scuba diver.”

Chapter Six

Diana leaned against her elbows on the aft railing of the forty-two-foot Newton Dive Special. She squinted behind her sunglasses as her gaze tracked over the water to San Diego's Mission Beach. The deck shifted beneath her feet as she automatically adjusted her balance. The sun shone down over a perfect blue sky. Whitecaps churned out from behind the boat as the distance from the bay increased. Diana was barely aware of the beautiful scenery.

"Are you okay?"

Diana glanced over her shoulder as she identified her friend's voice. Louise Troutman presented the image of a true California girl with her medium length, sun-bleached blonde hair and rich, bronze tan. Even at thirty-two, Lou sported an athletic build and full breasts. Counter to her outward appearance of a fun-loving beach bunny, Lou possessed a compassionate soul and high I.Q. Lou joined Diana at the railing, seeming completely comfortable in a skimpy yellow bikini and bare feet.

Diana resisted the urge to shout that of course she wasn't okay. She had seen her best friend murdered right in front of her in a dark, smelly alley. "I'm fine."

She hoped that Lou wouldn't argue the point, and for a moment it seemed she would get her wish. Lou looked out over the water and then sighed. "I know you're hurting, sweetie. Frannie was a good friend. It's okay to mourn her."

For some reason it angered Diana that Lou would give her permission to grieve the loss of her best friend. She lashed out without considering her words. "Well thank you so much for your understanding. I don't know how I could have gotten through the day without it."

"Hey now, wait a minute." Lou's mood quickly shifted. "You have no right to take it out on me. We all love you, but you're not going to talk to me that way, Diana."

Diana wanted to do more than yell. She wanted to punch something, anything, if it would take care of the pain in her heart. Francine had been like a sister to her. Fury still seethed, but Diana realized that Lou was right. She wasn't being fair, but her ire had nothing to do with Lou. In fact, that fury was the reason Diana was on this trip. Since that horrible day in Istanbul a few weeks ago, she seemed to sway between unexpected and uncontrollable tears to bursts of intense anger. She hoped that a few days away from work would help her to settle her emotions.

“I’m sorry,” Diana apologized, squeezing the railing until her knuckles turned white. “I’m just so angry.”

“I think that’s normal. I’ve heard that it’s called survivor guilt or something like that.”

Diana shook her head. “It’s more than that. I’m furious because Frannie died and I didn’t do anything to help her. A bunch of thugs killed her and I couldn’t even fight back. It’s my fault.”

“Now you stop that. The only ones at fault are the men who attacked you. They killed Francine, not you. Fran would have understood that and she’d be really pissed that you’re blaming yourself.”

As she thought about Fran, Diana realized the truth of the words. A slight smile graced her lips. “She would, wouldn’t she?”

“Yes. At least you took some time off from work afterward. That was a smart thing. When are you going back to Scripps?”

“I don’t know. In about a week or so. I haven’t taken a day off in a long time and couldn’t think of anything more fun than actually diving for pleasure.”

A shout from the bow of the boat caught their attention. With her eyes on the crew scrambling about the deck, Lou responded. “Well, diving Wreck Alley has got to be better than teaching scuba diving to a bunch of scientists and students all day.”

Diana was tempted to respond that she didn’t always teach diving, but she hadn’t actually participated in a research project outside Scripps for over a year. Instead, she followed Lou toward the front of the *Sea Witch* as the charter crew prepared to anchor the ship. Lou’s husband, Bill, had set about preparing the diving equipment. He smiled at Diana as they approached and she noticed his bloodshot eyes. Diana liked Bill, but she didn’t approve of him drinking beer right before a dive. The fact that she wasn’t his boss was the only thing that prevented her from making a comment.

“Coming through!”

Diana leapt to the side as the only child aboard the *Sea Witch* darted past her. Thaddeus Troutman raced to his father’s side and dropped onto his knees with such force that Diana winced in sympathy. The eleven-year-old didn’t seem to think anything of it as he started to pull out his own gear from a diving bag.

“Are you sure about this, Lou? I know Thad is certified for open water, but wreck diving is pretty dangerous, even for experienced divers.”

Lou shrugged. “He’ll be all right. Thad has over forty dives this year alone. Besides, we’ll be right with him the whole time.”

“I don’t know. This is the Ingram Street Bridge, a person could get easily disoriented in that jumble of concrete, steel and pillars.”

“You worry too much. Besides, it’s a great place to see a lot of fish with all the algae.”

Diana had to concede the point. As a Divemaster, she’d have preferred Thad have an Advanced as well as a Wreck Diving certification. The water here was about a hundred and ten feet and that was over the Open Water diver limits. She made a mental note to keep a close eye on the boy.

“What about Bill? How much has he had to drink?”

“Oh, he’s fine. Lighten up, Diana. Have some fun for once.” Lou squatted beside her family and took a wetsuit from one of the bags.

“I have fun.”

Lou paused in donning the shorty. The shortened arms and legs of the suit resembled something a surfer would wear. “Sure, you do. Have you considered asking the university to let you join in a research dive?”

It sounded like a great idea. Getting out of an Olympic-sized pool and into the ocean was an appealing prospect. “I’d love to, but Scripps doesn’t have any research projects going right now. Anyway, if I wasn’t there, who would teach students how to place samples into gear bags or rescue techniques to future scientists?”

Lou didn’t respond so Diana focused on her own equipment. Unlike the Troutman family, she enjoyed warmer waters in which to dive. The California bay waters averaged sixty-eight degrees at the height of summer due to the Alaskan current. As a result, she chose a full-body wetsuit instead of the shorties the Troutman family preferred. The green neoprene slid on easily over her full-body Lycra dive skin. The thin full body suit allowed Diana to pull up the wetsuit without struggling or chafing the skin on her knuckles by having to tug. Neoprene was notorious for sticking to skin and difficult to put on once a person started to sweat.

With her feet bare, Diana lugged her bag over to the aft dive ladder and sat down next to the tank racks. Although the charter boat offered equipment rental, Diana had brought her own oxygen tanks. She zippered thick-soled booties onto her feet and stood to snap the weight belt in place. The square yellow weights settled uncomfortably onto her hipbones, but would be fine once she entered the water.

By the time Diana snapped her buoyancy control vest, or BCD, onto her back with the tank and regulators in place, the others were ready to go. Diana noticed that Thad wore a pony tank. Considering his height, she

thought the shorter O2 tank a good choice.

“Come on, Reed. We don’t have all day.”

“Yes, we do,” she responded to Bill’s teasing. “I’m almost ready.”

Diana strapped on a dive watch before buckling her sheathed knife onto her right calf. Then she grabbed her mask, snorkel and fins.

“All right, I’m set. Everyone check your watches. At a hundred feet, we’ll only have about seventeen minutes of air.”

Thad didn’t wait for her admonishment. Like a youngster on a sugar rush, he hooted and leapt from the back of the boat. Diana blinked water droplets out of her eyes while Bill and Lou followed their son’s example. Instead of putting her fins on in the water like they did, Diana eased down to sit on the top rung of the ladder to put on her mask and fins. Once completely dressed, she eased into the water.

A short distance away, Diana spotted orange buoys that marked permanently installed ascent lines. The cables marked the way down to Wreck Alley where the city of San Diego had intentionally sunk six vessels along with the Ingram Street Bridge as a diver’s attraction. As an experienced diver, Diana still carried her own emergency signaling equipment, but didn’t think she’d really need them.

“Let’s go,” Lou said, placing her regulator in her mouth with her eyes pinned to Diana. The boys had already disappeared under the surface.

Earlier, they had all agreed on their dive teams. The boys would swim together while Diana and Lou were paired as dive buddies. Lou could be impulsive, but they had been on enough trips together for Diana to know she would never violate that basic rule of survival. Diana clamped her teeth down onto her regulator and gave Lou the thumbs-up.

They took their time descending, enjoying the water and the fish that swam all around. Just like anyone else, Diana wanted to reach the bridge and begin exploring but it wasn’t worth decompression sickness to get there a few minutes faster. The crystal blue California waters were heaven, encasing Diana in silence and tranquility. She felt the peace settle over her as she escaped the noise of everyday surface existence while life still thrived all around her in these blue depths. For the first time since Francine’s senseless death, she felt balanced. Diana followed behind Lou. She kept her partner in sight at all times and before long, she spotted the murky outlines of the Ingram Street Bridge.

Diana knew the bridge was intentionally dumped here after city officials replaced it in 1985. Over time, the ocean had claimed the steel girders and asphalt roadways. Heavily encrusted with algae and barnacles, the bridge was the perfect haven for fish of every species. Far below, she

could see Thad and Bill at the outer edges of the hulking mass. She left the ascent line and struck off at a downward angle behind Lou. She was still a little peeved at Bill's reckless drinking prior to the dive. Even though he only had a single beer during the short fifteen-minute ride from Mission Beach, there were other concerns.

The top of the bridge remains lay at one hundred feet from the surface. Depth and ocean pressure caused oxygen to compress, resulting in certain effects on the human body. Every fifty feet of depth was equivalent to a shot of whiskey. By her calculations, Bill was down two shots and a bottle of beer. He probably had a slight buzz. Diana reminded herself that she wasn't an instructor to these people. They were her friends and wouldn't appreciate a lecture on scuba safety. With that in mind, she decided to try to relax and just enjoy the dive. They would only have another twelve minutes before they would have to surface.

Diana waved to Lou and indicated that she wanted a closer look at a school of garibaldi fish. She was careful not to move too close since male garibaldi could become quite aggressive when defending a nest of recently laid eggs. The bridge was a popular nesting ground for the bright orange fish and Diana didn't want to take any chances. Garibaldi could grow up to fifteen inches and would bite. Diana looked back over her shoulder to see if Lou had followed and caught movement from the corner of her eye. Upon taking a closer look, she noticed Bill swim underneath a shattered segment of steel girders.

The motion of his fins kicked up sand from the ocean bottom, obscuring the normally clear blue view. Bill disappeared inside the massive structure with Thad close on his heels. Part of the fun of wreck diving was exploring old ruins. Diana forgot about the fish and swam over to the outer edge of the bridge. She saw Thad very near his father and searched around for her own scuba partner.

Lou also seemed intrigued by the boys' activity and swam toward the place where they had entered the pile of concrete and steel. Diana reached the spot first and peered through the tight opening. Bill had just settled onto his knees. He withdrew an underwater camera from a mesh gear bag and began snapping pictures. Multiple species of fish darted all around, some small and some large. The boys were inside a very confined clear area, surrounded from above and on all sides by debris. Diana could see numerous openings from every vantage point, providing avenues of ingress and egress to the sea dwellers.

Through one of the larger holes, she spotted a sea lion. Diana easily distinguished the difference in the animal from a seal due to its protruding

ears. Fascinated to see the sea lion in its pursuit of food, Diana reached for her own camera.

Bill had his back to the sea lion as he photographed schools of brightly colored blue and yellow tangs, garibaldi, crab and sea fans. He hadn't spotted the sea lion nearing his location. Diana thought it would be a great opportunity to get a shot of Bill with the animal behind him. Sea lions often played with human divers and Diana didn't consider this one any different. She swam part of the way into the opening to get a closer view and had just brought her camera up to focus on the scene.

At the same time, the creature suddenly darted into the artificial cavern. It headed directly toward the buffet of smaller animals, unmindful of Bill and Thad in the vicinity. Then, several things seemed to occur almost simultaneously. Diana noticed Bill start in surprise when the sea lion zipped by overhead. He rose up from his knees and the wake from the animal's actions caught him unprepared. Bill's mask loosened from the movement and slid up from his face. An experienced diver, he automatically reached for it. Fish scattered upon sensing a predator and the sea lion rammed into the side of the bridge as it turned in pursuit.

Diana felt the structure tremble from the impact. She dropped the camera as she started forward, instinctively intent on protecting Thad. The eleven-year-old had pressed backward against the bridge pilings when the sea lion entered so unexpectedly. With his hands clutching rebar, he was the image of a terrified little boy. Diana's eyes darted back and forth as she attempted to take in every detail.

Bill grappled with his mask and pulled it into place. As Diana watched, he tilted his head back and exhaled to clear the water from his faceplate. Unaccountably, she was aware of the bubbles floating upward from the force of his exhalation at the same time that the sea lion crashed into Bill. The animal wasn't trying to hurt him, merely chasing its lunch. Unfortunately, the impact threw Bill back against the ruins with enough force to make them tremble again. Loosened debris rained down and Diana automatically ducked her head, but the mask prevented anything from going into her eyes. The sea lion darted back out through another sizeable hole and disappeared from view.

She hurried toward Bill, intent on checking his injuries. Thad seemed fine and now that the sea lion had vacated the premises, he also headed toward his father. Bubbles poured from behind Bill, headed toward the surface. The speed of flow indicated a problem with his oxygen system. She was afraid that if she didn't get to him fast enough, he would suffocate or drown.

Diana reached the downed man's side. He had fallen backward against the wall of concrete and his head lolled to the side away from her. As she drifted onto her knees, she noticed that Bill's mask had come off his nose and mouth, resting over his eyes and forehead. Unconscious, his instincts still prompted him to breathe through his mouthpiece.

With the medical emergency on her hands, Diana needed Thad's help. She noticed the panicked look on the boy's face. Thad reached out and tried to pull the mask back into place on Bill's face, but there wasn't time for that. Diana grabbed Thad by the shoulder of his shorty and jerked him around to face her. She disregarded the angry look on his face as she shoved her diver emergency signaling gear to him. Thad hesitated for a fraction of a second before he caught on and grabbed the bag out of her hand. Once he had the emergency float and whistle, Thad scooted out of the bridge ruins and headed for the top. Diana could see the tips of his fins as he swam toward the surface. She hoped he would remember to make a brief safety stop along the ascent line or she might have a second crisis on her hands.

As for herself, Diana hadn't time to make a safety stop. She couldn't take that chance with Bill's life. She finished settling Bill's mask into place. He still had the regulator in his mouth but a quick glance over his shoulder told Diana that his hose had snagged on a jagged piece of rebar. The hose had ripped and his oxygen supply streamed out through the opening. Diana checked Bill's pressure gauge, alarmed at the rate with which his air diminished. She hooked Bill under the arms around his chest and headed for the opening. Towing her friend's husband along, it proved a tight squeeze to fit through the hole. Diana hugged Bill's back against her chest and held his regulator in his mouth as she started up.

Lou met her as Diana hauled Bill into open water. She reached for her husband, but Diana shook her head. She had control of the situation for the moment, but needed Lou to help her out in another way. She pointed upward and Lou got the point. Although she looked reluctant, Lou nodded and led the way toward the charter boat.

Her eyes fixed on the surface, Diana could see Thad stopped along the ascent line. Far above him, she noticed the surface marker buoy she had given him as it floated upward. Thad had inflated the SMB from his own oxygen supply and released it so that he could make the safety stop. The bright orange SMB would signal occupants of the charter boat that a diver emergency had ensued.

Lou did not stop beside Thad. She kept going, clearly intent on alerting the boat crew though she did make a short, chopping motion

toward her son as she passed. Thad let go of the ascent line with one hand, but stayed where he was. He looked at his watch and started upward again just as Diana reached his side. She followed Lou's example and kept going, but Thad stopped another ten feet up. If he continued making safety stops, he would wait for one minute every ten feet.

Diana's heart pounded in her chest as she struggled to hold onto Bill and vent the air from her BCD. She wanted a controlled ascent, not a rocket ride to the surface. She was attempting to dissipate the nitrogen from their bodies through a slow rise so that she didn't compound Bill's condition.

After what felt like hours, Diana neared the surface. Lou was still in the water, her fins and lower body visible. As Diana neared her location, Lou dove back toward her sans the mask, weights and buoyancy control vest. She grabbed Bill's arm and helped Diana haul him to the boat's aft dive ladder.

Diana spit the regulator out of her mouth as her face cleared the water. Three men stood nearby with their hands out to render assistance. "I don't know if he's still breathing. He may have inhaled water through the hole in his regulator hose. Radio the mainland that we need an ambulance standing by."

The men yanked Bill from the water and laid him out on the deck. They had already removed his mask and BCD along with the air tank before they turned him onto his back. Diana clambered out of the water as quickly as she could, silently cursing the few extra pounds that she carried. She pushed her fins off onto the deck and released the snaps holding her buoyancy vest and allowed the tank to thud the short distance onto the boat. Then she was up and headed toward Bill's still unconscious form.

"He's not breathing," Captain Jim said. "We need to start CPR. Jonesy, go radio the mainland."

"Aye, Captain."

Diana didn't bother looking up to see who responded as she pressed two fingers against Bill's carotid artery. She felt his pulse fluttering against her fingertips. She straightened out his limbs and positioned herself next to his shoulders, sure that Bill had inhaled water. She pinched Bill's nose closed and tilted his head back to start rescue breathing. As she went to work trying to pump water from his lungs, Thad climbed onto the boat and quickly shucked his gear. He moved to stand a few feet away, bent over with his hands on his knees. Diana noticed his bare feet and the pool of water streaming from his body from the corner of her eye,

but remained focused on her task. The charter boat's motor roared to life and they began a wide, slow turn to head back into the bay.

Time continued its slow crawl as Diana worked. She felt light headed as she continued trying to force air into closed lungs. Sweat tracked down her forehead, induced by a combination of her neoprene wetsuit, the sun overhead and exertion. She heard the moment when Lou began to quietly sob. Keeping her balance as the boat soared over the water wasn't easy, but Diana refused to give up. Suddenly, she felt Bill tense beneath her.

"Come on, you can do it. Wake up and breathe!"

Bill's eyes remained closed, but he turned his head to the side and grimaced. He coughed out a veritable fountain of water before he began to choke. Diana let out a pent-up breath and scooted tiredly out of the way as Bill's family surrounded him. She raised a trembling hand and swiped the sweat out of her eyes.

Captain Jim squatted beside her, his grizzled visage resting on Bill who lay weakly on the deck with his eyes closed. "You done a good job. Does he still need to get checked out?"

Diana nodded. "Yeah, definitely. We came up pretty fast and didn't have time to decompress properly."

Her heart finally began to resume a more normal cadence as she watched the rise and fall of Bill's chest. His breaths were even, but he did seem to be a little pale. Diana didn't feel all that great herself, but she didn't really think she had the bends. She had come up from similar depths before without stopping and never had an issue. It still wasn't a good idea because one could never tell when it would happen. Right now, she probably just felt the aftermath of fear and excitement.

She lifted her head as the boat began to slow and realized they were already about to dock. She must have nodded off a little from exhaustion. An ambulance waited near the pier with red lights flashing overhead. Bill was conscious and capable of walking off the dock under his own power. There wasn't room in the back of the conveyance for Lou and Thad so they raced for their car to follow the ambulance to the hospital. Diana felt exhausted, but her day was far from over. With Lou and Thad's absence, unloading all of their personal gear fell to her.

It took another hour for Diana to unload the gear, check on Bill and drive home. She lived in Rancho Bernardo, an elite San Diego neighborhood. When she spotted her two-story Spanish-style home, she let out a relieved sigh. Diana still needed to unload the scuba equipment and hose off the saltwater, but she was far too tired. She parked in the garage and headed into the house, interested in nothing more than

sleeping for a week.

Diana crossed through the kitchen and started pulling off her clothes. Her shirt landed on the floor and she'd unbuttoned her shorts when the phone began to ring. She ignored it and eventually the answering machine kicked in. Diana expected to hear a voice speaking into the machine, but instead the caller hung up. The phone started to peal again almost instantly.

“What in the...?”

Annoyed, she let the call go to the machine once again. Again, the caller hung up and then called back. Clearly, whoever it was wouldn't give up. Diana stalked over to the cordless phone and snatched it from the cradle. She was suddenly worried that it might be Lou calling to tell her that Bill's condition had worsened.

“Yes?” Diana answered somewhat breathlessly.

“Ms. Reed? This is Lillian Primus. I'm sorry to bother you, but I could use your help with something.”

Book Two: Woman's Heart - Chapter Seven

Diana stepped out of the airplane into Istanbul's blistering heat. She blinked against the glare before following the other passengers down the ladder steps and onto the tarmac. The surface felt slightly melted, sticking to the soles of her feet a bit as they traipsed toward the terminal. The airport stank like a freshly paved road. She still wasn't quite sure how Ms. Primus had talked her into this. Returning to the place where her best friend died was the last thing Diana thought she'd ever do. Yet, here she was.

With her eyes carefully averted to avoid garnering any unwanted attention, Diana located the baggage claim area. While tourists abounded, a woman alone sometimes still needed to remain cautious. Especially here, where women were often regarded as property. She stood against the wall, looking around surreptitiously as she waited for the carousel to engage. Fear caused her heart to hammer against her ribs. While she could logically tell herself that this airport was a far cry from a dirty, dangerous alley, her survival instincts wouldn't allow her to fully believe it.

Ms. Primus had told her that someone would meet her. That she could tell, there wasn't anyone looking for her. People hugged friends and loved ones, greeting the passengers after the thirteen-hour flight from the States. Others milled around waiting for luggage, practically ignoring their children who ran all over. Screams of laughter combined with the mixture of various languages to create a reverberating din.

Finally, the conveyor belt switched on and Diana moved closer as suitcases spewed forth. She slipped between bodies to move toward the front, careful to make as little contact as possible. She needed only to wait a few minutes to claim both bags and when she turned around, she spotted a man holding a sign that bore her name. He was big and made an imposing impression. Normally, Diana might have initially feared him, but one look into gentle brown eyes told her she was safe with him. She felt some of the tension in her shoulders ease.

"I'm Doctor Reed."

The man with the heavy stubble and western clothing bowed respectfully and lowered his sign. "I am Muhammed Yilmaz, your humble servant. Ms. Primus respectfully sends her apologies that she could not

meet you in person.”

Muhammed took the largest of her bags, the one loaded with her personal scuba equipment. Her newest employer had told Diana very little over the phone. She had merely explained that she needed Diana to come at once. She wasn't under any illusions that this would be a pleasure trip. While Ms. Primus had mentioned diving, her serious tone implied this was a working excursion. Diana hadn't asked a lot of questions. She had the time off accumulated from Scripps and it didn't take much convincing to extend her vacation. She owed this woman a debt she could never possibly repay.

As Diana accompanied the bearish man out of the airport and toward a waiting taxi, she decided to attempt to gather a little more information about why she was here. She hesitated until Muhammed gave the driver instructions in Turkish and they pulled away from the curb. “So, do you know what Ms. Primus needs me for?”

“Has she not told you?”

“Not really. She just said that she needed a diver and here I am.”

He seemed startled by such a simple explanation. “You did not ask?”

“I...owed her.”

“Ah, I understand the lure of a debt repaid. I too owe Ms. Primus much. Many years ago, she rescued me from incarceration. I was a young man then and made some questionable choices.”

Diana mulled over that bit of information. It couldn't have been that many years ago since she judged Lillian Primus to be somewhere in her late thirties. Still, it didn't escape Diana's notice that he did not answer her question. Perhaps he was merely distracted by the mention of an obligation.

“What are we going to do?”

“Please,” Muhammed interrupted with a raised hand. “If Ms. Primus has not told you, then she has her reasons. You must ask her your questions.”

Diana was impressed by his loyalty. More than that, she was even more impressed by the woman who possessed it. Duly chastened, she didn't attempt to communicate further. Instead, Diana turned her eyes to the traffic-jammed streets. Primus had told her to prepare for an extended journey. That alone was enough to pique her curiosity. Muhammed's limited responses served only to increase her excitement over this mysterious adventure. She was thrilled to repay the incredible woman for showing magnanimous kindness to a stranger. The lure of an adventure was an added bonus.

The sun had just started to set when the cab pulled up in front of the hotel. Diana craned her head back to look upward toward the top of the Grand Hyatt's castle-like structure. She estimated at least twenty floors. When she glanced back down it was to see Muhammed holding the door for her with a curious expression on his face. A bellhop picked up both of her bags and waited patiently.

“Sorry, I guess I’m a little tired from the flight.”

Muhammed showed her directly to a luxury suite on the top floor and took care of the bag attendant before Diana could offer. The opulence of the room caught her off guard. It was easily large enough for half of her home to fit into. A mini bar took up one corner of the sitting area and two other doors led into what Diana assumed were bedrooms. A wonderful view of the city beckoned her to the windows.

“Did I miss something? I thought this was a working trip.”

Muhammed offered her a cryptic smile. “Ms. Primus is currently making arrangements for our journey. She will join you as soon as she is free. Please make yourself comfortable.”

He turned to leave and Diana took a hasty step forward. “How will I get ahold of you if I need something?”

“I assure you; it will not be necessary. I will see you again tomorrow, Doctor Reed.”

Things happened so quickly that the door clicked closed behind him before Diana could say anything else. “I guess so.”

She understood Primus not meeting her at the airport, but really thought she would be at the hotel once they arrived. Diana wasn't typically uncomfortable in strange cities, after all she had traveled all over the world to dive the most remote locations. This arrangement just seemed a little weird. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do to change things. Diana took her time unpacking her belongings and taking a shower. Afterward she stood wrapped in a towel, drying her hair as she stared out over the lights of the city.

Istanbul was beautiful at night, the lights standing out like stars in the galaxy. Her grumbling stomach interrupted the moment, reminding her that she had eaten little on the flight over. Diana dressed quickly with the intent of running out to grab something quick. Of course, she had no intention of leaving the hotel. The experiences of her last trip to this part of the world impressed upon her the need for caution. She stopped when she considered Primus might show up while she was gone. Maybe she would call room service instead of eating in the hotel restaurant. The last thing Diana wanted was a game of tag in the middle of the night in a

foreign country. She had just picked up the phone to call down to the lobby when someone knocked on her door. Diana felt sure she knew the identity of her visitor, but it didn't pay to be careless. A flash of Francine's unmoving form in the alley convinced her that a little prudence was required.

"Just a moment."

Diana braced her hands on the door and leaned forward to peer through the peep hole. Lillian Primus stood outlined through the fisheye view with an amused expression on her normally stoic features. Diana's jaw dropped slightly. She had forgotten how absolutely stunning this woman was.

After pulling herself together, Diana cleared her throat and opened the door. Despite her best attempts at appearing cool and collected, she couldn't help but stare at the vision before her. Lillian Primus leaned one shoulder casually against the doorjamb. She cut a dashing image dressed in a figure-hugging black suit with satin lapels. The deep scarlet shirt under the jacket boasted a high Mandarin collar. Both the colors served to set off the milky paleness of her skin, making her appear as a modern-day Snow White. Her thick, medium length hair fell in midnight-tinted waves down over her shoulders, threatening to cause Diana to spontaneously combust. She doubted the woman was even aware of the sheer animal magnetism she exuded.

The sight of a raised eyebrow communicated Lil's amusement. Diana's mouth snapped closed and she cleared her throat in embarrassment. "Um, would you like to come in?"

Lil pushed away from the doorframe and entered the room. She took a moment to look around before addressing Diana. "Is the room to your liking?"

"It's great, thank you."

Uncomfortably aware that her nipples were standing at attention, and mystified by that reaction, Diana crossed her arms over her chest. She waited for Ms. Primus to tell her exactly why she had made the trip to Istanbul on short notice, but it didn't happen right away. Instead, Lil crossed the room and moved behind the mini bar. She spent a moment searching and then retrieved a highball glass. As she opened an expensive bottle of cognac, Diana noticed that even these simple movements were supple. She moved like a jungle cat, her actions sensual and provocative. Diana was caught unaware when indigo eyes unexpectedly met her own.

"Would you care for something?"

Diana shook her head.

“Thank you for coming, Doctor Reed. I apologize for such short notice.”

Good, she was going to jump right in. “It’s Diana, remember? You were awfully cryptic over the phone. Do you mind telling me what’s going on?”

“As I said, I require the services of a skilled diver.”

Okay, so she was beautiful and definitely a little off. Diana had apparently flown halfway around the world to play glorified underwater tour guide. “Well, there are several popular wrecks just off the coast.”

“I’m not here for pleasure. I have a specific mission in mind.” Before her benefactor could be more specific, Diana’s stomach rumbled. Lil smiled. “Perhaps we could discuss it over dinner.”

Normally, Diana would refuse. She would insist that someone being so insistently vague come clean before agreeing to a meal with them. Then again, there was nothing normal about this situation, and Diana had to admit she found the idea of having dinner with Lil titillating.

“All right, lead the way.”

In the interests of time, they agreed to dinner in the hotel restaurant. The maître d spotted Lil as they approached and astounded Diana by how quickly he smiled and snapped his fingers for a server. They were quickly shown to a quiet table in the corner with an unobstructed view of the city. It was the same view Diana had from her room. Who was this woman?

People literally jumped to do her bidding and seemed quite happy doing so. First the American Consulate, then Muhammed and now this. Diana realized belatedly that even she fit into that category, rushing to fly to Istanbul out of a sense of duty. She didn’t believe that everyone could possibly owe the enigmatic woman so it had to be something else.

Diana covered her confusion by perusing the menu. The restaurant had quite a selection of Mediterranean and local Turkish cuisine, but Diana was far more aware of the woman sitting across from her. It seemed to her the silence between them grew uncomfortable, but Lil didn’t appear to notice. She easily ordered her meal and waited for Diana to do the same. Once they were alone again, Diana decided she couldn’t take the secrecy anymore.

“Ms. Primus, please tell me what’s going on. I didn’t fly for so long to stare at you across a table, as attractive as that view might be.” Diana surprised herself by her words but refused to backpedal. She gritted her teeth to keep from speaking again as she waited for a response.

“Very well. I’ve asked for your presence because you are more than a diver. You are a scientist.”

Diana choked on a sip of white wine. “You need a scientist?”

She wasn’t sure what she had expected, but this certainly wasn’t anywhere near the list of possibilities.

“Doctor Reed...”

“Diana.”

“Diana. I am searching for an important artifact that I believe is submerged somewhere in the Mediterranean Gulf.”

Lil stopped and Diana thought she was attempting to gauge her reaction. At this point, Diana didn’t have enough information to provide one. Over the years others had sought her out for similar excursions, usually rich thrill seekers with more money than sense. She doubted this woman fit into that category.

“Go on.”

“I have come to believe a certain artifact, a sword made from the Tree of Life, is hidden under the waters of the Gulf. It lies just off the coast between the borders of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.”

“The Tree of Life.”

Lil nodded once, sharply. “Yes, the Tree of Life from which God forbade human kind to partake, presumably because it would render them virtually immortal.”

“Umm, correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t the Tree of Life supposed to exist somewhere in the middle of the Garden of Eden?”

“I see you know your Scripture.”

“I know my mythology,” Diana corrected and then took a larger swallow of wine. “Look, Ms. Primus, no offense. To each their own. As you pointed out, I’m a scientist. I believe that if you can see and touch something, then it’s real. The rest of it is just theory.”

“Please, call me Lil. I’m not asking that you believe. In fact, a skeptic is exactly what I need. At least I know you’ll keep me honest.”

Diana still had reservations. She surmised Lil could afford such a potentially massive undertaking, but this required more than money. Diana felt it her responsibility to point out the truth. What she did with that advice was up to her.

“Lil, people have searched for the Garden since the beginning of recorded time. No one’s ever found it. What makes you think you can?”

Lil’s shoulders tensed, her expression unreadable. “That is something on which you will need to trust me. Suffice it to say, I recently discovered a clue that points to our destination.”

There was something she wasn’t saying. Diana could tell that she was holding something back. While she owed Lil a lot, Diana didn’t like

going into a situation blindly.

“And if I refuse to join your little adventure?”

“That is your prerogative. The area we travel through is extremely dangerous, just as much today as it has been throughout history. I cannot promise a safe journey. However, should we find that which I seek, the rewards will be great.”

Her archaic way of speaking notwithstanding, now Lil had Diana’s attention. Initially, this had seemed nothing more than a huge waste of time, albeit a highly lucrative one from the offer Lil had made her over the phone. From the way Lil spoke now, there was more to this than a fruitless search and Diana found herself unwillingly intrigued.

“How so?”

Lil’s eyes darted around and she stopped speaking as their meal arrived. For the balance of the evening, she seemed content to discuss more innocuous topics. Near the conclusion of the evening, Lil ordered a glass of cognac and settled back in her chair. Her eyes appraised Diana as her hands loosely clasped the crystal between her palms.

Diana resisted holding the amazing blue gaze for long. She felt as though she could fall into Lil’s eyes forever, find every promise she had ever dreamed of. There was a timelessness to this woman she found difficult to fathom. Some would call Lil’s an “old soul.” Diana knew only that she wanted to know more. Not about the journey or her purpose on this trip. She wanted to know more about Lil.

A slow smile graced Lil’s full lips and Diana realized some of her fascination must have shown through. Rather than embarrass Diana by commenting directly, Lil asked, “May I count you among our group, or should I find someone else?”

“No, I’m in. When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning at dawn. Be warned, Diana, this will be dangerous. I will ask you once more before we set out in the morning. That will be your last opportunity to withdraw.”

“I won’t.” Diana was absolutely certain.

“Good. Muhammed will bring you some personal security devices before we begin.”

“I just have one final question. How many others will be joining us for the actual search? I can’t possibly be the only diver on your payroll.”

“True. I have a couple of local divers that will meet us once we arrive in Kuwait. We’ll all set out for the final leg of the journey from there.”

Chapter Eight

Diana took one last look around the luxurious accommodations. Muhammed had arrived a short while ago to collect her belongings and deliver the promised security gear. Her heart beat slightly faster than normal as she checked out her attire in the full-length mirror. A heavy black flak jacket covered her torso and lightweight khaki shirt, leaving her arms bare. Muhammed had helped her adjust the utility belt she wore around her waist. A thigh holster was attached to the belt, along with a water canteen and extra ammunition pouches. All but the canteen were currently empty. Diana had no idea what type of weapon Lil would provide, but the mere sight of these accoutrements was almost enough to make her ill. She didn't like guns and had never used one before.

"A thousand pardons for the interruption. The charges for your room have been settled."

Diana jumped at the sound of Muhammed's voice. He stood by the door though still in the hallway. Diana swallowed hard and spoke through a throat dry with trepidation. "I'm ready."

She glanced around as she closed the door, sure this was the last time she would see such comfort for a long while. There were few people around as they headed outside. The sun had just started to break over the horizon, but provided enough illumination in combination with the streetlights for Diana to have a clear view of the street. Three military-type cargo trucks lined the curb. A few men with rifles stood guard around the vehicles to prevent the more curious from approaching. Dressed in camouflage clothing and black combat boots, they cut quite the figure. Diana wasn't sure whether these men were mercenaries or civilians hired expressly for this expedition, but if Lil trusted them with her safety then so did she.

"Good morning."

Diana turned to see Lil's smiling face. Even at this early hour, the woman seemed wide-awake and full of barely harnessed energy.

"Hi. Did I miss something? It looks like we're preparing for an invasion."

"Not at all. I just like to be prepared. Shall we get started?"

Diana followed Lil toward the front of the short convoy. She couldn't help but notice the way Lil's hips swayed gently as she walked. Powerful thighs were encased in desert tan chinos that were bloused over the tops of high, brown combat boots. Lil had forgone the tactical vest Diana

wore, but she had a similar utility belt clasped around her waist. Her holster held a vicious looking black handgun. Below the short-sleeved khaki shirt, the muscles in Lil's forearms rippled. This was a woman in magnificent shape.

When Lil opened the passenger door of the lead truck for her, Diana averted her eyes. She didn't want to be caught staring. Regardless of her attempts at subtlety, Lil again sported an amused smile. Diana had a feeling that very little escaped her notice. She felt her face burn as she climbed into the vehicle. Instantly, she noticed a crossbow mounted on the rear glass. A steel bolt was already loaded into the firing mechanism.

Lil joined her a moment later, taking up the driver's position. After she jammed the key into the ignition, Lil turned toward her. "I told you I would offer one last chance to withdraw. This is it. Are you sure you wish to accompany me?"

"I haven't changed my mind. I will say that I don't believe we're going to find what you're looking for, but I promise to try and help you in the attempt."

"Thank you. Now, let's do something about those empty pouches."

Lil had yet to start the vehicle and didn't seem to be in any hurry. Instead, she leaned across Diana's lap to open the glove compartment. Diana couldn't resist gently inhaling Lil's sweet, clean scent. It wasn't that of perfume, soap or any other artificial chemicals. Rather, the scent belonged solely to Lil. Diana's eyes drifted closed for an instant as she pictured open fields, bubbling brooks and a clear spring day. The image was destroyed when Lil turned to present her with a handgun.

"This is a Glock .40. It is already loaded so please keep your finger off the trigger."

Diana nervously cleared her throat, hesitating to take the weapon. "As I told Muhammed, I've never fired a gun in my life."

"And hopefully you won't have to this time either. I'm providing you with this pistol as a security measure, a last resort if you will. This weapon has no safety. It is called a 'hot weapon' for that reason. Keep it in the holster and never put your finger on the trigger unless you intend to use it."

Reluctantly, Diana took the pistol and placed it into the holster without bumbling too much. Once it was secured, Lil provided her with two extra magazines of ammunition and showed her how to install them in the pouches. Apparently satisfied that everything was as it should be for the moment, Lil started the truck and pulled away from the curb. Diana verified that the others were right behind them by looking in the

passenger side mirror.

“So, what’s with the crossbow? Isn’t that kind of an archaic weapon?”

“From your frame of reference, maybe,” Lil responded mysteriously. “I prefer simpler weapons, however. I think they have an elegance that modern handguns do not. Also, there’s less to go wrong with them if I’m in a tense situation.”

Diana couldn’t argue with that. She couldn’t count the times she’d purchased the latest in technology only to find that the old stuff operated just as well and was far less confusing.

Initially they headed east, but gradually turned south. The entire trip from Istanbul to Kuwait would take around thirty-one hours, barring any unforeseen circumstances. Since they were traveling through an unstable region, Diana realized anything could happen. American soldiers were everywhere throughout the Iraqi and Afghanistan areas, fighting insurgents. The indigenous peoples had been at war off and on throughout the centuries. All in all, Diana was beginning to question her sanity for agreeing to any of this, but she had given her word and she wouldn’t back down now.

“We’ll cross the border into Syria in about fifteen hours. Why don’t you try and take a nap?”

“I’m curious, why didn’t you hire people down near the Gulf for this? We could have flown directly into Kuwait’s airport and left from there. It would have been much faster.”

“True,” Lil allowed. “It also would have drawn more attention to our excursion. Having a rich American arrive and join a heavily armed caravan is not a wise move in such a precarious location. I would prefer not to garner the attention of insurgents or the local government. By driving in and avoiding major nerve centers, we are more...circumspect.”

“I get it. We’re flying below the radar.”

“Precisely. Besides, I have waited a long time to find this artifact and I don’t intend to start making mistakes now.”

With that, Diana allowed conversation to ebb. She rested her head against the door and closed her eyes, concentrating on the feel of stale, hot air blowing through her hair. Hours passed slowly. Eventually, Lil called a halt for a quick breakfast of flat bread and water. It was a far cry from last night’s meal, but Diana wasn’t very hungry. Comparing herself to Lil’s sleek athletic build, she thought she could stand to lose a few pounds anyway. They were on the road again in no time.

The scenery outside major cities was unremarkable. Diana gradually

lost herself in thought, planning the dives and what equipment they would need as stunted trees, desert scrub and sand flashed by. The sun tracked across the sky, growing more intense by the hour until even the breeze failed to bring relief. Sweat tracked down Diana's face and neck before soaking into her collar.

When the radio crackled to life it was so unexpected that Diana flinched in surprise. The man transmitting sounded excited, frightened and angry, all at the same time. He spoke so rapidly in Turkish that Diana had difficulty understanding the message. Lil's expression tightened as she reached for the mic. She responded calmly in only a few words before ending the communication.

"It's all right. One of my spotters is reporting a skirmish between ISIL and Kurdish forces south of Baghdad. It's nothing that concerns us."

"At least not for now," Diana muttered.

Such encounters could last for hours or days. The fact that they were due to arrive in the area sometime in the next few days didn't fill her with a lot of comfort. Added to that fact, Lil's expression didn't convey the same reassurance as her words. She seemed tense. Diana felt her stomach flutter in nervous response.

Despite her misgivings, she kept mute. The day passed with Diana jumping at every backfire and lizard that crossed the dusty lane in front of the vehicle. Finally, the sun headed toward the horizon and Lil directed them off of the road. The truck bounced a little as she left the roadway, but Diana felt only relief that this day was drawing to a close.

To her dismay, Lil didn't allow Diana to relax just yet. While the men set up camp, she motioned for Diana to follow her a short distance from the others. Lil had strapped the crossbow to her back. She didn't speak, leaving Diana mystified as to her intentions. Along the way, Lil stooped over and picked up a large rock. She placed it on the ground and then turned to Diana.

"I think we should allow you some practice with that weapon, just in case."

"Oh, right. That's a good idea. I know I'd certainly feel better about carrying it around."

"Let's start with the basics. Pretend that you need to utilize the weapon. The first thing to do is unsnap the holster with your thumb. At the same time, wrap all of your fingers except your index finger around the grip."

Diana did as instructed, slowly and carefully. Lil kept up a steady stream of encouragement as Diana withdrew the Glock from the new

leather. It stuck a bit, but Diana persisted and the holster let go with a squeak.

“First rule, don’t ever aim the muzzle of a weapon at anyone unless you intend to shoot them. Even a supposedly unloaded pistol can be deadly.”

“Got it. What’s next?”

Lil showed her how to aim the weapon and sight down the barrel. She wanted Diana to try and shoot the rock she’d placed upon the ground. The first few shots missed the mark quite impressively. Lil adjusted Diana’s grip, showing her how to push forward with her dominant hand and pull with the off hand to form a crude kind of stabilizing tripod.

“Now squeeze the trigger slowly, don’t yank it. Allow the recoil after the shot goes off to naturally raise the muzzle.”

This time Diana’s shot tossed the rock high into the air. Diana was so excited that she started to turn toward Lil without thinking. She still held the gun with her finger on the trigger. Lil hampered the turn by catching Diana’s right forearm in a firm grasp. While Diana realized Lil was only reinforcing handgun safety, she felt the touch to the core of her being. She shivered in response and Lil released her abruptly.

Lil seemed befuddled by her response. She cleared her throat. “Um...I think you’ve got it now. Why don’t we head back?”

She didn’t wait to see if Diana followed. Having no choice, Diana holstered the Glock and trudged back to the camp. In the short time they’d been gone, a few large open tents had gone up. A smaller tent stood closer to the fire and camp chairs were scattered about. A fire burned strongly with some of the men gathered around talking. Muhammed sat in the center of the group, poking the fire with a stick. He laughed along with the others when someone apparently told a joke.

Diana could smell something cooking, but she wasn’t sure she was actually hungry.

“Would you like to sit, Doctor Reed?”

Diana smiled and chose a seat beside Muhammed. Her eyes gravitated to the leaping flames as she thought about Lil. There was something mysteriously captivating about the woman. Diana had thought of her often over the last few weeks and now that they were in the same proximity, she could think of little else. She had wanted to believe it was natural considering how crucial their interaction was after Frannie’s death. The innocent contact a few moments ago left her wondering if there wasn’t more to it than that.

Lil was a gorgeous woman by any standards, but Diana typically

wasn't attracted to someone for their looks. She tried to convince herself that it was the characteristic of secretiveness Lil possessed that intrigued Diana, though she couldn't deny the sheer animal magnetism. The fact that she constantly carried a weapon on her back made her appear like a warrior from a simpler time and was even more attractive. All of that aside, Diana wanted to know more about the woman. She remembered thinking the same thing the previous evening.

"Muhammed, how well do you know Ms. Primus?"

His dark eyes narrowed momentarily, but Diana had trouble reading his expression. The gathering darkness and flickering flames rendered him inscrutable. After a moment, he answered softly. "I have known Lillian for many years. She is a dear friend, yet I feel I know her hardly at all. You must understand that she does not trust easily."

Diana nodded. She had gathered that on her own. Somehow, she wanted to be someone that Lil trusted with her secrets. Her eyes rose from the fire and locked with Lil's as she came toward them. For only a moment, a fleeting instant, they connected on an unspoken, instinctive level. Diana felt as though she was falling into a well of emotions. Her breath caught and she forgot everything but this woman. Lil stopped, waiting for something that Diana couldn't fathom. In that evanescent second, she could have sworn she witnessed concern mixed with a healthy dose of desire. Diana trembled, on the cusp of discovering something wonderful. Then Lil's expression altered and the visible emotions vanished almost immediately to be replaced with bewilderment. Diana's heart pounded. She wanted to reach out across the distance, to stroke Lil's cheek, kiss the full lips and witness the deep blue eyes close as Lil moaned her arousal into Diana's mouth.

Suddenly, Lil blinked and the spell shattered. Diana realized she was surrounded by strangers in a place where being gay could get her killed. She inhaled sharply and pulled her gaze back to the fire. She pretended not to notice when Lil joined them, laughing and talking with her men.

Dinner was served a short time later. Lil was the first served, but she passed her plate to Diana with a question in her eyes. Diana avoided the look and poked at the goat meat that was roasted over the fire. Parts of it were charred and other bits completely raw. Some kind of boiled tubers accompanied the meat, but Diana was far too aware of Lil to eat much. It hadn't escaped her notice how gently Lil treated her. Throughout the meal, she caught Lil watching her several times. Unlike before, she couldn't detect any emotions whatsoever.

Finally, she decided she was losing it. Diana was exhausted from

constantly being on edge all day, nothing more. Lillian Primus was not romantically interested in her, simply baffled that Diana was acting like a ding-dong. She couldn't really blame her there, but after such a long flight and practically no sleep, Diana thought her behavior perfectly understandable.

She passed her almost full plate off to one of the men and left the group. Diana hadn't any idea where she was headed, only that she needed some solitude. Lil hadn't yet explained the sleeping arrangements so Diana struck out away from camp. After walking steadily for a few minutes over the dusty ground, she stopped and concentrated on drawing one deep breath after another.

Diana searched the sky overhead, amazed as she usually was when away from city lights. The stars were so clear, numbering in the millions. They seemed almost close enough to touch. As she watched, a shooting star streaked by overhead. Diana smiled.

"Are you okay? You seem upset."

Diana wasn't sure why she felt so distressed so she changed the subject. "As a kid, I always thought that wishing on a shooting star would make my dreams come true. As an adult, the myth has been destroyed. Now I know that it's nothing but a meteorite or space debris bouncing off the atmosphere. Sad. What I wouldn't give to believe in magic again."

Lil's brows furrowed in confusion. "Magic is all around us, Diana. Science doesn't negate that fact."

"How do you know?" To Diana, it seemed the answer to that question was all that mattered. Her heart raced as she awaited Lil's response.

Lil shrugged. "I've seen it," she responded simply. "Every moment of every day, I live it. I *know* that it exists."

"Just like the Garden of Eden?"

"Exactly like that."

"And this...relic you're looking for? You're convinced it will show you the way to something?"

"More than ever."

Diana had only one more question. "Why me? You said you needed a skeptic, but I think there's more to it than that. You could have hired any scientist in the world, a lot of them with more impressive credentials. Yet, you settled for me. Was that just because I owed you something?"

"You don't owe me anything and I've told you why."

"You've told me nothing." Diana bit the words off, suddenly angry and unsure why. "Tell me. I deserve to know why I'm out here in the

middle of nowhere looking for something that doesn't exist."

Lil's square jaws clenched. Her hands fisted, but Diana refused to back down. She tried to hold the enigmatic gaze in the dark and Lil finally relented. "You're here because...I find you intriguing."

"Excuse me?"

"Most people are an open book to me, but not you. I can't get a sense of what you're thinking or feeling. I have to admit, that makes me more than a little curious about you."

"So I'm here just to satisfy your curiosity?" Somehow the idea stung.

"You do have the qualifications I'm looking for. That is the truth."

Diana waited a beat, hoping Lil would confess a reciprocal attraction. Saying she found her intriguing wasn't quite the same thing. When the declaration she wanted wasn't forthcoming, Diana suddenly felt more tired than ever. Lil wasn't interested and it was something Diana would have to get over. All she could do was try to overlook her growing fascination and concentrate on her work. It was why she was here anyway.

"Well, I hope that we find what we're looking for." The words tasted like ash. The truth was that she hoped for so much more than that. "I'm tired. I'd like to turn in. Can you show me where I'm sleeping?"

"Of course. That's a good idea for all of us. We should reach our destination the day after tomorrow."

Lil led her directly to the smaller tent near the fire. While they were talking, the men had dispersed. The only few standing around were those on sentry duty. Diana nodded to the man standing closest to the fire and ducked into the tent behind Lil. The first thing Diana noticed was that the tent was arranged for two people. Camp cots were set up to keep them off the ground.

"We're sharing?" She found the idea disturbing.

"Many of the men are sleeping in the back of the trucks. Others will occupy cots inside the larger tents."

Diana's pack hung from the tent frame adjacent to one of the cots so she moved over to sit down beside it. She planned to sleep in her clothes, but her boots were something else. After placing the utility belt on the ground Diana removed her footwear and slipped under the thin blanket. While she was busy, Lil stood watching her.

“Aren’t you going to sleep too?”

“In a moment. You might want to put the boots into the cot with you. Unless you want camel spiders to take up residence during the night.”

Diana’s face burned in embarrassment that she had forgotten about the little beasts. She relocated the boots to the foot of the cot and rolled over with her back toward Lil. Diana could hear her moving around, readying for bed but didn’t relax fully until the sounds stopped. Curiously, it was Lil’s quiet respirations that eased her into sleep.

Chapter Nine

Lil remained hyper-aware of Diana sitting beside her in the truck. The drive for most of the day had been silent, each of them speaking only when necessary. It had been like this since the first day on the road. Lil hadn't intended to reveal so much when speaking with Diana that first night and remained uncomfortable for the lapse. Diana had a way of breaking through her barriers, despite Lil's inability to read her. Perhaps because of that very fact, she realized.

She snuck a peek at Diana from the corner of her eye, but needn't have worried about being seen. Diana's head rested against the side of the truck, her eyes closed. Her utility belt along with the sidearm rested on the floorboard, but Lil couldn't find it in her to chastise the woman for the security lapse. Lil wasn't wearing hers either and the dark circles on Diana's cheeks indicated how little sleep she'd managed recently. Lil lay nearby each night, witness to her fitful tossing and turning.

During Diana's short snatches of slumber, Lil contacted Kaya through their mental link to ensure the well-being of her owl and that all was on track with the expedition arrangements. Even with the lack of rest and another early start, Diana never complained. Lil found her quiet strength compelling. She was also aware that she could be at least part of the reason for Diana's weariness.

She hadn't missed the interest in Diana's expression as she watched Lil from her place by the fire, an interest Lil returned. There was a time when Lil would have acted on that attraction. That was a very long time ago and Lil thought she'd outgrown such inclinations. She couldn't understand why she even considered another involvement after so long. These things never ended well. Mortals *always* died and Lil was always left alone once more. Determined to put it out of her head, Lil gripped the wheel tighter and concentrated on her mission.

The convoy would need to stop a few times during the day to eat and top off the gas tanks. There wasn't such a thing as a filling station out here, but they'd brought everything required for the journey. Another twelve hours of driving would make for a long day, but Lil thought it worth the time behind the wheel. By taking a longer leg the first few days, tomorrow would require only a few hours on the road. Personally, Lil would rather drive straight through from Istanbul to the Gulf, but she had to make allowances for her weaker companions. Arriving exhausted to their final destination wasn't conducive to quality work or clear thinking.

The radio crackled to life again for the first time in days. Lil reached for the mic. Before her hand ever connected with the plastic, she heard the panic in her spotter's voice. He shouted that the local skirmishes between ISIL and Kurdish forces had expanded. Still twenty miles north of Baghdad, Lil couldn't understand the cause for his excitement. She reached for the mic to gather more information, but halted with her hand inches away. Suddenly, she had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

A high-pitched whistling sound caused Lil to frown and scan the sky. Her limited field of vision through the windshield prevented her from seeing the incoming missile, but she had heard the sound before. An AT4 was the most common anti-tank missile in use anywhere in the world. As sun glinted off of airborne metal, Lil swerved the wheel.

Diana was thrown against the truck door, awakening abruptly as the seatbelt tightened around her body. "What the hell?" she shouted as she braced one hand against the dashboard and grabbed for the door's safety bar with the other.

Lil didn't have the time or inclination to respond. She was far too busy evading the incoming projectile and fighting the wheel as the tires slid through the sand once the truck left the roadway. Lil's jaws clenched as the missile impacted close enough behind them to throw the vehicle forward. The rear tires left the ground, making control a fantasy.

The resounding explosion deafened her momentarily, just as the blinding flash of light prevented Lil from seeing anything in front of her. The crimson inferno engulfed them, flames roaring past the truck before dissipating harmlessly in the air. It was the shrapnel from hitting the remainder of the convoy that did the damage.

Lil lost her struggle with the steering wheel. She felt the truck beginning to roll up on one front tire, heeling dangerously at a canted angle in the prelude to flipping over. Instinctively, she translocated from the cab of the vehicle. Her feet hit the desert sand and she dropped to one knee, off balance from the sudden transfer. Lil could hear automatic gunfire chattering a short distance away and drawing closer. She was on her feet, sprinting toward the truck before the conscious thought to check on Diana even occurred to her.

"Diana!" Lil shouted. There was no response as she approached.

The truck lay on its roof, the hood and door closest to Lil caved in from the impact. The explosion shredded the rear cargo area and bodies lay strewn haphazardly across the distance. Some of the men moaned and attempted to move, but others were twisted at macabre angles that indicated they would never stir again. Parts of the canvas covering the

cargo area were on fire, but Lil's concern was solely for the occupant of the cab.

Lil grasped the bashed in door with both hands and tore it from the frame, heedless of watching eyes. She pitched the ruined metal away and dropped into the dirt to reach inside. Diana's eyes were closed and blood streamed from a cut on her temple. Lil was aware of each drop that stained the roof of the truck and for one heart-stopping moment she thought Diana had not survived the crash.

With trembling fingers, Lil reached inside and pressed against Diana's carotid artery. She felt the flutter of life and almost sobbed with relief. Diana responded to the touch with a moan. She slowly opened her eyes and although her vision seemed a little cloudy, Lil was grateful that she lived.

"I'm going to try and get you out. Grab hold of my shoulders."

Diana nodded and then clenched her teeth from the effort. She grabbed onto the shoulders of Lil's shirt just as Lil unfastened the seatbelt. The restraint let go and Lil gently eased Diana out of the opening. The seatbelt had probably saved her life.

Lil helped Diana to stand and kept one arm around her as she led her away from the wreck. She hadn't time to grab for her crossbow or the utility belt containing Diana's Glock pistol. Diana stumbled slightly and Lil saw her eyes drop to the truck door lying several feet away from the truck.

"Did you do that?"

"It's not important. We have to get out of here before we get caught in the crossfire."

"Crossfire? Who's shooting?"

Diana seemed shaken, cut and bruised, but not badly injured. Lil ignored the nonsensical question and urged Diana to move faster. Lil wanted to check on her men, especially Muhammed, but one look at the burning remnants of the convoy assured her it was pointless. Only the men in the same truck as Lil and Diana had stood any chance of survival.

The skirmish rapidly approached their location. Lil could now hear male, as well as female, voices shouting. Most insurgents were male, but Lil knew that the Kurds also had women warriors. She could sense fear, anger and zealous commitment, along with a myriad of other emotions surrounding them. If she could distinguish these individual emotions, then the fighters were too close for comfort. It was not Lil's intention to become involved in a war.

She urged Diana to run for the cover of a stand of nearby straggly

trees and desert scrub. While Lil could have instantly translocated to safety anywhere on the planet, her abilities would not allow her to take a passenger larger than Pravde along for the ride. She refused to leave Diana behind again as she had when she vacated the truck. Regardless of her instinctive reaction to danger, Lil felt guilty that she reacted as she had.

“Come on! We’re almost there. We can hide among the brush.” Even though that was a bit of an exaggeration, Lil recognized the importance of offering some hope to their situation.

Lil slung one of Diana’s arms around her neck and pulled her along beside her. Diana was slow to respond, giving Lil the impression of being mired in quicksand. Finally, she lost her patience and swept Diana off her feet. She carried her like a small child, easily sheltered in the safety of her arms.

She sprinted among the scrub, hoping to utilize the scorched convoy as additional cover. As the weeds caressed her legs, Lil felt a sense of calm returning. She placed Diana on her feet and encouraged her forward. Too late, Lil realized they were not alone. Lil blamed all of the emotions riding on the breeze for clouding her sight. Regardless, she barely registered the swatch of camouflage colored clothing before they came face to face with a boy with a gun.

He appeared barely old enough to shave, but obstinately pointed the AK-47 at Lil and Diana. One glance told Lil he was terrified. He shouted something she couldn’t understand through the ringing in her ears, but didn’t wait for a response. Lil saw his finger tighten on the trigger. With her hands holding Diana upright, Lil had no chance. She spun around, throwing her body directly into the firing line even as she thrust Diana away.

Bullets hammered into Lil’s body, tearing through muscle, bone and vital organs. Each impact was like a spike of agony. She heard Diana screaming, but only in the back of her mind. Her efforts were focused on the immediate threat. Lil concentrated past the pain and continued swinging around. She swung her right arm in an arc toward the assailant. The heel of her hand connected with the barrel of the AK-47, knocking it into the air. At the same time, she strode forward and head-butted the young man across the bridge of his nose. She felt the crunch of bone and the spray of blood. Soundlessly, he crumpled into the dirt.

With the ruffian either unconscious or dead, Lil gave up on the struggle to keep moving. Her body collapsed forward. She caught herself by bracing her hands on her knees. She closed her eyes and took several

deep, heavy breaths as she struggled not to lose consciousness. A touch on her back reminded her that she wasn't alone.

Diana's hand slid across her back and encircled Lil's waist. The grip was strong and sure and for once Lil was happy to lean on someone else.

"I've got you."

Lil gladly cooperated as Diana eased her to the ground behind the stunted scrub and then dropped down beside her. For a long while, they just lay there as the fighting shifted and moved away toward the foothills. Lil was content to rest in the dirt even though she could feel the life ebbing out of her. Blood flowed from the multiple puncture wounds and foam bubbled out of her mouth with every exhalation. A bullet had cracked a rib and forced the bone into one of her lungs.

Her other injuries were just as grave. Lil figured she had a punctured spleen and damaged kidney at the very least. Another round had taken her high in the left side of her chest. She could sense her body's frantic attempts to repair the damaged heart valve. Anyone else would have died instantly. If she had to be cursed with immortality, why did it have to hurt so damn much when she was gravely wounded?

Diana rose up slowly to her knees, distracting Lil from her morbid thoughts. Her eyes tracked the movement because she had little energy for anything else. After a few more moments, Diana looked down at Lil.

"We're not out of trouble yet, but they moved far enough away that I think I can get to the truck. I'm going to get the first aid kit."

Lil attempted to shake her head. "Don't...don't bother."

She was trying to say that her wounds would heal, but Diana cut her off. "Don't you dare give up on me. You're stronger than that." Her voice trembled with tears, but Lil couldn't see them because her eyes had closed from exhaustion.

"Just..." Lil swallowed past the blood in her throat. "Just a flesh wound."

Lil felt the air displacement as Diana stepped over her and headed toward the wreckage. She would only have a few minutes at most to act before Diana returned. Lil gathered her remaining strength and attempted to reach out toward Imani Bah. As the closest of Lil's companions, Imani would be the logical choice to assist in a rescue. It was no use. No matter how hard she tried, Lil couldn't make the connection.

The gravity of her wounds required all of her strength and abilities to go toward healing. Until then, she couldn't translocate, communicate telepathically or even stand without help.

The sound of someone dropping down into the ground apprised her

that Diana had returned. Gentle hands reached for the buttons on Lil's shirt and she heard the sound of a sharply indrawn breath. Lil forced her eyes open and looked up at Diana.

"This is more than a flesh wound."

Diana quickly removed bandages and antiseptic from the kit. She swiped at the torn flesh gently, cleaning the blood from the wounds that continued to seep regardless. There were too many holes to bandage and Diana eventually settled for binding Lil around the torso and situating a pressure bandage at the shoulder.

"Lil, you need a hospital. I'm sorry, but there isn't much I can do for you."

Lil attempted a smile. "It's still twenty miles to the nearest hospital and we don't have a ride."

Diana didn't respond.

"We need to go," Lil told her. "We can't stay out here in the open."

"Where are we going to go? I'm all ears, but I don't think Greyhound makes any stops this far out and unless you can levitate, I'm open to suggestion."

Levitation was an interesting concept and Lil was just weak enough to be sidetracked by the suggestion. Through sheer willpower, she concentrated. The region had changed over the centuries due to wind, erosion and moving landmasses. Tectonic plate shifting had raised mountains in the area and mountains had natural concealment such as valleys, estuaries and grottos. Sometimes there were even caves. Insurgents often utilized caves as bases of operation so those were to be avoided.

"Help me up?"

"You shouldn't be moving," Diana argued, clearly horrified by the idea. "You need an ambulance."

"Help me up or get out of the way."

Diana's lips compressed together and her face flushed, but she finally relented. She slid an arm under Lil's shoulders and helped her to sit. Lil had to stop there for a moment until she caught her breath. She noticed that her shirt and britches were saturated in blood, but there was little she could do about it. Instead, she climbed stiffly to her feet. Diana kept hold of her as she made the transition from sitting to standing. Lil swayed a little and Diana steadied her.

"Follow me."

"Do you know where you're going?"

Lil briefly closed her eyes again. She wasn't angry, just trying to

figure out how to keep Diana from arguing with every suggestion. “Do you trust me?”

“Considering that you just saved my life and almost got yourself killed in the process? Yes, implicitly.”

“Then let’s go. First, we need supplies from the truck.”

Lil leaned on Diana once again as they made the short sojourn back to the downed vehicle. It felt like a journey of epic proportions. Lil gritted her teeth to keep from screaming with every shuffling step. Sweat poured down her face and tracked down the center of her back, further saturating her shirt. By the time they reached the truck, Lil knew she wouldn’t be able to make it to any decent shelter. She wondered how Diana would react when Lil appeared to die.

Finally, they reached the wreckage and Lil had to sit. She leaned against the side of the truck and panted heavily. Drawing breath was like breathing fire due to the broken rib.

“Get your utility belt. We might need the weapon and ammunition. We’ll definitely need the canteen.” Lil took her own belt when Diana presented it and found her canteen was full. She suspected Diana’s was as well. She was relieved to see that Diana had the forethought to bring the first aid kit with them. “Tie a sleeping mat to the pack and shove as many supplies as you can carry inside. I’ll need my crossbow as well.”

Lil rested her forehead on her knees. She didn’t intend to doze off, but after what seemed only a second, Diana was shaking her awake with a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t do that! You scared the hell out of me.”

Diana held a canteen to her lips and Lil sipped the water, grateful when it flushed the coppery taste of blood out of her mouth. She spit the first mouthful into the dirt before swallowing the rest.

“Do you have everything?”

“Yes, at least as much as I think I can carry for an extended time.”

“Good. Let’s move.”

Lil didn’t attempt to conceal her weakness as she leaned on Diana once again. It wasn’t fair to make her carry everything, including Lil’s weight, but there was no help for it. Lil wasn’t in any condition to do heavy lifting. She could barely place one foot in front of the other as she directed them south. Lil maintained enough awareness to move off the beaten path and toward the nearby range. She soon learned that “nearby” was a relative term.

The foothills of the mountain range were only a few miles from the roadway, but it might as well have been light years. With every step, Lil’s

condition grew more fragile. Blood pumped from her wounds with every heartbeat. Breathing was an agony. When they finally reached a sandy knoll, Lil called a halt.

“I have to rest.”

“It’s about time. I thought you were going to try to be Superwoman.”

Lil tried to smile at the attempt at humor, but couldn’t summon the strength. She grunted in relief when Diana eased her down into a low crevice, her back toward the incline. This spot was out of the waning sunlight and the sand felt blessedly cool to her fevered flesh. Lil put her head back and took one final breath before she gave up the struggle. She felt nothing but relief as her heart ceased to pump.

Diana pulled the first aid kit out of the pack and turned to inspect Lil’s wounds. Through the bloody rags of her shirt and the sodden bandages, it was difficult to assess her injuries. She kept up a steady monologue as she worked to change the dressings.

“I think we’ll be safe here for the night. I brought some dried rations so at least we won’t be hungry before morning. Hey, look. The bleeding’s stopped. Maybe you weren’t hurt as badly as I...”

Diana froze. She couldn’t bring herself to look at Lil’s face for a moment, her eyes pinned instead to her chest. The satin bra encasing small, firm breasts was covered obscenely in ochre. That alone was disturbing, but even worse was the way Lil’s chest refused to rise and fall. Diana’s eyes filled with tears and her head dropped forward.

No, it couldn’t be. After everything they’d survived, Lil couldn’t die. The sun began to set as Diana grappled with the truth. The nightly breeze awakened and lifted Lil’s dark tresses gently from her forehead. The sight broke Diana’s heart and she finally allowed the tears to fall. Throughout their short affiliation, Diana had resisted her attraction to Lil. She had wanted to say something more than once, to discover if there could be anything intimate between them. Cowardice had prevented her from acting and now it was too late. She would never know.

Diana always had the feeling that Lil was lonely, cut off from others in some fundamental, yet unfathomable, way. Because she was such a generous and giving person, it seemed so unfair. Lil had deserved better. She had deserved to know that someone had cared for her. Diana

regretted that she had never said anything, but she would make sure that she took care of Lil now. Scavengers would not find and feed upon her in this isolated desert.

Stiff from sitting so long in one place, Diana groaned as she shifted over to dig through the pack. She didn't have a shovel handy, but a metal camp plate would work. Tears continued to fall softly as Diana dug the edge of the salver into the dirt and began scooping out a shallow grave. She considered her options as she worked.

She had supplies, including two canteens of water and two handguns. She had no illusions about the crossbow. There were also rebel fighters everywhere and Diana was terrified she would accidentally bump into them. Worse yet, she didn't have a clue how to get to Baghdad except by the main road. She'd be a sitting duck if she walked back there.

Diana glanced at Lil's motionless form. In the dim moonlight, she appeared to merely sleep. Somewhere in the distance, scattered artillery fire boomed. It wasn't uncommon in this region although Diana forgot about the unrest until the quiet of the night intruded. Sometimes the flashes lit up the night sky, outlining Lil's pale form. Seeing her like this reminded Diana of the woman's courage. She owed it to Lil to find that same strength within herself. For that reason, Diana decided to chance the road. Rebels had to sleep too. It would be safest to travel at night. As soon as she finished here, she would head back to the road.

Hours later, the hole was finally deep enough. Diana took a moment to wipe the perspiration from her face with a clean bandage and take a sip of water. Then it was time. She grasped Lil from behind with her arms around her chest, ignoring the blisters on her hands from digging with a metal plate. Lil was heavier than Diana had suspected, but she managed to drag Lil toward the furrow. She wrestled Lil's body into the pit and arranged her into a comfortable pose before she stood back to survey her handiwork.

There was nothing more she could do.

Diana began at Lil's feet, shifting dirt back into the hole and covering the body in a systematic way. She told herself that she was just being thorough but finally admitted the idea of covering Lil's face made her feel a little nauseated. When she finished, Diana knew she would have to find some heavy rocks to put over the mound or the wind and scavengers would unearth the remains.

The night was starting to get away from her and Diana tried to pick up the pace. She wanted to be well on her way before the sun came up. The first scoop of dirt onto Lil's chest produced an unexpected reaction.

Lil took a single sharp inhalation. Her body arched upward and Lil's eyes opened.

Diana moved backward so fast that she lost her balance and landed on her butt. She continued to scoot away with thoughts of zombie and vampire movies roaring through her head. Diana couldn't look away as Lil's eyes focused and found her in the darkness.

“Diana Reed. What in God's name are you doing?”

Chapter Ten

“What the hell are you?”

The fear in Diana’s voice made Lil cringe. She had heard it before, but it had never been directed toward her. Lil found it disturbing to be the target of that terror now. In the face of such fear, the only thing she could think of was to speak the truth.

“I am Lil...”

“I didn’t ask *who* you are,” Diana grated. “I asked *what* you are.”

“Then shut up and listen.”

Lil hadn’t intended to react so sharply, but her temper finally prevailed. Her goal to find the artifact created from the Tree of Life was thwarted by someone else’s war. She was grievously injured protecting Diana and temporarily died as a result. Now, although reanimated, the wounds still hurt like hell and Diana was demanding answers. Fine, it was time for the kid gloves to come off.

“I am Lilith, the first woman to walk the Earth. I awakened in God’s Garden, brought to life directly by his breath filling my lungs and I cannot die. I was present when Arthur falsely accused Morgan La Fey and witnessed the arrival of beings from the stars who taught the Egyptians how to build.”

Diana’s brow furrowed in disbelief. “Right, and I’m the Queen of England.”

“You asked for an answer and I have given it. What other explanation would you have?”

“I think it’s far more reasonable to assume you were merely in a light coma and you’ve just awakened from it.”

Lil snorted a laugh and then grimaced in pain. Her wounds had begun to seep again and she recognized the impending signs. If this didn’t prove her words to Diana, nothing would.

“Come here.”

Lil sat up in the trench as Diana reluctantly approached. Her hands trembled as Lil unfastened her shirt to bare her midriff. She pulled the bloody bandage away, wiping the seepage as much as possible to present a clear view of her torn flesh.

“What am I supposed to be waiting for?”

“Be patient.”

Lil held the blood-stiffened flaps of her shirt aside and watched as her stomach began to move. The shifting of her flesh made it appear that

something alive wiggled beneath the surface. Diana gasped and tried to move away, but Lil caught her wrist in a vice-like grip and refused to let go. Fluid streamed from the bullet hole and a moment later, the tip of something emerged. Diana whimpered and wrestled to free herself to no avail. An instant later, a mangled lump of metal surged forth and dropped to the ground with a muted thud.

“It’s one of the bullets that entered my body.”

“How?” Diana whispered.

“I told you, I can’t die. While I might appear dead for a while and even stop breathing, eventually my body recovers and I go on as I always have.”

“I don’t understand.”

She still had that breathless, disbelieving quality in her voice, but eventually Lil knew she would come to terms with the truth. She released Diana and lay back to rest. She still had a lot of healing to do and some of her injuries, such as the ones to her heart and lung, would take a lot more time. Until then, she was the same as any recovering patient and she had needs.

“Would you mind getting me some water?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

Diana quickly retrieved a canteen and handed it over. Lil noticed she was careful not to allow their fingers to touch. She hadn’t even the strength to shake her head in disappointment.

“Are you hungry? Do you even get hungry?”

Lil sipped some of the water before she answered in a deliberately bored tone. “Of course I do, and that would be very nice. Thank you.”

Time passed as Lil consumed a little beef jerky and a ration bar. She waited silently for the barrage of questions Diana would soon begin to fire off at her. It hadn’t happened often that Lil confessed the truth to someone, but the result was always the same. At first, they refused to believe. When they could no longer deny the facts, the questions would pour forth in a torrent, sometimes almost too fast for Lil to keep up.

“You said your last name is Primus, but that’s not true. If you’re really Lilith,” Diana hesitated. “I can’t believe I’m even saying this. I think my brain is about to explode.”

“It is true. I chose Primus because it translates to ‘first.’ I am the first woman.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that. If you were the first, why did...*God*...create Eve?”

Lil covered her smile by drinking a little more water. Diana still had

trouble even though she'd seen the evidence with her own eyes. At least the scientist in her had begun to reassert itself. "Because I was made from the same clay as man, I possessed the same strong will. I refused to bow down. I was considered flawed, an error. Yahweh rectified that error by creating a woman directly from man, from his rib, so that she would feel compelled to do his bidding."

"And the others that you mentioned, the ones from the stars? Are you telling me that aliens actually exist? Please tell me you're pulling my leg on that one."

"So you really believe me when I tell you I am Lilith, but have difficulty ascribing to life on other planets?"

Diana cocked her head to the side, considering the question. "Well, I guess when you put it that way, it does sound a little silly. Look, I'm still not sure I believe any of it. I admit that little trick of expelling a bullet out of your stomach is impressive, but I'm not a medical doctor. There could be a perfectly reasonable explanation."

"Of course there is. That is why I ceased breathing and my heart stopped beating for hours on end."

Diana didn't rise to the bait and Lil allowed the discussion to taper off. As weak as she felt, they needed to get moving. Diana would either come to believe the veracity of Lil's words or she wouldn't. At this point, Lil didn't care. She would recover completely in a day or so, barring further injury, and needed to focus on getting her expedition back on track. To do that, she needed first to know about her men.

"Do you know if any of the men survived the assault?"

"No," Diana shrugged, "I'm not sure. I wasn't really thinking about it. I just wanted to get out of there. I'm ashamed to admit that out loud."

"There is no shame in wishing to survive. It's human nature. I'd like to go back and check on them, but I'm not sure it would be safe to do so."

Diana snapped her fingers. "Damn, I didn't even think about our cell phones. Isn't there someone we could call for help?"

Lil shook her head. "Unfortunately, there isn't any service out here and I can't contact my people. We either expend time going back to check on them or we strike out for Baghdad. We cannot do both, but must make a choice."

"You still need to get checked out at a hospital, Lil. Even if you're some kind of walking miracle, which I seriously doubt, bullet wounds like that need to be treated to prevent infection."

Lil scooted backward out from under the mound of dirt covering her body. She shook her head. "I don't think I'd be much help for anyone

anyway. Although it isn't likely I'll develop an infection, I'm still far too weak. I think we should head for the city and send someone back for Muhammed and the others."

Diana offered her a hand and Lil stood on shaky legs. They gathered the supplies and started walking again. Diana carried everything as she had before and seemed content to let Lil lead. Lil still hurt with every inhalation, but the sharp stabbing pain in her chest had ebbed.

"Are you going to answer my question?" Diana surprised her by asking.

"Which one?"

Diana sighed. "You're going to make me say it, aren't you? Are there really aliens?"

Lil chuckled. "I suppose that depends on your perspective. To them, we are the aliens." Diana grunted and Lil relented. "Yes, they really exist. I went with them for a time and learned so much more than humanity can begin to fathom."

"Why did you come back?"

"I missed my home. I missed Earth. After I returned, I was quickly reacquainted with mankind's aggressive ways and I longed for a return to space, but it was too late. The old teachers who seeded mankind with knowledge were gone. Even they were appalled by the inherent hostility of our backward species."

"Wow, you really don't like people, do you?"

Lil's standard answer when presented with this question was that no, in fact, she did not care for people. She surprised herself when she responded.

"I like you." She attributed the lapse to her still precarious condition. "We should go. I'd prefer to reach Baghdad as soon as possible."

Lil didn't know whether Diana believed her or not, but getting her to agree to travel was another argument. Diana insisted Lil needed to rest, but Lil didn't want to be alone in the desert without her men. She was afraid of what might happen to Diana if she became incapacitated. It was only when she pointed out their lack of security that Diana agreed to move. Again, Lil had to lean on Diana's shoulder, unable to completely support her own weight.

As much as Lil had determined to push onward in her quest, her body refused to cooperate. Lil barely managed another quarter of a mile when she had to stop and catch her breath. Lil refused to look at Diana as she wiped the sweat from her brow. Diana surprised her by throwing the pack at Lil's feet.

“This isn’t working,” Diana sagely pointed out. She squatted and started tugging at the bottom straps on the pack. “I couldn’t carry many supplies so I decided on the shelter half instead of the sleeping mat you suggested. Now, I’m glad I did.”

Until Diana loosened the low-lying tent from the pack, Lil hadn’t noticed the heavy canvas material. She was grateful for Diana’s foresight. Used by the military for combat-type situations, the shelter half would house two people although there wouldn’t be a lot of room to move around. At least it would provide them some protection from the elements and the bugs.

“I’d argue that we need to keep moving, but something tells me I would lose.”

“You’re damn right you’d lose,” Diana snarled unexpectedly. She kept her back to Lil as she yanked the straps loose. Diana set up the tent with sharp movements that easily communicated her anger.

“Are you upset that I didn’t tell you who I really am or that you had to watch me die?”

“Yes!” Diana stopped trying to set up their shelter to confront Lil. “Yes to both of those. I get that I probably wouldn’t have believed you about who you really are. Whatever. But after you were shot you knew your injuries were fatal. You had to have. You should have warned me then what would happen.”

“And still you would not have listened,” Lil said calmly. “You would have blamed my words on a delusional mind, a misconception based on denial of my impending death.”

“So I just had to see it to believe it?”

“Exactly.”

Diana turned away quickly, but not before Lil saw the glint of tears in the moonlight. She set the tent up, keeping her back to Lil throughout the procedure.

“I’m sorry for upsetting you. My only excuse is that trust doesn’t come easily for me. There are a great many who would happily profit from discovering my true identity.”

“Do you think I’m one of those?”

Lil couldn’t interpret Diana’s quiet tone. She sensed the question was loaded with subtext and her answer would determine any future relationship with Diana. Lil didn’t even have the benefit of an expression to go on since Diana wouldn’t look at her. Weak, tired and uncharacteristically vulnerable, Lil stopped trying to steer the conversation. She decided to reply truthfully. If Diana chose to leave

afterward, that was up to her.

“If I thought you were one of those people, I never would have asked you to join my expedition.”

Diana finished fumbling with the equipment and knelt beside Lil. She still seemed tense, but not as angry. “Let’s get you cleaned up. You look like something out of a zombie apocalypse movie.”

Lil wasn’t sure what Diana meant, but happily complied. The gore-stiffened shirt dropped onto the sand, revealing bruised flesh from multiple bullet wounds. The wounds had already knit back together in many places, but others still seeped. Diana used a fresh, clean bandage and some of their water to clean Lil’s skin.

“It looks like some of the bullets punched all the way through. The holes in your back haven’t closed up completely. How’s your breathing? I can hear whistling sometimes when you inhale.”

“It’s a little uncomfortable,” Lil admitted as Diana applied gauze pads to her back. “I think my lung was punctured, but it’s healing. How are you holding up? Your voice sounds...odd.”

“Hmm? Oh, I guess I’m just feeling a little numb. I keep expecting to wake up from a bad dream any second now.”

The comment unexpectedly hurt more than her lacerated heart. It had been a long time since someone compared Lil to a nightmare. That the remark came from someone she was growing to care for stung more than Lil wanted to admit. Lil gritted her teeth to refrain from speaking further as Diana helped her change into clean clothes and crawl into the shelter. Lil stretched out on her back and rested an arm across her eyes, hoping that conversation was finished for the night. As the silence ensued, Lil concentrated on reaching out mentally. The hush from Imani Bah was just as complete as that within the tent.

“What are you doing?”

“Excuse me?” Lil expected Diana to assume she was trying to rest.

“You seem tense.”

“I am in pain.”

“Sure you are, but is that all there is to it?”

Lil sighed. “No, that isn’t all. I’m trying to contact one of my women.”

“One of your women?” Diana asked incredulously. Lil sensed Diana roll toward her onto her stomach though she couldn’t really see anything in the dark. “Is that some kind of chauvinistic euphemism?”

“Not at all. I have several women who work for me.”

“And you’re trying to contact them how, exactly? Osmosis?”

Lil frowned at the laughter in Diana's tone. "No, telepathically. I am able to communicate with them through a mental bond."

"Why didn't you do that before? What are they saying?"

"They are saying nothing," Lil admitted. "I'm unable to reach anyone. Apparently, my injuries are still too severe for me to make the link."

"So, you have to be well to reach anyone? That's not much of a gift if you're in trouble."

"This much I know," Lil mumbled.

Lil quieted again and attempted to focus once more. She took slow, even breaths, relaxing her muscles as she reached out mentally. Lil felt a tenuous tingling, a hint of a tendril of thought snaking outward over the continent. She chased the thread, sure that at any second she would reach Imani.

"How many women do you have working for you?"

Lil lost the link. She scowled. "Uh, seven. One for each major continent."

"Really, that's all? Why wouldn't you have more? Some of the continents are pretty big. Do you know them all personally or is it some kind of job that's passed down as people die? Do you choose them yourself?"

Lil was having trouble keeping up with the questions. She had expected this rapid-fire interrogation earlier and thought the time had passed. "I assure you, seven are enough. Yes, I chose them and know them all personally. Not just anyone can fulfill this role. They do not die until or unless they no longer serve me. Zoe Yates handles Australia, Camilla Romero is in South America, and Imani Bah is in Africa. Imani is closest to our location and it is her I am attempting to contact. Any other questions?"

"How old is the oldest one?"

"Imani was born in 1872. Why?"

"Just curious. Have you reached anyone yet?"

Lil finally lost her patience. "How am I supposed to contact anyone with you continually asking questions?"

The abrupt silence made Lil feel a little guilty for snapping at Diana, but she didn't apologize. She tried to reach out again, slowing her breathing and attempting to follow the bond toward Imani. The wind blew grains of sand against their canvas shelter and the night cooled as time passed. Lil's wounds took their toll and lulled her down into a healing slumber.

Diana awakened to the sound of voices. For a split second, Diana tensed in irrational fear that the insurgents had returned for them. She relaxed when she realized the voices weren't raised in anger and there were no sounds of gunfire. From what she could tell, there were only two speakers and both were female. She easily identified Lil's voice, but not the words since she spoke in an unfamiliar language.

Her first instinct was to race out of the shelter in the hopes that someone had come to their rescue. Diana had already risen onto her knees and started for the exit when she suddenly hesitated. After what she'd learned about Lil the night before, Diana wasn't sure what she'd find waiting for her outside. What if it was an angel, or a demon, or another supernatural being?

Preposterous, she quickly discounted. There were no such things. Right, and Diana had imagined that Lil returned back to life after being perforated like a pincushion by several high velocity rounds.

She pulled the edge of the shelter half aside far enough to peer outside without being noticed. Diana squinted against the bright sunshine. Once her eyes adjusted, she saw a dark-skinned woman speaking with Lil not far away. The stranger was a lot shorter than Lil, barely reaching her shoulders. She wore colorful African garb including a bright orange and yellow head wrap. The woman nodded at something that Lil said and then glanced in Diana's direction. Her sudden smile made Diana think the stranger knew she was being watched.

Suddenly, the woman raised a hand in a parting gesture and simply...vanished. Diana rubbed her eyes, shook her head and scanned the immediate area. She jumped back slightly when Lil entered the shelter very much alone.

"Was that the woman you told me about? Imani?"

Lil settled onto the sand beside her and reached for the water canteen. "Yes. I was able to contact her a short time ago."

"So you're better then?"

Lil sipped the water and nodded.

"That's it? That's all I get?"

"What further answer do you require?"

"Look, can you just try to talk like a real person? I want to know

what's going on. Is she going to call in the troops and how in the *hell* did she vanish like that?" Diana was way past patient. She was frustrated and wanted answers to a hundred different questions all at the same time.

"No, Imani isn't going to call in the troops. She is, however, sending a truck to come and retrieve us. She'll see that arrangements are made to get the expedition back on track so that we may continue our search for the artifact."

Diana waited, but Lil didn't say anything about the people she'd lost in yesterday's attack. "And the vanishing trick?"

Lil seemed to weigh her response, her jaw working as she chewed on the words before responding. "I'm able to translocate..."

"Translocate?"

"Instantly move from place to place at will. I've shared that gift with the women who work for me, although they tend to have a more limited maximum distance."

"Anywhere? Then why haven't you just transported us to safety?" Diana was confused and getting pretty cheesed. She couldn't understand why Lil put them through all this if she had the ability to relocate them anywhere in a wink.

"I can't do it when I'm injured," Lil snapped, seeming to finally lose her own composure. "My body had to heal and that is where all of my energies were focused."

"Okay, that makes sense but what about Muhammed and the others? Is she going to send anyone for them or is that just their tough luck? Oh well, they're dead and it's time to move on? How heartless can you be?"

"Of course I care," Lil snapped, showing some emotion. In the time Diana had known her, Lil rarely appeared anything but completely composed. "Imani will ensure that the men are retrieved and their families notified. Not that it has anything to do with you, but Muhammed was my friend. His loss pains me deeply and his family will be well compensated for his loss."

"But?"

"But he would understand. I have to find the dagger. Or sword, or whatever this artifact is." Lil's voice dropped to a whisper and she refused to meet Diana's eyes.

"Will you tell me what's so special about this relic? I get the archaeological significance of such a find, but why is it more important than the people you've lost? I think I deserve to know the answer."

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me," Diana answered honestly.

Lil shifted around, clearly weighing her response. “The dagger...at least I assume it is a blade of some sort, has the power to end my life. Permanently.”

“Are you kidding me? We’re doing all this because you want to die? Wasn’t last night enough for you?”

It seemed that dying once would be enough for anyone. Diana couldn’t understand why Lil would want to experience that again on purpose. Most people avoided death at all costs. On top of that, the idea of suicide was completely unfathomable.

“Diana, how can I explain this in such a way that you comprehend? How can I describe the never-ending torment of living for eons, of seeing everyone and everything you have ever loved perish? My fate has never been my own. The dagger will end my life for good, at least that is my hope. I just want it to end.”

“Oh, I understand all right. You’re a coward.”

Lil surged up onto her knees, unable to stand inside the low-slung tent. “How dare you? You have no idea what it’s like.”

“To live for centuries? No, I don’t, but I know giving up when I see it. You’ve been given an amazing gift.”

“This is no gift, it’s agony!”

Diana wasn’t convinced. She’d never considered the chance of living forever, but the possibilities were endless. “Think of the things you’ve witnessed. The building of the pyramids, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.”

Lil nodded. “The Black Death in Europe, the Salem witch trials. Believe me, Diana, there is more ugliness in the world than beauty.”

“If that’s all you’re looking for,” Diana allowed. “A gift is what you make of it, Lil. You say your fate was never your own, but I don’t think that’s true. Eternal life is just as much a blessing as a curse, but you’ve decided to see only the negative. How can you be so blind to the wonders all around you?”

“Now you sound like Samael.”

“Who?” The name sounded familiar, but Diana couldn’t quite place it.

“The archangel, Samael. He is the closest thing I’ve ever had to a true friend. Although he can be extremely frightening at times.”

Diana smiled. Ironic how she’d just been thinking that angels were imaginary. “An angel, huh? Haven’t you ever had anyone to love?”

“Of course.” Lil sounded offended, which only amused Diana even more that she could get a rise out of the normally stoic woman.

“Unfortunately, love can never last. Death, at least for most people, always comes.”

“It’s not about that. It’s about the feeling, the love you share with another. Most people only experience that once. You’ve had countless opportunities, and I guess,” Diana hesitated as the truth occurred to her, “now I know why you’re afraid to keep living.”

“I’m not afraid. I’m tired,” Lil argued. “I’m tired of loving so completely and losing everything. No matter how hard I resist, it always happens again.”

The air suddenly felt heavy between them. Diana had the oddest sensation that Lil wanted to say more. She remembered the look that passed between them a few nights ago. She had watched Lil across the campfire, struck by her beauty and the way Diana had started to feel for her. That night, Diana thought there could be more between them. She’d forgotten about that in the excitement of trying to survive an insurgent attack and watching Lil die. Lil’s words reminded Diana of the chemistry between them.

Diana reached out and cupped Lil’s cheek, overwhelmed by the urge to show Lil that life was always worth trying. To her surprise, Lil leaned into the touch. The tear that tracked down Lil’s cheek proved her undoing.

Diana caught the moisture with her thumb. She leaned forward and touched her lips to the humid trail. Lil gasped, the puff of breath sweet against Diana’s mouth. Magnetically drawn, almost against her will, Diana closed the slight distance and kissed her. Lil’s eyes closed and Diana felt her soft, silent moan. A sharp sensation of arousal flooded her mid-section and Diana attempted to deepen the kiss. She touched the tip of her tongue against Lil’s closed lips, anticipating that she would open her mouth. Instead, Lil pulled away.

“It could happen again now,” Diana whispered, lowering her defenses entirely to show her desire.

“No,” Lil grated in a trembling voice. “I can’t watch someone else I care for die. I know you think I’m a coward, but I can’t go through this again.”

Lil pulled away and exited the tent, leaving Diana alone with her whirling emotions. Anger warred with hurt and arousal. She wanted to argue with Lil, to force her to admit that some things were worth the risk. Diana had just started out into the desert heat to pursue the topic, whether Lil wanted to hear it or not, when a truck rumbled toward them.

A heavy black cloud belched from the truck as it roared to a stop,

carrying the stench of burnt motor oil. Lil refused to look at Diana as she spoke to the driver. The man didn't appear too savory, or freshly showered for that matter, and spit a brown stream out in an arc from the truck window. Lil gave a few sharp directions and then headed for the passenger side. She climbed aboard and left the door hanging open.

“Are you coming?”

Chapter Eleven

Gravel and loose sand shifted beneath her boot soles. Lil appreciated the crunching sound, a muted counterpoint to the violent cacophony of distant bombs and sporadic weapons fire. Rebel insurgents fought somewhere a few miles away. They weren't any threat to Lil, at least not physically, but she couldn't help blame the unrest for their current predicament.

Because of the random AT4 strike on her convoy, Lil's men were dead, her equipment lost, and the other divers she'd contracted scattered to the four winds. The trio had decided that the Cradle of Life was decidedly bad for their health and longevity. Now Lil was in a demolished section of Baghdad late at night searching for a contact. A mysterious man sent her a note in the hotel bar, via the waiter, to say he had associates who could provide security to get her expedition back on track. She had yet to determine how this mystery man had learned of her need in the first place.

At least Imani had managed to charter a boat by using some of her local contacts. One of Imani's people, a man, would function as a front for them to avoid the inherent second-class stigma of being female. That left trying to provide sentries for the next phase of the journey. Lil had tried recruiting American servicemen and women, but to no avail. Apparently, they hadn't any time for extracurricular activities.

Lil halted abruptly and scanned the area. For the last week, she'd felt eyes watching her. So far she hadn't seen anyone following her, but she knew someone was there. Her dark clothes ensured she would blend into the darkness and the lack of working electricity would definitely help. There were no streetlights here to give away her presence. She wished she had Pravde nearby so she could see through her eyes, but she was safe at home across the ocean.

When nothing moved in the shadows, Lil continued on her way. Signs of war were overt here with blasted buildings and sporadic running water from broken water mains. Stray dogs ran the streets though none were visible at the moment. The area was being rebuilt through the generosity of the United Nations and countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. Scaffolds and heavy equipment sat quiet for the moment, but Lil knew she wasn't alone.

A man stepped from shadows cast by the partially crumbled brick wall of a ruined school. Lil assumed he was the one she felt watching her.

She saw the arrogance in the tilt of his head, the scowl in his eyes as he expected her to bow down to his masculinity. He wore frayed old camouflage utility clothing that he'd probably taken from a dead soldier. Lil's assessment was based on the bloodstains on the clothes and his lack of obvious wounds. Unwashed, greasy black hair and a week's growth of stubble added to his bad guy image. All he lacked to complete the picture was an eye patch. She didn't care for him, but that wasn't important at the moment.

A cloud moved away from the moon and Lil noticed the crosses carved into both of his cheeks. She had seen people do many strange things to themselves for all sorts of reasons, religion being chief among them. Lil boldly approached the unsavory character, intent on finding out the information she needed and getting back to Diana at the hotel. She tried to ignore the uncomfortable sensations she experienced around this man.

"You have something for me?" she asked in the local dialect.

He smiled, showing several missing teeth. The remaining ones appeared never to have seen a toothbrush. "You are looking for soldiers?"

"Bodyguards," she corrected automatically. "I don't need mercenaries, just some men to protect a diving expedition off the coast."

Dark eyes narrowed and Lil wondered if she'd misspoken. "What is it you seek?"

"That is none of your concern. Can you put me in contact with someone or not?"

The stranger suddenly spat on the ground, a clear sign of his disgust. "Where is your man? Why is a woman here alone? You say you seek protectors and yet you come to such a dangerous place without anyone?"

Lil sensed the escalating tension. She suspected the stranger had set this meeting as some kind of test, one she had apparently failed. Her muscles tightened as Lil expected him to attack. She didn't see a rifle or handgun, but he probably thought her an easy mark. He probably planned to rob, possibly rape and definitely kill her. She would easily break his neck before any of that happened. Lil didn't expect the wickedly sharp scimitar he pulled from somewhere at the small of his back.

"You may kill me, but I am sent to deliver a message by the elders. Throughout time we have watched you and are aware of your true identity. Our mission was ordained by God at the moment of your expulsion from the Garden."

This was different. "What is your message?"

"The Evil One was banished from paradise at Allah's will as were

you. We will prevent your return, even if it means our own demise. The Haimia have sworn this as a sacred oath.”

Lil had assumed his earlier raised voice a sign of anger that a woman would attempt to deal with him as an equal. As he finished delivering his warning, his voice trembled and clued Lilith into her error. She now also had an inkling who sent her the message to be here. The Haimia had orchestrated this encounter. Somehow, throughout centuries, they had followed her and she had never known. Lil felt foolish and that fueled her ire.

“You said you know who I am. You should consider what I will do if you try to stop me from following my quest.” Lil hardened her voice, playing on the man’s fear.

“You are the child eater, the succubus and temptress of men. Bullets and poisons will not kill you, but you cannot regenerate if you are in pieces.”

No, she couldn’t regenerate in pieces. But that wouldn’t prevent her consciousness from carrying on unimpeded. The idea of being awake and aware, yet unable to move was worse than the thought of never-ending life. Lil shuddered in the face of such torture.

Muted light glinted off the blade as he raised it high to signify his intent. He rushed towards her and Lil barely jerked away as the bladed weapon flashed in front of her face. She felt the swish of air as it just missed severing her nose. He spun again, quickly attempting a backhanded slice. Lil’s jaw tightened in irritation. If she had a nickel for every group with a self-appointed mission to kill or maim her. First it was the Knights Templar and now these Haimia.

Before he could connect, Lil translocated. She reappeared a hundred yards away under an intangibility spell. She heard the attacker trip in the rubble as he missed in the attempt to decapitate her. With his target no longer present, the force of his strike threw him off balance. He hit the ground with a muffled curse. Lil rolled her eyes and tossed her head. This was a complete waste of time.

Lil needed to get back. Diana would be worried. Although Lil wanted people to protect the ship and crew during their quest, things were taking too long. She’d already lost a week trying to put the undertaking back together. Lil would give it a few more days, but after that she would go through with the team she had now.

A low growl caused her steps to falter. She quickly discarded the notion that the sound emanated from the Haimia assassin. She had left him far behind and the sound didn’t seem to be one capable of originating

from a human throat. Easily recognizable as a sound natural from a canine, Lil wasn't initially concerned. Stray dogs roamed all over the Middle East. Unlike in some other countries, people in the region were more anxious with their own day-to-day survival to concern themselves with neglected, abandoned, or homeless animals. In her current state, under the intangibility spell, Lil wasn't really worried.

As she stood motionless in the full moon of a beautiful Baghdad night, a huge, shaggy beast rounded a building directly in front of her. Approximately the height of a large wolf, it stood out beneath the moon's glow only due to its silvery gray coat. Judging by the crimson light in the eyes, this was no ordinary canine. Lil would have known that simply by the stench of death assaulting her nostrils. The ragged coat and breath issuing from the open muzzle reeked of blood and rot. Lil fought the urge to gag.

She quickly assessed the direction of the wind and the sound of her own beating heart. She stayed frozen out of an instinctive urge for self-preservation. Though she wanted her mortal existence to end, she had no desire to experience shredding agony pointlessly. Then she remembered the spell under which she stood. Nothing could see, smell or touch her at the moment. Lil had paid a heavy price in gold to the sorcerer Merlin many centuries ago for this ability. Despite the cost, it had proven worth the effort more than once.

The bony head swiveled from side to side as the creature sniffed the air. Lil held her breath as scarlet orbs turned in her direction and stopped, proving her assumption of safety faulty. The muzzle closed and a more intense, rumbling growl reverberated from the heavy chest. Startling intelligence stared out at Lil even as the stench of sulfur grew stronger still.

Lil had never personally dealt with one of these monsters, but she recognized a hellhound when she spotted one. Before she had properly completed the thought, the beast attacked. It launched itself upward with one final snarl. Lil automatically translocated, but managed to limit the distance. She couldn't shift to somewhere that innocent bystanders might be hurt so she moved only a couple of hundred yards. She had used the relocation and invisibility spells so often that she expected the hound to lose her. Instead, it swiveled on its paw pads and rushed her again. Once unleashed, the creature would relentlessly pursue until it dispatched the prey or was killed and sent back to hell.

It charged again, so fast that Lil barely had time to react. Lil spun aside. The jaws closed together with a sound similar to tree trunks

snapping. Simultaneously, Lil chopped downward on the creature's neck with the blade of her hand. She put all of her strength into the move and expected to shatter the hound's spine. Instead, the animal barely flinched.

Teeth flashed in her face and Lil reached for the muzzle. She tried to grasp the upper and lower jaws with the intent of twisting and breaking the mandibles. She missed and the hound's teeth sank into the flesh of her right elbow. The bite was so powerful that the teeth tore through skin, sinew and muscle, finally reaching the bone. The creature's weight threw them to the ground.

Lil heard her own cry of pain, but continued to fight. She wrapped her legs around the hound's torso so that it couldn't rip her belly open with its rear claws. The dog bit down harder and shook its head from side to side, shredding her skin. Blood slicked her body and the ground beneath them. Lil reached around the hound's thick neck with her left hand and grabbed hold of the clamped muzzle. Her fingers slipped in blood and saliva but she persevered. Even as the skin of her fingers parted beneath the sharp teeth, she pried the jaws apart. Her right arm finally free, Lil used both hands to break the beast's neck with one final, powerful wrench.

Rather than falling limp, the heavy body abruptly puffed into a thick, oily cloud. The stench flew up her nostrils and down her throat as though the beast refused to surrender. Lil choked as the cloying presence attempted to suffocate her. The taste of decay on her tongue was too much. This time, Lil did retch. Her stomach heaved and she was thankful for not having eaten.

The reflex had the effect of expelling the noxious fog from her mouth. Suddenly, the cloud collapsed in on itself, withdrawing from Lil and shooting downward. The hound's remaining spirit finally relented and disappeared rapidly into the ground. Now formless and unable to stay in the corporeal realm, the hound hastened back to its master.

Lil lay back on the ground, panting and exhausted. Her arm ached, her fingers burned and her chest felt like someone had poured acid down her throat and it had pooled under her sternum. She fervently hoped it was only a pulled muscle and that she hadn't reinjured her heart. When she could breathe again without sharp, all-consuming agony, Lil struggled to sit.

Her elbow felt crushed and she could barely wiggle her fingers. Already the joint had swollen and turned purple. Despite her injuries, they were nothing compared to those she'd recently endured. Slowly, she climbed to her feet and became aware that her invisibility spell had

dissipated during the struggle. She hadn't the strength to reconstitute it. She had just dispatched a creature sent from hell and was more concerned with wondering about the purpose of the visit. Even if the beast had killed her, she would eventually have reanimated. Lil thought it far more likely that the visit was a warning of some type. She couldn't fathom why, but had no doubt that she must be getting close to something and someone didn't like it.

It took hours for Lil to make it back to the hotel. All she wanted to do was lie down somewhere and sleep. Only her concern for Diana kept her on her feet. Lil wasn't able to relocate by magical means and had to make the short journey under her own more natural power. She deliberately avoided the main lobby doors and took a rear entrance into the building. Fortunately, it was the middle of the night and no one was around to see her disheveled state. Lil gratefully pressed the button for the elevator and took the conveyance to the penthouse suite that she shared with Diana Reed.

She'd never be able to relax until she ensured Diana was all right. Part of her questioned why she cared so much. She allowed that Diana's kiss might have affected her more than she wanted to admit. Either that or she was just getting soft with her advanced years.

"Maybe I'm just tired," she muttered as the door opened to her key card. Somehow, she'd retained the card in her hip pocket throughout the struggle with the hellhound.

With her softly spoken comment, Diana surprised her by sitting up on the sofa in the living area. "Lil?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm sorry that I woke you."

Lil recognized the words for the lie they were even as she spoke them. She was actually happy to find Diana alive and whole. She unaccountably drew comfort from Diana's presence, feeling the tension ease between her shoulders. Diana clicked on a table lamp and Lil flinched from the unexpected brightness.

"You're hurt! What happened?"

Lil tried not to smile. She felt warmed by Diana's concern, but attempted to conceal her expression as she hobbled toward the sofa. Diana quickly made room for her. She leapt up and headed for the small kitchenette while Lil rested on the cushions. Diana returned quickly with a dish of warm water and a cloth. She gently bathed the blood from Lil's arm, hands and face. Her movements were soothing and Lil's eyes watered from the tenderness in Diana's touch.

Diana awoke with a start when she heard the muttered words. She hadn't meant to fall asleep, but the exhaustion and stress of the last few days combined with the late hours had overcome her resolve. Worried because of the disasters that appeared to keep pace with their every move, she had intended to wait up until Lil returned safely.

She had left only the light in the small kitchen burning. It was enough to deduce that Lil had not returned the hail and conquering hero. Concerned, but determined to see the truth, Diana reached up and switched on the table lamp.

"You're hurt! What happened?"

Guilt warred with apprehension as Diana made way for Lil to drop wearily onto the sofa. Blood streaked Lil's right arm, both hands, and dotted her face and clothing. Diana pressed her lips together to halt the torrent of questions and recriminations. She *knew* she should have gone with Lil, if only to watch her back.

Diana left Lil's side long enough to procure some clean water and bandages. As she cleaned, she noted with relief that the most serious injury was the right elbow. Purple and hugely swollen, Diana thought it had to be excruciating. She looked more closely at the wound and gasped when she saw bite marks. She glanced up to see Lil's eyes were closed. Her head leaned against the cushions and she appeared to sleep. Only the tension in her body and lines under her eyes told Diana otherwise.

"Dog?"

Lil smiled softly. "Something along those lines. It was a hellhound."

Diana wanted to believe Lil was pulling her leg and almost said as much. As she hesitated to respond, she witnessed the puncture wounds begin to knit together. Blood stopped seeping and the marks disappeared entirely. Even the swelling looked better than it had only moments before. She swallowed hard and went for a casual tone.

"Are you going to fill me in on what happened or should I just guess?"

Lil's eyes finally opened, her expression one of concern. "Are you angry with me?"

Diana took a breath. "Well, let me think. In the past week I've seen you riddled with bullets, watched you die and come back to life and now you stroll in with a mangled elbow talking about a date with a werewolf."

“Hellhound,” Lil corrected.

“No, I’m not angry. I’m...wh...” Diana raked her fingers through already disheveled hair. “I’m bewildered, flummoxed and on the verge of losing my mind.”

“There is nothing wrong with your sanity, Diana.”

“Don’t get cute or I might get pissed off after all. Just tell me what happened. Did you meet with our contact?”

“I did, but things didn’t pan out.”

“How so?”

“Because it was a set up. He wasn’t trying to help us find security. It was a test.”

Lil told Diana about the man who proclaimed membership in a group called the Haimia. She explained their self-appointed task in keeping Lil from returning to the Garden. Diana was surprised to find Lil so forthcoming, but wasn’t about to squander the opportunity.

“How do you know their task is self-appointed?”

“You mean how did I know God or one of his messengers didn’t assign this responsibility?”

Diana nodded.

“Because things don’t work that way. God doesn’t speak to mortals through burning bushes as he did in the old days. To be honest, I don’t really think he cares about any of this anymore.”

Diana presumed Lil spoke of humanity in general. “And the hellhound?”

“A warning to stop what I’m doing. Which of course makes me all the more determined. If someone sent a hound after me, then I must be on the right track.”

In her excitement, Lil reached out and grasped Diana’s hand. Diana felt the contact to the pit of her stomach, but couldn’t return the gesture since she still held the stained washcloth.

“I thought you said things didn’t work that way.”

“For ordinary mortals, no. You forget I’ve been around since the beginning. Besides, God didn’t send this beast.”

“Satan?” Diana thought her head would explode.

“Lucifer, yes. It makes perfect sense.”

Diana pulled away from Lil’s grasp and tossed the rag into the water bowl. She placed the whole mess on the coffee table. “I’d really like to know how. In what twisted, bizarre, parallel universe does any of this make sense?”

“Samael delivered a message to me from Yahweh that an artifact

existed that would end my life. Clearly, I'm interfering with the intended order of things by encouraging strong women to make this world a better place. God believes in free will above all else."

"But Lucifer likes you meddling in things," Diana guessed.

"It *is* an age old feud and clearly I've become a tool in the game."

"Then it's time to let them fight their own battles."

"Precisely."

The triumph in Lil's tone caught Diana unaware. She quickly realized Lil's point and rushed to argue. "Not like that! Not by finding this dagger and committing suicide. Something tells me that you're looking at things from too simple of an angle."

"Diana, none of this has been simple."

"That's not what I mean. Hear me out." Lil agreed with a nod. "All my life I've refused to believe in religion. God, angels, and demons. It was all a little much. Now, I find out it's all true. I'll grant you that I'm not an expert on the subject, but I seriously doubt that the death of one person can change the course of the entire world."

"What are you saying?"

"Tell me *exactly* what...Samael, is it? What did he say to you?"

Lil responded immediately. "The path to that which you seek can be found in Gobekli. Made from the Tree of Life, your prize will steal your breath away. Be sure of your path, your goal will bring death."

Diana repeated the words over and over in her head. She looked at them from every angle and with every possible meaning that she could detect. In the end, she had to disagree with Lil's conclusion. "Lil, I don't think he meant what you thought."

"What else could it be? Why the hellhound if not to prevent me from following through with ending this mortal coil?"

"I don't know," Diana admitted, "but that prophecy could have more than one meaning."

Lil grew pensive, her eyes narrowed and focused on a point between her feet. Finally, she muttered, "You're right, unfortunately. These things rarely go as planned. I should know, I've been here often enough."

Diana didn't know what she meant, but it was late and this discussion was getting them nowhere. "You're exhausted. Why don't I run you a bath and let you soak while I make you a snack? At least the swelling's gone down in that arm."

"That sounds like a truly excellent idea. I'm covered in things best not mentioned and I'm starving."

"There you go. Two birds, one stone."

Diana stood and offered Lil a hand. For a second, Lil didn't respond. Diana held her breath, sensing that such an uncomplicated gesture would prove a turning point. Blue eyes sought Diana's gaze. At first cold and unreadable, Lil finally relented. Her gaze softened and Lil reached for her. Only their fingers touched, but that meek contact was more tangible than anything else around her. The heat and strength of Lil's touch was more real than the breath in Diana's lungs or the floor under her feet.

Again, Diana experienced the sharp sting of longing in the pit of her stomach, just as she had that night across the campfire. Her eyes were drawn to Lil's full, soft lips. She remembered the sensation of them against her own during the single kiss they'd shared. Had it really only been a few days ago? Diana could easily believe a lifetime had passed since she explored the Cupid's bow with her tongue, tasted the sweetness of Lil's breath in her mouth. Judging from the sultriness in her expression, Lil also felt the desire simmering between them.

Diana cleared her throat and took a step back, encouraging Lil to stand. She quickly released Lil's hand and turned her back, headed for the bathroom. Though the spell of attraction had yet to dissipate, Diana felt a shiver of doubt. After their previous kiss, Lil had stated she couldn't get involved again, that it was too painful. Diana wanted Lil, more fiercely than she had ever craved anyone, but the fear of rejection overrode her hunger. Even if Lil responded to her advances, Diana didn't believe she could stand it if Lil later blamed exhaustion for an emotional lapse in judgment.

She was aware of Lil trailing behind and then standing with folded arms as Diana drew the bath. The tub was deep, promising a veritable nirvana of soaking time. Steam rose from the water, deliberately hot rather than merely warm. Diana wanted the temperature intense enough to unknot overused muscles. She thought Lil would approve that potency since she struck Diana as a woman of extremes. She would never do anything halfway.

"Well," Diana stood and basked silently in the combined heat of the steam and Lil's body. "I'll leave you to it while I make us something to eat."

"Us?" Lil asked softly with a hint of something Diana couldn't identify in her tone.

Diana shrugged. "I haven't eaten either. Do you mind if I join you?"

"On the contrary. I insist."

Diana shivered for an entirely different reason. Her face burned as she slid between Lil and the doorjamb, attempting not to touch her as she

squeezed through the small space. On automatic pilot, she headed for the kitchen. A plate of fresh vegetables, cheeses and dip would be light enough for a late-night snack so as not to induce nightmares. By rote, Diana chopped and sliced, arranging the food in a ring on the plate and placing a bowl of dip in the center.

Slowly, she came to the decision to try for Lil's heart. She didn't want just a sexual encounter. Diana had tried that in the past and it had never worked. Bringing Lil joy and pleasure became the single most important need as she worked. She wanted Lil to realize that death wasn't the only purpose for living. She fervently hoped to show Lil that it was okay to love. Especially since Diana was pretty sure that she already loved Lil.

With all of that in mind, Diana drew a bottle of Dom Perignon from the mini-fridge and popped the cork. Lil had ordered the wine from room service when they rented the room and Diana thought it would be the perfect thing to help Lil unwind. Two fluted glasses joined the tray of food. Diana tucked the icy bottle in the crook of her arm, hefted the tray and padded on stocking feet back into the bathroom. She hadn't thought very far ahead of making a play for Lil's affection and stopped abruptly when she walked in to see Lil naked in the tub.

Of course she'd be naked, Diana thought. What else did one wear into the tub? She couldn't help but notice Lil's perfection. Somehow, she'd expected Lil's body to be covered in scars. From all the stories she'd heard, it just seemed logical. Diana realized that Lil's regenerative abilities would prevent such a possibility. Hard muscle flexed under the milky complexion. Prominent rib bones were visible beneath small, round breasts. Diana's vision dipped lower, encountering the dark triangle at the apex of Lil's thighs. Slowly, she looked up.

Lil opened her eyes, seeming surprised to find Diana standing there watching her. To her credit, Lil didn't comment on the visual inspection. Instead, she nodded toward the tray.

"Are we celebrating something?"

"Uh?" Diana shook her head, focusing her thoughts. "You mean the champagne. Yes, we are definitely celebrating. You survived a werewolf attack..."

"Hellhound."

"And that is always a cause for celebration."

It was a lame excuse for the alcohol, but Diana went with it. She settled the tray onto the vanity across the room and then strode over to stand looking down at Lil. For a moment, she was undecided how to

begin. Then she made her decision.

Diana squatted onto her knees and reached across Lil's body to take the soap cake from the cubby. A washcloth floated in the tub and she reached for it without hesitation. Lil's arched eyebrow proved no deterrent. If Lil wanted Diana to stop, she would have to say so. Diana soaped up the cloth and then said, "Lean forward. I'll do your back."

Lil did as requested and Diana concentrated on washing her. At first, she scrubbed vigorously, but slowed as the fear of rejection dissipated. She hadn't been sure Lil would acquiesce, but now that she had, Diana intended to follow through with her plan. She wasn't much of a seductress, but that wouldn't keep her from trying.

Diana gave up the appearance of bathing Lil. She dropped the rag and used both hands to massage Lil's shoulders. At the first touch, Lil moaned. Diana gasped slightly at the sound and felt her nipples harden. She kept the pressure firm, working out the kinks without encouraging Lil to fall asleep. Slowly, she slipped downward, absorbing the sensation of Lil's skin beneath her palms. When she reached Lil's lower back, she couldn't go any farther without grasping intimate flesh. Diana began on the biceps closest to her.

"That feels so good."

Diana hoped Lil couldn't hear the way her heart skidded off her ribs. She moved all the way down Lil's arm and included each finger. Diana couldn't do more in their current position without crossing an imaginary line. She didn't think Lil was quite ready for that. Diana turned to gather the tray, but stopped and reached for a glass of the golden bubbly. She took a healthy swig to fortify her nerves. Then she put it back and grabbed the tray. By the time she spun around, Lil had lain back to watch. She seemed unconcerned by her nudity though Diana couldn't read her emotions behind half-lidded eyes.

"Here you go. A little wine will help you relax more."

Lil accepted the glass and took a small taste. "Diana, I'm not sure this is such a good idea."

"I thought you said you were hungry." Diana pretended to have no idea what Lil meant. She reached for the platter and held it out.

Lil ignored the food. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I've never been more sure of anything."

Diana took Lil's glass with her free hand and returned everything to the tray. Lil didn't resist, nor did she move to vacate the tub.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

“Why me? Is it just some thrill, sleeping with a child eater and temptress of men?”

Diana smiled. “First off, I doubt you’ve ever eaten a child, but no, it’s not for the thrill.” Diana rose up onto her knees. “You sound angry, but I know you aren’t. I’ve seen the truth in your eyes.”

“Oh really? What truth is that?”

“That you want me as much as I want you.”

“Diana, just because we want something doesn’t mean it’s a good idea.”

Diana braced her hands on the porcelain. She leaned forward until she was only a breath away. “That’s your fear talking. I know you have commitment issues, but some things are worth living for, Lil.”

“Oh really? Like what?”

So close together, Diana felt the whispered words on her face. She licked her lips and inadvertently brushed Lil’s lower lip. Diana’s eyes closed from the exquisite taste. She almost forgot the question.

“Love.”

Consumed with need, Diana was no longer worried about rejection. She cupped Lil’s face between her palms and kissed her gently. At first a simple press of their lips, Diana sought to reacquaint herself with the soft velvety feel and habit-forming sweetness. Lil didn’t move beyond pursing her lips. Diana took it as an invitation, but wanted Lil to be as eager as she was. She didn’t know how to accomplish that except through speaking her heart.

Diana pulled just far enough away to speak. “You see the eons you’ve lived as a curse, but you’re wrong. Time is a powerful wave that can crash down and engulf us. But that’s not a bad thing, Lil. *This* is not a bad thing. This is extraordinary, all by itself. You just have to be strong enough to see it.”

Diana kissed Lil again, once on the lips and then each cheek. She moved to Lil’s ear and kissed the lobe. “The real question is, am I pressuring you into something or do you want this too?”

In response to the question, Lil’s arms rose from the now cold water. Diana went willingly when Lil reached for her. The kiss that followed wasn’t as tender as before. Lil separated Diana’s eager lips and the passion soon grew too fierce for their current location.

Diana reached for a towel and wrapped it around Lil’s shoulders as she stood. Neither worried about draining the tub. They fell into bed in the first room of the suite they came to. It was Lil’s. Cocooned in Egyptian cotton, enveloped by Lil’s scent, Diana allowed Lil to

remove her clothing. Lil's naked weight pressed Diana into the mattress. Diana felt overwhelmed. She was far too aroused to distinguish all of the individual sensations hammering through her nerve endings. She lost track of time and space as Lil kissed and caressed her body. Diana stroked Lil's back with her fingertips, skimming downward over the rise of her hips. Her fingers came to rest in the crease between cheek and thigh.

Sharp teeth nipped Diana's neck, causing her to moan. As Lil loved her, Diana finally realized that heaven did exist. She'd discovered it here in Lil's arms. Diana let go of her ego, no longer concerned about being too heavy. Lil made her feel cherished, never hesitating to touch or explore. Diana gave herself over completely, eventually crying out her satisfaction as Lil relentlessly and repeatedly drove her to completion.

Afterwards, Diana returned the favor. She used her entire body, lips and tongue to try and convey the depths of her devotion. Lil had become everything to her in such a short time and this was the only way to express that truth. When Lil surrendered to her, groaning in orgasm, Diana wept grateful tears. She didn't know what she had done in her life to deserve this gift, but she would embrace it for as long as Lil would have her. Even if that proved for only a single night. Diana knew she could live on the memory of this experience, every taste and every touch, forever.

Chapter Twelve

Lil stood atop the sun deck on the one-hundred-foot yacht. Standing out here with the sun reflecting off the Persian Gulf waters and the smell of the sea, Lil felt there were endless possibilities ahead. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this way and sensed that the unexpected relationship with Diana was at the heart of these new emotions. Lil wanted to explore the depths of those feelings, but realized she wasn't being fair to Diana. Once she found the relic, her life would end and Diana would be alone. It was for the best. Eventually, Diana would discover that she belonged with someone more like herself, someone more positive. Someone who hadn't seen so much darkness.

With her eyes closed, Lil concentrated on the feel of the sun on her face. Her inner vision had merged with Pravde's. The snowy owl soared overhead and Lil could see for miles. Over the last week, Lil could be found here checking their surroundings and ensuring their safety. She felt more content now than she had in a very long time, years it seemed.

"Everything all right?"

Lil opened her eyes and focused on Diana. Her brow was furrowed in concern. "Perfectly fine. Nothing but empty water all around."

Diana glanced overhead as a flapping sound approached. Pravde barely missed touching her with her outstretched wings as she landed on Lil's forearm.

"That's amazing. How exactly does that work?"

"We have a special connection," Lil explained. She stroked Pravde's back as the owl preened. "I'd say it's telepathic, but it goes much deeper than that."

"Can I pet her?"

"Of course."

Lil remained still as Diana reached out. She sought to reassure Pravde through their link, but the owl never flinched. Lil reveled in the awe on Diana's face as she touched the bird with only her fingertips.

"She is an amazing creature. Is she always there when you call for her?"

Lil had surprised herself recently by telling Diana everything about herself that she could think of. She loved the fact that Diana asked about the bird with curiosity rather than trepidation. "Always. She is a great friend."

"Well, that's clear," Diana chuckled.

Lil smiled in return.

“Has she ever accepted another human being the way she does you?”

Lil wondered if Diana was hoping to occupy a place in the bird’s heart. The very idea of such a wish touched her. Lil had to take a moment to clear the lump from her throat. “Believe me, I’d love nothing more but so far Pravde has shown no such inclination. Still, if anyone could change her ways, I think that person would be you.”

“Can you call her when you’re injured?”

Lil shook her head. “No, I’m afraid that when I’m hurt, all of my energies go into healing. I’m fine now, if that’s what troubles you.”

“That’s good to know.” Diana’s tone had dropped to something incendiary, her gaze a smoky promise.

Lil swallowed. “Why is that?”

Diana moved a step closer and Lil felt a trickle of nervous sweat slide down her temple. “It’s good to know that you’re in perfect health. I intend to take advantage of that. Later.”

Lil glanced around and noticed a couple of crewmembers strolling by on the lower decks. She and Diana shared a room on the yacht, using the excuse of safety in numbers, but the crew wasn’t deaf. “Uh, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why? I can be quiet if you can.”

Having spent a long and loving night with Diana before leaving Baghdad, Lil doubted that very much. Diana was an extremely thorough, albeit vocal, lover.

“Somehow, I believe you are lying. Now if you’re through trying to tempt me, how about we plan our next dive?”

Diana relented though the fire in her expression dimmed only slightly. “Fine, spoilsport. Let’s go into the salon. I could do with some tea while we go over the map.”

Lil and Diana retired to the main deck’s comfortable sitting room. Wood paneling and plush carpeting gave the boat a luxurious feel, completed by the heavy, overstuffed furniture and cherrywood tables. They settled next to each other on the sofa to begin pouring over underwater scans of the region as well as maps outlining areas already explored.

Utilizing dual axis sonar scanning equipment, they had two and three-dimensional images of the Gulf area they currently explored. Lil had printed a hardcopy since she preferred the feel of paper to staring at images on a computer screen. To date, they had explored sites between fifty and one-hundred-sixty feet. Nothing had panned out.

“What if we moved farther south and west, maybe toward Kuwait?” Diana proposed.

“I don’t know. It seems like the Garden should be in this area. Granted I was thrown out of there eons ago, but the memories haven’t faded all that much. A single river watered the Garden. When it left the Garden, it broke into four headwaters.”

“I understand that,” Diana pressed, “but the waters are too shallow in the northern region to hide a huge garden.”

“It just doesn’t make any sense.” Lil banged a fist on the table.

“Hey, it’s okay. We’ll figure it out.”

Her words were meant to be reassuring, but Lil didn’t miss the sadness in her eyes as Diana turned away. The idea of seeking death didn’t rest well with Diana, but Lil couldn’t lie to her. This was still her goal.

“Maybe we’re looking at this all wrong.”

“How so?” Diana asked.

“We know that over time erosion can bury entire cities. Perhaps the Garden does lie to the north near the Faw harbor.”

“So, what? We pretend to anchor off of Faw and dive around the edges of the harbor? Would it be deep enough?”

Lil tried to picture the area in her head. Silt and sludge could have covered the Garden, but there would be signs of it that might show up with satellite imagery. The real trick would be avoiding detection by local authorities. Anything they found would be confiscated by the government as part of the country’s history.

“Perhaps. Water levels have risen over the centuries and erosion could contribute to concealing the oasis.”

“Okay,” Diana conceded somewhat reluctantly. “I guess it’s time we turn this ship around.”

“I will let the captain know. We can plan our dives for tomorrow morning.”

Lil stood and Diana followed her example. A touch on her arm prevented Lil from leaving the room.

“You’re not going to tell him what we’re doing?”

“That would not be a good idea,” Lil admitted. “So far, he thinks us merely eccentric, rich westerners, but if he finds out what we’re after...”

“Things could change. I wish we had more people to help with this. It seems like it’s taking forever. Can’t you just *beam* from place to place and check these things without anyone knowing?”

“It certainly would be faster, but if I could do that I already would

have. I still need oxygen and time to look around. Besides,” Lil teased, “it’s more fun this way. I enjoy spending the time with you.”

Lil surprised herself with the admission. The moments of gentle connections with Diana had grown over the last few days. She had expected to panic after having sex with Diana, but it never happened.

“That’s sweet,” Diana said, reaching to clasp her hand.

Lil squeezed and released her. “Why don’t you plan our dive while I speak with the captain? What do you say to dinner on the sun deck today?”

“Sounds great.”

Lil left her in the shadowed cabin and made her way forward. She found the captain near the bow. Pravde ruffled her feathers as they approached the man’s back. She dug her talons in a little deeper and Lil glanced at her in concern. The bird didn’t like this man, but so far, he’d done nothing untoward. Lil agreed with Pravde’s opinion, but didn’t really care about the impressions he gave. As long as he performed the tasks for which he’d been hired, Lil had no complaints.

“Captain Shirazi, I’m afraid we’ve had a change of plans. We’d like to head back to port in the morning.”

Shirazi squinted at her beneath his sweat-stained cap. Lil could have sworn she spotted a momentary sense of concern in his dark eyes. “Of course. May I inquire as to the change of plans?”

Since her cover story was an American on vacation, Lil couldn’t exactly tell him the truth. She shrugged to illustrate a casual indifference. “I guess we’re just ready to feel solid ground beneath our feet.”

“Then you did not find what you’re looking for?”

“Who says we’re looking for anything?”

Shirazi looked down and sketched a shallow bow. “My apologies. I simply assumed from the pattern of dives you have made the last few days. I meant no disrespect.”

Lil thought his behavior a little odd, but let it go. Making more of the comment would accomplish nothing. “Think nothing of it. Would it be possible to have dinner early tonight, perhaps in about an hour?”

“I will see to it.”

The sun had begun to set over the Gulf waters. Lil and Diana

occupied a small, circular table covered with a linen cloth. The elegant flatware, china and crystal setting added to their image as rich, vacationing Westerners. Although a champagne magnum resided in a nearby ice bucket, it was merely a prop. They drank water. Lil's physiology prevented the alcohol from affecting her during a dive, but it wasn't the same for her companion. Diana refused to drink while they were in the water so much.

Lil took in the highly romantic venue, made complete by the scenery, the exquisitely prepared meal and the company. Her eyes rested briefly on Pravde, who resided on a nearby rail. She preened contentedly after a dinner of fresh caught fish. Lil jumped slightly when Diana grasped her hand.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

Lil quietly assessed her companion. The soft intensity Diana directed at her took Lil's breath away. She felt tingles of arousal and fear in equal measures. Diana ignited fire in Lil's blood, but terrified her because of the emotions she generated. Regardless of her fear, Lil wasn't inclined to run.

“At one time, I would have maintained a relationship with you until we accomplished our goal.”

Diana's eyebrow rose, communicating her amusement. “You mean the goal where you commit suicide and leave me behind?”

There was an undercurrent of doubt and anger threaded throughout the sarcasm. Lil felt a flash of fury, but quickly let it go. She understood that Diana's reaction was prompted by her tumultuous feelings. Lil bypassed the question to focus on expressing her heart.

“Somehow, you've managed to convince me to let you in, something I swore I'd never do again. I realize this isn't easy for you. You know you're essentially contributing to helping me find the instrument of my demise.”

Diana squeezed her hand and said softly, “I'm hoping you'll change your mind before we get to that point. I'm hoping you'll see that what we have right now is worth living for.”

She felt tears prick her eyes. Lil opened her mouth to respond, to say anything that would express the depths of her affection. Before she could speak, the roar of a fast-approaching vessel filled the air. A hail of automatic gunfire inspired Lil to leap across the table. Dishware crashed to the deck, adding to the cacophony as she tackled Diana out of her chair. Dimly, Lil was aware of Pravde taking flight to escape the bits of lethal metal. Lil clasped Diana closely to her. She kicked over the table and pulled Diana behind the lightweight shield. It wasn't a lot of

protection, but it was better than nothing.

“What the hell?” Diana shouted, cowering closer to the wooden floor.

Lil wondered the same thing and quickly propelled her awareness into Pravde. A cigarette boat sped around the yacht, executing a tight arc in order to make another pass. A handful of angry men had targeted the yacht. Lil couldn’t imagine their possible motivation until she caught a glimpse of a familiar image. She directed Pravde to fly closer. Lil felt the owl’s initial resistance. The instinct for self-preservation was strong in the bird, but loyalty won out.

Pravde glided on a thermal current, dipping lower. The men aboard the craft weren’t interested in the owl. With a closer view, Lil identified the dual crosses carved into the men’s cheeks.

“Haimia.”

“Those guys you told me about before? What are they doing here?”

Lil had no time to respond to the frantic questions. Already, she was assessing the situation through Pravde’s perspective. The attacking men had automatic weapons, but apparently not an unlimited supply of ammunition. Lil couldn’t see ammo boxes or any other weapons lying on the deck of the smaller craft. Other than the magazines inside their AK’s or any clips carried in their pockets, Lil thought that the extent of the threat.

“Stay here. I’ll try to draw their fire.”

“You can’t be serious!”

Lil scampered away, heading for the lower deck in an attempt to reach her crossbow. The ship’s crew had already begun returning fire. Lil tried to stay out of the way of flying rounds as she scrambled toward the cabin she shared with Diana. She’d only recently healed from her previous injuries and didn’t relish the agony of another gunshot wound. A round passed closely enough that Lil felt the heat. It pounded into the wooden frame of the pilot house before she could hustle below deck. She heard one of the crew yelling in anger as he returned fire.

As Lil entered the stateroom, she silently cursed herself. It was such a habit to maintain her identity that she hadn’t even considered translocation. With the men occupied in such a dire situation, it was doubtful anyone would have noticed. Lil grabbed the crossbow and her quiver of steel bolts. She slung the arrows onto her back and made up for the previous oversight by relocating directly to Diana’s side.

To her relief, Diana was still alive. She huddled against the gunwale farthest from the attackers. She had dragged the table over with her to create questionable shelter.

“That was fast.”

“I hate to keep a lady waiting.”

Lil took up position at the opposite side of the deck, using the hull for concealment. She squatted down and pulled the crossbow into firing position. Lil closed her eyes, drawing on the link with Pravde to gain information on the marauders. The cigarette boat was just pulling around the stern of the yacht and coming back for another pass. Lil saw one of the men concentrate his fire on the craft and instinctively ducked as an explosion shook the planks under her feet. The driver kept going and Lil saw the perfect moment to return fire. She hadn't any need to sight in with the weapon, having already done so through Pravde's eyes.

Her finger tightened on the trigger as Lil stood. The crossbow dispatched the dart down range with terrible haste. The bolt passed halfway through one of the men, the point visible as it emerged from his back. Rather than drop his rifle and fall dead to the deck, the Haimia's finger tightened on the trigger. An expression of fierce concentration gripped his visage as he tried to remain standing. While he lost the struggle and dropped to his knees, he still managed to empty his clip.

Lil threw herself backward away from where the rounds tore through the gunwale. The man missed hitting her, but Lil heard Diana cry out in pain. Her head whipped around and she saw that Diana had suffered a flesh wound as a stray round scraped the skin on the outside of her left shoulder. Despite the minor injury, fury caused Lil's vision to grow crimson. She stood without regard to her own safety and began firing the deadly steel bolts in rapid succession. Her arrows all hit the mark. Two men fell into the water as the driver crouched and sought to evade the onslaught. Two more lay dead on the deck. Only the driver remained. He angled the cigarette boat on a collision course with the yacht. From where he crouched behind the wheel, Lil didn't have a clear shot.

With only seconds to spare, Lil directed a mental shout to her airborne companion. Pravde reacted at once, folding her wings and zipping into a dive. She headed toward the driver, zeroing in on him from behind. Lil witnessed the exact moment when some instinct told him he wasn't alone. The Haimia turned his head and saw the owl. He flinched back in surprise and inadvertently yanked the wheel. The unexpected momentum flipped the man over the side and he hit the water with a splash. The boat angled slightly off course, now at an angle toward the yacht and no less threatening.

“Hang on!” Lil yelled as the craft headed directly toward the yacht's bow.

She felt the shudder as the two vessels collided. Lil barely managed to follow her own advice, gripping the cleat on the upper gunwale as she was thrown off her feet. The crossbow clattered to the deck, but Lil's body flipped over the side. Her formidable strength allowed her to hang on and after a second the harsh vibrations stopped.

The air seemed unnaturally silent with the cessation of gunfire. Lil hung in place for a moment, attempting to get her wind back and push the quiver out of her face with her free hand. Pravde briefly touched her mind, assuring Lil of her safety.

"Diana, are you all right?"

She didn't respond, but Lil could hear her rasping breaths. Lil considered that Diana might be even more injured than she thought. Lil pushed the quiver behind her and reached up to grasp the gunwale. She pulled herself upward, resembling a woman attempting a pull-up. When she could see over the edge, she froze in surprise.

The captain of the ship, Shirazi, had his back to her. He was trying to get to Diana, but she kept the table between them. Sometime during the altercation with the Haimia, the captain had pushed up his shirtsleeves. Lil instantly noticed the cross carved into his forearm. It was the same as the ones carved into the faces of their attackers. In his other hand, he held a knife.

"You want to hurry up here?" Diana asked sharply. She danced backward as Shirazi slashed out at her.

Lil catapulted herself onto the deck and raced toward them. Shirazi heard her pounding feet and swung around just as Lil reached him. Lil had struggled with enough people in the past to know that in a knife fight, one was usually cut. That didn't happen this time as they were too close. Shirazi hadn't time to complete his move before Lil blocked his wrist with her forearm. She struck him hard enough that the knife went spinning away.

Shirazi tried to kick her, but managed only to put his knee into Lil's midsection. There wasn't enough force behind the blow to do any damage. Lil grabbed Shirazi under the jaw and shoved him against the gunwale, pushing him backward.

"It's me you want," Lil grated. "Why did you try to hurt her?"

"She is with you. That is all the motive I require." Conviction colored Shirazi's expression, unblemished by any fear for his own demise. "We will keep you from returning to the Garden. No matter how many of us you kill, you will fail."

"Captain!" someone shouted from below. "What are your orders?"

Lil had precious little time to decide on her next course of action. The crew wanted to know how to react to the recent attack and Lil was faced with a choice. If she let the captain go, he would probably order his men to kill them both. She could translocate away from here, but wouldn't be able to carry Diana with her. Lil refused to leave her behind. That left only one alternative. With a sharp, upward twist, Lil broke Shirazi's neck. He slumped forward, but Lil held him up to keep the impact of his body against the deck from alerting the crew to her actions.

"Lil! What the hell?"

Diana's harsh whisper couldn't have carried to the crew and Lil spared her a quiet glance. Then she reached down and grasped Shirazi's trouser leg. She pitched him backward over the gunwale and heard his body hit the water far below.

Lil didn't bother to look over the side. She walked over to the steps and looked down at the first mate. "The captain is dead. One of the bullets must have hit him. He fell over the side."

Concern visibly warred with philanthropic motivations. With the captain gone, the first mate no doubt realized he was now in charge. Lil didn't wait for all of the ramifications of the truth to occur to him. Instead, she sought to distract him by reinforcing the fact.

"The ship is yours."

He nodded and glanced away, clearly attempting to decide his next move. "We will return to port. The yacht now belongs to Shirazi's brother."

The first mate, a man whose name she had never bothered to learn, had managed to surprise her. Lil expected him to make a more mercenary call. Apparently, he had a larger sense of honor than she thought. Lil didn't know how to respond.

"That sounds like a good idea," Diana said. Her voice trembled, but she didn't hesitate. "I think we're done out here anyway. How damaged is the yacht? Can we make it back okay?"

"The damage is minimal. We will head back as soon as we can. I must ask you both to return to your cabin and not interfere with crew duties."

A polite way of telling them to stay out of the way, Lil thought. "We understand. Of course, I'll make sure you and your men receive a bonus for your trouble."

He merely nodded and walked away to begin issuing orders. Lil turned back to Diana, troubled by the expression she encountered. Lil couldn't name whether it was fear, anger or disappointment. Strangely,

the last of those possibilities bothered her the most.

“I’m sorry, but I had no choice. He would have ordered the crew to kill us.”

“And you think they would have?”

“Without a question. The crew swore their loyalty to Shirazi.”

“Well,” Diana said quietly. “I suppose we’ll never know.”

Lil reached out to touch her shoulder, but Diana flinched away. She walked by Lil without meeting her gaze. In seconds, Lil stood alone on the sundeck. Somehow, she felt like she’d just lost something infinitely precious. Lil had never asked for a personal relationship with Diana and it surprised her when it happened. Now, it appeared she had irreparably damaged their connection in attempting to save Diana’s life, but Lil couldn’t find it within her to regret that decision, no matter the cost.

Chapter Thirteen

Lil was grateful she'd had the foresight to book the largest suite possible at the hotel in Faw. That wasn't really saying much since Faw was a far cry from a big city like Baghdad, with only a fraction of the population. She was relieved to have a sitting area of any kind here, even if the room bore a close resemblance to a kitchen pantry with barely enough space for a small end table and a sofa. At least they had two bedrooms. After yesterday's attack and the captain's death, Diana had retreated into her room and closed the door.

Lil sighed and refilled her coffee cup, disappointed that they hadn't managed the planned dive this morning. She sipped the slightly bitter beverage and gazed out the balcony's glass door. Sunlight glinted off the nearby water, promising another warm day. Lil tried to believe it was the lost opportunity to search for the Garden that left her feeling so melancholy.

A door opened unexpectedly. Lil turned to see Diana finally emerge, carrying a freshly showered scent with her. Diana eyed the mug in Lil's hand.

"Any coffee left?"

"I just made a fresh pot."

Lil kept silent, watching Diana putter around in the miniscule kitchen area. She wanted to ask any one of a hundred questions. Was Diana still angry with her? Was she ready to end their affiliation? Worse yet, did she regret ever meeting Lil? The unfamiliar sting of fear kept Lil quiet. If Diana did desire to return home on the first available transport, she'd have to initiate that conversation herself.

Diana joined Lil a moment later, looking out toward the harbor as she blew on her coffee. Lil's heart sank when Diana still refused to look at her directly.

"Where's Pravde?"

Lil placed her mug on the table. It felt like the coffee she'd ingested had become a stone in her belly. "I took her home last night. The situation is just too dangerous. I didn't want to take a chance she'd be harmed."

"I see."

The simple phrase carried a wealth of implication. Lil sensed she'd failed Diana again. The frustration was finally too much. "I'm going to get dressed and head down to the harbor. I have a dive to get in before the day is over."

Lil spun on her heel and strode for her room. She had stowed her gear in the bedroom closet, or what passed for a closet.

“Don’t you want me to come with you?”

She halted in mid-stride, unable to detect any inflections in the question and too afraid to read anything in it. “Do you want to come with me?” Lil asked over her shoulder.

“Well, that is why I’m here, isn’t it?”

The derision in the query was the last straw. Lil didn’t appreciate the passive/aggressive behavior and was tired of tiptoeing around the issue. She turned around to confront Diana head on.

“Diana, I understand you’re furious with me for eliminating Shirazi, but just say it. I know my actions seemed extreme to you, but I had to do it.”

“Is that what you think? That I’m mad at you for killing a man who tried to murder me first?”

“Isn’t it?” Lil challenged. She was surprised to feel her pulse pounding. Adrenaline sang in her veins, generated by Diana’s emotional and physical distance of the last several hours. She didn’t know when Diana’s opinion of her had become so important, but the fact that it had angered her all the more.

“No. God no. I’m not mad at you at all. If anything, I’m pissed at myself. I’ve been so stupid.”

“What are you talking about?”

Diana placed her mug next to Lil’s and then reached out to grasp her hand. “Come sit with me.”

Lil allowed Diana to guide her to the sofa. To her surprise, Diana sat with their thighs pressed close together. Lil reveled in the contact, focusing on the sweet touch as an anchor in her confusion. She waited nervously for Diana to speak.

“After you...after Shirazi died, I realized I’d been treating all of this like a game. I never really took any of it seriously and I almost got you hurt.”

“By Shirazi?” Lil was more confused than ever. “Diana, you know that I can’t die.”

“That’s not the point. I almost got you *hurt*. You’re so damn willing to put yourself in danger to protect me, but do you think you’re the only one who cares? I can’t stand the idea of seeing you in pain because of me.”

Diana’s distress was palpable, made all the more acute because Lil had never sensed her emotions before. The exquisite sharpness of that

first contact threatened to steal Lil's breath away. She quickly released Diana's hand and faced her across the small distance. Lil cupped Diana's cheeks between her palms.

"Hey now. Where's all this coming from?"

To her surprise, Diana blinked away sudden and unexpected tears. "The Haimia, Shirazi...the whole thing was my fault."

"I'm sorry, but I just can't see how that's possible. The Haimia targeted me as soon as we arrived in the area."

"Exactly. You told me all about them and the crosses carved into their skin, but I didn't listen. When I saw the marks on Shirazi's arm, I never put it together that he was with them."

"You mean you saw his brand when he tried to kill you? It was too late by then. The damage was already done."

"No," Diana said vehemently. "I saw it the first day we left port. One of the anchor cables jammed and Shirazi rolled up his sleeves to help get it loose. As soon as he saw me looking at the scar, he left the deck. I just thought he was embarrassed or something."

Diana shifted farther away on the cushions. She remained close enough to talk, but far enough away to make contact difficult. Inherently, Lil knew Diana needed that distance to deal with her guilt, but Lil couldn't hold anything against her. She was too relieved and touched. Relieved that Diana's anger wasn't directed toward her and touched that her tumultuous emotions were rooted in her feelings for Lil. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had cared for her so deeply.

"Diana, let it go. There is enough blame to go around. I told you the Haimia had scars on their faces. It never occurred to me they would mark themselves elsewhere. There's no way you could have made the connection."

"But I should have."

"Shh."

Lil scooted closer so that Diana was essentially pinned between her and the sofa arm. She couldn't think of anything else to say that would express how Diana's devotion softened her heart. Instead, she leaned forward until Diana's lips were a whisper away. Lil hesitated, not from fear but because it felt like a lifetime since they'd last kissed. Being unable to do so over the last week had made Lil's yearning all the more intense.

Finally, she crossed that short expanse. The second it took to make that connection felt like an eternity. Before she could complete the kiss, Diana acted first. Diana's lips parted instantly, hungry and seemingly

desperate. Lil was swamped by her scent and heat, but especially the urgency. Initially, she had wanted this caress to be as tender as their first time had been but Diana's passion rose up and wrenched Lil into a conflagration. Everything else vanished as Lil clutched Diana to her. Tongues caressed, stroked and tasted. She felt strong fingers in her hair and behind her neck, urging her nearer.

Heart pounding in response, Lil could think of nothing but ripping Diana's clothing from her body and taking her right there. She held back only by the thinnest margin.

"Wait," Lil mumbled against full lips.

"Don't want to. I need you."

Lil kissed Diana's burning lips, more chastely this time before she managed to draw away slightly. "I want you too, but not like this."

"Why?" Diana's hurt was almost palpable.

"Oh honey, don't you see? It's been so many days since we were together and after what happened on the ship... I just want everything to be special."

Lil gently held Diana's gaze until the fire faded slightly and comprehension dawned. Diana took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The tension in her body eased. After a moment, Diana released her near desperate grip on the back of Lil's neck.

"It's been special since the first moment I saw you in Istanbul, standing over me like a dark knight."

Lil found the comparison amusing. "Is that how you see me, like some conquering hero?"

"Frankly? Yes. The fact that you can blush about it just makes you more adorable."

"I'm not blushing," Lil denied though she could feel the sting in her cheeks. "Right, let's get back to making things special."

"At least you didn't deny being adorable. What did you have in mind?"

Lil considered the question carefully. She wanted to do something to show Diana how special she was, how much Lil cared about her. The choices were limited given that they were currently in a desert region in a country that focused very much on conservative ideals. Having a romantic date on the town between two women was a decidedly bad idea.

"If we were in the States, I'd recommend a picnic in the park. Just you, me, the sun and maybe some ants to make things feel authentic."

"Ants, huh? That's cute. So, if no picnic, what else?"

Lil stood suddenly as an idea occurred to her like an epiphany. She

walked over and dumped the contents of the wicker fruit basket onto the low-slung table. Lil looped the handle over her forearm. “We may not be able to have a day, or night, on the town but we can do something here.”

“Like what?”

“I need to run out and grab a few things. I promise I’ll hurry and it will all be worth it.” Lil fervently hoped that was true.

“And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

Lil grinned and felt a sweet sharpness in her chest. She hadn’t felt this happy in a long time. “Stay here and think sexy thoughts. I intend to take you up on your amazing kisses later.”

“Just the kisses?”

“Oh no, I definitely don’t plan to stop there. I’ll be back soon.”

“In that case,” Diana stood and kissed Lil gently on her lips. “That’s a reminder of what’s waiting for you when you get back.”

Pulling away from Diana was one of the hardest things Lil had ever done. She had to emotionally brace herself to take the half step back that would allow her to translocate. “Are you ready for this?”

Diana shook her head in confusion. “Ready for what?”

Rather than answer, Lil focused on the location in her mind and winked out of the room. She thought she heard Diana’s gasp of astonishment before she rematerialized a third of the way around the globe. The Amazon rainforest loomed all around her, pressing in from every side. Lil inhaled the scents of turf, exotic flowers and fresh air untainted by motor oil or vehicle exhaust. Somewhere in the distance, a jaguar screamed.

She was after the perfect flowers and fruits for a meal Diana would never forget. The Amazon Basin boasted the highest plant biodiversity on the planet and as long as she didn’t stumble into a river full of piranha, Lil knew she’d be successful. Within minutes, Lil harvested purple orchids, lilies, and heliconia. A few birds of paradise rounded out her selection and Lil was ready to move on to her next destination.

A scarlet macaw cried out overhead, preventing Lil from leaving. For several long moments, she was captivated by the striking colors, the power in the creature’s beak. She glanced around at the life overhead and felt her breath taken away by the amazing sight. It was so beautiful here. Lil usually isolated herself, coming out of the manor in Maine only when necessary. Her world consisted of the countryside around her house and interacting in a limited fashion with people only when necessary.

Lil wouldn’t have minded spending more time in this bewitching location, but Diana beckoned to her. She blinked and reappeared a few

miles away. The sound of a triple waterfall pounding into a clear blue pool drew her attention as Lil popped out of the ether. This was one of the oldest and wildest places in her memory. While the Garden of Eden was purported to house the largest selection of food trees, this area was a close second.

She added small, sweet bananas, red cocona berries that tasted like a blend of lemon and tomato, and maracuya. The maracuya was an egg-shaped yellow fruit as big as a softball. Most people knew the maracuya by its common name...passion fruit. Lil smiled thinking the addition of the fruit fitting. Now she just wanted to track down some grapes, cheeses and a beverage that would complement her choices.

As soon as she got over the shock of seeing Lil vanish, Diana went into the bathroom and splashed water on her face. Hearing about the phenomena of translocation and actually witnessing it in action were two very different things. Diana wasn't frightened by what she saw. She was enchanted. Lil's abilities were nothing short of magical, something she'd given up on long ago. The stoic, logic-oriented scientist had promptly given way to the child still buried deep inside. Captivated by the magic and overwhelmed with the first blush of love, Diana felt their future together held only promise.

Diana had no intention of waiting patiently in the hotel room while Lil went off to scavenge their dinner. The mention of a picnic had given her an idea. She dried her face and spritzed perfume on her neck and wrists. Then she shoved all of the furniture in the small sitting area back against the wall, away from the huge glass window. Diana retrieved the blanket and pillows from the bed and spread it out on the living area floor.

The blanket took up almost the entire expanse. They would be able to lean against the sofa's front for a backrest if they needed it, but would have an unimpeded view of the Gulf. Finished rearranging furniture, Diana had no idea how long Lil would be gone. Nor did she have anything else to do, but fidget. To keep busy, Diana set a pot of coffee to brew, but didn't switch the machine on. She wanted it ready for later.

With nothing else to keep her busy, Diana stepped out onto the balcony. She was struck instantly by the scent of the water. The almost oppressive heat of the sun stung her skin and the brilliance made her

squint. Her preparations hadn't taken more than ten minutes and standing in the sun quickly threatened to give her a headache.

Diana planned to be ready for Lil, not ill from heatstroke. She returned inside and reclined upon the pillows. Time passed and her muscles relaxed. Diana drifted in half-sleep, sure she would feel Lil's presence when she returned. She thought it a dream when she felt her ears pop from displaced air. The scent of something sweet and flowery tickled her nose. Diana reached up and swiped at the irritating caress. The contact ceased for a moment, but then returned. Frowning, Diana opened her eyes.

Lil lay beside her, looming over and smiling down. She held a blossom in her hand, teasing Diana lightly. As she watched, Lil tucked the orchid behind her ear.

"Should I let you sleep?"

"No, I was just passing the time. I'm glad you're back."

"Me too. What's all this?"

Diana's stomach rumbled and she sat up. "The rearranged furniture? You said something about a picnic. This was the best I could do. Do you like it?"

"It's perfect. Just like you."

Diana felt her cheeks burn. She pushed a lock of hair behind her ear as she thought of a response. "I'm hardly perfect."

"You're perfect for me."

Lil kissed her and Diana gave up on arguing the point. She reached out to touch Lil's face, stroking along the line of the square jaw. Then her stomach ruined the moment by complaining loudly.

"We'd better feed you before you pass out."

Lil pulled the wicker basket onto her knees and Diana's mouth watered. The colorful assortment of fruits, cheeses and bread looked amazing. She couldn't identify most of the fruit, but trusted that Lil wouldn't poison her. It was only then that she noticed all of the flowers surrounding them. Lil must have laid them out while she slept.

"How long have you been back?"

"Only a few minutes. Champagne?"

"Yes, please. This is amazing. Where all did you go?"

Lil's cheeks flushed slightly before she answered. "The fruit and flowers came from South America and I found the wine at a wonderful little place I know in France."

"And the cheese and bread?"

"Wisconsin."

Diana's eyes widened as she began to peel one of the little bananas. "You've been to four different continents today?"

"I wanted a little diversity." Lil shrugged and Diana laughed.

She took a bite from the fruit and the flavors burst over her tongue. As she watched, Lil made quick work of the cork inside the bottle. Diana giggled when Lil realized she'd forgotten to bring glasses. They drank straight from the bottle and spent time feeding morsels of food to each other. Diana bit into the passion fruit Lil fed her and juice ran down her chin. Lil caught it with her thumb. She placed her thumb into her mouth to suck the moisture from her skin and Diana's eyes riveted on the sight. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen. Suddenly, she wasn't so hungry anymore.

"Your eyes are so clear and deep, like the waters in Japan." Diana heard the awe in her own voice and made no attempt to conceal it.

Lil didn't look away. "You make that sound like it's a good thing."

"It is."

Diana took the nearly empty champagne bottle from Lil's hand and placed it in the basket. She rose up onto her knees so that she could look down at Lil's face. Diana deliberately kept their eyes locked, trying wordlessly to communicate not just desire, but also the intensity of her heart. Diana leaned down and kissed Lil, a gentle brush of their lips. As before, the tenderness didn't last.

She felt Lil gasp and captured the puff of air in her mouth. Strong arms embraced her. Diana reveled in the heat and the feel of Lil's breasts against her. She tried to memorize the feel of the cushiony softness, the taste of champagne on her lips, the heat of their skin mingling. Somehow, Diana was on her back, the floor hard under her shoulders and Lil's feminine vitality pressing her down from above.

Lil left her mouth and sharp teeth nipped her neck. Cool air caressed her chest as Lil unfastened Diana's shirt, stirring a wave of fire in her that threatened to burn out of control. Lil's strong thighs straddled Diana; her knees planted on the carpet to support her weight. Diana wanted all of that weight residing on her. Unable to speak in the moment, she pulled on Lil's shoulders to communicate her desire. Lil refused to obey, but whispered words of assurance in her ear.

"Trust me. I'll take care of you."

Lil lowered herself slowly until she lay directly on top of Diana. Diana found her lips again and tried to convey without words what this beautiful, gentle soul made her feel. Lil returned the soft, toe-curling kisses, punctuating them with gentle nips of her teeth along Diana's neck

and the lobe of her ear. Diana wanted so much more. When Lil pinched Diana's nipples through the material of her bra, Diana cried out and arched into the contact.

The sensations singing through her from nipple to groin made Diana groan and reach around to clasp Lil's hips. Her hands slid under Lil's waistband until they were filled with twin globes of warm, naked flesh. She pulled Lil against her, raising her hips to increase the weight where she needed it.

Slowly, it occurred to Diana that Lil was fumbling with the snap to her jeans. Happy to comply, Diana reached down to assist. With agile fingers, she parted the button and unzipped the closure. Lil immediately invaded, sliding under the edge of her panties and cupping her moist heat. She stopped there and Diana thought she'd lose her mind.

"Why are you stopping?"

"Don't worry. I am going to make love to you, but I just want to be sure you don't want to move to the bedroom."

The sensual words created goose bumps on Diana's arms and legs. "I don't think I can make it that far," she panted. "Please don't make me wait."

Diana felt Lil brace her knee against the floor to take her weight. She used her free hand to push the flaps of Diana's shirt aside and then reached underneath to unclip the bra. When Lil's full lips closed over Diana's nipple, Diana had to clench her jaws to keep from screaming out at the sensations that cascaded through her body. She buried her fingers in Lil's hair and held her in place.

For long, agonizingly sweet moments, Lil tortured her with lips and teeth until Diana felt she would explode. She couldn't stand it anymore. She wanted Lil inside her and she wanted to return the favor, to feel Lil's warm walls surround her fingers.

When Diana released her head to reach for the fastener of her jeans, Lil relented and captured her lips in another burning kiss. Diana opened to her, avid where before she'd been tender. Soon their clothes were completely open, allowing full access and there was no hesitation as each sought desire-slick flesh.

Diana pushed easily into Lil with two fingers. Lil was drenched and Diana's hand was immediately coated in her desire. Almost simultaneously, Lil's long fingers opened Diana completely. Nothing else existed, but the desire to consume Lil and be devoured in return. They moved together, stroking deeply and searching for the spot that created the most pleasure. Lil's breath burst against Diana's ear as she gave

herself over to the intensity.

Her thumb brushed against Lil's clit and Diana felt her jerk. Lil began to thrust against her while she pushed into Diana more urgently.

"Yes," Diana hissed. "Do it, I want to feel you."

Lil suddenly stiffened and groaned. Diana held her as the release washed over her. Lil's orgasm triggered her own and she held on tightly as they continued to move and arch into one another. Orgasms burned a trail from her abdomen, through her groin and tingled sharply on the backs of her thighs. Over and over the sensations surged until Diana thought she might not survive such a colossal crest. Finally, the sensations began to lessen.

Diana held Lil to her, listening to her rapidly thumping heartbeat that beat in tandem with her own. They spent a few minutes trying to catch their breath. Soon, Lil raised her head and Diana expected her to say it was time to move to the bedroom. Instead, she began kissing Diana again. Passion threatened to overwhelm her. Before she could allow that to happen, Diana had to tell Lil the truth.

"I love you, Lil."

Lil seemed momentarily confused. A frown rested between her brows and she started to speak. "I..."

"Shh, don't say anything. I just wanted you to know." Diana shifted and something hard jabbed her under the shoulder. "Ouch. Would you like to move somewhere more comfortable?"

Lil grasped the salver and slid it aside. "You mean like the bed?"

Diana had told her not to say anything, but she couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. She swallowed the hurt, resolved to give Lil time. "Exactly."

"I'm the one who's supposed to have old, brittle bones. You don't hear me complaining."

"Yeah well, I prefer proper pillows and soft sheets. Come on, grandma."

Diana shrieked when Lil dug her fingers into her ribs. She pulled away laughing and grabbed a pillow before she sprinted into the bedroom with Lil hot on her heels. Diana bounced onto the mattress and dodged to the other side as Lil piled in beside her.

"Let's lose these," Lil recommended, pulling her shirt off and tossing it onto the floor.

Diana followed suit, shucking her clothing as quickly as possible. Before she knew it, Diana was lying warm and safe in Lil's strong embrace. She snuggled against Lil's chest, inhaling their mingled scents.

Although it was only the middle of the day, Diana felt she could sleep.

“What’s wrong?” Lil’s voice surprised her.

“Hmm?”

“I can feel the tension in your shoulders. Are you all right?”

Diana’s contentment enveloped her like a cloak so it took a moment to realize that something *was* bothering her. She had no concerns about being with Lil. Somehow, Diana knew this was where she was meant to be, had been headed all her life. Thinking back over the day, she realized the problem.

“Lil, I know we’ve gone over this, but why can’t you just let this quest go? You don’t really need the dagger, do you? We could be happy together if you’d just allow it.”

Lil’s chest rose and fell with a heartfelt sigh. “I know this is hard to accept, but I’m just so tired. Not physically, but my soul is weary. The fact is that no one is meant to live forever. Death is a blessing just as much as it can be a curse. There has to be an end to this, even for me.”

Tears tracked across Diana’s nose and fell onto Lil’s chest. Diana tried to stop them and she wanted to argue with Lil on her beliefs, but she couldn’t find it in her. Diana couldn’t imagine how she would feel if she knew she would live forever. The very idea was inconceivable. Still, Diana realized that she would never willingly seek death. She wanted Lil to feel the same way. She wanted to mean enough to Lil to give her a reason to go on.

“Diana, I know you don’t agree with what I’m doing, so I’m going to give you one last chance just as I did the day we left Istanbul. Will you help me find the dagger?”

Her eyes closed in agony, but there was only one response she could give. “Yes.”

Lil tightened her embrace, hugging Diana close. “What have I ever done to deserve someone like you? Why, after everything we’ve been through, are you still here?”

The mood had become entirely too serious. Diana sniffed and sought a way to bring back the playful romance from earlier.

“Like I’ve said before, things aren’t always what you think. In the immortal words of W. C. Fields, I’m looking for a loophole.”

Lil laughed aloud, causing Diana to grin. Then she found herself on her back once again with Lil looming over her.

“Oh really? I’ll show you a loophole.”

Lil dug her fingers into Diana’s ribs again, tickling her. They tumbled across the bed until Diana managed to get the upper hand. She grabbed

Lil's wrists and pinned her arms against the sheets. Looking into the startling blue eyes, Diana felt riveted in place.

"You have the most amazing eyes. I could stare into them for eternity."

"Sweet talker," Lil said softly.

"I know you think you deserve to die, but your heart is pure and precious. If anyone is perfect, it's you. You're perfect for me," Diana finished, repeating the words Lil had spoken to her such a short time ago.

Diana didn't give Lil a chance to negate the compliment in her typical self-deprecating way. Instead, she kissed her. Lil started to respond, but then her body tensed completely and Lil pulled away. Startled, Diana felt certain something was very wrong.

"Lil?"

"Someone's in trouble." Lil sat up and scooted for the edge of the bed. She reached for her jeans and shoved her legs into them without bothering with underwear. "I'm sorry, but I have to go. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Book Three: Love's Gift – Chapter Fourteen

“Wait a minute. What’s going on?”

Lil couldn’t blame Diana for her confusion, nor did she have a lot of time to explain. She did her best as she quickly threw on her clothes. “Somewhere, a young girl is coming of age. She calls to me because I can feel her importance, what she’ll mean for the world someday.”

Diana scooted to the edge of the bed and grasped Lil’s shirtsleeve. “How is that an emergency?”

“Because I can sense her panic. She’s lost and alone and if I don’t get to her, well, I just think something really bad is going to happen. I wish I could explain better, but that’s all I know.”

“I thought you could see everything to do with your charges.”

Lil settled onto the edge of the bed to pull on her shoes. She shrugged in answer. “It doesn’t really work that way. I just get flashes, a feeling of what’s going on around them. Things don’t get clear until I’m closer.”

“But you can tell she’s in trouble.”

It wasn’t a question and Lil was grateful that Diana had an intuitive way of understanding what she was trying to say, even when Lil herself had difficulty. “I wish I had my jacket,” Lil mumbled.

“You’re going somewhere cold?”

“Yes, and I think I’m going to need help. I shouldn’t have taken Pravde home.”

Diana scooted toward the edge of the bed, moving onto her knees. Lil immediately noted her excited expression. “I could come with you.”

Lil gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’d love that, but it won’t work.”

“Why not? I don’t mind, and I’d love to see you in action.”

“That’s not what I mean, sweetheart. I can translocate around, but I can’t carry anything larger than my bird.”

“So who’s going to help you?”

Lil stood and shoved her credentials into her hip pocket. She could feel the child’s urgency, spurring her to hurry. “I’ll get one of my people to meet me, someone familiar with the area.”

“Are you going to kiss her? The girl?”

The way Diana asked the question troubled Lil enough to hesitate. She needed to go, but this was so important that she rationalized that a few more seconds wouldn't matter. "Diana, a kiss doesn't make me a pedophile. It's simply a way to transfer some of my power, breath to breath."

"Of course, I didn't intend to imply otherwise. I don't even know why I said it." Diana's eyes skidded away. "I guess I just felt a little jealous that I couldn't go with you."

Lil's heart twisted. She urged Diana to look up at her with a hand under her chin. "You don't need to be jealous. My dreams are filled with only you."

Peaches and cream cheeks flushed a brighter red, illustrating Diana's embarrassment. Lil thought it was cute. "I've truly got to go now. I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Tell ya what," Diana offered, "I'll stay here and plan the details of our next dive. My laptop has the link for Scripps and I can pull up satellite imagery of the area as well as the latest sonar and bathymetric information we have on file."

"Thank you. I'm sure I'll be back before you even finish."

"Do you know where you're going?"

"Someplace cold and remote. I have to focus on the girl, tap into her energy. Regardless of where it is, you know I have people on every continent. It'll be fine."

Lil kissed Diana's lips and left the bedroom. She remained deeply aware of Diana sitting on the bed and the scent of their loving in the air. She could still feel Diana's caress on her skin, but most of Lil's focus was directed toward the girl. With nothing in her path as she headed toward the sitting area, Lil calculated she could safely take three good steps without charging into the sofa. She took the steps slowly with her eyes closed, immersing herself in the child's aura, feeling the transmitted fear cascade over her.

The familiar sensation of displaced air washed over Lil as she winked from one location to another. The cold struck with such force that Lil hunched forward and wrapped her arms around herself as information poured in. Mount Fuji's peak was almost always below freezing. Fortunately, she hadn't reappeared on the summit. She could see the peak looming high overhead so at least she had a point of reference.

Lil estimated the temperature at about thirty degrees. At this higher elevation and combined with the wind chill, it felt at least ten degrees colder. She could see her breath, visible on the high west wind. A small

child wouldn't last long in this without shelter. Lil reached out with her mind, calling for one who could help.

"Haruko Jin, I need you," Lil whispered, adding her voice to the silent plea.

Through the brief burst of mental contact, Lil transmitted the situation's urgency. Not only was there a child lost in the wilderness, but also, she and Lil could both freeze to death without intervention. Lil had no idea how long the girl had stayed in the woods and Lil herself didn't have a coat. For the girl, Sumi Takara, there would be no coming back if exposed too long. Lil could stay in a death-like state until discovered or until summer came to the mountains. Neither prospect seemed appealing.

Seconds passed that felt like hours before Lil experienced the familiar pop of displaced air. Relief poured through her as she spun about to face her assistant.

"Haruko, thank you for coming so quickly." The words were difficult to speak through chattering teeth.

Haruko Jin overlooked the bow Lil offered and thrust a coat toward her. Lil's hands shook a little as she donned the garment. Soft fur from the hood caressed her face and blessed heat embraced her body.

"You won't help her if you perish, Lilith."

Finally comfortable, Lil shoved her hands into the coat pockets and took a brief instant to notice Haruko's tired state. Her hair stood up as though she had just climbed out of bed and small lines marked her eyes. For all these tiny signs of exhaustion, Haruko remained one of the most beautiful women Lil had ever seen. Almost waiflike with doe brown almond shaped eyes and a gentle smile, Haruko also had a quiet, dependable strength. She'd once held Lil's heart, or so Lil had thought at the time. Maybe it was just loneliness.

"We should hurry," Lil said. "I'm not sure how long Sumi's been lost."

Lil struck off through the woods. She had materialized at the location where she'd sensed the child, but Sumi couldn't have known. She had kept walking, searching for help. A bright burst of illumination clicked on from behind, making their task easier. Leave it to Haruko to grab a flashlight before heading into the woods.

"She is fortunate you sensed her at the time of marking," Haruko pointed out. Snow began to fall, punctuating her statement. "She would not have survived the night."

"Sumi! Sumi Takara!" Lil called out.

A branch smacked her in the cheek, which Lil absently brushed aside.

All instincts were trained around her, all senses employed as she tracked Sumi. A tiny whimper made her turn abruptly to the left and Lil dashed toward the sound. The hair stood up on the back of her neck when Lil heard a menacing growl near the same spot.

“Haruko, hurry!”

Lil raced ahead through the bobbing, dizzying light Haruko aimed ahead. She barely saw the hulking shadow of a fallen tree and propelled herself over the obstacle. With Haruko trailing behind, the light was abruptly cut off. Lil took a few more steps to allow Haruko to climb over the tree. Lil relieved her of the flashlight and scanned around, searching desperately for the lost girl.

A flash of color caught Lil’s eye just as a lithe creature vacated the small clearing. The quick little fox had no interest in dealing with two fully capable humans. Lil ran over to Sumi and dropped down beside her. She didn’t see any injuries, but it was hard to tell. Sumi had lain on the ground and curled up in a fetal position. Her eyes were closed, but Lil could see her breath fog with each exhale.

“She’s alive.”

Lil scooped Sumi up from the cold ground and into her lap. Thinking quickly, she unzipped the heavy coat and wrapped the flaps around Sumi’s small form, hoping her own body heat would help. Sumi cuddled closer, drawn to the warmth though Lil believed she remained unconscious. In the illumination cast by Haruko’s flashlight, Lil noticed the pale cheeks, rounded by youth and the heavy shadows cast by Sumi’s thick eyelashes. A sharp sense of protectiveness surged through her breast, causing Lil to inhale sharply as her eyes filled with tears. She was surprised by such a maternal emotion and couldn’t fathom where it stemmed from. A pleasant heat started in Lil’s fingertips and spread throughout her hands before moving up her arms. Soon, the sensation suffused her entire being. Lil thought she imagined things when the clearing began to glow. Then she realized the heat inside her had manifested into a physical entity, illuminating the clearing all around.

Lil perceived the flow of power transferring from her hands and into Sumi’s body through touch alone. This had never happened before. Then again, Lil had never felt such tenderness for a human child. Always, she had acknowledged the need to imbue her gifts into the younger generations, but hadn’t experienced any type of real connection with her protégés.

“Lilith? Are you well?”

“I’m fine, Haruko,” she whispered in response as the moment passed.

“We should go.”

Lil nodded, still captivated by such a magical moment. That she could still discern such an instant was in itself a miracle. “Yes, we should.”

Haruko assisted Lil to her feet with her small charge. The bright light Lil cast from within had already begun to fade. She allowed Haruko to guide them from the clearing with her flashlight, still shaken by the experience, but feeling much warmer than she had before. She couldn’t help but wonder if that internal glow had caused a temporary heat inside, alleviating the cold that seemed to have seeped into her bones. If so, perhaps it had also transmitted to Sumi and would keep the child soothed until they reached safety.

Lil kept silent as she followed Haruko through the forest. With her thoughts in turmoil, Lil was pleased to allow Haruko to lead them. She would know the quickest routes to civilization.

“The Yoshida hiking trail is not far from here,” Haruko said, breaking into her thoughts. “It will lead us to the Fifth Station.”

“Aren’t the hiking trails supposed to be closed this time of year?”

“Of course, but people rarely heed rules. Someone probably decided that camping this time of year was a great idea.”

Lil stifled her anger, afraid the emotion would transmit to the sleeping girl. She didn’t want to follow the spellbinding moment in the woods with such a crass reaction.

“How far?”

“An hour, perhaps less if we encounter a search party.”

After that, Lil concentrated on holding the small charge against her chest as they stumbled through the dark. The snow fell softly but the wind died down, giving them a break from the stinging cold. Lil’s strong arms never tired and she felt the moment when Sumi began to shiver once again. Lil tried to project the same internal heat she had shared earlier, but couldn’t seem to call it forth. The thought occurred to her that the phenomena might be an anomaly and she found the idea disturbing. She liked the idea of transferring abilities through a simple touch.

“There,” Haruko spoke. “I see lights through the trees.”

Lil glanced over her shoulder and spotted the wavering beams of flashlights headed in their direction. Soon after, she heard voices calling out from a distance away. She and Haruko picked up the pace.

“*Sumi! Doko ni imasu ka?*”

Shortly thereafter, Lil could hear the crash of underbrush as searchers pushed their way through. Lil's heart pounded in relief when she heard voices calling out for Sumi. Her primary concern was to get the girl to shelter and ensure her well-being. For once, she wasn't focused on achieving her goal of passing on her abilities, though that had occurred through an unintentional avenue.

"Here," Lil called out in Japanese. "We've found her."

Soon, Lil and Haruko met up with a search and rescue team made up of both men and women. Sumi's parents were among the group and Lil was happy to witness their tearful relief. Sumi finally awakened and looked around with confusion in her dark brown eyes. The group invited Haruko and Lil to go with them and enjoy a hot beverage as a way of saying thanks, but Lil demurred. She had promised Diana she would return as quickly as possible.

Haruko kept her peace, but Lil could tell by her expression that she was mystified. As soon as they were alone, Lil attempted to cut her off. "Thank you again, Haruko. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get out of this forest."

"Of course. I'm sure you seek the heat of a fire."

"You know me so well," Lil agreed, feeling a twinge of guilt for taking such an easy way out. She didn't know why she hid her relationship with Diana and allowed Haruko to think she only wanted to sit in front of a fireplace.

"I should. We were together for many decades, Lilith. That is why I can see that you are being untruthful."

"Excuse me?"

Haruko smiled. "It is no matter, keep your secrets. You've changed, Lil. There's a light inside you that I haven't seen for quite some time."

Shamed, Lil bowed her head. Of course Haruko would see right through her. Lil couldn't think of a single good reason to hide anything from her oldest friend. "I once believed my heart filled with only sorrow, but that's no longer true."

Haruko clasped Lil's hands together and raised them to her chest. Her intelligent eyes assessed Lil before she spoke. "Yet for all your joy, I sense sadness."

"You always could read me."

"I should hope so. What is it, what troubles you so?"

"I'm closing in on my objective," Lil admitted, "and I find myself suddenly ambivalent. The end is all I've ever sought, but now I'm simply not sure if it's the right thing to do."

“Wanting to live is as natural as the urge to breathe, Lilith. Especially when we find love.”

“Am I so obvious?”

Haruko nodded and squeezed Lil’s hands once again before releasing her. “You are to me.”

“And what of you, Haruko? If my life ends, so will your immortality. I don’t know if you will age suddenly and die, or continue to live out the rest of your days in a normal fashion.” Lil slipped off Haruko’s coat and returned it.

“I am one hundred thirty-eight years old. I’ve had a full life and I grow weary for a change. Nothing lives forever, Lil. Or at least, nothing should.”

Lil stood alone in the forest after Haruko left. Confusion warred with wonder as she contemplated the recent turn of events. Haruko had surprised her with the observation that she had changed. Lil hadn’t seen it, *couldn’t* see it until confronted with the truth directly. Now she couldn’t deny it. Yet despite any assumptions Haruko harbored about how she’d accomplished this feat, Lil couldn’t accept credit. She had to admit that Diana had managed this seemingly miraculous transformation on Lil’s behalf.

In the face of such staggering reality, Lil took in the lonely beauty of the wooded terrain on which she currently stood. Mount Fuji’s peak thrust upward into the night sky, shrouded by a gentle cloak of snow. Absent birdcalls or predatory growls, Lil could easily believe herself the only human on an alien world. At one time, Lil would have welcomed such a happenstance, perhaps craved it. Now all she wanted was to return to Diana. Lil desired nothing more than to take Diana into her arms and feel the warmth of her skin, hear her heartbeat and taste the promise of her kiss. Unwilling to let another moment go by without Diana at her side, Lil turned and vanished from the clearing.

Chapter Fifteen

Lil appeared in the sitting area of the hotel room. A quick glance around informed her she was alone. More time had passed than she'd initially intended when she left and the sun was on its way past the horizon. Since Haruko had informed Lil it was past two in the morning in Japan, she estimated the time at just after eight in the evening in Iraq. It wasn't all that late and she couldn't imagine where Diana might be.

After poking her head into the bedroom, she discovered Diana lying on her stomach on the mattress with her feet up in the air. She studied the screen on her laptop rather intently, allowing Lil the opportunity to study her. A smile graced Lil's lips as she allowed her eyes to slide over Diana's relaxed posture. Lil took comfort from simply knowing they were in the same room.

"Are you hungry?" Diana asked, though her eyes never left the screen.

"How did you know that I'm here?"

"Reflection. I can see you hovering behind me." Diana turned to regard her with a playful expression. "Come over here. I've got an idea."

Lil sat close to Diana, their thighs touching gently as she waited to hear what Diana had to say.

"First off, you didn't answer my question. Are you hungry?"

"No, not really. I had enough to eat earlier. What have you found?"

Diana propped her chin on her hand. "I think we've been going about this search of yours all wrong."

"How so?"

"Lil, I know you have an almost photographic memory, but I think there's a chance we're looking in the wrong place."

"I can understand your point," Lil conceded. "Human memory is a faulty thing. People can be convinced of anything if they hear something often enough."

"Exactly. Even eye witnesses to a crime are notoriously unreliable."

"All right, so what makes you think we're searching in the wrong place?"

"This does."

Diana tapped her computer screen. She opened another tab and Lil spotted the gold letters announcing "Holy Bible." It was no secret, even to Lil, that the Bible was available now on the Internet to anyone anywhere in the world.

“You’ve been doing research.”

“I decided to go straight to the source.”

“The Bible? You do realize that not everything written there could be taken as strictly accurate. What could you learn from a book written hundreds of years after the fact that you couldn’t discern from someone who was actually there?”

“Funny you should ask.”

Diana scrolled down the page searching for something specific while Lil waited. Lil didn’t necessarily believe the words contained within, nor did she completely disbelieve. She knew without question that many of those events had in fact occurred. Lil just didn’t necessarily agree with the slant often adopted by the exclusively male authors.

“Here, it says: ‘And a river went out of Eden to water the garden and from thence it was parted and became into four heads.’”

Diana continued to read, naming the four rivers that had broken off from Eden’s life-giving waters. The ancient names of the Pishon and Gihon were familiar, but Lil recalled that they had long since dried up. Diana interrupted Lil’s internal musings when she suddenly grew excited.

“This is what caught my attention. The third river is one that goes east of Assyria and the fourth is the Euphrates. Of all of these, the Euphrates is the only one that either still exists or retains the original name.”

Her passion proved contagious, drawing Lil into the debate. “That’s right. The Tigris is the modern name of the third river. That gives us two points of reference.”

“I pulled up satellite images of the area.”

Diana reached for her laptop and settled it onto her knees. She positioned it in a way that Lil could see the screen. Lil studied the spot Diana pointed out, easily noting the point where the Tigris and Euphrates converged. A single line led from that spot and eventually annotated where the joined rivers poured into the Persian Gulf. At one time the entire area was labeled the Cradle of Life.

“What about the Gihon and Pishon?”

Diana began typing on the keyboard. “There are some images that show two dried up riverbeds that converge with these two. I had to go through the Defense Mapping Agency database to find a bathymetric and topographic chart. Here.”

“You hacked into the Defense Agency?”

The lines of the rivers in question meandered over the map and were hard to dispute. Combined with ancient memories, Lil pictured the region

in question. Her heart thumped hard against her ribs and the moisture in her mouth vanished. The implications swirled through her head. Despite her elation, Lil felt compelled to argue.

“I’m sorry to disagree with satellite mapping, but if the Garden truly was located where these points indicate, humankind would have discovered it long ago. The Garden of Eden is not located on the desert surface, visible to all who happen to glance its way.”

Lil flinched at the sudden hurt in Diana’s stormy green eyes. She would have given anything to rescind the sarcasm in her thoughtless words. It was far too late for that and Lil could only look away in shame. After a short, uncomfortable silence, Diana continued.

“Of course, you’re right. However, if you keep reading, the passage goes on to say: ‘So he drove out the man and he placed at the east of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword which turned everyway, to keep the way of the Tree of Life.’”

Lil finally met Diana’s gaze. The hurt had vanished, replaced with a sudden excitement Lil found difficult to interpret. Careful to keep any cynicism from her tone, Lil said, “I thought you didn’t believe in organized religion.”

“I don’t, but regardless of how I feel, this is still a historical record of events during that time. I’m not sure how accurate it is, but I believe this can help us narrow down the search.”

“All right, then somehow the Garden is concealed.”

“And to the east of the region of Eden, a flaming sword guards the Tree of Life. Now I don’t really think it’s a sword,” Diana pointed out. “More than likely, it’s some kind of barrier.”

“A force field or a dome.” The flash of a long-buried memory struck with such force that Lil surged to her feet.

“What is it?”

Lil shook her head and closed her eyes, attempting to sift through the minutiae of conscious recollection. “Thousands of years ago, after I was expelled from the Garden, I attempted to return.” Lil raised her hand, miming the actions taken so long ago. “Pain, like I’d never felt before or since, encompassed my whole body. It felt like thousands of scorpions stinging me without end. I fell to the ground, unable to breathe, unable to see.”

“Electricity?”

“Not as such, but the shield definitely delivered some type of shock to my central nervous system. The next thing I knew, Samael was there. I was an innocent and I wasn’t afraid until he withdrew his sword. Azrael is

a flaming sword.”

Lil’s eyes opened when she felt Diana take her hands. “I thought we agreed the tree isn’t really guarded by a sword.”

“But what if it is? The meaning of Azrael is ‘helped by God.’ Typically, the name is associated with the Angel of Death, which is Samael’s title. What if Samael was charged with preventing people from returning to the Garden? I know he can assume different shapes, why not invisibility? The mere touch of his blade would create excruciating pain.”

“I thought Sam was your friend?”

“Please, call him Samael. He’s definitely not a ‘Sam’ kind of being.” Lil shuddered slightly at imagining the archangel’s reaction to a diminutive form of his name. “And he is a friend, or at least he is now, but he still has his tasks to perform. He’s certainly not under any obligation to tell me what they are.”

“Okay, I can’t even begin to argue with that,” Diana admitted. “I have no idea what angels can or cannot do. All of that doesn’t change the fact that we still have a starting point. Now, I’ve done some research and the terrain has changed over the years. This region was once a fertile rainforest. Wind, sand and erosion have taken their toll, burying entire cities under hundreds of feet of earth. We know two rivers have dried up while the Tigris and Euphrates have continued and cut deeper and deeper channels into the crust. Like you said, if the Garden of Eden still existed above ground, it would have been discovered long ago. Maybe it’s concealed in the water, just not this far down. Maybe it’s submerged beneath the Euphrates.”

Lil resettled next to Diana, following her train of thought. “True, but the Euphrates River is only about thirty-three feet at the deepest point.”

“Yeah, I don’t really know what to think about that.”

Regardless of this sudden roadblock, Lil was touched that Diana had gone so far out of her way to help in her quest. She felt like even more of a heel for lashing out against Diana in her impatience. Seeking a way to ease any lingering injury from her thoughtlessness, Lil rested a hand on Diana’s thigh.

“You may not believe in God or religion, but I believe in you. If there is a way for us to continue our search, I’m sure you will find it.”

“Thanks, but short of divine inspiration, I’m just not sure where we go from here.”

Divine inspiration? Surely it couldn’t be that easy. “How would you like to meet an Archangel?” Lil suddenly asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“We need more information. Since Samael is a friend, maybe I can get him to tell me something.”

Diana raised her eyebrows in skepticism. “If he’s the one who’s supposed to keep you out, why would he tell you anything?”

“He wouldn’t,” Lil said with a smile, “at least not intentionally.”

“I’m confused.”

“You won’t be.” Lil took Diana’s hand and encouraged her to stand. “Just stand behind the door and no matter what you see or hear, stay quiet and stay out of sight.”

Lil bore little hope that Samael wouldn’t actually know of Diana’s presence. On the bright side, he wasn’t above his own quirky brand of mischievousness. Perhaps that would be enough for him to play along with her, assuming he even bothered to respond.

Leaving Diana behind the doorway into the bedroom, Lil strode into the sitting area. She stood directly in the center of the small clearing and attempted to project an air of calm confidence. Despite her confident demeanor, she acknowledged the importance of showing respect to a being that had been likened to a demon in times past.

“Samael, I require your assistance. Please show yourself.”

Nothing happened. Samael didn’t appear, angels didn’t sing and there were no supernatural lights to indicate a celestial presence. Lil rolled her eyes in annoyance. Couldn’t she just get a break? Ever since she’d begun this adventure it had been one constant struggle. The only good that had come of this was meeting Diana. Briefly, Lil recalled her ambivalence upon the mountaintop. She tried to hang on to the lure Diana’s love presented. On the heels of that moment, Lil flashed to all the lonely years since awakening naked and cold in a deep forest.

Haruko along with countless others had helped ease that loneliness, but it never lasted. Eventually, the infatuation always faded. Thinking of Diana and experiencing the first blush of love, Lil wanted to believe things had changed. She wanted to presume that Diana would prove her true soul mate, but she found the weight of ages difficult to refute. Anger and frustration ultimately won out.

“Show yourself you myopic, cloven-hooved poor excuse for a seraph!”

Lil shouted the words toward the ceiling, eschewing any pretense of respect. The result was immediate. The ground shook beneath Lil’s feet and lightning split the sky outside the window. Lil’s ears rang from the sudden intense air pressure.

“Enough!”

The single word reverberated through her head, driving Lil to her knees. She slapped both hands over her ears and cringed as she waited for the flash fire that would incinerate her bones. Too bad she would reconstitute and carry on as usual. Lil felt as though her brain would liquefy and stream out through her ears, but eventually the pain lessened and she slowly regained her feet.

Samael had decided to appear under his more benevolent guise as a blond-haired, blue-eyed cherub, the very image of a celestial being. Snow white wings extended around his body, taking up most of the space in the room. Despite his choice of physical presence, fury radiated from his gaze. Samael held Azrael aloft in his left hand, one foot extended toward Lil as though already in motion to sever her head. Blue flame licked along Azrael's blade, promising an exquisitely painful demise.

"You tread upon dangerous ground, Lilith. Present to me a single reason why I should not cleave your soul from your useless form."

Lil recognized that Samael hadn't spoken aloud, but hoped to coax him into a more auditory form of communication for Diana's benefit, assuming she hadn't fainted from shock.

"Because your master forbids it." Her voice trembled slightly, but not from fear. She was still human and the sudden appearance of a supernatural creature had the adrenaline coursing through her veins, just as it always did when she encountered Samael.

"What do you want?" Samael's tone was less than inviting.

"I need more information to find the Garden."

Samael threw his head back and laughed, the first sound he'd created since arriving in the small room. The laugh held little amusement, causing the fine hairs along Lil's spine to stand on end. The sound reminded Lil of the screams of the tortured.

"You have nerve, Lilith. It is the only reason you remain standing."

Finally, he spoke. Lil felt a brief sense of elation that Diana could overhear the encounter. It vanished when faced with the prospect of extracting information from God's messenger. "I thank you for granting me that favor, Samael. You know I hold you in highest regard and I wouldn't call on you unless I absolutely had to."

"I reiterate Lil, what do you want?"

It was a start. "I discovered the artifact at Gobekli that told me to return to the Garden."

"You cannot go back, Lilith. No human can."

"Then why should God bother to set me on this path, Samael? Think about it. You said this was a test and that if I passed, I would have that

which I desired most. How do you know that you aren't the one who's supposed to help me reach that goal? Besides, I'm not completely human."

Samael made a show of sheathing Azrael. He glanced over his shoulder as he did, only once but it was enough to tell Lil that he realized they had an audience. "I am not a witless mortal, Lilith. You cannot so easily deceive me. I cannot be misled into telling you that the entrance to the Garden lies between Ad Dayr and Al-Harithah. I cannot be so foolish as to inform you to look for a boulder shaped like a weeping woman."

He vanished before Lil could respond, leaving her feeling stunned that he had willingly passed along a bit of information. Then again, Lil thought it simply another example of Samael's puckish sense of humor. Very likely, he wanted to see what would happen if Lil reached her goal. He'd probably be chastised for this transgression, but he was one of God's favorites. The punishment wouldn't last forever.

"You did it!"

Lil turned around just in time to welcome Diana into her embrace. She smiled in shared joy and exuberance. "Don't get too excited. That's still a twenty-mile stretch that we must explore."

"Yes, but it's less than two hours from here. I knew we were close."

"And we never would have found it if it hadn't been for you." Lil kissed Diana quickly. "If you hadn't brought up divine inspiration, I would never have thought to bait Samael."

"He is quite impressive. I can't believe I just saw a real angel. A real live angel! Who'd believe such a thing?"

"Archangel," Lil corrected. "There is a very important distinction. Most angels are simply God's messengers. Archangels are warriors, fierce and cold-blooded. They are ruthless and obey only his commands."

"Then why did Samael tell you anything?"

Lil shrugged. "Because duality is part of his nature. I guess you could say he's always been a bit of a rascal."

"Fortunately for us."

"Indeed."

Renting a car proved out of the question. They couldn't find anyone who would lease a car to a woman. Fortunately, a stack of cash to just the

right person in a dark alley provided them with the needed transportation. The incident reminded Diana of the meeting with Lil, when a bribe had greased the wheels of democracy in order for her to get Francine home to her parents. Diana remained grateful that Lil freely employed capitalistic tendencies in order to get them where they needed to go. One day, she'd have to ask how Lil had managed to amass such a vast fortune, but for now it was more important to focus on their destination.

They passed through a small village, Al-Harithah from the Arabic signage, and Diana perked up a little. The drive hadn't been long, just enough for her to stiffen up from sitting. Soon after, Lil drove off the paved road and headed toward the Euphrates. Approximately halfway to Al Dayr, Lil stopped the four-wheel drive vehicle. Diana spotted the marshlands directly adjacent to the river's waterway.

"What next?"

"Well," Lil said as she opened the door and climbed out. "I can picture the rock Samael spoke of and transport to its location."

Diana unsnapped her seatbelt. "So you can translocate just by thinking about it?"

"If the image is clear enough in my mind, yes."

Somehow, Lil's words weren't exactly encouraging. Diana refrained from commenting as she exited the truck and moved around to stand beside Lil. The sun stood directly overhead and sweat broke out above her lip from the slight exertion. While traveling in a moving vehicle with the windows down the heat wasn't so bad. Now unmoving and dressed in long sleeves and jeans, Diana was already too hot.

"In that case, I think we should get this show on the road."

"I concur."

Diana watched as Lil closed her eyes and her brow furrowed slightly. In an instant, Lil winked out of sight and Diana experienced the now-familiar sensation of displaced air. No matter how many times she witnessed translocation, she didn't feel she would ever find the sight less than remarkable. Diana shook her head in wonder and returned to the cab of the vehicle for a canteen. As she slacked her thirst, she surveyed the region once again.

They had stopped beside the widest point of the river. Here the water flowed especially strong, a foaming, swirling watercourse that crashed over concealed obstacles and threatened to overflow its banks at certain times of the year. The general climate of the river area was sub-tropical, arid desert, but immediately adjacent to the Euphrates, the land was very fertile. Here, the earth supported aquatic vegetation such as reeds, rushes,

papyrus and stunted trees. Water buffalo could be found lurking about while keeping a safe distance from human predators. Locals used the river for everything from land irrigation and fishing to watering livestock and bathing. Diana was pleased to see that Lil had chosen a more secluded place to prepare. There weren't any people nearby, not even a weather-beaten hut.

Diana took a long swallow from the canteen as she considered diving the estuary. It wouldn't be easy. Unlike the sea, diving a river brought inherent complications, chief among them being visibility. Sediment in the water and the flow of the current would make conditions murky at best. She found it highly likely that she wouldn't be able to see more than a foot in front of her face, even with the very best in diving lights.

"I found it."

Diana recoiled in surprise and spilled water down her chin before she spun around to face Lil. She hadn't felt the expected rush of air upon her return. "How far?"

"Only a couple of miles. Shall we?"

As they drove toward the marker Lil had discovered, she filled Diana in on the details. "It's amazing. The energy flowing around the rock is something I haven't felt in centuries. I could feel the power shimmering in the air."

"I'd think you could feel something that strong from a distance," Diana pointed out. "How is it that you've never noticed it before?"

"I think it's shielded somehow, like you have to know exactly where you're going before you can find it. Do you know what I mean?"

Diana sighed. "It makes as much sense as anything else."

Lil drove off the roadway again a few minutes later and headed directly through the marshland. Mud splattered the fenders and birds took flight. The swampy area wasn't large and Diana spotted the rock formation from some distance away. Lil stopped the truck directly beside the boulder and Diana was astonished that it did indeed resemble a mourning woman with her head bowed from grief.

She climbed slowly out of the vehicle and walked over to the rock. The Euphrates crashed along its course less than two hundred feet past the marker. Diana felt goose bumps erupt on her forearms and her cheeks flushed though not from the noonday sun. Even she could feel the potency that fairly shimmered on the slight breeze.

"It's here somewhere," Lil spoke from beside her.

"The river supposedly watered the Garden," Diana said. "We should be standing in the middle of it, but I don't see anything like what was

described in the Bible. Are you sure Sam didn't lie to you?"

Lil shook her head. "Samael may mislead or purposely deceive, but he wouldn't outright lie. There was no reason for him to give us the information unless this is where we need to be."

"Then I guess we dive."

A shiver of unexpected fear unraveled in Diana's stomach, causing her to shiver. She wasn't excited about the prospect of diving these muddy depths. On the upside, if they found nothing maybe she could persuade Lil to give up this dangerous pursuit and consider building a life with her. The thought motivated Diana to get on with it.

"I'd recommend tying a line between us so we don't lose sight of each other if these were calm waters, but considering the circumstances I don't think that would be wise. Tethering us together could cause more of a problem. We might get trapped on submerged debris."

"Agreed, the river isn't very deep, but a person can drown in two inches of water if conditions are right."

"Do you want to set up camp first?" Diana asked as she walked back to the truck.

They had decided to forego any sort of crew and had only each other to rely upon. Finding the Garden of Eden was an endeavor best kept to themselves. Lil had told Diana about the thief among her dig in Gobekli and neither relished a repeat performance.

"I think that's a good idea. Do you want to eat before we start?"

Diana shook her head, reaching into the rear of the vehicle for the small, two-man tent. "I'm not really hungry."

She was aware of the concerned look Lil shot her way, but focused on getting the camp set up. The trees would provide cover from prying eyes. As soon as the tent was in place and a fire ring established, Diana settled onto a camp stool and motioned for Lil to join her. She just wanted a few minutes together before setting to work.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. For some reason, I'm suddenly a little nervous about this endeavor. Lil, are you sure you want to go through with this? I think we could be happy together."

Lil grasped her hand. "I believe we could as well, but I must see this through."

Diana snorted, but the situation wasn't funny. "You know, I really just wished you'd have chosen me over death."

"I want to, don't ever doubt that."

"Then why continue?" Diana pressed, surprised that Lil had admitted

so much in such a short statement.

“Because, as a friend recently reminded me, nothing should live forever. I love you, Diana, but this ceaseless existence must come to an end.”

Tears threatened and Diana didn't try to fight them. She allowed the moisture to track down her cheeks as she pulled Lil's hands to her chest. “Despite what you believe, the future isn't always what it seems. Just because your immortal existence ends, that doesn't mean you'll die. How do you know that you won't continue to live out a normal life from that point on?”

“I don't and if it turns out to be as you say, nothing would make me happier than to live out that life with you.”

Diana sagged with relief and rested her forehead against Lil's. The soothing contact combined with Lil's loving words melted the terror residing in her gut. “Thank you for that. I guess it's time to plan our dive.”

Sniffing back the tears, Diana wiped her cheeks and pulled away. “We're both experienced divers, but I think we should limit our time in the water. With the lack of visibility, we're sure to become separated and I don't want to take a chance on one of us getting injured.”

“Which is exactly why I wish I could sense you. If you were hurt, I would know instantly.”

“It's okay,” Diana assured her. “We'll be fine.”

“I'm pleased you're such an optimist. Regardless, I think ten minutes at a time should prove sufficient.”

“I think so too. I'd like to make it five, but we'd never get anything accomplished. Getting below the current will be the hardest part. Once we're below the first couple of feet, the waters should calm enough for our purposes.”

Diana dove the waters of Japan during typhoon conditions. On the surface, things could prove quite dangerous, yet several feet down the surroundings became calm and quite beautiful. There was no reason to believe this situation was any different.

“Also,” Diana added, “I think we should wait until dusk. With the sun filtering through the water, it'll illuminate every grain of sand and reflect back at us. It'll be impossible to see much at all. Our best chance is to make this a night dive.”

“Then we shall wait. I'll prepare lunch.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Ready?”

Diana stood at the widest part of the river wearing her wetsuit complete with fins. Once in the fast-moving water, she didn't think she'd have time to fight with her equipment. She'd be too busy struggling to get beneath the surface before crashing headlong into an unseen obstacle.

Lil nodded and placed her regulator into her mouth. Both quickly checked their watches before sharing a single glance. It was enough to communicate their intentions. Diana stepped into the water first, holding onto a large rock near the bank. She moved around to the lee side of the stone where she was out of the strongest of the water's flow. Diana grasped the flashlight in her left hand and clicked it on. One more glance at Lil and Diana submerged.

Instantly, she was surrounded by swirling sand that greatly reduced visibility. Only the beam of her flashlight kept Diana from being completely blinded by the conditions. The powerful light helped, but she didn't believe they would find anything at all unless they literally stumbled across it by accident.

Diana and Lil dove half the night for ten minutes at a time. Diana loved the water, but eventually she started to feel exhausted and waterlogged. Fighting the current to submerge took most of her strength and by the time she made her way under the flow, she didn't have a lot of time to look around. On top of that, the current carried them far downstream away from the rock Samael had pointed out. Diana began to think this was a futile endeavor and looked forward to the sunrise.

Finally, she and Lil agreed to one more dive before calling it a night. Diana suggested they start upstream this time so that the Euphrates could carry them down toward the Weeping Woman. Lil agreed and they entered the water a half-mile upstream. Diana inhaled air from her regulator as the river closed over her head and used her remaining strength to fight toward the riverbed. Once she felt the pull of the waters lessen, she took a second to rest her trembling muscles and then continued downward.

Again, there wasn't much to see. Her flashlight battery had begun to weaken and she didn't expect it to hold out much longer. Suddenly, she caught a movement at the corner of her eye. Diana expected to spot one of the fifty species of fish that inhabited the water. What she saw instead made her flinch away in concern. The shadowy shape reminded her of an

octopus, but there were no cephalopods in the Euphrates and certainly nothing of such a massive size.

Diana shone her light in the same direction and again caught a flash heading toward the bottom. She started downward in pursuit. Though she wasn't searching for a squid or octopus, this was the only thing of any importance that had happened all night. It was just unusual enough that the incident fit in with Lil and the supernatural occurrences that seemed so commonplace around her.

The light grew stronger as Diana swam downward. For a moment, she blamed the increase in brightness on her flashlight. Then she realized the illumination originated far below. Diana spotted the riverbed and moved forward toward the light. She stopped abruptly when she discovered a sudden gorge not mapped in any bathymetric chart she'd ever seen.

Diana looked upward in an attempt to locate Lil, but couldn't see anything. She considered the terrain in relation to her starting point at the riverbank. The sun hadn't yet risen, but Diana was convinced she was under the desert sand, almost directly below the Weeping Woman. A quick look at her watch told her time was almost up, but Diana couldn't stop now. Excitement caused her pulse to hammer and she kicked her fins to propel herself forward toward the drop off.

The unexplained illumination grew brighter as she approached, strong enough now to make her wince. When it suddenly vanished, Diana felt blinded. It took a moment for her vision to readjust to the meager glow from her flashlight. She refused to move forward until she acclimated for fear of swimming over the edge.

Finally able to see again, Diana noticed something strange. The area where she was remained just as heavy with underwater sediment as ever, but just ahead she could see an area completely free of floating particles. She couldn't think of any phenomena to explain such a thing and moved forward in anticipation of a major discovery. Looking down, she noticed a line in the sand demarcating the spot directly in front of the gorge. She didn't anticipate any resistance as she prepared to swim past the edge. Diana just wanted to hover over the drop off and try to get an idea of how deep the pit was. She was caught unprepared when she charged head first into an unseen obstacle.

Diana flinched away, pulling her knees under her to assume a squatting position directly in front of the line she had noted before. The blow smarted, but she hadn't been going fast enough to cause any real damage. The sudden barrier made her consider the time and her air

supply. Diana still had twenty minutes of air according to her gauge, but she was past due for resurfacing. Lil would be worried, but Diana was afraid that if she left she'd never find this spot again.

A few more minutes, she promised herself. If she couldn't get past the wall by then, she would mark the location with an electronic buoy. The device would emit a signal she could track.

Diana put her hand out, palm up, and encountered...something. She mirrored the action with her other hand, much like a mime pantomiming a barrier for an audience. But this wasn't make-believe. An invisible wall?

Why not? Diana had seen a lot lately that defied any semblance of logic. Why shouldn't she encounter an invisible wall that defied the laws of physics?

She sat back on her heels to contemplate her next actions and was distracted by a fish swimming by. The small animal passed her and crossed over unimpeded through the unseen barrier. Diana watched it swim away unharmed. This wasn't really a wall, more like a screen.

Her eyes widened and Diana almost spat out her regulator as the implications struck her. An animal could pass through, but not a person. Mankind was expelled from the Garden, but nothing she'd ever read indicated the same was true for lower lifeforms. Then there was the fact that this gorge didn't show up on any map yet she could see it clearly in front of her. Every scientific bone in her body howled in protest that she was wrong, but Diana was sure she'd found the entrance, or at least *an* entrance. This was the way in.

Diana removed her glove and held her hand out again. This time she felt a small tingling sensation upon contact, but not the searing pain Lil had described. Diana wondered if the barrier had lost strength over the eons or if the water somehow interfered with the signal. Perhaps the intense shock was reserved especially for Lilith. With no answers forthcoming, Diana spent time exploring the area. She started with the riverbank to her left and moved back to where she estimated the center of the riverbed lay. Finally, Diana realized she had to leave. She was running out of air.

Diana barely remembered to release the buoy. She activated the device and sent it upward.

Reluctantly, Diana surfaced. The current caught her as she approached the surface, but she had moved close enough to the bank that she climbed out without too much trouble. Diana couldn't wait to tell Lil what she'd found. She quickly shucked her tank and fins and dropped her mask onto the pile so that she could run back to their camp.

Diana spotted Lil standing beside the tent. She still wore her wet suit, but had been back on land long enough for her thick hair to dry. She had her back turned and stood looking out past their campsite. Diana crashed toward her, feeling sticks under the thin soles of her booties. Suddenly Lil spun toward her and Diana saw the crossbow aimed in her direction.

“It’s me!”

Lil dropped the weapon and met Diana halfway across the small space. Though Diana was soaking wet, Lil didn’t hesitate to scoop her into her arms. Lil held her tightly and Diana felt her body trembling.

“I was so frightened that something had happened to you. I tried to find you, but you know I can’t sense you. You of all people know you aren’t supposed to leave a diving partner. What the hell happened?”

Diana pulled away, grinning in her excitement. “I’ll tell you all about it, but right now I really have to pee.”

“Diana!”

“Fine, I’ll pee in a minute. I think I’ve found it.”

“You think you...?”

Diana could hear Lil swallow. She nodded and smiled so wide it hurt. “I think I found the entrance.”

“Where?”

“We’re standing right on top of it.”

Diana helped Lil gather her equipment as well as a fresh oxygen tank for herself. They rushed back to the spot on the bank where she’d shucked her gear. Frustration thrummed along her veins when they lost time by having to trek back upriver before entering the water. As before, the current would carry them toward their final destination.

“Just stay as close to the bank and the bottom as you can. We’ll run into each other at the buoy. Here’s a locator so you can track the signal. I’ve got another one.”

Diana didn’t realize she was babbling until she spotted the indulgent smile on Lil’s lips. “What?”

“I think you’re even more excited than I am.” Lil passed Diana’s mask to her. “Thank you.”

Diana chuckled, feeling a little self-conscious. “You’re welcome, although I have to confess that I’m not eager to help you find the dagger.”

I think I'm more thrilled with seeing the actual Garden of Eden. If it really exists, that is."

"Right."

Diana shot Lil a tolerant look before donning her equipment. She stepped into the water first, immediately resisting the pull of the strong current as she settled farther into the river. Diana sat on the bank to pull on her mask and fins and then eased into the flow just as the sun broke the horizon. They had some time before the sunlight through the water would present a serious issue and she planned to reach the barrier before then.

Despite the sense of urgency she felt to breach the boundary, Diana willed herself to patience. The last thing she needed was to bash into a boulder or submerged tree stump. She clicked on the flashlight and concentrated on following the tracking signal. In no time, she reached the point where the sediment stopped and clean air flowed past the shield. Diana settled onto her knees to wait for Lil. She could see the wonder in Lil's eyes behind the mask. A cloud of sediment swirled around them as Lil knelt beside her.

Diana took off her glove and started to raise her hand. She wanted to illustrate where the shield began, but Lil caught her arm before Diana could make contact. She shook her head vehemently, but Diana patted Lil's hand in an attempt to convey that it was all right. Lil didn't seem reassured, but released her.

When Diana made contact with the invisible wall, she felt the now-familiar tingle. Lil apparently took comfort when she wasn't injured and removed her own glove. She reached out to touch the wall and Diana would have smiled if not for the regulator she held in her teeth. The urge to smile dissolved an instant later.

White static-like fire shot from the barrier as Lil reached out. The current struck Lil in the palm of her hand and she recoiled in pain.

"Lil!" Diana screamed silently.

Lil had fallen to the side and her body floated in the current. Diana caught her in her arms, noting that Lil retained consciousness, but her expression was twisted in agony. Her body was bowstring taut and shivers traveled throughout her frame. She could see Lil's jaw clenched on the regulator. Diana dropped her light and the tracker. She cared more about getting Lil to the surface than losing her equipment.

The Euphrates fought her as Diana pulled Lil through the water. Before, the river had seemed benevolent and soothing. Now it more resembled a beast with ravaging teeth. Diana's heart pounded and she knew she was sucking up too much oxygen, but she couldn't deny the

panic she felt. Belatedly, Diana inflated Lil's BCD and her own vest. The oxygen inside the buoyancy control devices assisted in rushing them to the surface. Diana wrestled her way through the current and up toward the bank. At one point, she reached for the clasp on Lil's weight belt and allowed it to drop away. Without the heavy weights, they almost shot to the top. Once they emerged, she pushed as hard as she could toward the side. Diana kept her regulator and mask in place so she wouldn't accidentally suck in water as she tried to rescue Lil.

By the time they crawled out of the river, Diana's muscles felt like jelly. She spat out her regulator and pushed the mask up over her forehead as she rolled Lil onto her back.

"Lil, can you hear me? Lil!"

Lil's regulator dropped away and she writhed in pain. The sound of her moans made tears spring forth in Diana's eyes. Diana tried to focus on taking care of Lil rather than wallow in worry. She grabbed Lil's hand and searched her palm for signs of injury, but found nothing. At her wit's end, Diana could do nothing but quickly remove her scuba gear and hold Lil in her arms until the agony abated.

They sat together on the bank as the sun came up and dried their hair. Diana rocked Lil in her arms as though she was a small child. She planted kisses upon Lil's forehead and cheek and eventually the tension in Lil's body eased. Soon she lay quiescent, her breathing regular. Diana wondered if she'd fallen asleep.

"It would seem that I still cannot return." Lil's voice sounded harsh, like a heavy smoker after their third pack of the day.

"If I hadn't seen it myself, I never would have believed it."

"Did you feel anything when you touched the barrier?"

Diana nodded, her cheek still against Lil's forehead. "Just a slight tingling sensation. Certainly nothing like what happened to you."

Lil struggled to rise and Diana assisted her. With an arm slung over her shoulder, Diana helped Lil back to their camp. She was disturbed by Lil's weakness. Diana had seen Lil dead and returned to life, but never this unmitigated exhaustion. To date, Lil's superhuman strength had never failed her and Diana worried that it wouldn't subside. Immortality was one thing, but dealing with a supernatural electrocution was way beyond her purview. Hell, all of this was way past anything Diana had ever experienced. She was out of her depths and felt like she was holding on by her fingernails.

Finally, they reached the camp. Diana assisted Lil into the tent and helped her lay down on the cot.

“Wait, I need to get this off.”

Diana hadn't forgotten about the wetsuit and booties, but hadn't wanted to push the issue. Since Lil brought it up, Diana thought she must be strong enough to remain upright for at least a few more minutes. She helped Lil peel off the scuba suit and boots and assisted her into some light britches and a button-down shirt. After that, Lil practically fell onto the cot. Her eyes were already closed and fatigue fairly oozed out of her pores. Since she was shivering, Diana pulled the light blanket up to Lil's chin. Once her tasks were complete, Diana knelt in the sand beside the cot and rested her palm on Lil's forehead.

“Are you going to be okay?” She couldn't disguise the concern in her tone and didn't bother making the attempt.

“Fine. I'm just tired. I think I'll sleep for a while.”

Diana thought that was a great idea. She placed a lingering kiss on Lil's cheek, just to the side of her mouth. “I'll be outside if you need me. Just get some rest.”

“Diana.”

“Yes?”

“Maybe...maybe we should give this up. I couldn't stand it if something happened to you.”

Relieved at the possibility of giving up this foolish quest, Diana wasn't quite sure what to say. Lil had wanted this for so long, but all Diana wanted was for her to choose life. Then again, Lil was currently injured and worn out. Chances were good that she would regain her resolve once she'd rested. She couldn't afford to get her hopes up.

“It's okay. We'll talk about it later. Sleep now.”

Diana left the tent and squinted at the sunlight. Sweat beaded on her upper lip despite the slight breeze. It seemed like only moments ago that dawn had started to break. Lil's comment about giving up her search weighed on Diana's mind as she returned to the riverbank. She had to make a couple of trips to bring all of their equipment back to camp. After that, she changed clothes and spent time checking over straps and buckles to ensure everything remained in working order. Diana exchanged the empty air tanks for spares taken from the rear of the truck.

When her stomach grumbled in protest, Diana finally broke down and heated up some dried beef stew over a quickly ignited campfire. She performed everything out of instinct and muscle memory, not really seeing anything. Instead, Diana wrestled with her guilt. Nothing would make her happier than to spend her days getting to know Lil. Yet despite the attractiveness of her daydreams, Diana knew that immortality

weighed on Lil like an anchor. In the end, only Lil could make the decision.

Diana's eyes stung from exhaustion. She stood and extinguished the campfire by dumping sand over the flames. When she was sure she wouldn't set fire to the marsh, Diana went back into the tent. They'd spent the entire night diving and she was running on fumes. Lil's breathing was deep and steady, reassuring Diana that she was no longer in pain. Unsure where they would go from here, Diana sighed and plopped down on the edge of her cot. After removing her shoes, she climbed under the small coverlet and closed her eyes. She wasn't sure she could actually sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

Diana awakened a few hours later. From the heat inside the tent, the sun was almost directly overhead. Diana sat up and rubbed her temples, trying to ease a slight headache. She felt hung over from too little sleep. The first thing she thought about was Lil. A quick glance assured her that Lil still slept. Diana didn't want to awaken her so she left the tent and grabbed a canteen to slake her thirst.

Although Diana's desire to return home with Lil remained strong, she realized she'd made a decision while she slept. She couldn't live with herself if she allowed Lil to walk away from here when they were so close.

Diana ensured Lil's crossbow was propped against her cot and gathered her equipment to head back to the riverbed. She trusted Lil would know if anything or anyone dangerous approached. As she walked toward the Euphrates, Diana had to admit that she deliberately hadn't awakened Lil to let her know where she was headed. While it was true she wanted Lil to rest, Diana also didn't want Lil to talk her out of her next move. She would find a way in. What Lil chose to do once they breached the Garden's barrier was up to her.

With the sun high overhead, Diana realized visibility would be even worse than usual. She didn't worry about it as she dressed and donned her weight belt, BCD and tank. A replacement tracker for the one she'd lost before would keep her on course. Diana put on her fins and mask before ever entering the water because her hands would be full with the flashlight and other gear. As long as she didn't bash her head in on a concealed obstacle, she could follow the pulse back to the buoy.

Diana was surprised by the river's strength. Logically, she realized the current wasn't any more forceful than before. Her body was just that much more exhausted. Diana's muscles pulled as she resisted the current. She quickly dove toward the bottom to escape the pull of the flow. A few powerful strokes sent her toward the bottom.

It took only minutes to reach the buoy. It floated serenely in the water, the red LED light standing out through the murk. Nothing appeared disturbed. Diana retrieved the tracker she'd previously dropped before she started at one side of the river and moved across the channel, checking for any breach no matter how miniscule. It took time, but she persevered, analyzing the invisible shield in a systematic manner. The line of shielding remained unbroken.

Diana had no idea how much time had passed. Eventually she found herself back at the point near the center of the river where she'd seen the fish pass through. The time had come for a more scientific approach to her dilemma. Diana ignored the irony of approaching a supernatural situation with logic as she removed the knife from her calf sheath.

Sediment swirled as Diana dug the tip of her blade into the riverbed near the edge of the drop off. Regardless of how deeply she excavated, the shield continued, appearing to sink into the abyss along with the uncharted gorge. When she couldn't see anything owing to the amount of debris in the water, Diana sat back on her heels to think her way through the situation.

Animals could pass through, but people couldn't. The shield restricted sediment, keeping the water beyond the wall pure. Relatively speaking. The rules seemed arbitrary at best, but made her wonder if other inanimate objects could pass through. Diana squeezed her hand, feeling the wet cloth of her glove. Before, she had removed the glove to touch the force field. What would happen if she tried to push her hand through while wearing the glove?

Diana suited her words to actions and tried to thrust her hand through the intangible boundary. All she got for her troubles was a bruised fist.

Ow!

So that wouldn't work. This time, Diana utilized her knife again. She stuck the tip of the knife against the barrier. Diana expected the same resistance, but the blade continued through without any trouble. Her progress ceased when her hand once again encountered the shield. That would have been too easy, she thought.

She needed a new theory and a different angle of approach. Starting over, Diana tried to push her way through the wall at various locations. Nothing worked and the only thing she accomplished was becoming more exhausted by the second. She'd been tired when she began this dive, but she was way past that now. The frustration she felt didn't help.

Somehow, Diana found herself at the spot where the fish had crossed earlier. Bubbles floated toward the surface as Diana exhaled and stared at that site. Diana felt lethargic and chose to rest for a moment, staring into space. Idly, she wondered how long she'd been down here. How much air did she have left and how could she go back and tell Lil she'd failed?

A bright light caught her attention, forcing Diana to focus. It reminded her of the unexpected illumination she'd experienced the day before. As had previously happened, the light grew until it swamped the meager beam emitted by Diana's flashlight. She squinted in the brilliant

shine that rivaled that of the sun. Slowly, the illumination narrowed in until it centered on a point directly in front of her.

Feeling a bit hypnotized and surreal, Diana reached out to touch the particle of light. She quickly realized that the source remained on the far side of the barrier and that she couldn't reach it. Almost simultaneously, she gasped in surprise.

The source of the light was alive. While the creature had a definite form, the illumination it emitted made its body appear fuzzy and unfocused. Diana couldn't make out arms or legs. The first thing the child inside her thought of was a sprite or a fairy, but this thing didn't even have wings. It was nothing more than a dancing ball of light.

Diana swallowed hard and considered that she could be running out of air. Hypoxia could account for hallucinations. A quick look at her gauges told her oxygen deprivation wasn't the answer. She was low on oxygen, but not dangerously so. Movement made her look up and Diana realized the...*thing*... seemed to be beckoning to her, urging her to cross over. She shook her head, trying to communicate the impossibility of accomplishing such a feat.

The ball of light flickered faster and zipped a few inches from side to side, encouraging her to come through. Diana moved slowly, unsure what would happen as she reached out. This time, unbelievably, her hand passed easily through the shield. She felt no resistance of any kind and moving forward proved as effortless as swimming down the Euphrates. The barrier rippled and retracted as Diana eased ahead. Seconds later, the sediment was gone and she could see in all directions. The water was now as clear as any ocean.

Diana jerked in surprise when the sprite encompassed her index finger and pulled her forward. The little thing was much stronger than its size indicated. Diana gave a single look back over her shoulder, worried about continuing on, yet reluctant to stop now. In the end, there really wasn't a choice. She had to see how this played out. As she swam forward, the light grew until it embraced her entire left hand and suddenly tugged her downward toward the steep gorge.

Concerns about air rose again and her fear along with them. She hadn't planned a deep or extended dive of any kind. With her air so low already, panic threatened. Diana gulped air she couldn't afford. At this rate, her tank wouldn't last for long. Diana struggled against the light, pulling back with all her strength as she attempted to swim back toward the surface. It was like trying to pull her fist through concrete. Diana flailed harder and succeeded only in losing her facemask.

Instinct urged her to inhale through her nose and Diana quickly pinched her nose closed with the fingers of her free hand. She could feel the pressure building on her eardrums and worried how much farther they would fall. Unexpectedly, the light ball leveled off and zipped ahead. Diana calculated they had traveled well past the edge of the Euphrates' boundary.

Now that they weren't dropping, Diana wrestled her panic under control. As a Divemaster, she knew panic was the fastest way to drown. If she kept her head, she might get out of this alive. She concentrated on watching where they were going. In this clear water, Diana kept track of the route traveled so that she could make her way back.

Suddenly, the creature headed upward and relief washed over her. As they traveled toward the surface, the sight of sunlight surprised her. She had no time to reflect on it because the illuminated creature didn't stop when Diana's head broke the surface. The thing hauled her toward the bank and didn't let go until her feet cleared the water. It released her abruptly and the last she saw of it, the light ball zipped off into the trees.

Diana spat out her regulator and coughed until she almost threw up. She had pinched her nose closed when she lost her mask to avoid inhaling water, but felt like it must have seeped in through her eyeballs. Diana was sure she'd coughed up half the Euphrates before she finished. The first thing she noticed when she could focus properly was her regulator lying on a verdant bed of green. Diana rested on her hands and knees and slowly looked around in shock. This couldn't be. She closed her eyes and shook her head in an attempt to clear the hallucination. She felt the heaviness of the air tank on her back and the weights settled on her hips. Diana pushed up until she was in a kneeling position where she discarded both.

She had performed these actions so often there was no need to look. Instead, she surveyed her surroundings with wonder and a bit of evaporating doubt. Diana had quickly discounted the hallucination theory, but had a hard time believing this was truly the one and only Garden of Eden. The dancing ball of light as well as the splendor before her certainly seemed to indicate that it was. Diana stood slowly.

Lush, heavy forest surrounded her and dew shimmered on the grass. Trees of every description surrounded her, bearing fruits so varied and colorful they reminded her of a rainbow. Some of the fruits Diana easily identified, but others she'd never seen before. Some sported thorns and others appeared somewhat furry.

Birds called from the treetops. Those she couldn't see very well, but

flocks of intensely hued parrots zipped by overhead, playing and squabbling without concern for the uninvited woman who stood nearby. In addition to the glorious flora and fauna, Diana couldn't help admiring the grass. Thick and lavish, it felt like a carpet under her feet. Considering their location in the Middle East, that was surprising enough. Even more shocking was that all the grass for as far as she could see was neatly trimmed at ankle height. It appeared as though the grounds keeper had been hard at work. Then again, a supernatural garden probably trimmed itself.

Out of habit, Diana glanced down at her equipment. She jumped sideways when she spotted the mask she'd lost lying in the grass at her feet.

“Dear God!”

The sound of her own voice in the jungle startled her further. It took a minute to get her racing pulse under control. The fact that nothing had threatened her in this magnificent setting went a long way toward calming her fears. Once her hands stopped shaking, Diana finished taking inventory. She left everything on the bank. Wearing only her wetsuit and booties, Diana set off to explore the area. A path appeared that she hadn't previously noticed. Though it was a hard-packed dirt trail, it proved surprisingly free of debris. Diana thought she could probably walk on the trail barefoot without fear of injury.

Diana felt like she was in the middle of a Jules Verne novel. She looked up toward the sky and that impression grew stronger. The sky was, in fact, a gorgeous baby blue and the sun a bright yellow, but superimposed over that was an image that forced her to question her sanity. Above the treetops and a single snow-covered mountain, the entire region was surrounded by earth. As though submerged in a pit, Diana could see walls of dirt, rock and tree roots high above and all around.

Her first impression was of a giant projection, lending her the claustrophobic sensation of being buried alive. The scientist in her perked up to analyze the situation. While Diana realized that logic wasn't strictly reliable here, the basic laws of physics still must apply. Searching carefully, what she could see of the terrain above confirmed her suspicions.

She thought the Garden must reside in another dimension, far below the desert or perhaps on another plane altogether. Either way, it existed outside time and space. Mankind could search until the end of days. Without supernatural intervention, as she'd had, they would never find the lost paradise.

She forgot about Lil and her life previously as she traversed the dirt path. A cool, sweet breeze gently lifted her bangs, drying her hair and suit. At one point Diana grew concerned about so much sun exposure. She had fair skin and practically lived in sunscreen. Despite that, her arms showed no indication of sunburn.

Motion from her right drove the mundane thoughts from her mind. Diana crouched as adrenaline surged. In seconds, she shifted from worried to astonished. Her smile grew wide at the sight of a jungle cat carrying a cub in its mouth through the woods. The animals were less than thirty yards away. The creature had to know she was there, but showed the same lack of concern as the birds she'd discovered on the riverbank. Of course it had been millennia since humans walked the Garden and animals that lived here had no reason to fear them. Their lack of concern didn't surprise her as much as the cat itself. How long had it been since saber-toothed tigers walked the Earth?

Pristine white teeth curved from the upper mandible, resembling the tusks of an elephant. The huge, shaggy coat made Diana want to bury her face in its softness. She felt her heart expand in joy and wondered what possible temptation would be worth throwing away life in this paradise. Then she remembered Lilith. How much worse it must have been for her. To awaken into such a magical existence and be summarily expelled before there were words or emotions to describe her pain and sense of betrayal. Her only crime the inability to fit into a predetermined model of behavior.

Tears choked her and Diana suddenly wanted nothing more than to return to Lil's side. She must be out of her mind with worry. She turned to retrace her steps to the riverbank and stopped cold. This couldn't be right. The lane was there right before her, but Diana could have sworn it curved back in the wrong direction. She'd carefully kept track of the terrain as she strolled through the Garden and something was very wrong.

Despite her concern, Diana started back down the path. Instead of turning right in her previous direction of travel, the trail curved sharply to the left and led off into the thickest part of the jungle.

"This is impossible!"

The sound of a woman's laughter echoed all around. Startled by the unexpected noise, Diana quickly searched her surroundings, but she remained alone. Thinking she'd imagined the laugh, Diana shook her head and persevered in attempting to backtrack her way to the water. In minutes, she realized it was hopeless. The trail definitely twisted in such a way that she couldn't possibly reach her intended destination.

The possibility of becoming lost in this strange and beautiful land that time had all but forgotten forced Diana's earlier joy to evaporate. Now, worry caused her heart rate to elevate slightly. Shadows grew around her and Diana cast a glance overhead for the source of the penumbra. Clouds obscured the previously clear sky and currently blocked the sunlight. Along with the unexpected cover, the breeze grew chilling. Diana's breath frosted as she exhaled and she suddenly had the distinct impression that she wasn't alone upon the path.

She spun around expecting to find something menacing stalking her, but she was alone. As a scientist, Diana didn't believe in premonition or precognition, but she did believe in instinct. She sensed a dark presence. She didn't have to see the source of her fear to know that something malevolent stalked her in this angelic setting. Intuition told her that she couldn't continue blithely down a path to an unknown location. Because she felt that staying on the path would lead to her demise and because her terror insisted that she had to *run*, Diana took off across the perpetually maintained grass. She struck out in the direction from which she knew she'd originally come.

Diana streaked across a meadow, refusing to turn around though there was no one present to witness her irrational fear. Sweat beaded on her upper lip despite the sudden chill. She felt like a kid afraid of the dark. If she turned to look, the monster would get her. The only trouble was, the monster felt like nothing more than a cloud of hate and paranoia.

Up ahead she spotted something that eased her panic. From her vantage point in the clearing, she saw a large brown lump with something red and much smaller tucked against it. The two somethings turned out to be animals. Specifically, Diana saw a large brown bear sleeping near the tree line. Tucked up against the creature's side was a small, reddish fox.

They picked up their heads in tandem and watched her in a sleepy manner. Both appeared perfectly relaxed and Diana took her first calm breath in several minutes. She tried to tell herself that if there were something to be frightened of, these animals would know long before she would. As if to confirm her thoughts, the fox actually panted with a dog-like grin.

Diana still sensed the dark presence behind her, though it seemed like she'd put some distance between them. It had definitely been the right decision to leave the path.

When the animals unexpectedly jumped to their feet and scurried into the woods, she changed her mind. Diana finally gave into her fear and sprinted across the meadow. She jumped over a fallen limb and raced into

the trees. Where the grass was trimmed and the path unblemished, here the woods were thick and obstructing. Thorns and brambles grabbed at her wetsuit and hair, struggling to keep her from fighting her way through. Blood dripped from a scratch on her hand and she realized that this wasn't going to work. An adversary could easily lay an ambush in this terrain.

Diana glanced around quickly, never catching sight of her pursuer. What she did see was the leading edge of something that appeared to be a game trail.

"Please be the right path," she whispered, making a break for the tiny groove.

Judging by the previous trail's condition, Diana hoped this one would be clear enough for her to see anything dangerous coming toward her. It was a struggle to reach the path, but she didn't stop running when she hit the packed dirt. Instead, she sprinted down the lane until her breath came in bursts and her heart threatened to explode. She rounded a corner blocked by a particularly large tree and tried to stop.

Right before her, something that resembled the mixture of a gerbil and a porcupine stood directly in her path. Diana barely managed not to run the poor beast over. Running for all she was worth, she couldn't stop in time. She sidestepped the little animal and lost her balance, crashing into the neatly trimmed grass.

Diana started to rise, but realized the dark presence had faded entirely. She was once again alone. She lay panting and trying to regain her composure as her heart slowed to a normal cadence. When she felt she could stand up without puking, Diana sat and looked around. She caught sight of the strange looking animal waddling into the woods.

After a few minutes, she finally stood and walked to the center of the trail. Diana looked overhead and in all directions, but she couldn't deny the truth. The sun stood directly above her, just as it had since she'd entered the Garden. She was lost.

"Oh, now what? I'm never going to find my way back."

"Not with that attitude."

"Who said that?"

Diana spun around and saw a woman standing directly behind her. The stranger had a dimple in the corner of her mouth, enhanced by the huge smile she sported. Somehow, Diana was angry that this woman seemed to take pleasure in her predicament. More focused on her exasperation, Diana absently noted that the stranger wore a diaphanous, white gown secured with a simple gold belt around her waist. The

woman's blonde hair was piled up high on her head and secured in some mysterious way. She carried a single purple flower in her hands.

"Who are you? How did you get here?"

The woman laughed, reminding Diana of the sound she'd previously heard before her fright. "Which question would you like for me to answer?"

Diana frowned. "How did you get here? I thought humans were prevented from entering the Garden."

"They are, but I go where I choose. My name is Asherah and I have always been here."

"Uh-huh."

Great, the first person she encountered in the Garden of Eden had a screw loose.

"Not so," Asherah surprised her by saying.

Diana wondered if she'd unwittingly spoken aloud. She was more rattled than she'd thought.

"You might know my compatriot," Asherah said. "He goes by the name of Yahweh or Jehovah. Whichever you prefer."

Now the woman was claiming to know God himself. That confirmed her suspicions. "Uh, you should know that I don't really believe in God."

Asherah laughed. The sound was like the tinkling of bells. Unaccountably, it set Diana's nerves on edge.

"That's okay. He believes in you. How else could you have breached the barrier? Besides, how can you say that anymore? Look where you are standing, Diana Reed."

"You know who I am." That wasn't really very surprising. "Okay, if you're a friend of Jehovah, shouldn't you be some sort of angel or something? You look very solid to me."

Asherah held her arms wide, the bloom in her left hand. "This is merely a form with which you are more comfortable."

The humor in her smile had expanded to her eyes. The unique blue color reminded Diana of Lil, but that was where the similarity ended. Where Lil was brunette, Asherah was a blonde. Lil was also a pretty serious person most of the time, but not Asherah. In fact, Diana had the impression this woman was not above a practical joke.

"You're responsible for the changing pathways."

"What's wrong with a little fun?"

That was not an answer, which miffed Diana even further. "What about that thing stalking me through the woods. Did you do that, too?"

Asherah actually bent over at the waist and guffawed like Diana's

question was a huge joke. When she could speak again, Asherah said, “Oh no, that was not me.”

“But you know what it was,” Diana accused, pointing a finger at this truly weird stranger, “being omnipotent and all.”

“Of course, but I’m not giving that little gem away.”

Asherah winked at her and Diana’s head reared back. From the way she’d spoken, Asherah was hinting at something. Diana wasn’t sure she wanted to know. Then again, she wasn’t sure she couldn’t afford to know.

“Then what are you giving away?”

“This.”

Asherah held forth the purple bloom. Before Diana could take the offered floret, Asherah waved her hand and the flower disappeared, to be replaced with a remarkable piece of jewelry. Diana took the bracelet, captivated by the size of the ruby set in the center of a gold and silver circlet. She estimated the ruby at a good five carats. The gold and silver strands were woven together in such a way that Diana couldn’t tell where one began and the other ended.

“What’s this for?” Diana couldn’t lift her eyes from the shiny bauble. It was breathtaking.

“For Lilith of course, silly.” Diana was starting to become accustomed to the sound of Asherah’s laugh. “It will allow her to breach the barrier.”

The comment made her look up. “I’m not an idiot, Asherah. It was you. You led me to believe that God let me in, but you sent that dancing ball of light to lead me here. Why?”

“Let’s just say, I think Lil deserves a chance at happiness. She’s always been my favorite.”

“So what? You want to let her in to die? Just like that after all these centuries?” Diana felt fury descend over her, forcing logical thought to take a backseat. “Where were you before?”

“Indisposed.”

Diana waited, but there was nothing else forthcoming. Asherah merely offered her one of those innocent-appearing smiles.

“That’s all you have to say? Listen, I don’t know who you think you are, but I’m done with these games. We don’t need your help.”

Diana pitched the bracelet toward Asherah, but blinked when it reappeared in her hand. The breeze picked up without warning and the sky darkened. Lightning blazed and thunder boomed so loudly that Diana jumped. Asherah’s countenance had lost its light and playful demeanor. Diana felt her knees tremble in response.

“Watch your tone, human. I could blast you into dust with a single thought. My whereabouts are not your concern. You should be on your knees before me.”

Diana felt Asherah’s power humming through her veins. Barely able to speak, she whispered, “Who are you?”

“You know that man was created in God’s image. In whose image do you presume woman was made?”

Diana swallowed hard as the implications hit her full force. She was unable to meet the Armageddon blue eyes. Fear chased along her spine and awe threatened to drive her to her knees. Standing in such a being’s presence was almost more than she could bear. She trembled from the effort not to slump.

In a whispered tone so quiet as to be non-existent, Diana asked, “You’re God’s wife?”

“I know,” Asherah waved a dismissive hand. “You’ve never heard of me. Check your Gentile Bible. The books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Kings, Chronicles, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah.”

Her voice trailed off, fading into the ether and Diana could almost believe she’d imagined the remark. Why had she never heard of Asherah before?

“What do you want me to do?”

The sun peeked out again and the wind died away. “Do what you have all along. Return to Lilith. Show her how wonderful life can be. It is because of you that Lilith has this chance for redemption.”

“I don’t understand. How have I done anything?”

“Before you, Lilith carried only anger and bitterness in her heart. Little by little, her love for you has allowed her to embrace her humanity. Lilith believes all humans to be warlike, the scourge of creation. Yet for all that, when the hellhound attacked, she deliberately translocated to a place where mortals could not be harmed. It was a conscious decision on her part. Now why do you suppose that is?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither does she.” Asherah’s playfulness was back and Diana sighed in relief. “Yet that one decision changed her path to salvation. Go. Take Lilith the bracelet and allow her to find the end of her journey.”

Tears coursed down Diana’s cheeks upon hearing the words. Her breath caught in her chest and she found it difficult to speak. Choking back the emotion, she tried once more. “You can’t ask me to do this. I love her. I don’t want to lose her.”

The maternal tenderness in Asherah’s gaze made Diana feel at once

loved and scolded. “What is love without sacrifice?”

Before Diana could respond, Asherah disappeared. She vanished between the space of a blink and a breath. Diana still held the bracelet clasped in her fist. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and turned around. The path to the riverbed lay before her, straight and true. Without question or any doubt in her heart, Diana set out for the river.

Returning to the riverbank after speaking with Asherah proved fairly straightforward. The path now led in the proper direction, only meandering around the most significant of obstructions. Diana considered the lack of difficulty a silent confirmation that Asherah had indeed been toying with her. It figured, Diana thought as she donned her scuba gear. Apparently, the ancient Greeks had the right idea. The gods really did screw around with humans for their own amusement.

Diana grabbed her gauges and took a quick look before pulling on the buoyancy vest. The tank remained connected and she remembered how low she was on air when the light ball pulled her here. Diana calculated the trip had lasted about seven minutes. She’d have to breathe shallow.

“What the hell?” she shouted, startling the birds from their roosts.

The tank showed completely full. Considering the way her mask had materialized after losing it in the Euphrates, she shouldn’t really be surprised. More messing with the mortals. In this case, the game worked in her favor and Diana wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Thank you,” she said, looking around for her benefactor.

Asherah wasn’t anywhere to be seen, but Diana was sure she’d heard. With a shrug, she finished suiting up. Her thoughts had already turned to Lil and Diana was suddenly in a hurry to pass along her good news.

Chapter Eighteen

Lil awakened inside the tent. Her eyes were barely open before she realized she was alone. Then again, maybe not. Diana wasn't around, but Lil sensed danger closing in on her location. Lil scrambled off the cot and shoved her feet into her boots. She tied them in a haphazard manner and grabbed her crossbow and the quiver of steel arrows. Lil raced out of the tent, her boots sliding in the scrub as she halted right outside the circle of their camp. A quick check confirmed what she already knew. Diana wasn't anywhere around. It was a snap to realize she'd returned to the barrier to attempt to find a way in.

Several factors occurred to Lil simultaneously. She'd slept for several hours, judging by the distance the sun had moved overhead. Diana was safely elsewhere and there was a group of men closing in on Lil's location. Being empathic rather than telepathic, Lil couldn't read their thoughts. All she could glean were the combined intentions, which meshed together in such a way that she wasn't really sure how many of them approached. The nearest she could figure were that there were three or four of them and they were definitely male.

The Haimia. Even without visual confirmation some instinct, as well as recent experiences, told her who they were.

Lil scanned the camp, searching for anyone hiding close enough to be an immediate threat. While she could read their malicious resolve, and that they were nearby, she couldn't tell their exact location. Fortunately, she didn't see anyone near the truck. She traveled slowly around the tent, peering over crates of equipment. Nothing. Not even the sound of birds or insects. The only sounds she could hear were the crash of the Euphrates as it traveled through the Cradle of Life and the rustling of the breeze in the trees.

Suddenly, a stronger emotion emanated from one of the lurkers. Lil honed in on a section of especially dense trees. A man emerged carrying an automatic weapon at his side. The AK-47 hung by a sling over his shoulder. The menace in his countenance was clear though the rifle wasn't raised. Instead, he held a machete. Lil immediately noted the dual crosses carved into his cheeks. He was close enough for her to see the deep indigo of his eyes. The color clashed with his swarthy skin and long, dark beard. Lil barely had time to register his appearance before three of his companions joined them in the clearing.

The leader smirked, following Lil's gaze to his machete. The sight of

the blade and the sadistic expression sported by its bearer reminded Lil of her first encounter with the Haimia. She remembered the threat of being chopped into pieces.

“You don’t really believe I’m going to allow you close enough to use that?” Lil asked in the local dialect.

“You don’t really believe you have a say in the matter?” he returned somewhat arrogantly.

Before he’d fully finished the comment, Lil released the arrow she’d knocked into the crossbow. She took out the man to her left since he seemed more inclined to utilize his automatic weapon while the leader with the machete wasn’t as immediate a concern. Lil could have killed him, but at the last moment she pulled the shot. The bolt caught her target high in the right shoulder, missing anything vital, and threw him backward into the truck. He bounced off the hood and lay moaning impotently on the ground.

The balance of the small group rushed her all at once. Machete man reached her first. Unable to reload, Lil raised her bow to block his strike. The blade bit deeply into the wood, almost chopping it in two. No longer fit for shooting arrows, Lil used the weapon in another way. She smashed her assailant in the face and had the satisfaction of hearing his nose break. He flew several feet away and Lil hoped he was at least unconscious. There were still more attackers and she hadn’t any time to enjoy the pain she’d inflicted.

Lil spun to confront the remaining attackers. She threw her elbow into one man’s face while following up with a snap-kick to the other’s knee. Lil put as much force as she could behind the kick, intent on disabling him completely. The strength of her blow snapped the bones and one of them tore all the way through the flesh. The Haimia squealed and dropped to the ground, writhing in pain.

For the next few moments, she was busy blocking and returning punches. The leader of the group recovered and came after her once again. Even with blood covering his mouth and chin from the busted nose, he didn’t hesitate. This time he was smart enough to bring his rifle to bear.

Reflex saved her life. Lil grappled with the man still on his feet and pulled him in front of her as a shield. The AK-47 fired and the stranger’s body jerked repeatedly as high velocity rounds tore into his body. Her heart actually went out to a man who’d tried to kill her, but there wasn’t time to mourn the loss of life. At this distance, she’d be lucky if a bullet didn’t pass through and strike her.

Lil shoved the dead man toward his partner. Simultaneously, she noticed movement over the leader's shoulder and saw Diana emerge from the woods. Lil quickly registered the concern on her face, but was immediately filled with apprehension for her safety. She needed to take this last man out before something happened to Diana. Before she could close the distance to the leader and finish him off, the Haimia with the broken knee tripped her up. Lil caught herself with her hands braced in the marsh grass. The dead man fell beside her and Lil quickly rolled to the side, expecting to feel bullets tearing into her body. Instead, she heard Diana's voice and looked up in sudden terror of what would happen next.

"Excuse me."

Diana tapped the Haimia on the shoulder. Presumably out of reflex, the killer turned at her touch. Diana stood several inches shorter than the bearded man, but that didn't stop her from swinging her fist and punching him in the middle of his broken nose. Lil never would have expected it, but he folded like a house of cards.

With three of the four out of commission, Lil rolled over on her backside and kicked the remaining Haimia in the head. The blow was enough to render him unconscious. Lil had barely registered the fact before she jumped to her feet and rushed to Diana's side. Diana stopped shaking the pain from her punching hand and raised her arms as though welcoming Lil into her embrace. Lil wasn't in a hugging mood.

"Are you all right?" Lil asked, frantically checking Diana over for any signs of injury. "You could have been killed. What were you thinking?"

Diana transitioned from overjoyed to furious. Lil recognized her change in mood by the frown suddenly resting between her brows. "Swing high?"

"That's not funny."

"It certainly is not. You can't expect me to just stand in the trees while these guys kill you."

Diana actually stomped her foot and Lil thought her absolutely adorable. Belatedly, Lil reached out and hugged her close. She relished the feel of Diana's warmth pressed against her and closed her eyes to enjoy the sensation. It didn't last long.

"I have to tell you something." Diana pulled away and grabbed Lil by the forearms.

"Fine," Lil agreed, "but not here. I'd say we've worn out our welcome. If these men don't return to whoever sent them, more will be sure to come."

“Lil, don’t worry about that. We have to go.”

Lil couldn’t blame Diana for being wound up. It wasn’t every day that a person came upon an attempted murder. It wasn’t surprising that she’d want to give up on their quest either, as disappointing as that was. Lil had her own doubts, especially when she considered attempting to breach the Garden’s barrier. She didn’t think she could go through that kind of excruciating pain ever again. The perks of never finding the dagger would be spending more time with Diana. That was something in which Lil could happily seek solace.

“I understand. I’ll start loading up the truck. Why don’t you pack up inside the tent?”

“That’s not what I mean. We can’t leave. Lil, you have got to listen to me.”

Lil glanced worriedly at the three unconscious men at their feet. They wouldn’t be out forever. “Diana, what could possibly be so important? I don’t want to kill these men, but something tells me they lack the same restraint. We can’t stay here much longer.”

“But I found a way in!” Diana finally shouted. “I’ve been there. Where’s your wetsuit?”

Lil felt stunned by the news. That Diana had gotten into the Garden was amazing. She was the first person to step foot inside God’s paradise since humans were thrown out. Despite her surprise, it didn’t really change anything.

“Diana, that’s fantastic but you know I can’t get through the barrier. Unless you want to return and spend some time there on your own, I can’t see the point of going back down there.”

A frown of confusion settled on Diana’s face, but cleared quickly. “Oh, no. You don’t get it.”

Diana pulled a bracelet from her wrist that Lil hadn’t previously noticed. The piece was marvelous, sporting a large ruby centered over a gold and silver braided circlet. Lil took the bracelet, turning it over and over in her hand. She’d been around a long time, but had never seen such craftsmanship. More than that, Lil could feel the hum of energy emitted by the mystical jewelry.

“Where did you get this?”

“I’ll fill you in on the way. Let’s get out of here before some of these guys wake up.”

Lil thought that remark particularly accurate since some of the men would never move again. One of them was decidedly deceased. The other three were injured, one severely, but that wouldn’t prevent them from

pulling a trigger. Lil still had her misgivings about attempting to return to the supernatural boundary, but holding something created by a mystical being went a long way toward persuading her.

“Let me collect my things.”

“You don’t sound very excited.”

Lil looked up slowly from the bracelet. She couldn’t deny Diana’s observation. “The truth is, I’m not sure how I feel. Let’s get out of here and you can tell me all about your adventures. Maybe by the time we reach the dive site, I’ll feel more enthusiastic.”

The conversation with Diana left Lil reeling. When she mentioned her encounter with Asherah, Lil experienced a joy she hadn’t anticipated. Asherah had very nearly been vanished from history and Lil hadn’t seen her in hundreds of centuries. The female deity rarely interacted with anyone on a personal level, certainly not to the extent that Yahweh had. Lil remembered asking Samael about Asherah before starting this adventure. He’d refused to say anything, but Lil had gathered he knew something. She was pleased to see that the secrets he kept concealed something good.

That Asherah still existed caused rampant, conflicting emotions. Lil felt excited, afraid and astonished all at once.

“Are you ready?” Diana asked as she pulled on her BCD and buckled the front of the vest. She was slightly hunched over from the weight of the air tank.

Lil nodded. She checked out the bracelet she still held in the palm of her hand, captivated by the beauty and the significance of the jewelry.

“I’ll admit that I’m still concerned about breaching the barrier. There’s a part of me that can’t believe I’ll actually get through, but if Asherah says the bracelet will work, then I’m sure it will.”

“You have that much faith in her? Considering what you told me about how you were thrown out of the Garden, I find that hard to believe.”

Lil snapped the spare weight belt around her waist. It was a little loose compared to the one she’d lost so she had to readjust the cinch. “Asherah visited me right after I left. She didn’t stay long. Sometimes, I almost convinced myself that it never happened.”

“What did she say to you?”

“Not much, really. She just encouraged me to hold true... her words. Asherah told me that one day I would find all that I sought and I would be happy. She told me that the torment would end.”

“That could mean anything. How is that helpful?”

Lil shrugged and then realized what she'd done. She smiled, thinking that Diana's habits had begun to rub off. “I don't know, but we never will unless we see this through.”

“Did I tell you that I saw a saber-toothed tiger?”

Lil wondered about the change of subject, but went along with it. “The Garden is untouched by time. There are creatures there that exist elsewhere only in folklore.”

“You'd better not be telling me that we could run into a T-Rex.”

Lil laughed and felt some of the pressure in her chest ease. “I would never tell you that. Some things you just have to experience for yourself.”

Once she finished pulling on her scuba gear, Lil settled down on the bank of the Euphrates. She allowed her feet to float in the current, her fins already in place. Lil's facemask rested on her forehead. All she had left to do before they headed for the barrier was to clasp the bracelet around her wrist. She hesitated, afraid the metal would burn into her skin.

“Come on,” Diana urged, sitting down beside her. “How bad could it be?”

“You do remember what happened when I touched the boundary?”

“Yes, but you said Asherah was nice to you. Why would she give you something just to inflict pain? It doesn't make any sense.”

Lil held her breath and snapped the jewelry in place before she could change her mind. She felt a slight tingling sensation, but no heat. Instead, the breeze suddenly picked up and Lil's bangs lifted into the air. She felt energy course out from the magical trinket and ripple out into the world around her. Along with the outflow of power, Lil felt her fears evaporate. Tears pricked her eyes at the relief of terrors hidden even from herself. Lil hadn't even known the weight she'd carried for so long until it disappeared.

“Lil?”

“I'm okay. In fact, I've never felt better.”

“Good, because some day you're going to have to explain to me what just happened.”

“I will,” Lil promised. “Now, are you ready to revisit my first home?”

Diana held her hand out, indicating the river in a playful manner.

“Lead the way.”

Chapter Nineteen

The sensation of euphoria faded quickly as Lil swam toward the invisible wall. Here, fighting the Euphrates' current, silence surrounded her. She knew Diana was close, but Lil couldn't see her through the sediment. Bright sunlight illuminated the sandy particles, reflecting the light and further obscuring her vision. Lil had never felt so alone.

Breaching the Garden seemed imminent and the very thought of their success caused goose bumps of apprehension to break out on Lil's forearms. The idea of a chill seemed farfetched. The area stayed quite warm and they had opted for short-sleeved wetsuits for their excursions. Now, Lil wished they had gone with the full sleeves. All of her senses were on high alert and Lil was struck by the water's bracing cool caress. Her eyes burned from too-bright light and she could feel every particle of sand against her skin.

The sand felt especially harsh, like sandpaper against her face and lips. Lil could imagine the miniscule grains abrading the rubber seals of her regulator. Something brushed against her side and Lil flinched in terror. Wild thoughts of kraken and leviathans almost made her drop the buoy's scanner. Lil held onto it by the thinnest of margins, but still tried to peer through the murky water as she searched for concealed threats.

Sea monsters weren't as common today as they once were, but this close to a supernatural oasis anything was possible. When nothing else happened, Lil tried to believe Diana had accidentally touched her. After all, they were headed to the same location.

Lil took a settling breath and focused on the signal receiver. She kept her eyes pinned on the readout, watching the numbers count down. Lil refused to focus anywhere else until the counter reached zero. Finally, she lowered the device and spotted Diana ahead since the sediment wasn't as heavy near the boundary. Diana had just stopped swimming and was maneuvering into a kneeling position.

It *had* been Diana who accidentally touched her.

Relieved and feeling a little silly for her childish fears, Lil knelt onto the river bottom next to Diana. She felt Diana watching her, waiting for whatever Lil would do next. Lil's pulse still pounded from her previous scare and she contemplated their next move. She wondered if it was too late to change her mind about all this. Humans weren't meant to reside in such a paranormal site, not even for a limited time.

Diana's hand upon her shoulder prompted Lil into action. She

couldn't deny her fear or doubts, but she also didn't want to appear foolish in front of Diana by refusing to face her uncertainty. Mentally braced for another bone-jarring shock, Lil reached out. She extended the hand adorned with the bracelet, hesitating the instant her fingers detected the thrum of energy. Past this point and Lil realized she would risk deliberately inflicting agony upon herself.

Lil turned and met Diana's gaze. She found support and understanding reflected back at her. Accepting whatever happened next, Lil kept her eyes pinned to Diana's and pushed her hand into the wall. Nothing happened.

Lil frowned and faced forward. Her hand had crossed the boundary without a single jolt. Diana's grip tightened on her shoulder and they moved forward together. Diana maintained her hold until they emerged into perfectly clear, crystal blue water. Diana had mentioned her previous guide into the Garden when she told Lil about her solitary exploits. Lacking that chaperone, Lil figured Diana maintained contact out of concern she'd be left at the wall.

Once past the impediment, Lil deferred to Diana. They headed down for several long minutes, swimming steadily toward a dark abyss. Lil couldn't imagine finding the Garden of Eden in a fathomless trench. She felt a little better when Diana leveled out and struck off for parts unknown. By Lil's reckoning, they were far below the desert floor. Diana showed no signs of hesitation, leaving Lil little recourse but to follow. Then she saw the sunlight overhead and knew without question that they had reached their destination.

Excitement hummed through her and Lil reached down to remove her fins while still heading toward the surface. She didn't want to miss a second of exploring the Garden of God's creation. Lil shoved off her facemask as soon as she breached the final obstacle and then she was on the grass. The sights, smell and sounds rushed back to her over oceans of lifetimes. She'd forgotten the sheer splendor. She was distracted by the unexpected, but long awaited, homecoming,

Somehow, she expected lightning to strike and cleave her in two. Either that, or the ground to open and swallow her up. How many centuries had she been told she could never go back? Yet, unbelievably and undeniably, this was the oasis of creation. Lil didn't realize that tears were coursing down her cheeks until Diana spoke.

"Are you okay?"

Lil nodded, but found it difficult to speak.

"Do you know the way from here? Last time, the paths kept

changing. I think Asherah probably had something to do with that, but is that normal?"

"I don't know. I wasn't here long enough to find out." There was such pain and betrayal in the simple statement that Lil almost choked on the words. "I guess that means we need some help."

"What do you suggest?" Diana sounded aggravated. "It's not like a GPS will work here, even if we had one, and hiring a tour guide is out of the question."

"Yes, it's not like we can bring another person in here, but what about an animal? Animals abound in this place and can exist without worry. Pravde will come in handy."

"Translocation? Are you out of your mind? You needed the bracelet just to get in. How do you know that once you leave, you can return? For that matter, how do you know you can leave in the first place?"

Lil raised her hands in a placating gesture. "It's okay. Weren't you the one who pointed out that Asherah has no reason to impede my progress?"

"That's not exactly what I said. I said she had no reason to *hurt* you, but there's no way we can understand her intentions."

"Well, I hardly think we have a choice," Lil said. "I have the bracelet and now that we've managed to find our way in, I have a clear mental image of this location. Diana, we need Pravde's aerial view to find the tree. Otherwise, we could be here for an eternity and not find that which we seek."

"There you go sounding like an Oracle again."

Lil couldn't blame her for being testy, but she was fated to lose this argument. "If I haven't returned in twenty minutes, start back to our camp. The Haimia will be gone by then and I will meet you there."

"What if I can't get back through the wall? I'm pretty sure Asherah helped me last time."

Lil rushed to quell the panic in Diana's voice. "Humankind was expelled from the Garden, remember? Somehow, I think getting *out* won't be a problem."

"Well, that's comforting."

Lil strode forward with images of the castle in Maine firmly fixed in her mind. She hadn't any more doubts to interfere with her actions. Lil disappeared in a wink and reappeared in her study an instant later. The familiar sights of home and the heady scent of wooden floors embraced her. Normally, Lil would be tempted to stay. It had been so long since she'd slept in her own bed, but in this case, she couldn't wait to rush back

to Diana's side. Without delay, Lil set out for the aviary.

Lil decided that traveling through the Garden's pathways proved just as challenging as Diana had predicted. Aside from the winding and often erratic meanderings, Lil adored everything she saw. There were fountains of honey that flowed like molten gold and animals she'd never seen except in a storybook. She and Diana rounded a blind curve and came almost face to face with one of those creatures. Lil inhaled sharply at the sight of a coal black unicorn directly in their path.

The beast snorted and reared up when it noticed the women. Muscles bunched and the sunlight shimmered on the ebony hide. Then the unicorn spun about on its rear hooves and Lil blinked in surprise as its color changed to something resembling a deep purple hue. In seconds, the unicorn thundered out of sight, leaving Lil a little breathless.

"I feel like I just saw the original 'Horse of a Different Color,'" Diana observed.

"What is a horse of a different color?"

"You know, from *The Wizard of Oz*."

"Oh, I'm afraid I don't usually attend magic shows."

Lil couldn't understand why Diana suddenly burst out laughing. Perhaps it was just all of the excitement. With a shrug, Lil redirected her attention toward Pravde. The owl circled high overhead, exploring the Garden in her own way. Lost in Pravde's view, the sights were even more glorious than from the ground. The single snow-capped mountain proved much more temperate near the base. Lil observed double and triple waterfalls, generated from snowmelt at the lower elevations. She watched the paths as they reversed course or twined away in completely new and unpredictable ways. There wasn't any sign of a T-Rex, but there were more than enough oddities to make up for it.

Far away, Pravde honed in on an orchard so deeply green that near the shadows, portions of it appeared blue. More lush than anything seen thus far, Lil silently encouraged Pravde to investigate. The owl plummeted downward on thermal currents in response to her prompting and Lil experienced the dive through their link. She sensed Pravde's thrill of flying and the sensation of freedom. Here, Pravde felt truly unhindered for the first time in her short life, without fear of a hunter's bullet.

Sharp eyes locked onto a heavily foliated tree that stood alone near a wide, perilous canyon. The tree seemed deliberately isolated, protected on one side by the gorge and distance from the balance of the forest. Its branches reached high and spread invitingly to all feathered creatures. Pravde lighted in the highest of perches, gazing downward to give Lil an unobstructed view. To her astonishment, this tree boasted multiple types of fruit upon a single bough.

The Tree of Life.

“This way.”

Lil set off across the meadow, unconcerned with any path. Her singular goal of finding this tree was near at hand. As she strode through perfectly manicured grass an idea occurred to her with such force that Lil wondered why she hadn’t considered it before. She finally had the answer for her dilemma of living with and loving Diana or following through with her previous plan.

“Wouldn’t it be safer to follow the trail?”

“No. They’re a distraction, meant to keep an intruder distracted and lost.”

“Are you sure?”

Lil kept moving, picking up speed until she practically ran. She could hear Diana’s panting breath, but couldn’t slow down now, not when they were so very close. As she expected, Lil eventually needed to cross over a trail, but she had not anticipated encountering a being she never thought she’d see again.

“Asherah.”

The hair like spun gold and eyes so like her own halted Lil in mid-stride. The dimples from continual laughter framed full lips. This smile had haunted her memories. The picture of feminine beauty housed in a slight frame took Lil’s breath away.

“I’m pleased to see you made it, Lilith.”

Asherah held her arms wide in invitation. Lil wanted to rush forward to be held in her mother’s embrace. She almost followed that urge but was able to resist Asherah’s siren call when anger surfaced instead.

“You could have stopped it. Had you stood up for me, I wouldn’t have been forced to leave. It’s all your fault.”

Asherah shook her head and Lil felt her sadness and regret to her soul. “You know that isn’t true, but you were so young and I knew you could never understand.”

“I’m not so young anymore. Tell me, what is it I couldn’t comprehend? That I am less because I am not male? That it is a mortal sin

for a woman to refuse subservience?”

“Lil!” Diana whispered urgently. She grasped Lil’s wrist. Diana was right to fear this creature wearing female flesh, but Lil would not be silenced.

“What I *do* know is that women are just as important, perhaps more so than any man. Where a man speaks with his fists, a woman communicates with compassion. Women nurture while men compete! How could any god expect me to bow down to such creatures?”

“All this time, my darling child, and still, you do not see.”

“I tire of this,” Lil snarled. “Stop me if you must. Strike me down or move aside.”

“So you can retrieve the dagger and end your suffering? I’ll not hinder you, Lilith, but before you continue look to your companion. See the love in her eyes and ask yourself if life is so terrible.”

Asherah’s request incited Lil further. “But that’s part of the problem, isn’t it? I’m not supposed to love another woman. That was made abundantly clear when I refused Adam.”

“Is that why you believe you were banished?”

“That is what I *know* and yet you went along with everything.”

Lil allowed the pain in her heart to dictate her actions. She did love Diana, but wouldn’t allow Asherah to use her emotions against her. It was all just another distraction. Lil strode away from Asherah, heading off into the woods. Guilt pummeled at her conscience for speaking to Asherah as she had, but Lil remained determined.

“Wait,” Diana said as they walked.

When Lil refused to stop, Diana reached out and grabbed her wrist again. This time, Lil responded. She turned back to see tears staining Diana’s cheeks.

“Hey, it’s all right.”

Lil wrapped Diana in her arms and held her close, taking comfort as she always did from this woman’s embrace.

“Did you mean what you said, about not loving me?”

“That I’m not supposed to? Yes, but we don’t always do what we’re supposed to. Diana, no one has ever dictated who I care for and no one ever will.”

Diana sniffled and relaxed against Lil, tightening her grip around Lil’s waist. “I’ve never seen you so angry. You can be a little intense.”

“I’m sorry if I frightened you. I guess I’m not so different from everyone else after all.”

“What do you mean?”

Lil rested her chin atop Diana's head, enjoying the feel of thick hair caressing her face. "Just that our parents have a way of bringing out extreme emotions."

Diana pulled back to gaze at Lil in surprise. "Asherah is your mom?"

"In a sense. Come on, we should get moving. I don't know if nightfall comes to the Garden, but I'd like to get closer to the tree before it does."

"So you still intend to leave me?"

Lil's heart twisted in pain when she heard the disappointment and betrayal in Diana's voice. She had felt the sting of treachery herself and never wanted to cause Diana that kind of hurt. Had she told Diana her ideas when they first occurred to her, they could have avoided this entire discussion. Instead, Lil had remained so fixated on her quest and being back inside the Garden that she put Diana's feelings second to her own. That wouldn't happen again.

"No, I'm not going to leave you. In fact, I believe I've figured out a solution to our problem."

"What is it?"

Lil squeezed Diana slightly, excited by what she'd decided. "I'm still going to get the dagger, that hasn't changed."

"I sense a 'but' coming."

"But...I'm not going to use it, at least not yet. Did you mean what you said about wanting to be with me?"

Diana smiled wide and said, "Of course I meant it. Are you saying you want to be with me, too? Like in a real relationship?"

"What we have is real. I'd just like to formalize it. Would you come to live with me in Maine?"

"In your castle?"

Lil could only nod. It had been decades since she'd asked another woman to move in with her. She knew Diana cared for her, but wasn't sure she'd agree to such an arrangement.

"I'd love to."

Relief left her feeling weak, but Lil couldn't allow such a wonderful moment to pass without demonstrating her joy. She captured Diana's lips in a tender and loving kiss, taking the time to savor the woman she'd grown to love. There was something almost sacrilegious about kissing someone in the Garden of Eden and Lil thrilled at the idea.

A warning rumble of thunder sounded from overhead. It was the first sign of stormy weather since they'd arrived.

Diana pulled away and glanced overhead with a smile. "Sounds like

someone might be offended.”

“Tough.”

Diana laughed at the simple comment. “Why, Lilith, I do believe you’re turning into a real girl.”

“Who says I can’t learn to speak modern English?”

“And I’m very impressed, but I do have a question. If you’ve decided you want a life with me after all, why go after the dagger? You don’t need it anymore.”

Lil hesitated to respond. Diana wouldn’t like what she had to say next, but there could be no room for dishonesty between them. Love required full disclosure.

“Because eventually, I will lose you. Hopefully, that won’t happen for decades, but it will come to pass. When that time comes, I will use the dagger.”

“Lil, you can’t. I don’t want you to commit suicide just because I die. I’ll want you to go on, to find another love.”

Lil shook her head, resolved in her decision. “No, Diana. I didn’t expect to feel this way for you and yet I remained committed to finding the dagger. Imagine how much more resolute I shall be when I lose you.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

“I’m sorry. I know this isn’t very romantic. What I mean to say is that I love you, more than I have ever loved anyone. You can’t ask me to go on without you.”

Diana cupped Lil’s cheek and kissed her lightly. “I have never felt so loved in my life.”

“Then you understand why I must do this?”

“Understand, yes, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Good, then we’re agreed.”

Lil took Diana’s hand and they continued on, joined by the physical contact and the emotions in their hearts. A quick glance overhead convinced Lil that the sun was indeed moving. It would set in a few hours and she wanted to close the distance to their objective. If they were forced to spend the night here, they’d have to sleep on the ground with no provisions.

“Are you hungry?” Diana asked, interrupting her thoughts.

“I could eat.”

“Unfortunately, there doesn’t seem to be a diner open at the moment. Any ideas?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. Let me talk with Pravde.”

“Pravde? What can she do?”

Lil stopped walking. “Just wait and see.”

A brief communication was enough to wake the owl from her roost. In her mind’s eye, Lil could see the bird remove her head from under her wing and launch into flight.

“She won’t be able to bring us much at a time, but I assure you that we’ll eat well.”

“How bad could it be?” Diana asked with a shrug, though Lil thought she still looked worried. “People used to live off the land without grocery stores or restaurants.”

“In some places, they still do.”

Almost before she finished speaking, Lil heard a shrill cry from overhead. She looked up as Pravde swooped down toward them.

“Get ready to catch.”

“Huh?”

Pravde released her cargo and two colorful pieces of fruit dropped into their hands. The bird had chosen a small bunch of sweet bananas and a massive red apple. They’d never have found an apple this size in any grocery store. Lil handed the apple to Diana and selected a banana for herself. She tucked the balance of the bunch into her elbow.

“Want to sit while we eat?”

“What a great idea. It’ll be like a little picnic.”

“Hopefully minus the ants.”

Pravde made a few more trips before Lil released her to find her own meal. The owl fetched grapes, lychee and mangoes. There was plenty to eat and even a little left over. Lil didn’t want to waste anything so she and Diana divvied up the few remaining pieces, carrying them by hand since they didn’t have a satchel of any type.

As the sun began its descent, Lil felt a tingling sensation on the back of her neck. Something was coming and she didn’t think it was a good thing. She looked around nervously, wondering from where the threat originated.

“You feel it too?” Diana asked.

“Yes, but I don’t know what it is. Just keep a sharp eye out.”

“At least we know it’s not the Haimia.”

“Right, at least there’s that.”

Lil didn’t mention that creatures in the Garden could be much worse than any human. Animals had their own set of rules, usually eat or be eaten. That was the natural food chain. From an idealistic standpoint, Lil thought that in this place a person shouldn’t have to worry about such things, but the truth was exactly the opposite. Animals weren’t evil, they

acted on instinct and the instinct to survive was the most powerful of all.

A rumbling sound approached from behind and Lil looked quickly over her shoulder. Something tunneled toward them, just below the ground's surface. From the way it caused the turf to buckle and raise, it had to be huge.

“Run!”

Diana didn't argue and they sprinted for the tree line. They'd been strolling through an open meadow and Lil hoped the deep, heavy tree roots would deter the unseen creature. Lil and Diana split up when they hit the trees, each dashing around huge redwoods. Lil stood directly behind the trunk, peering around her shield to see if the beast would pursue.

“That can't be,” Diana said softly. “Do you see it?”

Lil nodded, belatedly realizing that Diana couldn't hear her response. “Yes, the beast doesn't leave a wake behind.”

The creature veered away just before the trees and Lil saw that the ground only rose up from where the thing was at the moment. As it moved on, the turf resumed its original, flat appearance. This tunneling brute didn't leave a trail.

“It's gone.” Diana left her concealment and joined Lil behind the redwood. “Do you think we can rest for a while?”

Lil hugged her for support. “Let me find out how much farther.”

Chapter Twenty

The frivolity and light-hearted teasing of the day before had given way to haggard silence. Sleeping on the ground had left them tired and sore. Neither of them had slept much and even Lil had to admit that she missed the comforts of a soft mattress and Egyptian cotton sheets. After a light breakfast of nuts, berries and more fruit, they had set out for the Tree of Life once again.

“How much farther?”

“We’re almost there,” Lil replied, concentrating more on each step than her actual destination. “From what I can see through Pravde’s eyes, about another half mile.”

“Thank God.”

Lil looked over her shoulder and raised an eyebrow in inquiry.

“What? It’s just an expression. Besides, it’s hard not to believe in a supernatural deity when you’ve seen one for yourself.”

“Not supernatural, alien.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Lil was happy to use this conversation as an excuse to stop for a minute. She found a fallen log and sat while Diana joined her.

“Now keep in mind that I was created by these beings, and essentially so was all of mankind. I certainly don’t have all the answers anymore than you do. I’ve actually met Asherah only twice and that conversation with her yesterday was the longest talk we’ve ever had. Most of what I’m going to say is pure conjecture on my part from clues I’ve gleaned over the centuries.”

“Go on.”

“Before I do, how closely have you read your Bible?”

“Pretty closely, at least as far as Genesis is concerned. I was looking for clues on how to get here so I was paying attention to every word. Why do you ask?”

Lil nodded. “That’s good. All right, do you remember a passage that said ‘And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us’? He didn’t say man had become like him, he said *us*. That implies more than one, and indeed we know there is more than one because of Asherah. Now I’m not saying that Yahweh didn’t create life as we know it, but I am saying we don’t have all the facts.”

“Okay, I can see that. If there can be two, why not more? I’ll admit I’ve always wondered at things from a scientific perspective.”

“How so?”

“Well, if we have fossilized human remains predating the Garden, how is it that Adam and Eve were the first modern people?”

“Because the human genome was tampered with,” Lil answered simply. “Like I said, pure conjecture, however I remind you that I left the Earth for a time and traveled the stars with advanced civilizations.”

“I’d forgotten about that.”

Lil smiled and put an arm around Diana’s shoulders. “It was pretty amazing. I’ve seen things human eyes can never dream of, but I got tired of it and wanted to come home. As for this Garden, Yahweh and Asherah, all are amazing. It doesn’t matter how you look at them.”

“Okay,” Diana finally said after a long silence. “I never would have thought it possible, but you’ve convinced me. I’m officially a believer.”

Pravde interrupted the discussion by flying in and landing on the log beside Lil. She dug her talons deeply into the bark and hooted at her master.

“What’s wrong?”

“She’s telling me to get off my backside because she’s ready to finish this and go home.”

Diana giggled and put a hand over her mouth. Eyes alight with mirth, she asked, “Is that really what she said?”

“No, but close enough.”

After the short rest, Lil felt a renewed bounce in her step. They were close enough now that she could see the Tree. Awe flooded through her and she stopped at the edge of the huge clearing that marked the border around the Tree of Life. While feeling overwhelmed emotionally, Lil’s logic center worked just fine. There was a reason the Tree stood so isolated and they needed to utilize caution.

“What are you waiting for?” Diana asked, walking backward. “We’re almost there.”

“Diana, stop!”

The warning came too late. Diana had stepped onto a patch of bare earth. These patches weren’t rare, but scattered throughout the otherwise verdurous meadow. The ground dropped away suddenly beneath Diana’s feet, like a board of collapsing tiles. Diana’s shriek of terror cut off abruptly as her elbows and forearms hit the solid turf directly in front of her.

Lil dove toward her, landing on her stomach and grabbing for Diana’s clawing hands. Hauling backward with all her strength, Lil pulled Diana toward the edge of the drop. Diana scrambled upward and finally

flung a knee back onto solid ground. In only a few seconds, they lay next to each other panting from both fear and exertion.

“Remind me,” Diana said between breaths, “to keep an eye out for burning bushes.”

“We have to be careful. The Tree will be guarded.”

“Now you tell me.”

Lil stood up and helped Diana to her feet. “Step where I step.” The words reminded Lil of her adventure with Professor Clayworth at Gobekli Tepe.

This time, Lil kept a careful watch of their surroundings. She navigated around anything that might normally seem mundane, a solitary branch lying on the ground, a simple stone. If the object in question wasn't part of the field of pure, unblemished green, Lil avoided it. She kept one hand behind her, gripping Diana's wrist in case anything unexpected happened.

Ultimately, they closed within a hundred feet of the Tree. The full, thick branches spread far from the central trunk and Lil was careful to remain outside of the shadows cast by the limbs and foliage. Up close, she could see the unique produce hanging temptingly from their anchors.

“What kind of fruit is this?”

“I have no idea,” Lil admitted. “I've never seen anything like it, but I suggest we don't eat the fruit.”

“Right...one of the trees that man is forbidden.”

Something in Diana's tone informed Lil that eating was exactly what she had in mind. Normally, Lil's complaining stomach would have urged her to do the same.

“Don't do it. If you have to, think about what happened to Adam and Eve when they ate from the Tree of Knowledge. I have a feeling that the consequences here will be much worse.”

“Uh huh.”

“Diana!” When Diana met her eyes, Lil noticed a dazed expression. She appeared almost hypnotized. Lil snapped her fingers in front of her face and Diana blinked. After that she seemed more focused. “I'll buy you a T-bone and a huge baked potato with all the trimmings when we get out of here.”

Diana nodded and took a breath. “I'm okay now. Let's get on with it before I do something we'll both regret.”

“You stay here.”

Lil took a single step and then almost lost her balance when the ground suddenly began to rumble beneath her feet. Everything shook, but

the Tree's fruit didn't fall. Leaves rained down around them and Lil saw Diana drop to her knees with a mixed expression of curiosity and dismay.

"Earthquake?" Diana shouted.

Lil spotted a lump tunneling toward them from her left. The bulge moved toward them, disrupting the ground as it traveled, but leaving no sign of its presence as it moved on. "I don't think so."

The buried behemoth cut off their avenue of approach and centered itself directly beneath the Tree. It did not emerge, but Lil had the distinct impression that she would finally catch sight of the monster if she moved any closer.

"Now what?" Diana brushed her hands off on her backside as she stood. She kept her eyes locked on the mysterious guardian. "You think that thing will rip us to shreds if we keep going?"

"It can try, but I haven't come this far to turn back now."

"Speak for yourself. I'd really like to go home in one piece, preferably one working piece."

Lil felt the same, but readied herself to continue on anyway. She held her right hand out in preparation of touching the Tree and managed to close within ten feet. Lil thought she would actually make contact when the ground shook once again. Without warning, a thicket of thorns erupted and encircled the hardwood. A thorn caught her outstretched hand and Lil hissed in pain as she jerked away.

Blood coursed down her hand and dripped to the ground. The pain was intense, but Lil had experienced worse. Dying repeatedly, especially burning alive at the stake, gave her a unique perspective. She expected the miniscule wound to close virtually in an instant. Instead, it continued to bleed. Lil found the persistent injury more of a curiosity than a concern.

"Are you okay?" Diana grabbed her hand to inspect the wound. "It doesn't look too bad."

"I'm all right. I've just never been injured like a normal person."

"Well, get used to mortality. If you get what you're after, this is what you have to look forward to."

"Hopefully for many years to come." Lil squeezed Diana's hands. "It's a small price to pay."

Diana kissed her cheek. "Get on with it, but be more careful."

"I'm open to suggestion. This thicket is pretty...well, thick. I should have brought the Haimia's machete."

"What about the bracelet? It worked for the underwater barrier."

It was worth a try. Lil considered her wounded hand and realized she'd extended the one without the bracelet. She held her left arm up

vertically so that the bracelet would touch the thorns first. Rather than allow her to pass through as she had while submerged in the river, this blockade retracted from contact with the jewelry.

“That’s a neat trick.”

“Stay here.”

“You said that already.”

Lil stepped forward and the coppice drew back even more. The brush proved more barbed than substantial, only a couple of feet wide. Lil was through quickly and stood beside the Tree of Life. Filled with wonder that she had actually made it here, Lil forgot about the ruby bracelet and reached toward the trunk with her other hand. The meager laceration on her finger vanished.

“Do you think that was a little too easy?” Diana stood beside her.

Seemingly in response to her question, the creature in the ground erupted. Dirt and scattered debris rained down upon them and Lil leapt toward Diana, concerned only with her safety. She knocked Diana to the ground and covered her with her own body as a monstrous serpent emerged. She immediately saw the irony of such an occurrence, but disregarded the thought when she saw a human face upon the beast.

“Samael.”

“I am both the defiler and the bringer of knowledge,” the archangel responded in a resonating voice.

The booming sound made her eardrums ache. Lil stood with Diana and confronted her old friend.

“I understand. You bring a warning before I make my decision,” Lil said formally.

Intrinsically, she appreciated that this was the final test. She had told Diana before that the snake was a symbol of duality and Samael had just said as much to her. Lil could always blame the serpent for tempting her if her decision didn’t work out, but in the end, the choice was always hers.

Samael’s ghastly countenance weaved back and forth, bobbing in the air as his body writhed in a snake-like fashion. When he spoke, Lil could see his pink, forked tongue and his voice boasted a definite hiss.

“You have reached your goal, but what you enact here cannot be undone.”

“We’re good with that.”

Samael ignored Diana’s remark. His tongue flicked out and caressed the ancient Tree’s trunk. Straight away, the bark peeled back. An ornately carved wooden cutlass sprang forward. The hilt curved in an interlacing pattern that harbored tiny gems of every variety. The blade was also

constructed of wood, though honed to an extremely sharp edge. Lil doubted she could use the dagger in the traditional sense.

“You may not take the dagger from the Garden. Crossing beyond the great rampart will destroy the blade. Make your decision here, but know that the sword does not function as you believe.”

Lil was still stuck on the fact that she couldn't take the bladed weapon with her and use it at some date in the future. Her plan to live a mortal, loving and fulfilling life with Diana had just evaporated in the wind. She was now faced with the decision to sever her immortality or give up the quest forever. The idea of continuing on after Diana perished from old age threatened to steal the breath from her body.

“And if I should choose to utilize the blade now?”

“Then there will be an exchange. A life for a life. By giving up life eternal and existing as a mortal, another must die.”

“What?”

“You can't be serious.” Diana said almost simultaneously.

Lil's blood ran cold as she finally comprehended the full ramifications of Samael's warning. “You mean Diana.”

She heard Diana gasp and felt her grab hold of Lil's biceps.

Samael's head bobbed and Lil took that as confirmation.

“No.” Lil didn't have to think about it. “I'll not trade my desires for her life.”

Diana's grip eased off slightly.

“And if you are given the option of a stranger taking her place? Would you accept this gift if another, one you had never met, were to pay the price?”

This was where Samael's true nature emerged. As the tempter, he presented Lil with an offer that was difficult to refuse. Lil literally bit her lip to keep from accepting. She didn't want to leap into something she would later regret. Instead, she thought carefully and realized that no one deserved the result of such a bargain.

“I would not agree if you offered the life of the most vicious serial killer. This burden is mine to bear. Either sever my immortality without restrictions or allow me to continue as before.”

Along with her decision, Lil let go of the anger she'd harbored against humanity for so long. Just as this decision was hers alone, so were the choices she'd made in her life. She did believe people were warlike, but she also finally accepted that humans possessed the potential for altruism. She could no longer hold onto the past.

The serpent vanished in an instant, absent the theatrics of an

earthquake. In its place stood the innocent looking, blonde-haired cherub. Samael's blue eyes flashed with merriment, though he quickly knelt and bowed his head. Lil didn't believe his behavior was in honor of her decision.

"Congratulations, Lilith. You have chosen humanity over your own selfish wishes."

Lil and Diana turned to see Asherah.

"And what has that decision earned for me, a never-ending future of solitude?" Lil couldn't contain her displeasure, but wouldn't have changed anything if it meant another would die.

"Quite the opposite, actually." Asherah's typical mirth fairly oozed from her pores. "Put aside your disappointment and consider how you feel. Are your senses as sharp, do you feel as strong as before?"

The suggestion caught Lil unaware. Now that Asherah mentioned it, the sun didn't seem as bright and she could no longer hear the worms in the earth. Lil made a fist and noticed her lack of strength. It appeared that in return for making a selfless decision, Asherah had granted her most coveted desire.

"That easy?"

"It always was. You weren't banned because of your independence from men. It was because you harbored bitterness toward humanity in your heart. When you released your anger toward mankind, you released your burden. The decision was always yours to make."

"We make our own fate," Diana said softly, reminding Lil that she had spoken those same words many weeks ago. For all that she was many centuries older, Lil still had a lot to learn.

Samael stood and stepped toward her. "This is the last time we shall meet Lilith. Be well."

He surprised Lil by hugging her. Lil had only found herself in Samael's arms once before, when he rescued her from the pyre at Plymouth.

"You as well, Samael. Try to do as you're told."

He pulled away and smiled mischievously. "Where is the fun in that? What will you do now that you have obtained your objective?"

Lil looked to Diana and saw she had jolted everyone when she said, "Maine allows same gender marriage these days. What do you say?"

Samael frowned. "Do you see where we are, Lilith? God still disapproves."

"I don't need the reminder, but I'd rather reside in perdition for an eternity than reside in heaven for denying my heart."

“Aw,” Diana said, hugging Lil close. “You say the sweetest things.”

“Good for you,” Samael said with a wink.

Asherah didn’t seem quite as amused. She cleared her throat to interrupt the moment. “Lilith, since you lack your abilities, I think I should transport you and yours out of the Garden.”

“Are you saying we’ve worn out our welcome?”

“Indeed.”

“And the Haimia? Will they continue to pursue me once we leave?”

Asherah shook her head, causing sunlight to glint off of her earrings. “They no longer have a purpose and as long as you do not attempt to return, there is no need.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Lil called Pravde to her. She extended her arm as a perch, pleased when the owl refrained from squeezing too hard with her talons. As a mortal, it would be especially easy for Pravde to injure her. “And now, if you don’t mind?”

“I will miss you, Lillian Primus. Lilith the child killer no longer exists,” Asherah said in farewell.

Lil sat at the head of the table, watching her friends enjoy themselves. Everyone had made the flight in from different countries. The sound of English spoken with different accents as well as the laughter and the warmth inside the castle made her feel cozy and loved. Wine flowed and food was consumed. Once in a while someone threw a morsel at another in play.

“So you’re fine with the new arrangement?”

“I’m good, Lil, really,” Sophie answered. She took a bite from a chicken leg and spoke around a mouthful. “I don’t have to worry about living forever and you know, all I ever really wanted was a place to feel at home.”

“You’ll always be welcome here,” Diana responded, settling into Lil’s lap. “Now, you’ll have to excuse us for a minute. I need to talk to Lil.”

Diana grabbed Lil by the hand and led her into the study where she closed the door.

“Is something wrong?”

In response, Diana wound her arms around Lil’s neck and kissed her

on the cheek. “No, nothing’s wrong. I just want to make sure you’re happy.”

“Ecstatic. My people are pleased with how things have worked out and no one died as soon as I lost my abilities. I will admit that at one hundred thirty-eight years old, Haruko isn’t too sure about the prospects for a normal love life. And what of you, my love? Looking forward to making your home here with me?”

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be, though I’ll have to find another job. I’m sure that Scripps wouldn’t mind giving me a good reference.”

“You know you won’t ever have to work again if you don’t want to?”

Diana kissed her chin. “I know, but I’d never be happy with just sitting around. Speaking of which, I do have some ideas about staying occupied for the next little while.”

“Hmm, what did you have in mind?”

Lil kissed Diana’s neck and then opened her mouth to suck on the sensitive flesh. She felt Diana’s hum of pleasure and suspected things were taking an amorous turn. The idea appealed to her, but she couldn’t leave her guests languishing in the other room while they made love. Before she could voice that idea, Diana derailed her line of thinking.

“Well,” Diana said somewhat breathlessly. “I was thinking that we could start by exploring some of the hidden passageways in this castle.”

That wasn’t what Lil had expected. “Who said there are hidden passageways?”

“Darling, it’s a castle. There are always hidden passageways.”

“Later.”

Lil ended the discussion with a kiss. She should have known Diana wouldn’t just settle down for a life of domesticity. It was one of her best qualities. No matter what else happened, Lil would treasure every moment together for the rest of their lives.

About the Author

A decorated United States Marine and retired San Diego Deputy Sheriff, Susan dedicated her early life to public service. An on the job law enforcement injury pushed her into early retirement. These days, Susan resides in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The lush surroundings help fuel her creative side to pursue another passion...writing.

Ms. Thompson's other works include: *Under the Midnight Cloak, Now You See Me, Fractured Futures, Destination Alara, Under Devil's Snare, Woeful Pines, Illusive Witness, Beyond the Garden, The Flaw in Logic* and *Norwood Manor*. She has also published short stories in *Lesbians on the Loose, Crime Writers on the Lam* and *Our Stories*.

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Books by S.Y. Thompson

Under the Midnight Cloak

Lee Grayson is a nature photographer whose father is a senator in New York. She's never felt close to him and her faith in people as a whole is lacking. She moves to the town of Harmon deep in the Adirondack Mountains after inheriting her great aunt's estate, but the local townspeople seem a little...off. Then she meets Ranger Jamison Kessler and learns there's a killer running rampant around the area. Jamison seems to be hiding things from her and Lee is starting to become suspicious.

Lee discovers that her aunt was a central part of this community and that she possesses the woman's unique abilities. She and Jamison are falling for each other, but things take a turn for the worse when the murderer sets his sights on Lee and a cure for his condition which he believes her to be harboring. Their situation is further complicated by the fact that the killer isn't even human. Neither is Jamison.

Now You See Me

Corporate attorney Erin Donovan has nothing on her mind except representing her clients to the best of her abilities. One fateful day, she shows an irritating new client, Carson Tierney, around the tenth floor space of her own building and her life takes an unforeseen direction.

Carson is an awe-inspiring woman by anyone's standards. Possessing genius-level intelligence that has allowed her to become a self-made millionaire of a computer software company, Carson still has a dark secret that could be her undoing.

When the two are thrust together to escape a deadly killer in a high-rise office building while a blizzard rages outside, they have no one to

count on but each other. So begins an unexpected yet tender romance. However, unchecked love and desire isn't in their future. The murderer is still out there and he's coming for them. Will Carson's street-wise skills protect them both as Erin attempts to discover the killer's identity just as relentlessly as he is seeking their demise?

Fractured Futures

Detective Ronan Lee has just solved the crime of the century, or has she? The case of the copycat killer plunges her into an ancient mystery, but solving the murders raises questions about the world government's true objectives. An unexpected invention gives her the chance to travel to the past. Her target is the 21st century and her mission is to save the woman at the heart of issue. This same woman, Sidney Weaver, is a warm, personable and accomplished actress that Ronan would give her life to protect.

Unaware of what fate has in store, Sidney's life is boringly predictable until a mysterious stranger comes out of the darkness of night to protect her. She knows there's something unusual about Ronan, but despite her misgivings, she can't deny the mutual attraction. All of this takes a backseat when she's plunged into a harrowing game of cat and mouse that could destroy everything she holds dear.

Destination Alara

In the 24th Century technology has evolved but greed and war are constant. A rookie starship captain but a veteran of the recent Gothoan War, Vanessa Swann searches the outer rim of the galaxy for any sign of rebel activity. Her favorite pastimes are kicking enemy butt and making time with the ladies. The last thing Van wants is to team up with the Andromeda System's heir apparent and leader of the Coalition flagship, Princess/Admiral Cade Meryan.

Coal black hair, piercing grey eyes and skin the color of fresh cream threaten Vanessa's professional boundaries, but focus she must when

faced with repeated attempts on Cade's life. The fate of millions and the threat of galactic war rest on Van's shoulders. Whatever the outcome, their lives will never be the same.

Under Devil's Snare

Jamison Kessler and Lee Grayson are back in book two of the "Under" Series. Set one year after *Under the Midnight Cloak*, their adversary is very human. Someone has a fixation on Lee that manifests itself in a series of grisly murders rapidly approaching serial status and child abductions. These crimes are merely warnings, but what happens if Lee fails to interpret their meaning?

Jamison, Lee and the Panthera rush to save the lives of the innocent while they struggle to identify the instrument of so much suffering. Strains in relationships cloud their ability to see the whole picture. At the same time, U. S. Park Police Detective Patricia Hex shows up to help out but may soon become a threat to the Panthera community. Jamison's concentration splits between Lee, a mysterious killer and trying to keep Hex out of the Council's crosshairs. Her lack of focus may be all the stalker needs to get to Lee.

Woeful Pines

While undercover agent Emily Baptiste is investigating a rash of disappearances in rural Kentucky, she discovers something that strains the limits of credulity. The kidnapped are being hunted for sport. When she is also captured, Emily discovers an insane truth. The missing are taken through an inter-dimensional portal to a place where fantastic creatures reside, predominant among them are a race of vampires. The vampires use other species to hunt as well as for sex and slave labor.

Now Emily is among the hunted. Her only hope is Sheriff Jenna Yang from *Woeful Pines*, Kentucky. Unfortunately, Emily and Jenna hardly know each other. Will Jenna even realize Emily is missing? If she does, will Jenna be willing to risk everything to cross into an unknown land

and face enduring hardship to rescue a virtual stranger?

Illusive Witness

Who can you turn to when everyone betrays your trust? This is an especially important question for Ruth Gallagher. Severely injured at the same time that her best friend is killed in a mountain climbing incident, she later learns it was no accident. Repeated attempts on her life are made when a mobster believes she knows more about his criminal enterprises than she does.

Riding to the rescue is U.S. Marshal Emma Blake, but after all the perfidy can Ruth trust Emma? Barely healed from her previous encounters, she may not have a choice.

The Flaw In Logic

Science fiction and fantasy merge as this romantic adventure follows Commander R'cey Hawke, bounty hunter. R'cey hails from the technologically advanced Amalgam. Her mission to an archaic world is to apprehend a vicious criminal. What seems a simple retrieval goes askew when her vessel crash lands.

With no alternative, R'cey throws in with a small group of locals possessed of some pretty wild ideas. On this epic journey, R'cey discovers that golems, imps, harpies and most of all magic do exist. Logic is out the window.

Princess Thalia Dumont's agreement with a dangerous magician has unexpected consequences. She only meant to force the evil King Lotar, her father, to step down from the throne. That ill-conceived bargain forces her upon a dangerous quest to undo her error. The fate of her kingdom relies upon the outcome. Taking along an off-world stranger shakes things up even more. Both will have their eyes opened up to possibilities never before considered.



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