

Nightmares Are Not Always Dreams

© 2006-2012 by Mr. David R. Dorrycott

Originally published in the book, In The Time Of Oharu.

ELECTRONIC PDF VERSION.

*A story set in the shared world of Spontoon Island, created by
Mr. Ken Fletcher located, at this writing, at;
<http://spontoon.rootoon.com/>*

*A small number of signed copies have been given as gifts,
these are the first edition. If there is no statement of gift
on the back cover, this is a later edition.*

Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental. No other warranty is expressed or implied. This work may be too intense for some readers and governments. All characters involved in mature/adult situations are over 18 years of age. This work is not recommended for children.

Reproduction in any known or unknown manner is strictly prohibited. This work may NOT be entered into any contest or competition without authors written, signed permission.

Published by the Naorhy Free Press © 2012 c.e.

Introduction

“It made us feel squicky” N.A.F. Editors rejection letter.

This story was originally written while babysitting a remote and rarely visited political campaign office back in 2006 c.e. I had taken my own computer to set up as the office had none, then finding that days would go by without a phone call, visitor and having run out of envelopes to stuff, seal, attach labels & postage my mind started to wander.

That is always a dangerous thing, a mind wandering. I had already been writing in Mr. Ken Fletchers SPONTOON ISLAND universe for some time using Oharu, by now I was getting tired of writing just about her and wanted to explore something darker. Yes, darker than Cranium Island. This story is the result, I cannot say how it started or where it came from, only that the first words simply rolled out onto the screen, quickly followed by everything else. It took two weeks to write this, I would guess some 100 odd hours. Two weeks to write and six years to catch all the errors, to guide this thing into a final whole.

It is basically a horror story, a story so dark that it would only work in an Anthro universe. A what if story. What if in the far past one tribe decided that when Winter came it was easier to gather furs from unsuspecting members of other tribes than vicious animals. By doing so they gradually weakened those tribes, enveloping them, reaching further. How far could they eventually reach, how difficult would it be to wipe them out.

Logic showed that once that tribe reached a critical point, wiping them out would require the determination not of an army, not of a Kingdom but of a world and this world is too frightened to make the attempt.

Thus we have what is basically a 1930's style adventure, but one that does not end as the majority of such stories end. Just remember, no one is forcing you to read this.

Mr. David R. Dorrycott
1951 to 20??

Chapter One

Smaller Chinese furs parted quickly, making an open path for a huge English bulldog that pushed towards the old railcars doorway. Heavily muscled, at over six feet tall he was easily a foot taller than the tallest Chinese around him. Killian James Whitehall, reporter for the London Thymes was by now well used to travel in China. Of course, one could not forget the advantage his height and weight gave him over the average native standing around him. Slowly the train came to a jerky stop, its badly worn breaks screaming in protest at having to work yet again. As soon as he could, Killian stepped off his overcrowded train, it having managed to come to a rest at the just as crowded station platform. Even within the crowded station to air was cold, for it was early November of 1935, and the great reporter Killian Whitehall was dying. Throngs of Chinese flowed around him like a river around some great unmovable stone, completely unaware, and uncaring for the bulldogs fate.

Finding a place away from the throng Killian calmly studied his position. He stood in silence, appearing for the moment as some powerful statue, unmoving while an early mornings icy snow drifted around him. Nine years of travel in China during his life had left him immune to the mass press of fur about him. Twenty-two years of chasing wars, brush fires, bandit kings and warlords had inured him to any furred suffering around him. He'd been serving as a London Thymes Overseas reporter since after the Great War, adding to that those years of the war itself. Standing in the trenches as a junior reporter. It had hardened him, but not enough for what he had recently discovered.

Uninterested in the dealings about him he made his decision, turning to walk into the city. Until just a year ago he had thought that he had experienced the absolute worst that one fur could do to another. He had felt that nothing could affect him anymore. Not even begging children, mutilated by their own parents simply so that they might bring in an extra penny each day. Not even that could touch his soul anymore. Though the women who of late had started clustering around him, especially in the so public confines of his train, was a mystery. Yet since his loss in the Great War, even love seemed to have abandoned him.

Now at the ripe old age of forty seven he was chasing down his greatest, and most dangerous story. No slave traders these, anyway he had exposed enough of those already. No tomb thieves, assassins, serial killers, corrupt politicians, false churches, false prophets, grave robbing archeologists, door to door salesmen or other such lowlife scum. No, he'd finally tracked down what he now considered the absolute lowest life form in this world. All he knew about them had come from

whispered legends and a single ledger he had stumbled across. They called themselves The Brotherhood of the Boneless. They sold pelts mainly, though other materials were as easily available from them. Especially long forbidden meats. These were not your simple everyday dealers of four legged creatures, creatures often distantly related to themselves. No, not something as everyday and quite legal, though oftentimes reprehensible as that. He was on the trail of those who dealt in pelts that once walked on two legs. Once talk, loved, laughed.

Certainly stories had always abounded in this world of such horrible things. Mothers stories meant to frighten children into staying near their home. His studies though now suggested that apparently they had actually existed as far as written memory could be tracked. Many times such groups had risen, thrived in certain nations only to be brutally repressed eventually by others. But always they came back, and the manner of their return was a pattern he'd thought that he may finally have figured out. Each and every time such groups arrived it was with a Chinese flavor. Not just any Chinese flavor either. It was almost always a Manchurian flavor. Then Lady Luck had smiled on him. Smiled... she'd belly laughed. A little less than a year ago he had stumbled over the corpse of a wolverine. One who had fallen down a steep cliff, pulled down by a young doe chained to him. Both had been dead only a few hours and a simple inspection of the scene had told what had happened. Chained to the doe the wolverine had no chance of survival when she had leapt off a cliff. At first he'd thought the male a simple slaver, until within the dead wolverine's possession he had stumbled across a ledger, much as the ledgers Killian himself carried. Yet what was on those pages had both excited and then sickened him. It had given proof to him that the bedtime stories his crazy Aunt Mime had told him were based on hard fact. It had confirmed his worst nightmares. It had nearly driven him out of his mind.

He had carefully studied that ledger, committing to memory its facts, figures and code phrases. Then he had spent most of a year building a background for himself, just in case someone investigated. A year sounded like a long time, and for him it now was. But this kind of people would be covering their furless tails at every turn. He simply couldn't afford a mistake.

Code phrases, such as when asked one gave a small city in a nation abutting ones own birth nation as ones birthplace. He had since carefully followed the style of behavior its pages had indicated. On his right paw was a heavy gold ring, one that the wolverine had been wearing. A large red stone was insert within the ring, on that stones flat surface a strangely complex symbol had been carved. Killian knew that this would be his most dangerous investigation. His most important work. More importantly it would be his last story. Being his last, it had to be his best story. For Killian James Whitehall was dying. A tumor was slowly growing within

his brain. A tumor the best Doctor he had found could not remove. Not without, at the absolute best leaving him with the mind of a two year old. Thus each day was a blessing, each day was precious. He could only hope that there were enough days left to him. At least enough that his publisher would send others to follow him. Or at best, enough to shatter the worlds complacent views of what sugar coated foundations their lives were built upon.

As he walked away from the train a dozen or more youngsters ran up. Typically they approached every non-Chinese in hopes of pawing off some little trinket, some little fragment of food. Each offered anything from food to 'lost ancient objects' to their own sisters. In answer he growled at them, showing his fangs in the manner of a hungry animal, his action causing each one to dash off in a different direction. It wasn't his normal way of dealing with such things but the headache he'd been fighting since just before dawn had severely shortened his temper. He'd run out of the pain killing herb an old woman had sold him days ago.

"Well done brother" a voice commented from his other side. Those words had been in Mandarin he noted, not Cantonese. Turning to his left Killian found a rather large bull standing near him. Large yes, but mostly made of fat, not the iron hard muscle Killian sported from a lifetime of difficult travel. A pointed look at the mans right paw showed that he too wore the same style ring Killian now sported. "Anyone may wear a ring" he said in greeting. "You are from Baotou?"

"Anyone may be from Baotau" the bull replied. "I was born in Altay. You are from London?"

"London is filled with mindless drones. I was born in Galway. Welcome Brother."

"And you" the bull agreed. "You are correct, any may wear the ring. One ripped from a dead brother or sister. Yet that ring will rarely fit without change, and as you can see" he held up the paw that his ring was on, showing a worn but still visible complex delicate pattern running around its outer surface. "Mine has never been stretched. Nor cut."

Killian mirrored the gesture. "Nor has mine" he agreed, thankful that the wolverine had been fat and thus they wore the same sized ring. He much missed his class ring, yet to wear this one and hide his theft he had been forced to leave it on the wolverine's finger. "Now do we shake with some archaic ancient long hidden secret pawshake, bounce buttocks against each other while cooing some wild song or wink and nod until we fall asleep?"

Laughing the bull clapped Killian on his back. "You have humor in you brother. So few English have useful humor. I very much like the way you ignored those about you on the train, even the women who threw themselves at you. You have learned to be away from rabble even when surrounded by them." He shrugged. "I have been watching you since Chengde, for no other reason than I boarded your train there."

"I have no patience for product" Killian explained, still speaking Mandarin. "I am travel weary. Would a brother be kind enough to point me towards the Hall? I understand one still stands here."

"Better than. I am myself headed that way. Please join me. I am called Sying. You are?"

"Parker. Captain Samuel Wilde Parker. Of the 1st Middlesex Regiment" he answered, using the name of a friend who had died in the trenches many years ago. Died badly because of a poorly coordinated attack. Died cursing the General sitting in his comfort miles behind the lines. Died cursing his children, and his children's children. Such curses Killian knew tended to have a life of their own. He still carried the ferrets identity papers, though as to the why he could never explain. Not even to himself. "Call me Wilde."

Turning for the nearest exit Sying smiled again. "You English so much love your stilted forms of address Wilde. Have you come from the London Hall?"

"No" Killian admitted. "I never heard of us while in England, other than bedtime stories. Not until I stumbled across the Berlin Hall back in '21 after the war was I made aware of our existence. I looked around, found that I liked the idea so I decided to join. Of course, some could say that joining was the better alternative to becoming saddle leather." He continued following, having used the wolverine's personal history and detailed explanation of contact procedures to pass himself off as a Boneless Society member. Certainly that long dead wolverine must have had a rather bad memory, or was so foolish as to be mad for keeping such detailed notes. From this point on he would be depending upon what that ledger had taught him, and his memory. For the ledger had been shipped to London four months ago, along with a report on everything he had learned. By now he prayed to Buddha that it was in his editors paws. Privately the bulldog wondered if the effeminate Irish Setter would be able to hold his lunch upon reading its contents. Thomas was such a delicate man sometimes. Even if he had taken a bullet at the Some, then killed the Hun who had shot him. But he had his ways, and the contacts to circumvent even the densest Government bureaucracy. Or secrecy.

They walked together through the small city, one not quite large enough to be called an important city, yet by only a small measure. Sying pointed out areas of interest as they walked. Those areas Killian noted were generally filled with furs busy with their daily business. Not at all the typical tourist sights. “And how do you know your immune’s” the bull suddenly asked.

Caught by surprise, he had been looking at a particularly delightful pair of apparent twin antelopes with odd hairdo’s Killian covered himself with a laugh. “You mean the insured ones” he answered, giving himself time to sort through his memories. Yes, there it was. “They wear a symbol of course. Either on a necklace, bracelet or cut into their fur. Some a special hair style, like those two we just passed. There are so few insured families in Germany since the war that usually they are known by sight. Besides, the Berlin Hall culls from far outside Berlin itself. Most often outside Germany herself. France and Poland are their favorite hunting grounds. I am told there has never been an accident.”

“They lied. There are always accidents” Sying corrected. “Like Berlin we do not cull those from within our own city or near it. We are as careful as we may be, but thirty nine years ago a young man from Jilin was processed. He had forgotten to wear his mark. We compensated the family of course, then they buried what product could be recovered. It was our first mistake in generations.”

“You have since corrected your processing routine?”

“Yes” the bull answered. “Unless the product comes directly from a known member it is awakened first, then asked for its code word. Only after that test is it reduced to useful inventory. If though, say you were to arrange the pickup of a special product, by your mark it would already be known that this was no immune one. So the waking test would not be bothered with. That is preferred as it makes processing so much easier. Of course there haven’t been any errors since this new step was added. Still we retain the routine. Ah, there it is. Come, you must meet our High Lady. She has an interest in bulldogs, and not as product.”

They entered what seemed to be an old government building and almost immediately the air seemed cooler, though Killian thought he could scent the smell of ancient death seeping within its walls. They stopped at a reception desk where a very attractive female fennec stood, silently waiting. “Is Madam Xiùme in today my beautiful Shazeer” Sying asked.

“Not today Honored One” the woman answered. She opened a book that Sying did not bother to more than glance towards while she read. “Madam Xiùme went to inspect her latest acquisitions processing, to test fit her new clothing. After that she

expected to visit her special project. She left the city two days ago and is expected back very late tomorrow. Would you leave a message?”

“Tell her I wish to speak to her of the missing moon, and tell her of my friend here as well. We both need chambers.”

Closing her book the young fennec turned around, opening a tiny door. One of dozens behind her. From it she took two keys before closing it. Turning back to face them she smiled, handing Sying one key, Killian the other. When her eyes met Killian’s there was a strange widening to them, a marked difference in expression. *‘Not her too’* he thought as he accepted his key. “Third floor Honored ones. Rooms nineteen and twenty. Will there be anything else?”

“Yes. Have food, clean clothing and maids sent up. We are both tired and both in need of pleasure. Female pleasure.”

“It will be done honored one” the fennec answered with her liquid soft voice.

Two strong looking hounds came up then, taking both fur’s luggage and silently following the two as they walked up a wide sweep of stairs. As they climbed Sying kept looking over at Killian. “There is a problem?” the bulldog finally asked.

“No. I simply wonder why you sway occasionally. Have you used a drug, or has the sudden heat of our Hall affected you?”

“No to both I fear. There is a simple answer to that sway my friend. I am dying. I have a brain tumor. It is too deep to be taken out. My sense of balance is always in doubt now. Already my sight is sometimes affected. So I have perhaps three months left me. Most likely less. I much doubt more.”

“Why not return to England then? To be home with friends and family.”

Killian laughed. “England is full of straight laced snob nosed harlots. Here in China I may enjoy my last days. There are many pleasures I have come to love that I would not be able to enjoy in England, or even Berlin as yet. Besides, I prefer to leave what funds I have to the Society than to some wimp of a brother. Ah, my room.” He held out his paw. “I am happy to have met you. Perhaps later we may talk again?”

Sying took Killian’s offered paw with a firm grip that made lie to the visible fat. There was a great strength hidden behind that outer fat Killian realized. “I would be delighted my friend. And I am sorry to know that your time is so limited.

Perhaps though we may manage a hunt? I am overseer of several farms. It would be easy for me to arrange a small one.”

Images passed through Killian’s mind from the ledger, dark images that had invaded his dreams many times this last year. “Perhaps. Though I would have to be nothing but an observer. I am no longer able to confidently make the moves I once did.”

Nodded sagely the bull looked towards his own door. “Yet the thrill of a limited hunt is better than sitting in a hospital room, waiting for death to visit. I will see you later tonight. Where may I find you?”

“I would think the library. Reading is still a pleasure to me.”

“The Library it is then.” With that Sying released Killian’s paw and turned to his own door.

Killian had barely managed to open his suitcase when a knock came on the door. “Enter” he called in English, wincing at the pain his own voice gave him at the moment.

For a moment nothing happened, then the door opened slightly. “Enter?” a woman’s soft voice asked in Cantonese.

“Yes” he answered, switching languages. It was amazing he thought, how many languages one learned to converse in while wandering the world alone. He alone had been forced to learn eight fluently, not counting his native English. His door opened and two female panda’s entered. Sisters he thought. One carried food, the other a robe and satchel. All employees within these walls would be automatically immune he knew, for trusted trained servants with very closed eyes and mouths were worth much more than any single pelt could ever bring. “We are assigned to you for your stay” the larger panda explained.

“Food on the table for now” he instructed the smaller panda. “I require a pain killer. A powerful one that will not leave me unable to continue my work. Fetch one please.”

At his command the smaller panda turned and hurried out. There would be medical care within these walls certainly, very good medical care. Kings and Emperors might think themselves all powerful, but none was more powerful than one who could turn that same ruler into a rug at a whim, or their maiden daughter then live to boast of it. Only assassins were more dangerous he thought, even then the final

results would be debatable. Turning his attention to the second panda he raised one eyebrow.

“I am Sheen. I am to bathe you, then trim your fur” she explained. “After, my younger sister Chi and I will be delighted to be your pleasure.”

“My tastes are in thinner women” he explained in an attempt to avoid such an encounter, at least for tonight as she helped him from his traveling clothing. “Such as the fennec Shazeer.”

“I am sorry we do not please you honored one. I will ask if Shazeer is available, though I think not. Her duty is not complete until midnight. If she is not then I will find another.”

“Don’t bother. Tonight I simply wish a warm body, so either or both of you will do. I sleep best in Winter with a companion.” He stepped out of his trousers, allowing Sheen to complete his undressing then wrap him in that soft silk robe. Then he sat to wait as the panda went to ready his bath, wishing he was back in England. Back where civilized people didn’t wear and eat their brothers and sisters. While he waited the first panda returned, a elderly tall goat arriving with her.

“You have pain brother?” the goat asked in perfect Mandarin, forcing Killian to again switch languages. His Mandarin was no where as good as his Cantonese. His greeting immediately announced to the bulldog that he was a member, not an employee.

“I have a tumor” he explained again. “In my brain. It cannot be removed so I will die soon. I prefer to die within the halls of my kind than in some whitewashed hospital surrounded by bleating sheep.”

“I see. May I examine you first?”

“Feel free, though do please hurry. My head feels as though it may explode.” Killian waited while he was examined, though the final answer was the same as always. “If not a tumor then something as bad. You have been examined before?”

“Delhi” Killian admitted. “A very good English doctor who thought he might have a chance. His machine took pictures of the inside of my head. All he could do was offer his sympathies and suggest I return to England. To die.”

Chapter Two

“Ah. Then I will prescribe a small dose of opiate in alcohol. It is, I am sorry to say, the best path I may offer you.” He opened the bag he carried, taking out an ornate bottle. “I brought several drugs, this one is the best choice. One spoonful as needed. Later, when the pain is worse however much you feel that you need. At the end I will prepare a hypodermic for you, that you may pass beyond while unknowing your pain. To enter the great hunting lands without madness is preferable I believe. When you need more opiate send a servant to me.” He switched to Cantonese, repeating his instructions to the two pandas before returning to Mandarin. “I wish I had the skills, yet to reach so deeply. You would never be the same even should you live. If you need me again. I am Doctor Shi.”

“A true pleasure to meet you” Killian admitted. Taking the bottle he studied it a moment, then poured a dollop into a spoon his temporary servant Chi now held. Opening his mouth he let her pour the liquid onto his tongue. Very soon his pain ebbed, turning his headache into a nearly forgotten event. Reaching for his money belt he took out several gold coins. “I do not know the price you normally charge, but for the lack of pain this is what I offer.”

Doctor Shi nodded, accepting the coins. “Room and food are free always but medicine is expensive. Your payment is more than enough. Until your time comes Brother, I leave you to enjoy what pleasures you may.”

After Shi had left Killian allowed Sheen to remove his robe, relaxing while she and her sister carefully brushed the worst travel dust from his fur. If this service had been because he was simply rich, or both had fallen in love with him he would be in paradise. Yet the knowledge that somewhere near him fellow furs died to support such pleasures kept him tense. After his bath though, he was to discover that the sisters knew quite well how to relax even that form of tension.

“You are better today Brother?” a by now well known voice asked.

Killian looked up from his reading, noting that the bull Sying was standing across from the table he was using. It had been two days since his arrival and he had spent the first of those days doing nothing but resting, if what the two panda sisters did for him could remotely be called resting. In the least it was entertaining to watch. “Doctor Shi has given me a very effective medicine” he answered. “I felt almost no pain for some time after using it. Now that I have learned what dosage to use, I am experiencing a much better day. Please, join me.”

“Which is why you are currently avoiding the Li sisters I assume, to enjoy some rest.” After he had settled himself the bull leaned forward, picking up one of the books Killian had finished with. “Jo Lin’s island safari of 1903, you find these journals interesting?” he asked as he returned the book.

“They are quite inventive” the bulldog admitted. “As I may no longer actively hunt” he continued. “Reliving others hunts through their own words is almost as exciting as the hunt itself. Though Lin made a mistake allowing that priestess to survive. Even if her pelt was too coarse for use. According to Osip it cost him much later. It seem’s she was no simple priestess. She had real power and was somewhat unhappy that her husband was turned into someone’s jacket.”

“I seem to recall that story Brother Wilde” Sying admitted. “He died mad, claiming that those dark eyes were always there. Always watching him, never blinking. A second expedition was sent to that island many years later but no living soul returned. Thus has the Cranium Islands been marked off our lists of prospective hunting lands. It is simply too dangerous now. Perhaps in a hundred years it will be safe again. Perhaps never.”

Closing his book the bulldog sighed. “I would think that several thousand miles would be a long way to go for a simple hunt. Even for special pelts.”

“Ah, your words are those of one used to a large hunting lands with great variety. You have all of Europe to play with remember. China is large yes, but other than those herds we breed for speciality pelts most of our native pelts are much the same.” He tapped a book, one filled with the reports of lost hunters. “Much too inbred after so many thousands of years of fool Emperors. Any safari’s to Cipangu are doomed from the onset, though that land holds animals of great demand. For some time a brother on a Northern island sent pelts monthly. Fine pelts, of the best

quality. Then he was found. We will not visit that island again until memories fade. Twenty, perhaps thirty years is normal. Yet his pattern held no weakness, we use it elsewhere even now. Only that he had become self important, and thus woke those eyes we so strive to avoid. Sometimes a brother or sister forgets that they are not in a Hall. They give themselves away. It was only by sacrificing many middlemen that Portiere's error did not lead to the Kou Han Hall."

"Russia also holds pelts in great demand" Killian reminded the bull. "I understand that sable's are currently in extreme demand there. Especially by certain rather high placed women."

"True. So great a demand that the species is now endangered. We now only take those Stalin himself has thrown out, for he would have them killed eventually anyway. Even then there are few enough young pelts to satisfy the desires of even one Hall. Certainly not the needs of over two hundred. Today we have several thousand orders we simply cannot fill, or fill only when opportunity allows. Yet sables are not the highest in demand. Ratel, mink, always mink, wildcat and panda are the most in demand. Sable comes in a low fifth, though even a good house cat or rabbit pelt is often worth the effort. For boot and glove inserts if nothing else."

Sying leaned back, resting his huge paws in his lap. "Sable's are slow to breed, even so their gestation period is very long. To create such a herd, as we did mink and ratel we would have had to have started generations ago. One must first breed out the aggressiveness. By culling at first, then by selectively breeding for somewhat lower intelligence. Only when one has a properly prepared herd may one expect a steady supply of product. Now with Cipangu invading such projects are best left for less disturbed times. I have already lost one farm to those barbarians. I am moving others further West even now. This reminds me, Madam Xiùme has returned with her special project. She wishes to meet with you." A sly grin came to the bulls lips. "As I said, she has an interest in bulldogs. Xiùme has certain skills I think you will find makes your pandas best efforts pale in comparison. Are you free for dinner?"

"Of course. I will have to send a message to my servants, that they do not wait up for me. I should meet you in the dining area?"

"That would be best I think. Please come dressed as you are. Few Brothers or Sisters go in for ostentatious clothing. Even Madam Xiùme prefers subdued clothing within these walls. It is unfortunate that all you wear is cloth, yet that will not bother Madam Xiùme at all. Not at all. I will see you there in a half hour then." He stood, looked about for a moment then walked over to another table much further away.

Killian looked at the pile books, all bound with the skin of some poor fur who had caught a hunters eye. It made him sick, yet this was not the place or time to show such feelings. There had been one article that had interested him greatly. It had been the hunter Portiere that Sying had spoken of. He had managed over thirty pelts of the absolute highest quality, along with delicate cuts of meat prepared especially for the speciality market. He had been an excellent cook after all. Yet his own arrogance had been his downfall, and it was the one who had shattered that hunters slowly growing power that interested Killian. "So my friend. I have found your roost at least. Too late, yet perhaps, Buddha willing, not much too late."

Setting those books he had read onto a waiting cart, for a servant would return them later, he stacked the few still unread volumes on his table. They would remain there until his return, or three days. Whichever came first. Rubbing his tired eyes he called a waiting servant over, sending him to explain to the Li sisters that their efforts to entertain him would not be needed tonight. It had been a delight to discover that he had the two assigned to him for his stay, and that neither could speak or read anything but Cantonese. It was not so much that he found them attractive, though they were. But in his condition it would soon be difficult to learn a new face each time he returned to his quarters. Anyway they seemed pleased with the situation, though he could wish for just a bit more sleep. What was it with the women in this region he wondered. Since entering this part of China they had been approaching him more often, to the point one had nearly disrobed before him while on the train. It was a strange puzzle to him though.

Madam Xiùme turned out to be an extremely attractive Russian wolfhound. She greeted Killian with a hungry look in her eyes, a look that warned the bulldog that Sying's comment about her tastes had been a serious one. Yet it was the woman beside her that caught his eye. No where near as attractive as Madam Xiùme, though much younger, an auburn furred hound sat completely at ease. He studied her quickly, not wishing to insult his hostess by ignoring her. Afghan, at least some with that muzzle and long fur. But with long auburn fur rather than the expected golden yellow most afghan's wore. It was her eyes though that captured his attention. Green eyes so dark as to be almost black, eyes magnified by large round glasses she wore. It took a force of will to break her gaze.

"So. My special project captures you as well" the wolfhound laughed. "It is the eyes, I not have seen the like before ever." She laughed again, a heavy, Russian sounding laugh, as was her accent. "Let me introduce. Helen, this is Captain Samuel Wilde Parker, of the 1st Middlesex Regiment. England. He come here to spend his last days. Captain Parker, this Doctor Helen Maggy Sneed. Phd. She has come to China to search fossils. I speak all correct?"

“Well enough” the woman Helen admitted in common Chinese. “Though your Cantonese is much better than your English you still have a thick accent. I am pleased to meet you Captain Parker, though I am sorry to know that you are so ill.”

There was an accent to Helen Sneed’s voice that made Killian think of the American West. “New Mexico?” he asked bluntly.

“Wyoming” Helen corrected. “Though I have not been home more than a few weeks in these last eight years. I look forward to visiting my family for a month upon my return.”

A twist of Madam Xiùme’s face at those words told Killian more than he wanted to know. There was something else, something strange. Both women appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable, Xiume more so than Helen. As if something in the air were bothering them. He was though saddened that this woman would never see her family again, that she would never see America again. Most likely she would not see the morning sunrise depending upon the wolfhound’s mood. He turned his attention to his hostess, shutting out those eyes. After all she was only one woman among billions. In a short time she wouldn’t even be that. He had to remember that. He had to remember his goal, his big picture as the American’s put it. But those eyes. “Fossils you say Madam Xiùme. If Doctor Sneed hunts fossils what could possibly bring her to your attention?”

Setting down the wine goblet she had been tasting the wolfhound turned her head to study Helen, or as Killian knew she considered her, her special project. “Like you. Her eyes. But more. She sweet, kind. Much fun to enjoy. Much fun in bedroom” she finished with another, baser laugh. Killian noted that comment caused the American hound more than a little embarrassment, her tail positively went limp. “I think maybe she too skinny though. Work too hard. I fatten her up. Another ten, fifteen pound she be perfect. Then we see America together yes?”

“Certainly” Helen agreed, happy the conversation had changed subjects. “You must see the Grand Canyon, it is as impressive as your own Great Wall. And the Painted Desert. Then the Valley of the Kings. There is so much I want to show you Xiùme. But we’ll only have two months after we leave the ranch. I need to find another job and most American schools don’t much like female professors.”

Reaching out with one paw the wolfhound stroked Helens face, her claws Killian noted were extended fully, as if to comb that long fur. “You never have worry about job. I promise you. You always with me. I take care of you.”

Killian noted the lower lip suck in on Helen’s face. Something odd, something she wasn’t happy about. Could she suspect her fate? Then Helen spoke and he thought that he understood.

“I only wish Ruth was still alive. I miss her. Damn it why did she have to go and drown like that, and only a week after getting here. She’d loved to have met you Captain Parker. She loved the English, though her opinion of your food wasn’t something repeatable in mixed company.”

“Ruth?” Killian asked, turning his attention fully on the younger hound.

“Leibowitz. She was a student assistant of mine, used to be a dorm mate when I was working on my Doctorate. My best friend. She came on this trip because it finished her science courses and I needed her as an assistant. A week after we got here our boat was rammed by accident. Ruth never could swim well, we didn’t even find her body in those currents. That’s when I met Madam Xiùme. Her boat was helping in the search. They dragged me out of the river. I was too exhausted to even float. She took me to her home, took care of me all night. She held me until I could stop crying. That was the hardest letter I have ever had to write, the one to her parents. I miss Ruth a lot.”

“That seven weeks ago” the wolfhound explained. “No one ever find body. I have reward out anyone find body. Cannot send home now, can bury.” Those words brought a thin smile to Helen’s face, but not to Killian or Syng. Both knew what really happened. There had been swimmers under the water, most likely otters. Once the chosen product had fallen in that river her fate was sealed. She probably had been aboard Madam Xiùme’s boat, drugged and hidden long before they bothered to fish out Helen, who would have exhausted herself hunting for a woman already out of her reach. Killian realized that he no longer had an appetite. Though the conversation moved to other matters he limited himself to wine. Besides, within the Hall he could never be exactly certain where his meat had really come from.

As their evening wore on Helen excused herself, claiming exhaustion. Killian knew better, he had easily spotted the drug being entered into her drink by a servant when she wasn’t looking. Was tonight her last night then? It was Syng though who cleared up his odd worry. “I see you have decided upon hurrying events Madam Xiùme” he said. “She will gain weight that much quicker by sleeping after a large meal”.

“Yes, her pelt still too close my size. It must be larger. She work much too much. Hard work. Make meat tough, not sell high price. Brain though. I have three bid

already. Very intelligent. Many want intelligent child. Maybe two week she be ready process. Three outside. That I enjoy watch. Maybe tell what happen her Ruth before knife cut.”

“Where did the Jewess’s pelt end up” Killian asked.

Madam Xiùme smiled broadly. “Mink small, my size like Helen. I not fatten. Make body suit. Make me look mink, soft soft fur. Even make purse, long glove, boot, belt. Animal Ruth wonderful capture. Easy too.”

“There is an American professor, not a member but an immune. One who brings one or two products each season” Sying explained. “He himself did not come this year, though he sent four. That mink, two arctic fox’s and the green eyed hound. We have arranged an attack by bandits the last day of their encampment. Many will be carried away, abused, then most will escape. Those last three will vanish of course, though Ivan has his eyes on a buck he thinks would be tasty. We will see. It will of course close this area to his trips for several years. Still the war will do that anyway.”

“An immune selling product” Killian asked. His surprise was not at all faked. “I have never heard of such.”

“American’s” Madam Xiùme spat, as if getting rid of a bad taste. “They sell anything. All care for money. No honor. None. If not so well known, if not so useful immune find self on table. I not like that kind, even product so excellent.”

“So you will wait for how long to process this young hound” Killian asked. “A week or two? I am impressed by such restraint.”

“Restraint” the wolfhound laughed. “I loan her you tomorrow. You see why restraint. If not for pelt I keep. Never I find anyone like her. Those eyes. They haunt.”

“And are worth a great deal” Sying added. “Such eyes have never been seen around here. There are certain magicians who are in a bidding war over those eyes. Like gems, they are almost unreal, even if she is far sighted. If her sight were perfect her eyes alone would be worth more than ten pelts. She will bring Madam Xiùme a great deal of profit, even though she keeps the coat that will be made.”

“We see America together. Next Winter” the wolfhound agreed. “Only Helen not be breathing then. I see what she so much love, know her better. She keep bones warm long time. Now I have need sleep. You too talk, been long day chasing rock

climbing product.”

Once their hostess had left Sying tapped the table, catching Killian’s attention. “It is the eyes, isn’t it” he asked.

“That, and something more” Killian admitted. “Were I not dying…”

“She is product and Madam Xiùme’s property” the bull reminded him.

“It is not unknown for a furrier to desire a product, thus raise her to immune.”

“Or love a servant, and raise her to member” the bull continued. “You asked for Shazeer. Was there a special reason?”

Killian smiled, staring into his half full glass. “Like the hound, her eyes. I have always been attracted to eyes. It has been my downfall.”

“Thus you have left many pups wandering this world. Have you never found a woman?”

“Once. She was French. She had the most enormous eyes. She died in a Hun barrage. I swore never to allow another woman into my life again.”

Sying signaled a waiter, returning to their conversation as the table was cleared. “Tell me brother. Had you the power and the lifetime. Would you choose Shazeer or Helen?”

Killian snorted, looking up to lock gazes with the bull. “Now why would I be so stupid as to try and take a brothers woman?”

Sying grinned at his words. “Obvious, yes I am. But answer me. Which?”

“An hour ago I would have taken Shazeer and been happy all my days. She is beautiful beyond belief, while Helen is almost plain. Yet, as you said. It is the eyes I have no defense against. Now. Now I desire a product I have no ability to touch. Why do you not take your fennec? It is allowed, even encouraged.”

Sying leaned back before he answered, his chair creaking under his weight. “Wilde, here there are three who have taken rule at this Hall. We call them the stools legs. They have enough money and forces to lay to waste any who oppose them. One of the laws they changed was that one. No servant may be raised to member. No product may be raised to immune. Until they are gone I will have my

pleasure, but never my love. Especially as HiYung desires Shazeer as well. He arrived this morning from Indo-China. If he keeps his habits he will call for her tonight, as he does each night he is within these walls. He hurts her. Yet I am powerless to save her.”

Killian thought for a while before continuing. “HiYung is one of the three?”

“Yes. Oldest, most powerful. Doctor Shi and Madam Xiùme are the other two, though Doctor Shi only follows their lead to remain breathing.”

“Loan me Shazeer. I give my word I will not harm her. But arrange that she comes to my rooms tonight.”

“Why should I do that? It will cause troubles for her and you will be gone soon.”

“Because when he wants her and finds she is with another, he will do what? Rage? Scream? Come to my door and demand her?”

“All that” Sying admitted.

“Then he will die. I will duel him. After all I have nothing to lose but a few weeks. That will take one leg from your stool.”

Sying’s drink vanished down his throat. “Why do this? If you lose nothing changes. Even if you win there is still Xiùme.”

“Whom I believe few like?” He caught the slight nod of agreement. “With your permission I would like to taste Shazeer’s pleasures for two days. Perhaps longer. I have never been with a fennec. It would please me greatly. Yet I will not touch her unless I duel HiYung first. It is a win win situation for you.”

Sying remained silent for a long time before answering. “I will agree, but there will still be Madam Xiùme.”

Killian laughed, the first true laughter he’d had since discovering the wolverine’s journal. “If you noticed, Xiùme seems to have found something interesting about me. I will deal with her as well. In my own way. Only if you agree to help Helen escape China. Alive.”

“Why?”

“It is the eyes my brother. It is the eyes. I have little time and I do not like the way Xiùme toys with her product. She gives the woman hope, then will shatter her soul simply for the pleasure of doing so. We deal in product, we do not touch souls. If I may help the balance Buddha may smile upon me. As you said, I have nothing to lose but a very little time.”

“You are Buddhist? I would not have believe such. An Englishman a Buddhist. So the world does come to an end after all. Very well. I will insure your green eyed goddess escapes China. But you must choose another destination for her. She will never be safe in America. Not once her seller discovers her return and that she still lives. She will be death for him should he allow her to breath. And no, I will not give you his name.”

“Then let us play this game. Besides, I look forward to introducing my pandas to your fennec. It should prove.. Entertaining.”

Chapter Three

HiYung reacted exactly as Sying had projected. Demanding his favorite toy he was at Killian's door almost as soon as he had discovered where she was. By then the Li sisters had started their own investigation into the fennec's gardens. This meant that Killian had to answer his own door. For all three were, at his orders, busy in the way those two panda's most enjoyed.

"The fennec" HiYung demanded as Killian opened his door.

Killian looked back, just in time to see the worried woman's face disappear behind brown and white fur. "I am currently enjoying her, as is my right as a member" he informed the older porcine. "When I have finished, which will be two days at least, I will be quite happy to allow her departure."

"She is mine" the fat Chinese snapped. "She is mine each night I am here. I am here."

"As I can scent" Killian growled. "I chose her. She was sent here. Speak with the Hall Master."

HiYung's reaction was the classic move of an angry man stymied by what he saw as a lesser intruder to his domain. He swung with all his strength, only to strike the door Killian had closed in his face. With a howl of pain the porcine lost the last of his composure. "I will kill you Englishman" he cursed at the top of his lungs. "I will wear your pelt as my underclothing."

That was a mistake. One did not so threaten a member, any member. Killian opened his door again, noting the gathering of furs about HiYung, the shocked expressions on their faces. "Your offer of a duel is accepted. When and where?"

"The courtyard. Now" HiYung answered before realizing what he had stepped into.

"Very good. Revolver or automatic. American fast draw. I trust you own one or the other. If not I am certain the Hall will provide one." With that he shut his door again, throwing the heavy latch before tossing off his robe. Underneath he wore his traveling clothing.

"Master Wilde?" Sheen asked from the bed.

Strapping his gun belt on Killian took a moment to check the special and heavy .45 cal. luger's action before answering the panda's unspoken question. "Have her ready when I come back. I will be very hungry." He then took the opportunity to take a drink of his medicine. This was no time for an attack. Not with so much on the line. "Very hungry."

"She knows so little" Sheen continued with a touch of worry in her voice.

"Then teach her everything she needs to know, she will be your student for two days after all. Or more if I may arrange such. I have to go." Grabbing his battered traveling hat he unlatched his door and stepped out, to find two burly servants waiting outside. One quickly stepped to block his access to the door he had just stepped through while the other gestured. "Do you really think I'd miss this duel?" he asked in English. Then repeated the question again in Cantonese. Switching languages was getting tiresome. So were his headaches and his vision was slipping further at each attack. This would have to be fast he knew. He just hoped that his American friend had taught him well enough.

HiYung waited in the courtyard, his right paw swollen badly. "I ask for a delay" he said as Killian entered the courtyard. "My paw is damaged."

Killian spat at the ground. "You chose the time and place. Either now or lose your membership and your immunity. Your choice fat boy."

Growling a curse Killian barely heard the porcine step forward. "I'll sell your hide cheaply to Madam Xiùme. For her bed. You take advantage."

Killian ignored him, walking to the courtyards other side before turning to face his foe. There was no second, no referee. This was Hall business. Though dozens of members and servants were in evidence, not one stood to insure fairness. This was to the death. There was never anything fair about death. "When you are ready, draw."

For several minutes the two stood across from each other. Each silently watching the other, each hunting for a weakness. Finally HiYung moved, his speed catching Killian by surprise. His own luger had barely come level when HiYung's bullet screamed past his ear. Like most who preferred the fast draw HiYung's initial accuracy was poor. He was still pulling the hammer back on his American single action Colt for a second shot when Killian's slug plowed through his throat. It exited the back of HiYung's neck, taking a section of spine with it. This caused the porcine to collapse like a puppet with its string's cut. Safeing his own weapon Killian walked over to the dying man. Kneeling he brought his mouth close to the

porcine's ear. "You were set up" he whispered. "I will take Xiùme next, then perhaps Shi. But you, you will be buried in the city cesspool." He watched the horror grow in his enemies eyes as he realized his fate. Then that light too died, leaving nothing but a dead body.

None too gently Killian removed the heavy gold ring from HiYung's paw, studying it a moment before slipping it into his own pocket. Several servants quickly came up to drag the body away, one asking what to do with it. "City cesspool" he answered, turning away from the man. Sying was standing there, waiting. "I'll send her too you as soon as I get to my room" he told the bull.

"No. We deal fairly here. Besides I want to hear from her just how good an Englishman can be. Xiùme watched. She was unhappy to lose HiYung, but not as unhappy as I thought she might be. Perhaps she sees in you something better than him."

"I am dying. She is a fool."

"More-so, she believes you are not dying, though she admits you are ill. I honestly believe that she plans to marry you."

"And the hound?"

Sying looked away a second before answering. "I inquired before the duel, as if I were interested. She is not for sale at any price. I do not know how I may help you further."

"Right now I need a drink, then I've three ladies waiting for me." Killian sighed. "I'd rather just sleep. Maybe if I gave them the bed and I took the divan." Rubbing his forehead he suddenly stumbled, only Sying's strong arms kept him from falling as he curled up in pain. "Left pocket" he gasped, a moment later tasting the medicine Shi had given him.

"You need rest" Sying whispered as he replaced the bottle a bit later.

"I need this damn tumor cut out" Killian countered. "Short of that a bullet to the head would be a delight right about now."

"Not at least until you have experienced Shazeer. She is quite remarkable should I say so myself. Quite remarkable."

They soon reached a parlor, Sying helping Killian to sit. "Bourbon" the bull ordered. "Two and large." Finding a chair for himself he ignored a waiting servant, carrying it next to Killian with his own paws. "I owe you brother. You have saved my love from great pain. Two days. I would grant you two years for this should you have them."

"Two weeks is pushing it I think now. I thought months, but the pain worsens each day. At least it is Winter. I so love the Winter." Killian accepted the bourbon, taking a deep draught of the fury liquid before continuing. "And don't feel so in debt. I left her with the Li sisters."

"Shazeer has never been with a woman" Sying laughed. "And you left her with them? What orders did you give them?"

"To teach her everything in two days. I think she may be ruined for you. You should hate me."

Sying's following laughter caused heads to turn, such true laughter was rare among these halls. "Have you any idea what 'everything' means to those two?" He lowered his voice. "Shazeer will beg me to never let her out of my sight again. You have done me a great favor, a great favor. Tell me. What will you do with the pigs property."

Killian stared into his goblet, thinking. By accepting the challenge he had placed what little he owned on the table. By winning he now owned everything that the porcine had. Everything. What to do with it? "Half to the Hall immediately" he decided. "The other half I will hold, though I will write a testament. Is it much?"

"Half is three times what I have" Sying admitted. "You are now richer than I."

"Holding Shazeer I was already richer than you" the bulldog shot, pleased when the bull stuck out his tongue in good natured response.

"I will have her forever, you only have her a few days. Weeks at most. Thus I am the richer."

Killian abruptly realized that he truly liked Sying, that if it hadn't been for the bulls lifestyle they could have been true friends. He closed his eyes, thinking. So many of his friends were dead now. Only one he truly trusted still lived, and only recently had he discovered where the man had found a place to live. Letting his mind wander he went over his life. The Great War, so much death. Lives thrown away by generals who bought their way to power. Then the influenza pandemic,

so many more gone. Brush wars, warlords, inept commanders who sat in cooled offices drinking sherry while good men died under a blazing sun. Now Germany and Italy were throwing sabers around. Japan had an undeclared war going on here in China and he was worried about a few thousand lives a year? Less than the whooping cough took in a season. Then those dark green eyes came to his mind. That voice whispered in his ears. What was it about Helen Sneed that made his heart ache, what could he do to save her.

“Wilde?”

“I was thinking” he answered. “Which for men like us is very dangerous. How long is a servants contract here?”

“Depends” Syng answered. “More Bourbon” he called, noting both their goblets empty. “Shazeer’s has another year to go, then she will probably sign for another five years. Your Li sisters. They sold themselves to the Hall. They are still servants but they signed a lifetime contract. More money for their family, and to be honest they love their lives. Ask them, they are a surprising duo. Mainly servants stay for fifteen to twenty years. By then on their feet financially they move out of the way for someone else. Their immediate families are immune as well. Why do you ask?”

“Curious. I have some ideas. If you married Shazeer what would you do. Found your own hall?”

“No. Founding a Hall is always risky. Especially at this time of instability. I would move deeper into China. Japan will not reach all of China and if somehow they do I will go to America. I have relatives in Little China who do not know what I am. In any case I will be moving away with her as soon as it can be arranged. I could just buy her contract, but she would not be immune with only ten years service. It takes at least fifteen.”

“She’s been working here ten years? She’s hardly twenty.”

“Twenty-two, she started when she was thirteen. Her older sister brought her to us.”

Killian sipped his new drink, then looked up at the ceiling above him. “If I bought the Li sister’s contract...”

“They would sell themselves back when you die. They are extremely popular, even if they are in their thirties.”

“... and gave them to you. To care for say, Shazeer? And your children”

“They would keep her exhausted” Syng admitted. “And me.”

“A rich man living in far Western China. With a beautiful wife and two completely devoted servants. I won’t call them slaves, they aren’t. If the war forces you to America, say a farm or ranch somewhere in the West. You would miss the Hunt I imagine, but there are other pleasures in this world. Especially if the entire world is involved in war.”

Syng studied his own goblet, himself now in deep thought. Finally he looked up. “You are right. The Hunt no longer brings joy, only duty. I am finding of late that it sickens me.” His ears snapped back and forth a few times as he thought. “Shazeer is worth retiring for. Both sisters received immunity long ago. Perhaps raising a family would be a new joy, though what a half panda half bovine would look like worries me.”

“Nothing different that a half fennec half bovine” Killian suggested.

“You spin a delicate web my brother. But why? What is there in this dream for you?”

“I am dying Syng. I’ll be dead long before Spring, I will never see the flowers bloom again. First come the blinding headaches, then periods of true blindness. Finally I will be fully blind. After that, a day or two. Perhaps less and I will die in great agony. Right now I am finding ways to have pleasure before I cannot do so anymore. I find that doing this, it gives me an odd sense of pleasure. Will you deny me?”

Syng smiled. “Who am I to deny a dying man his pleasure. Yes, I will do this. But there is still Xiùme and Shi.”

Killian raised his paw, the signal causing a servant to hurry over. “Is the Hall Master awake?”

“Yes Honored One. For another quarter hour at least.”

“Ask him to bring the Li sisters life contract. Shazeer’s too. Since my duel I find myself with more money than sense. I wish to buy them.”

“Immediately.” As the servant took off Killian shrugged. “A dying man has no time to waste” he explained, dropping HiYung’s ring on the table between them.

“Thus falls a fool” he toasted as he lifted his goblet.

Several hours and much drunker later, Killian and Sying walked into Killian’s rooms. “See” Killian told his companion. “Told you I wouldn’t touch her ‘for tha duel.”

Shazeer tried and failed to raise her head. As much as she wished to move she was unable, she simply hadn’t the energy. All she could manage was to turn her head, her eyes widening at the sight of Sying. “Save me my true love” she begged, her voice weak from exhaustion.

“Why” Sying asked. “Y’er nothin but ah servant and those two look awfully happy.” Sheen looked up from her place, her facial fur damp, matted. Smiling she managed a wink to Killian before returning to what she had been doing. Of Chi there was no sign, until she came out of the bath. Staggered was more like it.

“They are exhausted” Killian observed. “But a’hm not.”

“No my brother, you are only drunk.”

“Drunk.”

“Very drunk.” Sying helped Killian into a chair, then walked over to the three women. “My friend is in too much pain to tell you this, so he has left it to me. Sheen, Chi? He has purchased your life contracts.” He noted the amazed looks on their faces. “Come come, you were aware that after thirty your contract could be bought by anyone, for any reason other than processing. Shazeer, he has also purchased your contract. Now you all know that our brother is not long for this world. Therefore he has placed in the Hall a paper that gives your contracts to me upon his death or departure.” Settling onto the bed he touched the fennec’s tail at its base, noting her reaction even through her exhaustion. “Wilde is a better man than any I have met within these walls, ever. He killed HiYung, he gave half of that fat pigs property to the Hall without complaint. The other half is mine upon, as with these contracts his death or departure. I want the three of you to care for him. I warn you that he has been in great pain twice tonight. Keep him warm, keep him happy and Sheen?”

“Yes Honored one?” the panda asked from the beds foot.

“You both will continue to serve Shazeer as you have been tonight. For as long as all three of you live.” Turning his attention to the fennec he was pleased to see the stunned expression on her face. “My wives must be pleasing to me little one. To

please me they must be fully trained, and always in practice.” Leaning down he kissed Shazeer, noting an odd taste to her lips, then stood. “Take care of our brother, for if any has earned your love. He has.”

After Sying had left Chi looked to her sister. “Did he say wives?”

“He said wives” Shazeer agreed from the bed.

“But there is still Doctor Shi, and Madam Xiùme” Sheen reminded them.

“I will deal with Xiùme” Killian said weakly from his chair. “Now be quite. Someone bring me a drink, then continue with my entertainment.”

Chapter Four

Three days later Madam Xiùme met Killian after lunch. She was wearing, he noticed, a very revealing silk dress, though the dark black fur underneath could not be her own. “You like?” she asked, mistaking his stare. “It is Ruth. She very tight. Like second fur.”

“Aren’t you afraid that Helen might notice” he asked, appalled at what had been done to the Jewess.

“Helen busy study rocks. She ruin paws lifting rocks. Not important, I want long sleeve. Not long glove like Ruth give. Not return until late tonight. Come invite you see latest product be processed.”

‘*See latest product*’ Killian thought. He swallowed his disgust. He was being invited to watch some poor fur be reduced to his component parts. ‘*Buddha*’ he prayed. ‘*Help me. I cannot long hold this facade.*’ His story though, his remaining life. He would gladly give both up to make all this go away. Yet it was real, he had to have all the details to force civilization to gag on their ignorance. This had to be stopped. Forcing a smile he bowed slightly. “Your processing place is nearby?”

“Half hour by car. Product arrive about then. We watch, see how fast they do. Bet fifteen minute. Come. Car waits.” Following Xiùme out he soon found himself in a darkened car headed West, trapped by a woman who had more than one hunger and demanded him to satisfy her appetite. All her appetite.

By the time they had reached the ‘plant’ Killian was again presentable, though Madam Xiùme didn’t seem to care. Barely wrapping herself with her thin dress she lead the way in, guards passing them through with hardly a look at either. By the time they arrived at their destination, a fan cooled chamber with a large glass wall overlooking what had to be a butcher shop there were cool drinks waiting. “Product now awake” Madam Xiùme commented. “They ask question.”

Within the butcher shop below three heavyset bulls stood. Tied to a chair, unable to see the three was a rather handsome ringtail. At some unseen signal he was asked one question, one he had no answer too. A moment later for him it was over as a large iron hammer crashed into the back of his skull. “Now fun begin” the wolfhound giggled as she moved towards Killian.

“Again?” he asked, fighting for time. Below him the freshly murdered ringtail was being laid out on a table easily capable of holding a much larger creature.

“Best time” Xiume purred as she wrapped herself around the ill bulldog. Below them one poor young ringtail lemur was quickly reduced to nothing, each organ prepared, each fluid bottled and marked. All to be sold to China’s hungry holistic medicine market. Even the bone would be ground up, then bagged and sold to ill furs uncaring that this young man had only that morning been chasing a very pretty fawn, unaware she was bait for a hunt. For the price of his life he had managed one last false kiss, nothing more.

On the trip back Killian fought to understand why he had responded so readily to the wolfhounds advances. Especially considering the butcher house atmosphere they had been in. It made no sense, unless. He sniffed carefully at the woman now curled up against him, peacefully resting. It would be so easy to simply break that neck, to leave her and her female driver lying dead on the road. But that wouldn’t save those green eyes, would it a part of his mind ask. Then he caught the scent and felt his body react against his will. Drugged, she had drugged him, with a drug as illegal as catnip. No wonder... “Ready again” Xiùme asked softly, her voice still laced with sleep. “That nice.” She shifted, throwing one leg across his lap. It was going to be a long drive back Killian realized. A long exhausting one.

Late that night he found himself being helped into bed by young Chi, having for the third time emptied his stomach into the toilet. “It’s the tumor” he half lied as she pulled covers over his shivering form. On the other side of him Sheen and Shazeer lay curled together, both already sound asleep. Chi carefully slipped under the covers, taking his shaking form into her arms with all the care of one who loved another, yet could do nothing to help him. His shaking however was more in reaction to the drug Xiùme had used on him. In truth, a reaction between it and Doctor Shi’s pain numbing drug. Grateful for the pandas warmth in his winter chilled bed he tried to relax, carefully going over his conversation with Xiùme in his mind once they had returned. Somehow he slipped into a dreamless sleep.

“You didn’t mind them watching us” he had asked. Xiùme had laughed, explaining that the glass was a one way mirror. That none of those below had ever seen a member of the society. In that way should the processing plant be raided no one could turn against their employers. He asked why they had bothered questioning the ringtail. After all, Xiùme herself had sent him. To that her answer was eye opening.

“He not wearing my mark. Remember necklace Helen wear? Blue teardrop? Silver chain. That my mark. They see that they know is special product. To take

extra extra care. They process ringtail seventeen minute. Helen they take hour, probably longer. No break skull either. I keep skull like Helen, Ruth so they drain blood first. Take longer, better result. Helen not feel anything, I drug first. Fear make fur fall out. Helen fur beautiful. She gain weight fast now, not work so much. One week, two most.” Xiùme had closed her eyes as she leaned against Killian. Had purred in pleasure at some thought, finally opening her eyes. “I promise Helen you, almost forget. Tomorrow night I bring her you. I make her ready be with you. You taste, tell me later what like. She like you. Talk about lot.” Then she had left him standing there. Standing with the sudden memory that she had never taken off the mink body suit. That above all things caused him to lose his lunch. He had just come to the edge of his sanity and looked over the edge. Only by great effort had he pulled away from that edge.

All the next day he spent his time going over each mantra he’d been taught. He was living in a charnel house, within the den of madness and he had almost come to accept it. Slowly, between the occasional attacks of pain he found his way back to full sanity. Sying had come by once, recognized what Killian was doing and mistook it for preparations to meet death. He had gone away, most likely to his own work. Killian forced himself not to think of Sying doing that sort of thing. He did not want to think of his new friend doing the things Xiùme did. Thus by the time dinner was ready he was truly hungry, and as calm as he could be considering his situation. Yet even with Xiùme’s warning it was a surprise to find Helen waiting for him, the wolfhound standing at her side.

“I leave Helen your gentle care” the wolfhound explained. “Have business away. I see tomorrow.” Nipping Helen’s neck lightly, the whispering something into the American’s ear the Russian quickly vanished with her strange white furred driver.

“Xiùme said you wanted to have dinner with me” the American hound explained in English. “I thought it a good idea, especially as it beats sitting at her house alone. So few people here speak English and I don’t understand Mandarin. Xiùme doesn’t understand a tenth of what I talk about, like the fossil I dug up last week. If you don’t mind sir, I’d just like to chatter a bit.”

“No problem” Killian agreed while taking in the view before him. Helen’s face would never be called beautiful. Attractive yes, but never beautiful. With her extra poundage though there was nothing to beg about her figure, she truly needed the weight he realized. Her many times brushed coat simply shined in the Hall’s gaslight, and truth be told he would like to hear English again himself. Even if it was a battered version American’s spoke. Leading her to a table he held the chair for her, his actions causing a few interested looks by others. Madam Xiùme’s ways were well known. Helen was simply another of her special projects, a lamb

willingly if unknowingly being led to the slaughter. As they returned to their own conversations Killian sat, a waiter arriving beside him before he was settled. He ordered quickly, sending the man away. “I hope you don’t mind but I ordered an all vegetable meal. It has gotten so that even the scent of cooked meat makes me ill.”

“I understand. Anyway Xiùme’s has had me eating so much meat I’m starting to have digestive problems.” Helen giggled suddenly. “I think she’s in love with me the way she dotes over me. Like this necklace, it must have cost her hundreds. I wish I felt the same, but she isn’t a woman I might really want to spend my life with. Lately though she seems to have changed a bit. She talks about you. In the long term style.”

“What about men” Killian asked, noting that the necklace she had mentioned was the one Xiùme had said marked Helen as ‘special product.’

Helen blushed under her fur. “A few” she admitted. “But again. None I’ve ever felt I wanted to spend my life with, or to raise a family with.” She picked up the wine goblet their waiter sat before her, glancing through the deep red liquid. “Though I have recently met one that I’d be willing to go the distance with. Tell me, are you married?”

“No. Not for a very long time. There was a French girl once. Then the Hun’s bombarded her village. I couldn’t even find her street. It was all craters and mustard gas. Since then no one.”

“Ever since. It has been kiss the girls and leave them to cry?” Helen asked with a laugh.

“Oh yes, absolutely thousands” Killian admitted. “I was a company reporter. I spent the war reporting on death and destruction. Since then I have spent the time since wandering the world. Discovering all the horrors one fur can do to another. It was a way to forget the war I think. It hardens you though. In a way I’m glad I’m dying. There’s another war coming and I don’t think my sanity would survive it. So tell me about this fossil. Cambrian or Pre-Cambrian.”

“Neither. I found it just below the extinction line. It was only about a quarter my size though its all twisted up around itself now. But the important thing is that its brain case was three times the size of anything else its physical size. The thing was smart.”

“Or used scent heavily, or sight. Even hearing.”

“You understand? I’m... I’m surprised.”

“Did a stint in Afghanistan with a Professor Merker. Crazy stuff he talked about. Claimed that there was a reptilian civilization as advanced as our own, maybe more advanced. That it died out with all the dinosaurs sixty five million years ago. He even had some odd carvings he claimed were made by them. Could have been anyone’s work for all I could see.”

“The Rainbow City” Helen whispered in awe. “He found proof? In Afghanistan? I have to go there. I have to see it. Please take me. You have to show me.”

“Hold on a moment Helen. Ah, our dinner.” He waited until the food was delivered before continuing. “Antarctica. He said they would be in Antarctica. That Antarctica was warm back then. But I’m not going to be alive long enough to get there even if we left right now. So forget it. Wait till you get back home. I’ll even write you a letter of introduction if you would like.”

Helen looked down at her food. “That wouldn’t help. He had a heart attack four months ago. It was a great loss. Say. This looks good.”

“It is. Would you please wait a moment? I need to send a message to my servants.”

“Sure. I’ll just pig out here and get fatter.” She looked up at Killian, again capturing his imagination with those impossible green eyes.

Standing Killian walked over to a waiting servant. Quickly he gave him a message for the three women in his rooms. Clean everything up. I’m bringing a special visitor. Then make yourself scarce in the other bedroom for the night. Returning to his table he was surprised to find that Helen had indeed finished most of her meal. “Eating for two?” he asked.

“Not funny” Helen answered. “I haven’t been with a man in five years. It’d make the record books. It just would. The worlds longest pregnancy. Just hungry all the time for some reason. Especially when I’m with Xiùme.”

Drugs again Killian knew without thinking about it. Xiùme so loved her drugs it seemed. He decided to change the subject slightly. “How do you keep your fur so glossy Helen, especially in the field? I know high society women who try everything they can think of and never manage such a glossy coat. They spend hundreds of pounds a year yet your coat would make theirs dull by comparison.”

Grimacing Helen took a drink of wine. “They aren’t looking low enough. Its fish oil. Nothing but plain everyday processed fish oil. Xiùme has me drink three glasses a day, but she does too and its not like she’s forcing me too. I just like doing things to please her.”

“So your in love?”

“Been there before Killian. This isn’t love. Its something else yes, but not love.”

“Your certain?” Killian asked. “I mean I’ve had fish oil before. Its great for constipation, but the taste. I wouldn’t think that is was something you do just for a friend.”

Helen stopped eating, turning her impossibly bottomless eyes on Killian she paused for a moment, as if collecting her thoughts. “I’ve been with men and women Wilde. I’ve loved both, but none really enough to spend my life with. I don’t love Xiùme. Not one bit. But I like pleasing her. There’s a difference and its one I can’t really explain. I don’t know why I like pleasing her, maybe its because she’s so in love with me. Maybe I don’t want to hurt her. But I won’t be spending the rest of my life with her. I know love Mr. Wilde. I know what real love is now. I know who I want to spend my life with and it certainly isn’t her.”

“I see” Killian admitted. He had seen such devotion before. It came either from a feeling of servitude, duty or... biting into his baked potato he pushed the other thought down. Hypnotism wasn’t supposed to make someone do what they didn’t want to do. But if you added the right drugs it was said that you could get your victim to cut their own mothers throat if you wanted too. “So who’s the lucky man” he asked, trying to derail his current train of thought.

Helen just looked back, still not finishing her meal. “Your one dense bulldog aren’t you Wilde. Let me give you a hint. I just met him and I fell madly in love the instant I saw his ugly face. Now I’m having dinner with him. Ring any bells? Or do I have to draw you a map.”

Killian’s fork hitting his plate was the only sound that followed. For long moments there was silence between them while the Thymes reporter fought to breath. “Your playing a joke on me right?” he asked.

“No” Helen answered while she pushed her remaining food around on her plate.

“Helen. I’m dying. That’s not a joke. Two weeks. Three on the very outside but I don’t hold out for that long, then I’m dead. Three if I’m really lucky. Now is not

the time to fall in love with me.”

Helen shrugged in defeat. “What do you want me to do? Cut out my heart and set it on your plate? I love you. I’ve thought it over, thought it was just a phase. But all the time I was in the field all I could think of was that ugly mug of yours Wilde. Then I found myself writing Helen Susan Parker a lot. I know the signs. I watched poor Ruth go through them. I know I’m younger than you. I’m only twenty six but I’ll be twenty seven in a month. I know your dying Wilde and I know I can’t get you out of my mind, or my heart. I know I’ve never loved anyone like this in my life. Not even my pet Sara.”

“Sara?” Killian asked, trying to change the subject.

“Little fluff bunny chipmunk in High School. We had an absolutely horrendous fling going. I mean to say that we were an item and a half. Not that our parents were happy about it, but in Wyoming you take love wherever you can find it. I mean there’s only like a couple thousand people in the whole state. More than likely they knew the truth, that we would grow out of it. Slowly yeah, but finally we drifted apart. I went to college and Sara ended up with this really butch prairie dog. Last letter I got from her they were happy as two peas in a pod. Sara loves housework while her Lee-Ann is the outdoors kind. They even have a couple of orphans living with them. A real family group. Should I go into detail as to what Sara and I used to do? “

“No thank you Helen. I’ve watched before.” He thought about last night, deciding that whatever this Sara and Helen had done it could never match Li sisters and Shazeer.

“Dirty old hound” Helen whispered as a flush worked up her face. “I’ve never gotten a chance to watch.”

Killian laughed softly in response. “Look, I’m not really hungry so why don’t we just take a walk.”

“I could show you the etchings in my room” Helen suggested slyly. “But there aren’t any and its Xiùme’s bedroom anyway. So, what about yours?”

“You’re an awful forward young woman. Even for an American” Killian noted.

“I’m running out of time aren’t I” she countered. “Anyway, for some reason I have to be with you. It started the first time I saw you. A slow hunger. Now I’m ravenous. You wouldn’t leave a poor girl to starve to death would you?”

‘More than you understand’ Killian thought, glancing at an ancient water clock near the stairwell. “All right then, I just hope that I can preform to a level you find interesting. If I can’t I’ll send in the Li sisters.” Helen just smiled, waiting until Killian had stepped to her chair before standing gracefully as he pulled it back. Together they headed for the stairs.

It was a very early morning when Killian was woken by the pain in his head. Forgetting his companion he tried to reach for his bottle, only to discover that Helen was laying atop him. “Gotta move” he whispered. With a soft moan the long haired hound slipped to one side, allowing him the reach he needed to obtain his prize. Carefully he poured the bottles remaining contents into his mouth, swallowing almost instantly. He would have to send Chi for more in the morning. As always when he drank the drug within seconds his pain receded. Dropping the empty bottle he laid back down, finding Helen sitting in the bed silently watching him. “What do you see” he asked gently.

“Without my glasses your just a big lovable blur” the American admitted softly. “But my nose isn’t fooled, your still Killian.”

“Wonderful nose you have my dear. And so... Killian?”

Helen smiled, snuggling up closer. “Ruth was a journalism major. I must have seen your photo twenty or thirty times in her books. She even quoted several of your stories in her schoolwork. Your quite famous in America you know.” She licked his neck. “Truth be told I’ve had a crush on you for years. I’ve read everything you’ve written that I could find. So why are you hiding my love? Its not because your in danger. Not now. What story is so important you have to hide who you are.”

“I can’t tell you” he admitted. “Its too dangerous.”

“I see. Well just remember that if you need me, I’m a wicked shot with a Winchester. Now come over here. We’ve got unfinished business.”

Later as he slept a dream of a large hammer putting out the lights in those bewitching eyes kept coming to him. Though he tried he was unable to push the image away.

Chapter Five

Killian was writing in his journal when Chi kneeled beside him. Looking down at the panda he saw worry in her eyes. “What is it Chi” he asked, closing his journal to protect from her sight the words he had written. Even though she couldn’t read them there was no reason to flaunt them to her.

“Master is in love with product” Chi answered. “Madam Xiùme never sell what is her’s. What will Master do?”

Frowning he turned to face her fully. “Chi. What makes you think I’m in love with Helen” he asked.

“Chi see love before. See sometimes Masters fall in love with servants. Chi see’s same thing in Masters eyes. Madam Xiùme will never sell product. Not even to you. This hurt you when girl processed. Chi not want to see master hurt anymore.”

“Okay Chi. First. Why would you think I’m any different to Madam Xiùme than anyone else and two, even if I were in love with Helen, whom I haven’t seen in four days anyway, I’ll probably die before she does. So what does any of this matter.”

“Chi love master. Sheen love master not so much but do. You are the first to see us as more than bed toys or servants.” She grinned suddenly, a wonderful sight Killian thought. “You gave us Shazeer to play with. To train. You trusted us. Madam Xiùme is in love with you. She does not believe Doctor Shi. She believes your illness will pass. Even so. Even though she loves you she would not sell Helen for any price. It is as you whisper in your dreams. Her eyes. Madam Xiùme cannot forget those eyes.”

“Servants see things then they talk among themselves.” He sighed, leaning back in his chair. “And masters forget. We ignore our servants too our own danger. All right then. Accepting that what you say is true. Even if I could in some way save Helen from her fate why should I bother? We will be together very soon anyway.”

Chi took a breath, looking around before speaking. “Illie says Helen was in heat first night she come here. Not in heat now. That can only mean one thing.”

“There is no way anyone could know if they were pregnant in just what. Five, six days? What kind of story are you spinning Chi. I don’t want to be angry with you but I need to understand where this is going.”

“Helen... Hounds stay in heat until they conceive or season pass” Chi explained. “Then they cool quickly. Most men never notice because we have moved far away from our four footed cousins. Men still scent these things, but most do not truly understand. Illie is certain. Has sent message. Helen carries your child.” She looked down, not meeting Killian’s eyes. “Madam Xiùme will not care. She wants coat. She plans place Helen’s head next to her friends. Like most masters Madam Xiùme does not believe product has any rights, is even truly sentient. Masters child will never be born. Master is Buddhist. Master knows that this is a crime against Buddha.”

Killian closed his eyes against a pain worse than any his tumor had ever given him. Babbet had been pregnant when the Huns shells had found her. Just a month from birth his child had been blown apart still in its mothers womb. Now this. It was more than he could manage and his drug soaked brain couldn’t work fast enough to find a way out. “I can’t help her” he whispered, but his words were those of one in deep pain. Not emotionless words of some hunter who didn’t care. “I couldn’t help Babbet, now I can’t help her. I’m useless.”

“Illie has an idea. Would you like to hear her?”

“I have nothing to lose Chi. But I can’t endanger you, your sister, Shazeer or Sying.”

“You will endanger no one by listening” the panda lied. “I will bring Illie to you when she comes with Madam Xiùme.” Chi smiled again. “Illie is Madam Xiùme’s driver.” Then she stood and walked out of the room. It was some time before Killian could return to his writing.

He arrived late for dinner that evening, unsurprised to find Madam Xiùme waiting for him. She was deep in discussion with Sying about something, both rattling along in Mandarin while Helen sat silently beside the wolfhound completely at a loss as to what was being said. Had she understood Mandarin he realized as he sat at the table, automatically signaling for a waiter, she would have been in hysterics. Xiùme and Sying were discussing the disposition of Ruth’s final ‘products’ and how much her total worth had been That he decided, was taking insult to a level he’d not seen outside of a certain now rather dead warlords tent.

Helen smiled up at him as he arrived and Killian had to admit that there was something different about her. Was Illie correct? Or was the Arctic Fox taking him for a ride? He wasn't certain but he knew how to find out, and quickly. "You are late" Sying commented as he sat.

"My apologies. I had an episode" he lied. "Chi and Sheen took care of me but it was a bad one. I feel well enough now thanks to Doctor Shi's medication." The meal he ordered was one Babbet had once warned him about. Although normally ignored by female hounds it became irresistible when they were with child. Even only a few days after conceiving. It was something to do with cravings she had admitted that one time. If Helen was truly pregnant she would all but steal his meal.

"They are getting worse?" Sying asked.

"They are" Killian admitted. He was growing fond of the huge bull even if the man was a furrier. There was about him that Killian liked. "And how is Shazeer?"

Sying laughed. "Still learning to walk again. My thanks for her loan. I would arrange another session with your pets for her, if you do not mind."

"Please. I love watching the three."

"Then she will arrive before you return to your rooms. Tell Sheen and Chi this. Do not show her any mercy. None. Now I must go for I have a train to catch. I hope to be back in the week." He stood then, taking a moment to say goodbye to Helen in her own language, which surprised her. Then he left.

"I miss you" Madam Xiùme said as she leaned against the bulldogs thick arm, still speaking Mandarin. "I be in season very soon. Will come to me? I would much like have your child."

"Abrupt and too the point" he laughed. "And if I say no?"

"Then I not leave Helen you tonight. So if say yes, I leave her you until return. If say no. Wilde love I must travel, though only few days. When return I process her. It be last chance drink again green eyes."

"You are leaving?" he asked. "Why?"

"An old order. Geisha vixen arrived Dalian. They entertain high rank officers. This is not low prostitute, is high class entertainer. I information that certain fox

among them. I have order from New Amsterdam for special Japanese fox pelt. Her pelt. This a chance fill order. It is great deal money for me. More than I earn from Helen and friend together. I wish I stay, your company something I much want. But chance is rare. She not remain long."

"When will you leave" he asked, fringing interest. "We could play tonight after all. With Helen."

A growl rose in Madam Xiùme's throat and her eyes seemed to flash with excitement. "I hold you that. When return. I delay process one day. That image must taste. But must leave soon. You eat. Keep strong. I be ready when return." Leaning close she kissed Killian and he noted that her kiss that of a hot blooded woman, not a casual acquaintance. Pulling back she touched his lips with her paw. "Not know why so drawn to you. Never happen before. You get well. We marry. You see. I make you loving wife. Dutiful wife. Deny nothing. I give you many pups. At home I be your slave. Now must go." She stood, waving Helen back into her seat as the hound rose. "You stay Wilde" she ordered in English. "He take good care you. I see three, four days. Promise." Leaning past Killian, and in the process pressing her ample breasts against him, she kissed Helen goodbye. This kiss too was anything but chaste. Then Madam Xiùme too was gone.

"You were talking about me" Helen stated after Xiùme had left and she again had control of her breathing.

"How's a threesome sound" Killian answered.

"You, me and her? Why?"

He looked at her. Those damned eyes he decided. If he were suddenly healed he could live a billion years and never forget those eyes. "Because I need you to" he answered seriously.

"Need. Or want? I know about men and their wild dreams Mr. Wilde" she answered with an uncertain laugh.

"Need Helen. I need you to agree to this. Please."

"It is your story. It is something about Xiùme isn't it. All right, but it'll cost you mister. And big time."

Killian's food arrived, quickly he signaled the waiter to remain while he watched Helen's face. For a moment nothing changed, until the foods scent hit her that was.

It was like watching a pup discovering something new. For a moment Helen just sat, then her tail straightened, fluffed and started wagging. “Um...” she started, only to have Killian silently slide his plate over to her. “Thanks” she managed before she started stuffing her mouth full.

“I’ll have my usual” he instructed the waiter softly enough that the hound couldn’t hear. “It appears my companion is somewhat hungry. No matter. For Madam Xiùme I will allow this insult. One time.” He now had his answer and if Illie wasn’t stringing him along he had a way out as well. A way out for Helen and a way to repay the wolfhound for all she had done to others. Either that, or they would die together. All of them.

Chapter Six

Killian woke screaming, at the same time blindly trying to curl himself into a ball while he grabbed his head, his tail twisting under him like a cheap curl dog. Quickly his mind twisted away from the pain, hiding within his skull as some great monster tried to shove its way through his brain. In seconds his three servants were around him in an effort to help. Chi desperately trying to pour medicine into his mouth, but the bottle was empty. She looked to her older sister who simply pointed at the door. Naked, the younger panda ran out of the room.

Now unconscious and with Shazeer rubbing his head Killian relaxed his grip on himself, only to grab the nearest thing to him when another bolt of pain slashed through his head. Killian now had an uncaring death grip on his sleeping companion. Breathing slowly through her mouth Helen could only whimper in pain as his great arms crushed her into him. Sheen knelt beside the suffering hound, gently brushing long shiny hair from Helen’s pain contorted face. “This is the worst time. Xiùme is mad. He cannot live long.” She tried to ease some of the auburn furred hounds pain by pulling against the bulldogs muscular arms, only to discover that she might as well have been trying to move welded iron bars for all her strength could manage. “How can I help” she whispered, not wanting to break Helen’s concentration.

“Worst thing is” Helen gasped as she fought for breath. “I gotta pee.”

Sheen turned to look towards the fennec. Silently she nodded to Shazeer before returning to caressing Helen’s face. “She will help you. Chi will be quick, for she truly loves our master as you do. It will hurt her badly when he passes. Breath Helen. Slowly. Think of something nice. It will help you. I will help you. Shazeer will help you. You are our masters love, the mother of his child. We will protect you.”

Of course none of this mattered to Killian who now was faced with pain worse than red hot iron needles under his claws (he had felt that before, in the Muslim countries.) Blindly he was fighting madly for some control. Control he could not manage to find.

It was near noon when Killian finally woke. Opening his eyes slowly he found dark green eyes watching him carefully. “Morning lover” Helen whispered. “You sure know how to show a girl a good time.”

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, finding he hadn’t the strength to move his arms from around her. Certainly he hadn’t enough strength to move off her body.

“A little. I’ll bruise but it’ll pass. In a month or two I won’t feel a thing.”

‘In a week’ Killian mentally corrected. *‘Less than. I have to get her to safety.’* “Chi. Sheen” he called weakly. “Help me roll off her.” Almost instantly three sets of paws were on his body, moving him to one side and allowing Helen her first full breath of air in hours.

“Ow” she complained as she tried to move. “That hurts. Next time just break my neck will-yah?”

“I’ll make a note of that. What happened anyway? I feel like hell.”

“You had an attack master” Chi explained from her position beside him as she gently groomed his fur. “Sister. We need new bedding. He lost control.” Nodding to her sister Sheen left, taking Shazeer with her. “There was no medication. I had to waken Doctor Shi. He was unhappy to be woken. He gave me your medicine.” She looked over at a red bottle. “It took a quarter of the bottle before you calmed.” A tear fell from her eye, drifting slowly along the soft fur of her face. “It will not be long, will it?”

“Not long” Killian agreed. “I must write. I must get my thoughts down for others to read before I lose those thoughts forever. There is so little time. So very little time.” He tried to stand, only to find the world was going grey around him. “Damn. My eye sight is going.”

“I will be your eyes” Chi offered, but Helen was already there. She nodded in unspoken agreement to the panda. Between them they helped Killian stand. “We will both be your eyes” the hound corrected. “To your desk, then Chi will get food. I’ll strip the bed. Thanks to Shazeer at least it wasn’t me who fouled the bedding.” They gently helped him to the next room where his desk waited.

“Bet you haven’t done that since you were a pup” Killian joked, rubbing his eyes. “I certainly haven’t. My sights coming back now. Thank you. I’ll be fine.”

“I never did as a pup” Helen admitted. “My brother did. So did my sisters but I never did. I wasn’t even afraid of the dark, not after the closet monster and my sister had that fight. Poor closet monster. She left my room dragging his pelt.” Helen sighed at the memory. “It wasn’t until High School I found out it was an old horse blanket she had hidden in the closet that she was dragging. Now there’s a

woman who can act.” She patted Killian’s arm protectively. “She’s in New Amsterdam now. On the stage. Well liked by the critics too. I wish I could introduce you to her. She’s mad I tell you. Absolutely bonkers.”

“And you aren’t” Killian asked.

“Hey there mister. I don’t sleep with three women.”

He smiled even though remembering part of the pain. “Four” he corrected. He looked out his window where heavy snow fell only inches away. “And you will. Its going to be very cold again tonight. I am tired of them sleeping on the floor, even if it is by the fireplace.”

“Your just a dirty old hound” Helen sighed. “If we lived a hundred years you’d still be keeping me up at night wouldn’t you.”

“I think it’d be the other way around. Now off with you. I’ve writing to do and I need privacy to do it.” He waited until Helen had left before opening his ledger. There was no possible way she couldn’t understand what was written in it. None of the three Chinese girls could read English, in fact only the fennec could read more than a few dozen words at all, and that only Chinese. If Helen found out the truth it would probably ruin their only chance. He was still trying to get over her knowing who he really was. There was nothing he could do about it, but it still worried him. Pausing, he looked out his window at a bare tree across the courtyard, remembering an old friend. *‘Damn I wish he was here. He taught me so much, but I haven’t half his brains. Damn Schnauzer would have this wrapped up, this hall closed and everyone in it safe. Or dead within an hour. Me... Here I am, depending on four servants to help me save the woman I’ve grown to love and their all women.’* Turning his attention back to his book he started writing.

Sometime later Sheen sat hot tea and sandwiches beside him. “Chi?” he asked.

“She has been called elsewhere. She will return soon. I hope.”

Sitting his pen down Killian turned to his servant. “Hope?”

“She asked...”

“WHAT!” he snapped.

“Doctor Shi was very unhappy to be taken from his bed. He did not wish to be bothered. He was.. Busy. Only by offering to serve him a few hours was Chi able

to get your medication before sunrise.”

“Damn bastard” Killian snapped. “Take me too him now. I own you. No one touches any of you without my agreement.” Jumping up from his chair he took two steps, then the floor slammed into his face. He woke sometime later, a freshly washed and groomed Chi sitting beside him. Silently waiting.

“You are angry with me” she stated. It was not a question.

“Not you. Shi” Killian corrected. “Never again. You understand me? As long as I’m alive no other man touches you. Ever.”

“But the medicine” Chi protested.

“I would rather live in such pain forever than have you make such an agreement like that. Never again. Now some tea please. I seem to be awfully weak for some reason.”

“It is the medication. We gave you too much. It will take the day to settle from your body.” She stood from the bed. “I have closed your book. Helen was looking at it when I returned. She is very upset. I took it away from her. Shazeer is holding it.”

“Damn. Send Helen in. Then bring my tea.” He paused a moment, suddenly realizing he was holding her paw. “And stay while I explain her questions. She will need you.”

“She did not know?”

“No.”

Gently removing her paw from Killian’s the panda left. Relaxing he looked up at the painted ceiling, for the first time realizing it had been painted to resemble a winters night sky. There was the hunter. Of course the hunter would be there. There had been tears in Chi’s face. *‘Not one, but four. Does a man have shake paws with death in order to find heaven?’* He pushed that thought aside. Or hell if they were found out. He would probably be forced to watch all four being processed, then be processed himself. Awake. Closing his eyes he waited for his hell to begin.

“I want to go home. Now” Helen demanded as she sat beside him. Killian opened his eyes, taking in the tear matted face. “I want out of China now. I’m never coming back.”

“How much did you read” he asked.

“More than enough to know I’m in the house of madmen. That the woman I thought loved me only wants my pelt so she can have a new winter coat. Enough to know what your story is. Tell me Killian. The truth. Were you going to just let them do that to me?”

“Like they did to Ruth? At first yes, until I met you.”

“Ruth? They.. They did this to RUTH?” Quickly Chi came to Helen’s side, embracing her.

“Listen my child and you shall hear...” he began.

“The midnight ride of Paul. What does that have to do with this.”

“First. Keep your voice down. If we are found out we are all dead. All of us. Maybe more if they catch Illie.

“Xiùme’s driver? What has she got to do with anything?”

“Helen please. Be quiet and listen. Illie is a slave. Not a servant, a slave. She was bought in Xiamen after having been stolen from her home island. For twenty-four of her twenty-nine years she has known nothing but slavery. There is absolutely no way to get you out of here without her help. If she’s lucky she’ll come with us. If not, well Arctic Fox meat is always in demand. Its either or for her now. Yes my love. You were just a name. Just another victim until I met you. One of millions in recorded history. One of thousands in the last year. When I met you that changed. Since then I’ve been doing nothing but trying to find a way to save you, and falling hopelessly in love with you.”

“Chi is already in love with you” Helen observed.

“So is Xiùme, which will make this both hard and easy. I don’t know why but the last month or so women have started throwing themselves at me. Its never happened before and its scary. Anyway this plan will be hard because I can’t take Chi with me. Easy because a person in love makes mistakes, mistakes are what I need Xiùme to make. How good an actress are you?”

“I acted with Marty for several years. We were on stage for two years in High School before she went to New Amsterdam.”

“Can you act like nothing is different between you and Xiùme. At least for a day?”

“Xiùme killed Ruth. I’ll cut her throat when I see her.”

“I have a better idea my love. What if Xiùme experienced the same fate she plans for you? The same fate Ruth experienced.”

Helen thought for long minutes, finally nodding in agreement. “I can live with that. But I take all of Ruth we can find with me.”

“Why? That’s dangerous and unless we are stone lucky there’s probably only one way you might be able to do it.”

“Wear her. At least part of her. I understand that. Ruth was my best friend. She was my religious sounding board. Hell Killian, if she’d been interested I might have spent my life with her. She was Jewish. She deserves a Jewish burial. Even if it is only her pelt.”

Killian closed his eyes against reality. This conversation was dangerous. Helen was way too calm. Way way too calm. And his head still felt as numb as a cotton ball. She should be going off like a vapor headed ten year old, at least in all the movies he’d seen that was the case. Adventure books too. “Why aren’t you in hysterics” he asked suddenly.

Helen grimaced, absently pulling her tail in front of her as she answered. “I’m a Wyoming ranch girl Killian. I’ve fought rustlers out on the range. I’ve even killed a few. But don’t worry, under this calm exterior before you is a little girl who wants to pee her pants, if she had any on. Who wants to run into her daddies arms for protection. Wants to run screaming out into the street to escape this madness. But I know that if I do I’m dead. It’s the same with rustlers, one of you is going to give up or die. I don’t give up. Besides” one paw went to her belly. “Shazeer confirms I’m pregnant and there’s only one person in this world who could be the father. So I have to trust you don’t I. But after this baby is born I’m going to have a serious nervous breakdown. Or at least I’m going to get so drunk I can’t hold onto a blade of grass. I’m scared Killian, I’ve never been this scared in my life. But I’m mad too and I’ve never been this mad either.”

“Fine then. Chi, Sheen and Shazeer already know. This plan belongs to Illie so their pelts are on the chopping block now because they didn’t tell anyone. Hell girl, even if we do nothing and they find out all are as dead as I am.”

“If we tell right now still be processed” Chi explained. “Because we wait so long. No more immune, no more breathing.” She touched her own belly. “I too have child. Wilde... Killian?” She looked to the bulldog who nodded yes. “Killian very much a man. More man than any I ever met before. I want my child to live.”

“I take it Sheen and Shazeer are going to start swelling too?” Helen asked, her tail swishing behind her in irritation as she processed that information. “I said you were a dirty old hound. Now I know you really are.”

“I didn’t know” Killian admitted. “Chi?”

“Shazeer hope maybe yes, think yes. Sheen know not. Was wrong time for Sheen, now good time. She very unhappy she miss such great man’s gifting.”

“Wonderful. Well go tell Sheen that tonight we’ll try again okay?” He watched Chi’s face light up before she left. *Great he thought. So here we have our heroic figure, the wonderful gunslinging two fisted Englishman saves the day. With the help of four women. Then he leaves three of them behind pregnant, while escaping into the rising sun with two others. This is going to play well in my biography. Even the movies couldn’t come up with this plot. Buddha I hope no one hears about this. It will absolutely ruin my sterling reputation. Oh snergs, will Mother be pissed. Sis will laugh her head off though. It’d be worth it to see fathers face. He’ll be absolutely livid.*

Helen leaned over, popping him on the arm lightly. “Okay dirty old hound get out of your thoughts. If your going to save the fairy princess I trust you have an army of dragons at your beck and call?”

Turning to look again into those green eyes Killian made his decision. “No army, no dragons” he answered in Arabic, the only other language Helen knew. As to why he used that language, he doubted anyone on this side of China knew Arabic. “All right woman of mine. Here is the plan.”

Chapter Seven

Madam Xiùme met him for their last dinner engagement at her door alone. In the icy Winter late afternoon she was wearing the thinnest of nothing he had ever seen on a woman. Beneath that she again wore the mink bodysuit. He noted with a sick feeling that it had been freshly brushed and oiled, now fitting her as tightly as her own flesh. Stepping into the house he glanced around. Unlike before Helen was no where in sight. Of course if Xiùme was wearing the mink Helen wouldn't be around, would she he realized. "Sad" he said, fighting a building despair that he was truly too late. "You have already processed her. I so wanted to watch those haunting green eyes fade into blankness."

"No. Helen at warehouse. Getting rock she say finally clean. I say I want to see but have other reason. Rock her most precious possession. I must have."

"Why bother? Its just a rock with some dead animals impression."

"True. But have reason. Come. I show you." Closing the door behind him Killian followed the wolfhound to her library. Once there she moved a lamp and a section of shelves silently rolled aside in response. "Trophy room" she explained.

Following her into the long room Killian found exactly what Illie had warned him to expect. Dozens of shelves were lined with row after row of stuffed heads. Each had a single item under or beside it. "Their most precious possession" he echoed in understanding. Following Xiùme to the rooms back he found her standing in front of a black furred minks head. Onyx dark false eyes stared out of dead sockets, probably a master artisans work of matching glass eyes with real ones he suspected. Ruth, he realized, had been a knockout. No wonder Helen had been so close to her.

Lifting the head gently with one paw Madam Xiùme handed Killian a worn book it had been sitting on. He opened it, thumbing through several pages. "Hebrew. Paw written copy. A Torah I think. It is the Jewish Holy Book. I can't read Hebrew so I might be wrong but I doubt it. This was her most precious possession?"

"So is holy book. Not know. Watcher see her with all time." Taking back the book she carefully arranged the sightless head back into place, pressing several out of place hairs down with her fingers. "Helen sit beside friend forever, like say wished could happen. They be happy." Picking up a small lacquered box waiting beside the minks head she opened it. Twin glass eyes stared out at Killian. Helen's

eyes. Truly a master artisan had created those eyes. Turning to another shelf she pointed to an open fan. "Geshia go there. She hard catch. Fight hard. I lose two helper before drug work. Already pelt being tanned. Be shipped New Amsterdam three week. Buyer he very happy. Have Congressman customer want for mistress. Kiss please."

Acting enamored he did just that.

Sniffing the air deeply Xiùme sighed, leaning against Killian. "You smell better anything world. Now you wait. I change. Cover mink. I have drug in Helen food. After she eat she not able think right. I show her Ruth. I show her you, I and Ruth." Xiùme giggled in an odd, mad sounding way. "I tell her how we prepare her. What happen to her. So tonight Helen see what happen Ruth. See Ruth on me. Drugs make not care. She want to play, not really understand. We have much fun Helen. I do this before but never with man I love." Kissing Killian she vanished out of the trophy room, most likely to a back bedroom.

Regretfully he turned his back on the forever staring mink, following his hostess out of the room. If everything went well they would escape, the three of them. Illie knew where a flying boat was kept that would hold them all, though its range was limited. With luck they could be in the air before midnight. If not then many pelts would be tanning by then. Taking a sip of Doctor Shi's pain drug he returned to the living area. He carried another drug with him of course. It would be up to him to insure Madam Xiùme received it. That part he knew would be easy. Slight of paw was in every good card sharks book of tricks, and in the trenches cards hadn't simply been a game. It was survival. If he was extremely lucky...

Xiùme had left him the main room while she went to change, a surprise for him she explained as she had vanished. What kind of surprise he wondered, could exceed the wearing of another woman's pelt as if it were ones own. He decided that looking around might be useful, perhaps he could find something incriminating some police agency could use. What he eventually found was Xiùme's own hunting journal. It was one of eight he noted from notes on the flyleaf. Though he could read Chinese fairly well there just wasn't more time than to insure himself that yes, this was what he thought it was. For the other seven volumes, most likely they were in her study or bedroom.

Almost too soon his hostess returned, now wearing a black silk gown that hid everything. He noted that she had taken time to brush her, no Ruth's fur he corrected himself. It brought a shine to it that highlighted her own natural beauty. She smiled in delight at his look. "I promised you. I deny you nothing ever. Tonight last time I wear clothing here. You want, you do. I never resist anything.

Anytime. In these walls I be your slave all my life. I love you Wilde Parker. I love you all my heart. I have many pups for you. I never love anyone before. Not know why I fall love with you. You different. You kind. You powerful man Wilde Parker. Powerful man.”

A car driving through the gates at that moment brought an end to her vows of love and a different expression to the wolfhound’s face. “Helen go soon” Xiùme giggled as she eased up beside him. “She think she love my man. I show different. We play all night, then before sunup they take. All things ready.” She pointed at a silver bound black box sitting in front of a wide couch. “I have drug ready make sleep for day. We put hound there, set on drive. Illie take us to plant. They come hour later. We watch process like last time. You I, we go America. We see Helen, Ruth family. Offer sorrow. Maybe even hunt. Both have many sister, brother. Maybe good pelt we take Jersey Hall. Make much money. Now act nice. Not want product know. Too tired fight again today.”

When Xiùme turned towards the door Killian had an instant flash of panic as he remembered the plan. He hadn’t expected Xiùme to move quite this quickly, had expected her to wait another day at least. There was no way to warn Chi, Sheen or Shazeer. They would end up processed because he had made a mistake. What was worse he had left his journals at the Hall. They would simply be lost. It would be all he could do to save Helen. Illie couldn’t show up at the Hall without her mistress. There would be instant suspicion and Xiùme he knew had no phone.

Helen walked in before Illie, the silent Arctic Fox carrying a large cloth shoulder bag that she carefully sat on the black box Xiùme had indicated earlier. “You may go Illie” Xiùme ordered. “Sleep. Will call when need again.” Illie bowed in a manner only the truly subservient could manage before leaving the house. “Now show special rock?” Xiùme asked Helen. Killian noted that the wolfhound was an excellent actress, she actually seemed excited. Of course she is you idiot he realized, she needs to see how to best display Helen’s head on that stone his battered mind reminded him. Walking over he watched attentively as the hound withdrew her prize.

“It’s from right below the extinction layer” Helen explained as she pulled out a heavy cloth wrapped object with both paws. “We call it that because there are no fossils above that layer for some time, though we don’t know why yet.” Carefully setting her stone on the bag so as not to scratch the expensive looking box Helen unwrapped her prize. Her head would fit easily on that thing Killian observed as the stone came into view. With plenty of room for Ruth’s as well. It shook him that the thought carried no more emotion to him than observing the size of a melon.

Carefully brushing the flat stones surface Helen took out a small wooden rod. “See here Xiùme? This is clearly a reptile, but nothing like anything in the books. It stood on its hind legs and though only one arm is evident, they were twice as long as anything near this size.” She ran her pointer over to where a skull lay. “Note the braincase. As you can clearly see it is three times normal volume for a creature of this size. There is nothing like this in the books. This has to be the first evidence of this species ever found. It may be a century before we stumble across another like it. Possible two.”

“Was intelligent?” Madam Xiùme asked, leaning over the box for a better view in spite of herself. Killian mentally shrugged. Now was as good a time as any and she had just presented him with an excellent target. Reaching into a pocket of his jacket he withdrew a hypodermic. It was the one that Shi had prepared for him for when the pain was too great. It would, he had been told, knock him out for a day. It was the same drug they used on product he had explained, so he could assure Killian that it was not only effective but fast. Very fast. Removing the needles protective cover he readied himself. Helen had to live. His books be damned, maybe he could call the hall from the harbor and warn the three girls but above all he would not let another woman he loved die.

“At least seven times more intelligent than anything its size” Helen was explaining as Killian plunged the needle into Xiùme’s right buttock.

Xiùme didn’t scream, she only yelped a bit and smiled. Then she giggled and told Helen that her husband to be had just stuck a pin into her buttocks. “I see he like give pain” she laughed. “I need learn like pain yes Wilde?” At those words Killian pressed the plunger to its base and then she did react. “What you do?” she asked, rubbing her injured posterior as she turned to face the bulldog.

“Something Shi gave me” Killian answered, holding up the empty hypodermic. “Its going to make you so hot you’ll never cool down.”

“Yes” the wolfhound agreed hungrily. “I your slave. Anything...” She yawned, looked puzzled then looked at the needle. “What in that” she slurred, swaying slightly even as Helen stood up behind her.

“Your going to hell Xiùme. As product” Killian admitted. “Say goodbye.”

“No.. I yours. I love...” Xiùme collapsed, caught from hitting the floor by Helen.

“Stupid woman” the hound observed as she laid the unconscious huntress down.

“Not stupid Helen. Anymore than you or I would be in such a situation” Killian corrected. “She is a woman who believes that she is in love. And I’m just like her in that respect, though I know I’m in love. I’m doing stupid things for the same reason she just did. I love you. You already know that Chi loves me, in doing so she’s putting her own life and her sisters life on the line. I don’t know why Shazeer agreed. And Illie? She just scares me. Now help me get her out of this then get undressed. Xiùme has to be in your clothes or they may suspect.”

“I have to find what’s left of Ruth” Helen argued, until the robe fell away and she backed off, whimpering.

“Honey, its okay. Help me get this off Xiùme first. Then we’ll search this death trap. At least I know where Ruth’s head is, and her torah.” He paused. Finally noting the tears running down Helens face, turning her facial fur into a mat of shiny hairs. “Go check her bedroom Helen” he snapped, his harsh voice breaking the hound from her shock. “I’ll get this. But remember that we have to hurry. We don’t have much time at all.” He glanced up an a beautiful carved grandfather clock. Well after nine PM. They had to be out of here in less than three hours.

After Helen left he rolled Xiùme over onto her stomach. What he found made him grimace. Xiùme’s mink bodysuit had been laced so tightly that her own skin was pressing out from between the cords. A quick inspection warned him that those cords were sinew. Most likely made from the poor mink herself. Cutting them was now out of the question. Fumbling, he began untying knots.

Later that evening, too near midnight for Killian’s taste the two, carrying two large suitcases slipped out of Xiùme’s house. Killian gently placed both bags into the trunk of Xiùme’s waiting car while Helen jumped into the vehicles back seat to escape the cold and building storm. Assured the bags were safe he closed the trunk and followed her.

“Wondered how long you two would take” Sying said in greeting. He had a rather large firearm held against Illie’s head. “Where is Xiùme?”

Feeling absolute defeat Killian pointed at the snow dusted box he and Helen had set on the drive minutes before. “There. Drugged. Asleep” he answered dully, noting that the bull was speaking Cantonese not Mandarin. Sying wanted Helen to understand what was happening. Wanted her to know he had lost. That she was lost.

“Very effective plan. So the great huntress is finally hoist by her own petard. You realize that without her special mark they will wake her, or when they see her ring. If you took her ring they will note its absence by the worn fur around that finger

and suspect. Jewelry is never taken off product until it is dead. She will come after you like fire. I believe that she truly does love you, though for the life of me I cannot understand the attraction you have to women.”

“She’s wearing the necklace she gave me and my class ring” Helen answered, her own voice showing defeat. “And my clothing. I have her ring” she held up her paw, showing the heavy gold ring that once graced the wolfhound’s finger.

“I see. Then this will be the last of Madam Xiùme. I must make certain to purchase her pelt when it is ready. It will make an excellent floor rug. Oh, I must say Helen that you make Xiùme’s clothing look wonderful. Very tight, it shows everything. You must be freezing in this weather. Illie, start the car please. I believe that dear Helen needs the warmth.”

“What now” Killian asked. “We get processed alive?”

Sying seemed to ponder that question. “Illie please do not attack me until I have explained. Then if you want, you can try.” He carefully put his gun away before answering. “Don’t be an idiot brother. If I turn you three over then Xiùme is saved. If she’s saved then I can’t marry Shazeer. Not only that, there will be an investigation. I will assure you that neither panda can resist our style interrogation, which involves slowly removing the pelt while alive and awake. Nor can I in any way shield them from such. They would quickly implicate Shazeer. I can’t have that. I could no more shield her than them. The airport Illie and hurry. There isn’t much time. Besides” he continued. “I seem to have broken Doctor Shi’s neck a few hours ago.”

“You broke his neck? Killian asked, stunned.

“Well you see it was like this. I went to your rooms to talk with you. Shi was already there. He knew you were gone, knew you really were not much of a danger to him by now and he wanted Chi. Poor Doctor Shi had a hunger for sweet Chi. He told me several times that she would make a wonderful pet, once correctly trained. Chi had resisted his advances of course, she only turned thirty a few weeks before you arrived and Shi hadn’t the funds yet to buy her contract. I arrived just as Shi threw Shazeer across the room. She had tried to protect Chi, being as she was your property. Even if only temporarily. Pity, it seems our good doctor had a rather nasty fall down the main stairway. Everyone saw him fall. I doubt anyone knew his neck was broken before he fell. Such a loss.”

“You don’t seem bothered much about it” Helen remarked.

“Why should I? The stool is shattered. With Madam Xiùme soon to be my doormat it will not return in my lifetime. I will have Shazeer. I will have both panda sisters willingly, whom many have dreamed of owning and I will have all your money. I will be a rich man in many ways now.”

“So why do I think your not telling me something” Killian asked.

Sying shrugged. “Maybe because I’m not. Just wait until we get to the airport. Oh, your going to need these” he handed Helen a bag that clinked. “Doctor Shi’s pain drug. Enough I hope. It was all I could find. Where will you go?”

“Australia” Killian answered. “There are no Hall’s in Australia.”

“Not yet but there is a hunter. Stay away from the West coast. Saggath is very effective. We get very fine roo pelts from him almost weekly. You will need a plane though so I have arranged one. Have you any money?”

“Everything in Xiùme’s safe. Illie gave us the combination. We’re taking her with us.”

“You better. She’s a fixture with Xiùme. When Xiùme goes missing she’s going to be number one target for our investigators. You couldn’t have gotten to Xiùme unless Illie let you. She is not just a driver, she is a trained assassin. Xiùme’s private bodyguard. They will flay her alive, very slowly. Then toss her still living body to the sewer rats. Still living because I have no fear she will break. Like I said, stay away from the West coast.” He paused to look out the snow streaked windshield a moment before turning back to the two. “I warn you that word will eventually get out. They won’t believe you were really dying Killian Whitehall. Not if they ever discover who you really were. I will do what I can to shield you both from that happening. Your goddess of the green eyes won’t be safe alone if that happens and I do owe you debts. I’d suggest Canada, there are no longer any Hall’s in that nation thank’s to those red coated Mounties of theirs but it is too close to her home grounds. I’m sorry Killian. I truly would have liked to have known you longer.”

“How did you know my name” Killian asked. Privately he was awed at how calm he felt. Perhaps it was the drug in his system. Perhaps it was simply his illness affecting him. More likely it was simple shock.

Sying smiled as he pulled a badly folded magazine out of his jacket, tossing it back into the bulldogs lap. “I ran across this. Its what brought me back early. You tore up the Prussian revolution rather well I think. Were you there?”

Opening the folded magazine Killian nodded. It was a copy of The London Illustrated Political Progress Weekly, the issue with those pictures of Princess Elizabeth in her bathing costume that had caused such a stir. “I remember this. Too bad about the fire in their printing rooms. Set them back two months before the following issue. Yes Sying. I was in Prussia for a while. One night just after those sham trials started I was roused out of my bed, my room searched, my notes taken. Then I was thrown out with the rest of my non-Prussian reporter clan. Ordered out of the country ‘or else.’” He touched Helen’s paw lightly. “Reporters don’t like ‘or else’ threats. I lost a lot of good friends to that dachshund so I’ve no love for Prussia or anyone from there. Wouldn’t mind putting a bullet in every one of those self styled new order heads. Writing that article was a labor of revenge, not love. I’m surprised you found that though. Its years old.”

“This is China” the bull reminded Killian. “A magazine will pass through thousands of paws before it is lost. There are so few who can afford such luxuries that we, the ones who can afford them, normally leave them for the less fortunate. The South gate Illie, then left to where two twin engine aircraft wait.”

“May I at least know your plan before you kill me” Killian asked.

Sying laughed. “I’ve read the Evil Overlords Manual Killian. It is required reading in my family. If I were going to kill you my answer would be no. Then I would have shot you in the heart and the head. Can you pilot a plane?”

“Of course.”

“And Helen?”

“No” the younger hound admitted. “I’ve never even been in an aircraft. We arrived by boat. Our equipment was very bulky.”

Sying glanced to Illie. “Can you fly?” he asked softly.

“No” the fox replied and Helen shivered at the sound of that voice. She had never heard Illie speak before, what she heard sounded like a ghosts voice. Soft, hollow.

A sound of Death frozen several times over.

“Unfortunate. You had best hope that you live long enough my brother, because I’m taking my pilot with me. I gave you Shazeer for long enough. Too long I have discovered. I will raise your child as my own, else face her wrath. A woman angered is more dangerous than any living thing I have found. What is it about you that has women ripping their heart out at your sight? Are you some kind of mage? Never mind, she begs to go with you as does Chi. Sorry but I won’t let you vanish with either of them. Park next to the closer plane” he ordered. “Besides, these aircraft can only carry four each.”

When the car stopped all four stepped out. Illie quietly went to the cars back with Helen, opening the trunk. “There’s something wrong” Sying whispered as he pulled out his weapon. “Shazeer should be greeting us.”

Quietly Killian matched the bulls move, sniffing the cold air as he armed his luger. “Ferrets” he whispered. “Ten, twelve at most.”

“Pion’s men. Damn it. I thought I killed all the guards. Must have missed one. I’m slipping. You go left I’ll...”

“Do nothing” that ghost voice finished. Illie stood beside Sying, having sat the bag she carried onto the icy cold tarmac. Beside Killian Helen stood, holding her somewhat smaller but fatter bag close to her chest.

“There are at least ten. Perhaps twelve” Killian informed the fox, awed as she slipped out of her drivers uniform. What was under that uniform was sleek, deadly and unexpected. “That much metal must be heavy” he observed.

“It is woven wire. It is nothing. Ten are nothing. Twelve are less. Wait for my return.” Then the fox simply vanished into the falling snow as if she had never existed.

“How...” Killian start to ask. “I was looking right at her.”

Sying simply shrugged. “Xiùme brought her back from Xiamen. All I know is she was taught by the best Chinese and Nippon assassin’s money could buy. I was boasting when I told her she could try. I’ve seen her take out three men with firearms and hardly move a muscle. Or seem that. I would not have survived a

second unless she wanted me too. When Shazeer told me this was her plan I knew it would succeed.”

“She’s Chinese? She doesn’t look Chinese” Helen whispered.

“Hawaiian I think. Perhaps Samoa. One of those islands. Taken as a child. Someone decided she’d make a better body guard than a bed toy. Whomever it was I can only hope she never finds him, because he is seriously dead.”

“Why is that” Killian asked.

Sying looked around, searching for who knew what before he answered. “She turned against her owner. That means she broke her training. I’ve been told that is impossible, yet I’ve just seen it. Someone like that, without a master. Without a purpose. You might as well throw dynamite into a petrol tank. Killian. When I arrived and found Shi in your rooms he was boasting that you would not be back all night because Helen would be processed. I knew that meant you would have to escape tonight so I took your women and your things. Your things are in the first aircraft. Your women. I keep them.”

“And welcome to them” the bulldog sighed. “I can’t keep up with them, couldn’t even on my best day. They are going to send you to an early grave. A happy one, but an early one.”

Sying nodded sagely. “Better to die young and happy than old and... Someone is coming.”

Seconds later Shazeer ran up and leapt into Sying’s arms. “Safe. We are all safe” she bubbled, seemingly trying for all her worth to strangle the bull in her grip, and doing a fair job at the effort. “She saved us.”

“Is she hurt” Helen asked.

“I am well” Illie answered from beside Sying as she picked up her bag. “There were twelve. They are no more. We must leave. Now.”

Sying managed to peel Shazeer off himself for a moment. “As the lady says. Where there are twelve there will be more. I will go West, you will go South. It will further confuse any followers.”

As they ran to the waiting planes Killian called to Syng “What about the owner. Won’t he be mad when his planes don’t come back?”

“Pion suffered a serious accident” the bull called back as he continued to the second plane, still carrying his Fennic. “He seems to have eaten a dagger. I am afraid that it did not much agree with his digestion. Now hurry. More men will come.”

Killian stepped over half a dozen bodies to gain access to the aircrafts open hatch. He glanced around as he lifted Helen into the waiting aircraft but no other figures were as yet apparent. Glancing at the dead ferrets he saw how they had died. Each one he noticed, had his throat slashed. Illie he decided was a woman he did not want to anger. While the fox preceded him into the craft he ran to the main wheels, yanking free both sets of chocks and tossing them into the aircraft before joining the two women. He found Illie sitting in the co-pilots seat, already starting the port side engine. “I thought you said you can’t fly” he commented as he slipped into the pilots seat, noting that Helen had found a place in one of the crafts two other positions. She was, he realized, wide eyed and still holding the bag containing Ruth’s remains tightly against her. Helen was rocking slightly as she softly sang some song. *‘She’s finally losing it’* he realized.

“I can not fly” Illie agreed. “I can however pilot a plane. I can not fly as I have no wings.” Coughing once the port engine caught, spinning up with a roar as Illie turned her attention to the starboard engine.

“This is a German design” Killian noted as he pulled his straps tight. His head was beginning to hurt again and the engines were not helping. Along with that the world outside his cockpit window was beginning to brighten, changing colors even as he watched. White snow was electric purple, black was dark green. Quietly he took another draft from the dark red bottle that contained Shi’s pain drug. Though the world soon stopped brightening the colors continued changing.

“Japanese make” Illie was explaining when he again turned his attention to her. “They made hundreds. Pion obtained four. We have a seven hundred fifty mile range with full load. Maximum. You will chart our course? I have never flown outside of China.”

“When we’re in the air yes. Where too?”

“Spontoon. I would like to see my family again.”

“Spontoon it is then. Wherever that is. Lets get this baby in the air.”

With a roar of raw power the Japanese built Junkers Ju 86D started down the frozen runway, her twin sister only seconds behind. As they passed an open, brightly lit warehouse several figures ran out. They were too few and much too late. By the time a car could start down the runway Syng’s plane was already airborne, Shazeer turning hard right into a Westerly course while Killian maintained a South-South-Eastern course.

“I will help Helen when we are on auto-pilot” Illie told the bulldog as they climbed for altitude through the building snowstorm. “Before she slips into madness and is beyond my reach. Do not touch anything until your fit passes. It is dangerous for you now. Killian. You never understood your draw to women did you.”

“Nope” he admitted. “Thought it was my manly ways.”

“It is not. Your body is throwing out such a heavy cloud of mating scent that even I am affected. Which should be impossible. It is a scent that demands a woman to mate with you. I believe that your illness is responsible. That your body is attempting to pass your bloodline to as many as it may.”

“And your only barely affected?” Killian asked. “This is a tiny place we are in.”

“I am having some difficulty” Illie admitted. “It helps that I was made barren. A part of my training. It was determined that going into season would make protecting my owner difficult.”

“So Helen really isn’t in love with me then” he sighed as the Junkers passed two thousand feet.

“She is very much in love with you Killian Whitehall. As is Chi. Those others only came to you because of your scent. She was in love with you before she met you. Ask her about that. You must know.”

“You know an awful lot about her” Killian noted.

Chapter Eight

“It is my profession. To know all things about those who are near the one I protect. Madam Xiùme thought to make Helen fall in love with her. She could not, for Helen was already in love. She mentioned you twice in conversation before you came. Her words were those of one in love. Not one discussing an unknown.

They broke five thousand feet before Killian reacted. “But. We never met. Its impossible to fall in love with someone without knowing them.”

“You are a famous man Killian Whitehall. She read of you extensively. I believe it is your words that opened her heart. I have read many of those words to better understand Helen. You are a great man Killian Whitehall. Had you not been struck down you would have changed many things. As it is you have affected all who read your words.”

“Even you” he asked softly as the medication caused him to start to drift.

“I came to you with my plan. Did I not?”

“Yes... Yes you did.”

“Now sleep Killian Whitehall. I will attend to your true love. I will save her for you. Not because of your scent. But because of your words.”

“Aye-aye Captain” Killian managed to reply, removing his feet and paws from the controls. He relaxed, letting the merciful drug draw him back into his own mind. Even as the aircraft reached its cruising altitude his mind faded back to old memories.

Killian lay helpless in the Junkers belly, squeezed into a makeshift bed. Around him were boxes, barrels and crates of Sion’s cargo. Most was probably illegal, like the two twenty gallon barrels of virgin catnip oil Helen had found, by the simple matter of spilling some on herself. Some of the boxes they couldn’t open, not without shifting cargo and thus disrupting the planes center of balance. None of the containers they had managed to open had carried aircraft parts so now they were on South Thomas island, an out of the way little spit of land known more for its laid back attitude than high technology. Still somehow Illie had found a mechanic to work on their ailing port engine while he laid helpless. His right side now completely paralyzed after an attack the evening before. As always Helen tended him. Never smiling, never laughing. It was as if she were a wooden puppet, though whatever Illie had done had brought her back from the edge of madness the fox had warned him that Helen would have to complete that trip alone. Apparently she had meant the trip to sanity, though could anyone who had experienced what they had ever again truly be called sane? He was certain that the answer would always be no. Now that she was safe he could only hope that she would break out of it, but there was nothing he could do.

Illie came in, nodded to him then picked up one of the barrels of catnip oil. “I have found a buyer” she explained before leaving. Soon she was back, the second barrel left with her. A buyer on South Thomas Helen explained a little later, meant Emperor for Life Bubba Joe Bob Willy Two Toes Junior. He loved too party and he absolutely loved felines and he loved what catnip did to them and himself. Which was odd because Bubba was supposed to be a full blooded ram. Still it was money, and though they still had plenty the island hopping route he had plotted would take another two or three days to get them to Spontoon. Fuel out here was expensive. So were parts and mechanics.

“What’s her name” Helen asked a little while later. She was speaking English now, slowly combing his fur into odd, seemingly random patterns. She was still completely emotionless he noted.

“Who’s name” he asked.

“You first love.”

“Babbet. Babbet Marie LeBatelier. She was a French poodle. Not much of a looker, but like you she had eyes a man could drown in and never care.” A flash of gold reminded him Helen was still wearing Xiùme’s ring. Quietly he made no mention of it. He feared that to do so might push her still fragile mind the wrong way.

“She died?”

“In the Great War. Hun artillery. I couldn’t even find her house. What else do you want to know.”

“In your babbling you talked of her. Once you said ‘Babbet likes you Helen.’ Killian. Do you really love me?”

“As much as I loved Babbet. Helen I don’t make jokes about love. Never. I love you. I want to live with you forever. This damn tumor won’t let me so, if you don’t mind, I want to experience as much of you as I can. While I can.”

“Who do I tell. When you die I mean. Who do I tell?”

“Probably the London Thymes. My family and I haven’t had any contact in almost twenty years now. Father wasn’t happy his second eldest son didn’t carry a gun and die honorable in the trenchers like his older brother. We had a fight. Mother sided with father. I tried to make amends later, several times. Seems the blighters finally decided to disown me. Except my sister. But Willy is always too busy exploring caves and climbing mountains and stuff to get involved in family matters much.”

“Illie says we should name this plane. She says you have too. Is it important?”

“If Illie says something should be done, I think you better do it. For a name though. Odin’s Eye. That’s as good as any.”

“There’s something to that name isn’t there.”

“Yeah. But it’d that days to explain it. Besides I’m probably the only one left who knows the joke. Everyone else died at the Some or just after. Helen. I have to tell you something. Something very important.”

“I’m listening” she whispered. It seemed to Killian that she was suddenly very far away. Still there, still listening, but somewhere from inside her mind. It worried him.

“When you get to Spontoon look for an Antonius Toews. von Antonius Toews actually. He’s an old friend. Probably the best man I ever met. Always tried to be like him in my own way. Always trying to do something to make him proud of me. Take him that journal we’ve been working on. Give the others to any police you meet, it’ll side track them away from him. But Toews. He gets the last journal. And something else. A bottle of good bourbon and my luger. He’ll understand.”

“All right Killian. Antonius Toews. Your last journal, a bottle of Bourbon and your luger. Do I give myself too him as well.”

There was a twinkle in her eyes, the first in a long time. “You do and I’ll kick that beautiful tail of yours around your ears. Toews a fine man. You can trust him with your soul. I mean that. But don’t try to give yourself to him. I think that it would embarrass him.”

Helen leaned over Killian, her long hair cascading over him like a dry soft waterfall as she kissed him. “No man will ever touch me again” she promised him. “Does this have anything to do with those words you keep saying in your sleep?”

“What words” Killian asked.

“It seems these stars too do darken” she answered.

“Antonius’s last words to me” Killian explained. “He was on the in the dock at his show trial. That’s a mock trial to you backwards American’s my love. He was a dead man and everyone knew it. I was in the audience sitting not too far from him. They wanted me there because of my reputation. They thought that I would tell the world that everything was open and above board. Kangaroo court it was. Anyway, he was giving his speech to the court when he saw me. For some reason he paused a bit. Then Antonius made a reference an old story of mine about Gallipoli. He turned to me and said ‘It seems these stars too do darken. Were their but one to relight them.’ I replied, um.. It’s been a long time. ‘I have with me oil, it shall be done.’ About that time some tin pot teenager with a club dry gulched me. I woke up in a prison cell. Then I was tossed out the next morning with orders to get out of town by sundown.” He grinned, a feral look. “Didn’t, von Toews was too

important. He still had so much useful life ahead of him. You know you never leave a friend behind if you have a chance.”

“I think I understand.” Helen seemed to pull back a little more from wherever she had been. Killian noted that more light seemed to be returning to her eyes. “I will love no man but you Killian James Whitehall. Though I live a thousand thousand years I will love no man but you. Forever” she promised.

“Don’t say that” Killian begged. “Don’t go through life alone.”

“Not alone then” she agreed. “I will grant you that one wish my love. I will not live alone my love. But if I ever do find someone it will never be a man. No man but you will ever have my heart this way. No man will ever again have what you have had from me. This is not a promise Killian. This is an oath. I may love only one man in my life. I chose you long before I met you.”

“Well at least Toews’s safe from you then” Killian laughed weakly. “Love. He lost his family in Prussia. Parents, brothers and sisters. Boy never married so he was spared that. My friends tried to help them but...” He closed his eyes. “There were so many solders. So damn many solders. Don't talk to him when you see him, not about that. There's only one way to tell him that isn't going to hurt him. I don't want to hurt someone who did so much for me. Still I have told him what I can in that last journal. Never tell him I said that though, it would anger him. Possible a great deal.”

A smile came to Helen’s face, bringing light back into her soul. “You’re a fine hound Killian James Whitehall. A damn fine hound. Your also the dirtiest old hound I ever met. I have to go out to Illie now, she’s waiting with painters. You sleep now. I left your pain killer by your left paw.” She kissed him again. “I love you” she whispered as her hair drew across his face, a sweet scent even after days without a real bath. Soon he was asleep.

When Killian again woke the world was cloudy. His eyesight wouldn’t clear and he could see nothing but greys. A roar of the aircrafts engines was all he could hear. “Helen?” he called. She was with him so quickly that he knew she must have been within arms reach.

“Worse?” she asked, smoothing his fur with her fingers.

“Going blind” he admitted. “All I see are greys, everything is cloudy.”

“Your voice is weaker too. Is there anything I can do?”

Killian thought a moment. Most likely the next time he fell asleep he’d never wake and as Helen said, he was a dirty old hound. Besides, his body was certain as to what it wanted. “What’s our altitude?”

“Eight thousand five hundred, headed directly for Spontoon. We should be there in an hour or so.”

“I’m going to miss you” he admitted. “But there’s one thing I want to do before I can’t anymore.”

“Anything my love. Anything.”

“Ever hear of the Mile High Club?”

Chapter Nine

Spontoon's airport radio crackled with an emergency call. Though spoken with a woman's voice, at this airport that was more the norm than any European would believe. "Mayday Mayday Mayday. This is Odin's Eye outbound from Barker island. I am declaring a Mayday. Spontoon Control, please answer."

In the tower a portly groundhog snatched the microphone out of a surprised young canines paws so quickly the hound counted to assure himself he still had the same number of fingers. "Spontoon Airport to Odin's Eye. We read you five by five. Nature of your emergency?"

"We have two dead engines, at angels eight and gliding. Approximately eight miles West of your position."

"Land or water" the groundhog asked as he hit the crash button.

"Land. Twin engine Junkers Ju 86D. Last out of Barker island. My pilot thinks they sold us contaminated fuel."

"What the hell is a eighty-six doing out here. It hasn't any real range" the old male growled as he grabbed another phone, quickly snapping orders to those who answered. Below him controlled chaos ruled as crash cars rolled. Meanwhile his trainee, having realized what was going on busied himself clearing traffic from around the runways. "Let me speak with your pilot" the groundhog snapped into the microphone.

"She only speaks Cantonese" came the reply.

"Well I don't, and Thomas here don't either. All right then you translate. Wind from the South South-East at twelve, gusting to nineteen. Visibility oh hell there you are... Runway length is..."

Odin's Eye almost fell out of the sky as Illie traded altitude for speed, lining up with an unmoving runway as best she could with a semi-responsive aircraft. One that seemed to have the gliding characteristics of a brick. With an anvil chained to it. She fought the earth's constant desire to pull them out of the sky as Helen translated information for her. Wind speed, direction, runway length, overrun

distance.. "Need ambulance for Killian" she snapped at her impromptu radio operator, recovering as the right wing suddenly dipped in a downdraft. It wouldn't be until the plane rolled to a stop before the arctic fox would stop gritting her teeth. This was her first dead stick landing. She fervently hoped that it would be her last.

Two days later on a rain swept afternoon Helen was woken from her vigil at her husbands side. "We'd like to talk to you about your cargo" a uniformed tabby said to her.

Helen looked up from her chair beside Killian's bed, her green eyes long ago gone red from crying. "My husband is dying. I'm not going anywhere. Can't you just wait until he passes?"

"Normally yes miss, but yer pilots just vanished. If she could do that from ah police station interrogation room I'd hate to think what you could do."

"I can do nothing. My husband is dying. I am going nowhere." Helen pressed her unconscious husbands paw against her face, staring at the officer.

For a long time nothing happened. Finally the tabby nodded. "I'll be outside." He turned and left, a haunting image of dark green eyes judging him. He wasn't much happy at the verdict he thought he'd seen in them.

Not too much later Helen stepped from the room, her sealed and bulging students bag held in both paws. "What are your questions" she asked hollowly.

"I'm sorry" the tabby admitted. "Wasn' right for me tah bother you then. He's gone?"

"He is with Ruth and Babbet. They will help each other. Your questions?"

"Some. Your passport says Helen Sneed yet you claim to be Mr. Whitehall's wife. Ahn some of tha that cargo's contraband here. You planning on going any further?"

"No. Destroy it as you wish. A friend of Killian's gave him that plane, all that cargo came with it. There wasn't time to change my passport as we were married only a few days ago on St. James Island. There wasn't time to empty the cargo as we were being chased."

“An tha smell of catnip?”

“There were two twenty gallon barrels in the cargo. Illie got rid of it. She said it was dangerous, that it should not come here. Killian agreed with her so she dumped it.”

“Your husbands friend. He was a banker?”

“No. A hunter. A successful hunter. Quite rich he said.”

“And tha plane? Its your husbands?”

“A gift to him yes. So that he might save my life. Illie’s life. I guess that makes it mine now. So?”

“Nothing for now. Paperwork. Okay. You’ll have to answer a ton of questions. They can wait, at least until after the funeral. We’ve got both your passports though his isn’t important now. You do have your pilots passport?”

“She too was a gift officer. Slaves do not have passports. Though my husband and I, we freed her. We could not though conjure from the thin air a passport.”

“Kuo Han?”

“China.”

“Same difference. Explains the marking changes I suppose. Anything I can do for you?”

“Yes. Is there a Synagogue or Buddhist temple here?”

“Both on Casino island, though tha Buddhist temple’s tiny. I’ll arrange someone to take you there. Anything else?”

“A bottle of good bourbon and the location of a Mr. Antonius Toews.”

“Bourbon you can get in town. Inspector von Toews is here on this island in Police Headquarters. I’ll explain to your guide. That it?”

“My application for asylum? I am pregnant and my life is forfeit should I leave these islands. I beg at least time for my child to be born. That I may leave him here where it will be safe. Once my child is safe my own life no longer is so important to me, though I have no desire to lose it. That is all I require. When I am done I will return. I will be available for your pleasure.”

“Your application is in the Allthings paws Mam. Donno what they’ll decide. They gotta hear your story, weigh all tha sides. I couldn’t even guess at their answer. Thank you Mrs. Whitehall. Again, I’m sorry he died.”

Sometime later a young male canine arrived. “I’m to escort you Mam” he explained to Helen. Nodding in acceptance, she stood. Still holding her bag tightly against her as they walked.

Chapter Ten

Helen had found the two Buddhist monks quite willing to handle her husband's funeral. Just as quietly she donated a hundred American dollars to their temple. It was the Jewish temple she most dreaded to approach. Yet anything less would be an insult to her friend. Holding her now heavy bag tightly she walked behind her guide. Someone though must have seen her coming she thought, or been warned as an elderly monk stepped from the doors as she approached the building's first step.

"You have need of this temple my child" he asked.

"I have brought my friend to be buried" she admitted, fighting to keep her heart from filling her throat. "Her name is Ruth Ester Leibowitz. I knew her for five years. I was to be maid of honor at her wedding. To my limited understanding she obeyed all your laws. I believe that Ruth was as a true daughter of Abraham as any woman could be. She was also my best friend. She was my.. My guide when I was confused. When I had trouble understanding the why of something."

"I understand. You have brought her ashes?" the rabbi asked, noting her bag.

"Not ashes. Nothing so clean as that. May we go inside? I am not Jewish but... Not outside. Not this. Please." Her voice cracked with her emotion, tears starting to drift from her eyes.

"You may enter. We are not so elitist that we ask a woman to stand in the sun. Or deny our house to any friend. Come daughter. Tell me this story I see burning in your eyes."

Helen followed him in, followed and when they were alone began telling her story. When she started removing certain things from her bag the priest said something sharply in Hebrew. As she continued he began a prayer. It took over an hour to tell her full tale. It took longer before the rabbi would let her leave. Even when she did he still had an ash grey pallor to his face. He had also refused her offer of money, the act surprising her. "Three days my daughter. Her funeral will be in three days. You will be there. May God curse those who did this."

"He doesn't have too" Helen answered, a bit more life in her voice now. She thought of the journals now in police paws and the one still in her possession. "My husband has already arranged that." Returning to her guide she gave the young hound a weak smile. "I need to buy the bourbon, the best on these islands. Then we must return to the police station and Inspector Von Toews please. After that I have to surrender for questioning." She felt much better now. Not only because her bag was a great deal lighter but because Ruth was now with her own people. She was where she belonged. Some great weight seemed to have lifted from her soul. For life now seemed more the worth living.

A bit more than an hour later Helen Whitehall stopped outside an unimpressive doorway. "This is his office?" she asked the officer who had guided her.

"Is. Doesn't like big fancy places he doesn't."

"Then if you will wait, I will not be too long." She turned her back on the native officer, opening and walking through the door with more courage than she would have had just two short months ago. What she found was vastly different than what her husband's hero worship had prepared her for. It was certainly a male's domain of course. She felt almost as though she were the first woman to enter this room in some time. Clutter was everywhere, though it seemed a well kept clutter. Across from her was a battered desk with an older Schnauzer behind it. To her left another native officer had started to stand from his. No her desk Helen realized with surprise, only to return to her chair at some subtle signal from the other. 'Toews,' she thought, 'I expected a God, yet he looks rather ordinary.'

Ignoring the native officer Helen walked to Toews desk, noting with pleasure that he rose to greet her. "You are Inspector Toews" she declared. It was not a question.

The hound raised an eyebrow, but then smiled and gave a slight bow. "Indeed I am, but you have me at a disadvantage dear Lady. Who is it that I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am Mrs. Helen Whitehall, Doctor of Palenotology. Late of China. American by birth." She hesitated, noting an odd expression cross the Inspector's face. No, eyes. It was mainly his eyes she decided. Reaching up from habit, she pushed her large round glasses back into position. "My husband charged me to complete one task for him. He also told me that, and I quote, 'von Antonius Toews is a

gentleman. More than that, he is an honorable gentleman. You may trust him with your soul.' She paused, catching not only her breath but her courage. It had taken time to memorize those words. Time spent in the darkness at over eight thousand feet while her dying husband, with Illie's aid, guided her to the best safety he knew. She could see the hound look down at his feet, and then look back at her with a question on his mind. A question she could see, for which he already knew the answer.

"I see." Von Toews answered. "And your...your husband's name is...?"

"Killian James Whitehall. He held you in the greatest of esteem. You Inspector, appear to have been his only real hero."

She could see a stricken look flicker across the man's face. "You say that in the past tense my Lady. He is dead then?"

"This morning. Of a brain tumor. He died under drugs so powerful that he had no way of knowing that I sat beside him."

Looking down at his paws again von Toews released a long, drawn-out sigh. "My condolences Lady. I had not been aware of his illness, or even his presence here. I wish I had known."

"My husband tasked me with one service. If you will. Please." She reached into the heavy cloth bag she had carried since entering college so many years ago, the cloth bag Helen's remains had been carried out of China in. She decided then that she would burn it as soon as she could. From it she withdrew her husband's last ledger, the one he had started after they took off. One which she had finished for him after he had lost his sight. "This he asked that I give to you, and only to you." She laid the book on the desk, adding to it the gold ring she wore. "And this. More importantly, above all things I was to give you these." She reached into her bag again, withdrawing a bottle of Bourbon and a heavy, well used luger. Setting them beside the book she fought back tears. "He said to tell you, 'They have been relit.' Killian promised me that you would know what this meant. Someday. Someday I wish you would tell me."

"When you are ready to hear it Lady, rest assured I will explain it all to you. You are staying here in the Islands then?"

"I have been offered a position teaching sciences to High School students. This job though depends upon the outcome of my request for Asylum. It is not a high-paying job but I will be near my husband and Ruth. Killian said that this would be a good place to raise our son. I trust my husband's advice."

von Toews looked up, quite startled. "Your son? Killian had a son? Is he with you? Is he all right?"

"Or a daughter. I am but a month or little more pregnant. Shazeer promised it would be a son. I do hope for a son but a daughter is just as welcome."

"I see. If your hope is fulfilled I, for one, hope in turn that he takes after his father. This Ruth, she is...?"

"She was a student. She became a friend, then more than a friend. Less than a lover. She will be buried in three days. Beside my husband. That is, all of her that I could bring out of China. That ledger will explain everything. Now if you please sir. I do not wish to waste more of your precious time. That and, well I must speak with several officials. It seems that the aircraft we were given to escape in was loaded with a cargo of interest to them. Good day to you Inspector."

"Until next time Mrs. Whitehall" the officer echoed. He watched in silence as she left, his door closing behind her.

The native officer, the other occupant of the room had watched the whole dialogue in silent amazement. Even by the standards of her relationship with Toews this was unusual.

"Sir? Hope yah don min my askin', but...what wuz that all 'bout?" Officer Katrina O'Tool asked.

Softly rubbing the spine of the ledger he had been handed von Toews looked to his partner. "A voice from my past Katrina. It seems to have been silenced" and here he waved the ledger. "It would appear it has not been completely silenced." And with that he sat down and began to leaf through his legacy.

Illie was waiting outside the Inspectors office for Helen. Still as silent, as frightening to Helen as ever. For all intents she could have been standing there since the dawn of time. "Your family?" Helen asked in Cantonese, for though

Helen knew English and Arabic as well Illie spoke no other language.

“They were pleased to see me. They were not pleased as to what I am, but they accept me. Fully” that ghostly voice answered.

“So now what will you do.”

Illie reached out, touching Helen’s nose softly. “I will live with my family. I will learn the ways I was born to live.” She dropped her paw. “I cannot be the woman I would have been Helen Whitehall. I will not reach for that. I will reach for peace. In truth though I will always be a woman of death. It is my place in this life. Should you need me I will know. I will come.”

Helen’s tail perked up just a bit more, there was at least some good news finally. “Is there anything I can do for you” she asked.

“Perhaps. Be my friend. I have never had a friend. I think I would like you to be the first.” She thought for a moment, apparently somewhat confused. Something which obviously bothered her. “What religion do you follow” the fox finally asked.

“I was raised Southern Baptist. Ruth showed me Judaism. I think I’m somewhere between those worlds. Why do you ask?”

“I have no God. I thought perhaps. But no. I will accept the Gods of my childhood. Now we must speak with those who uphold the law here. I am certain that our words will not be pleasant upon their ears.”

“There Illie, I know your right.” Helen held out her arm. “Shall we dance?”

Illie slid her arm into Helen’s. “I would be delighted.”

Turning to her bewildered guide Helen managed a friendly smile. “Led us into the place of judgement. That we may slay those lies that are brought against us and nurture those truths we bring with us.” His look of confusion was, to Helen, a delight. “We are to be interrogated” she rephrased. “Please take us there.”

Nodding in understanding, though still a bit confused by her first words the young hound started off again, both women arm in arm following him.

Chapter Eleven

January 11th, 1936

Now on Meeting Island Helen Whitehall found herself standing in a small open arena alone. Her black and white striped prison issued clothing hung on her body like oversized pajamas, even so unable to hide her swelling pregnancy. It seemed though that bulldogs were fast growers, she only hoped that she would not be ripped to shreds by her sons birth. Before her on ancient carved stone steps sat those who were known as the Allthing. Between them and Helen sat two others. One was a female star nosed mole that had been involved in all her interrogations. One whom she knew only as Shiva. The other was one of the local priestess’s, a calico. Helen was fairly certain that she had never met this particular priestess before, though she had met two others. With the ornate mask upon her face it was certain that she had no idea who she was. Within her body Helen could sense the life of Killian’s child. Of all that existed outside her body, nothing.

Abruptly and without warning a middle-aged fox stepped out from behind a doorway, a heavy clipboard in his paws. Helen recognized him as the officer who had interrogated her for nearly a half a month. He was reading as he walked, gracefully bypassing both women sitting in his way without bothering to look up from his reading. Oddly neither moved a hair. Apparently both took for granted that the walking man would move around them.

“Mrs. Whitehall” the fox called, not looking up from his pages. “You are come to this Allthing in request of Asylum. Is this correct?”

“Yes sir” she answered, finding it difficult not to look at those ugly wiggling things on the moles nose.

“Would you like to expound upon that request?”

“Expound?” Helen asked. “By expound sir, I am to assume you mean again explain fully the reasons for my request.”

“I do” he admitted.

“Very well sir. My life is instantly forfeit should the Brotherhood of the Boneless

ever discover where I am. I cannot return home as the one who freely, for his own profit, threw my colleagues and I into their nest would insure my death. My death because I would bear witness against him should I discover just who he is. To my misfortune is that I do not know exactly whom this person is. As I am already known in the circles of my profession, hiding from him is impossible. I am with child. Though my own death would simply mean that I will rejoin my husband Killian the sooner, my child's life is more important than my own. I ask. No. I BEG that I be allowed to remain on these islands only until my child is born. Afterwards, should it be your decision I will return home. Home, where I will be dead quite quickly. My child though I would leave here. To be raised by a native family. Any native family, raised as a native with a native name."

"I see" the fox replied. He lifted a page, glancing to his right where the mole sat unmoving, other than those tendrils that was. "This Brotherhood. It is from them that your husband rescued you?"

"Illie rescued us" Helen corrected. "Killian was too ill by then to have rescued a snail. He was dying. It was Illie. And Sying, who went another way with his family."

"This Sying. He was a full fledged Brother of the Boneless?"

"Yes Sir."

"I see. Tell us Mrs. Whitehall. Why would a so called Brother endanger even a toeclaw in order to help you and your husband escape. Your entire story doesn't sound believable I am afraid."

"Why does any man do anything" Helen responded. "Perhaps for love. He was in love with his Fennic woman. When it was discovered what Killian and I did to Madam Xiùme she would have been skinned alive. In front of him with no hope of saving her even the slightest of pain. Maybe he was frightened of Illie as well. I consider Illie my friend, yet she frightens me even so. Or perhaps it was simply a whim. I do not know."

"So you claim to have no knowledge as to why an admitted foul criminal would help you. I do not understand. Still we will move on. About this cargo you brought with you. Were you aware of its contents?"

"No Sir." Helen wished for a glass of water but this was a trial. Her trial. A trial for her life, her child's life. She hadn't the courage to ask. "As I explained each time I was interrogated, what eleven times now? As I explained. We arrived and took off in less than ten minutes time. There was no time to inspect our cargo, or any care to do such. We did discover the catnip. Illie disposed of it. We searched when we had time those packages we could reach. None held aircraft parts, food or drink. Other than two ancient pots most likely looted from some grave I can recall nothing I would consider illegal. I still have no knowledge of whatever else was there. Whatever else we could not reach. Nor have I been allowed back to Odin's Eye since we landed."

Turning another page the fox clucked much as a chicken might. "Then you were unaware that there was a full case of absinthe. A drink which due to containing the hallucination thujone is illegal in this country."

Helen sighed. It was a complete rehash of her original interrogations up to including the star nosed mole Shiva. As far as she could tell the only difference was that Priestess and all those silent furs watching her. "I was unaware. If you read further you will discover that I gave permission for a complete search of Odin's Eye and the destruction of anything illegal. Anything."

Pages turned again as the fox reviewed his notes. "Yes, yes you did. I see that you also freely signed the required permission forms. So you still claim that you are not a smuggler?"

"Of course I am" the hound snapped. "I smuggled in my child didn't I? I smuggled in Ruths remains didn't I?" Helen had reached her breaking point. So many weeks and more of constant claims that she was a criminal. That her story was a fabrication. That in truth there was no danger to her other than perhaps Chinese law enforcement officers. Abruptly she no longer cared that she was standing before the only people who could save her life. "Listen you self rightist little snot nosed fox. I have had enough of your slanted accusations. Either charge me with a crime or not. Right now."

Unflustered the fox turned another page, completely ignoring his victims outburst. "Quite a large sum of cash aboard. Along with jewelry, gold and silver bullion. Even several pounds of loose gems. You state here that half of any value of your legal cargo is to go to this Illie. Why?"

“You know why” Helen snapped. “Read it to this Allthing yourself.” In the time of her imprisonment Helen had shown no anger, no emotion at all. Now though she was angry. Her feet hurt, her throat was dry, she had a headache and right now she truly needed to find a restroom.

Opening one eye a bit wider than the other her inquisitor seemed to smile. “Very well Mrs. Whitehall.” Turning his back on his prisoner the fox began to read. “Mrs. Whitehall states that without Citizen Illie Fishhunters assistance...”

He went on, while Helen stood trying to make sense of things. Illie’s name was Fishhunter? That made her seem less threatening somehow. Her family were fisherman then. So much started to make sense about her strange friends capture. A fishing village would be easy prey for such creatures. Especially at certain times of the day. Lost in her thoughts she was caught by surprise when she heard her name. “Yes?” she asked.

“If you will follow the guard please” the fox instructed. “Your case will be discussed and decided. You will be brought back when a decision is made.” Finished with his instructions the fox turned and left, leaving Helen with her judges. Left her to follow his instructions or not. Turning around the hound quietly followed her guard.

After Helen had departed a badger leaned forward. “Shiva” she asked.

“She has spoken nothing but the truth in my presence” the mole answered. Her words given in the native Spontoon language, not the English that had been spoken in Helen Whitehall’s presence. “Were that she a liar. That I could stomach more than this truth.”

“Anyone?” the badger asked. No paws were raised, no voices spoke. “Then we thank you for your service Shiva. You may return to your life. For now.”

All waited until the mole had departed. Finally the badger spoke again. “Honored Mother. Your words upon this woman’s future?”

Standing, carefully brushing straight her soft grass skirt the masked calico feline known as Dia-Kura prepared herself to answer. “Refuse her plea at your souls pain” she answered. “I will speak with her.” Without another word she too left.

Having first been allowed to visit ‘the ladies room’ in an attached building, or was it simply another carved cavern Helen wondered, she had eventually found herself standing on a balcony overlooking Meeting Islands main town. It couldn’t really be called a city, as Casino Island alone had ten times the population of this town. Still the view of both town and the busy harbor beyond was impressive, even soothing.

“It is fifty seven feet to the ground from this point” a gentle voice informed her in lightly accented English. “And few inches. There are heavily strewn volcanic borders below. You would not survive your landing.”

Turning quickly in surprise Helen found herself facing the still masked priestess who had been in the judgement chamber. “How did you know” she asked.

“It is my place to know” Dia-Kura explained. “To the how, your body language was that of one making a fateful decision. Knowing where we are, it is simple to understand your thought.”

Leaning back on the substantial iron railing Helen studied the smaller feline before her. “They don’t believe me” she claimed.

“Do not be a fool Helen. They know all that was in your husbands words. They know what happened here not that many months ago. They know Helen. Do not take us for fools simply because we are not Europeans. We know. How painfully well do we know. You have simply placed a face upon that evil. A face we did not have. In true Helen, that face makes this evil the more frightening.”

“If they believe me why haven’t they done anything” the afghan protested.

Dia-Kura settled down on a round topped stone stool. One apparently designed for one wearing grass skirts. For a few moments she remained silent, then spoke softly. “We are a tiny nation Helen Whitehall. What would you have us do. Invade China with our military forces? I promise you, a single tiny freighter will hold our entire military might with much room to spare. We have sent photographic copies of your husbands books to every nation who has a presence upon our islands. Some nations are our enemies, others dangerous in the future. Yet we have shared. What else can we do?”

“I don’t know” Helen admitted, crossing her arms under her swelling breasts. “I apologize. I am simply used to my nation. What we would do. I just guess that I wasn’t thinking is all. Its so infuriating. Knowing so much, not being able to do anything about it.”

“Such is the way of life” the priestess answered.

“Won’t you at least take that mask off” Helen asked.

“I can not” Dia-Kura explained. “Until your case is resolved. It is ritual with my people that when one is judged, one see’s not the face of those who judge. Even if that one is a known childhood friend.”

Helen pointed back the way they had come. “They don’t wear masks.”

“Though they are Spontoon. As I am. They are not my people” Dia-Kura explained. “It is complicated. My people were brought here from Egypt. Other tribes were brought from other countries. Together we are Spontoon. Proud to be Spontoon. Yet we are not all of the same culture. Not yet. Perhaps in a thousand years.”

“That explains the mask of Bast. But where is your sistrum Priestess.”

Dia-Kura nodded as though in agreement. “You are well educated for an American” she admitted. “I am a priestess of Spontoon, not of Bast. Though she I follow. There are perhaps a thousand, even more Gods and Goddess’s followed on Spontoon. This is not important to everyone. Only that those Gods and Goddess’s who rule these lands are respected by all. Though we have no official religion, we reject those new ones of Europe and Arabia. I am as much a daughter of these islands as the High Priestess Huakava herself. I am also a daughter of Egypt. Most Ancient Egypt.”

“I would not have jumped anyway” Helen abruptly admitted. “It is against my beliefs. Even were it not, my child deserves to make his, or her own choices in life. Death is not a choice I may make. Not yet.”

Dia-Kura smiled behind her mask, her expression unreadable through the carved ebony. She had been afraid that Helen would jump. It was rare, but had happened. “Should you be allowed to remain in our lands, what will you do.”

Helen leaned on the ornately twisted iron railing again, looking out over the harbor. “I would like to teach” she answered. “I haven’t my Doctorate. That nightmare of a field trip was to help me finish my thesis. I would have been defending it in a month or two. Ruth would have been with me, holding my notes.” Tears abruptly filled her eyes, causing the scene before her to waver. “I miss her. Dammit, I loved her. I just realized that Priestess. I loved her, and I never even got to tell her that.”

Dia-Kura eased forward, placing one paw on Helens back. “Did she love you” the feline asked softly.

“Ruth?” Helen laughed, though she made no effort to shake off that touch. “Ruth was getting married. I was going to be her Maid of Honor. He’s a good man. A scientist. A physicist, or close enough its no difference. They would have been happy together.”

“And you?”

“Until just now I wasn’t certain I was in love with her. I knew I was happy to be with her. I would most likely never have known. We would have remained close friends. Priestess, it is obvious that I am comfortable upon both trains. Had I met Killian elsewhere. Had he not been dying I would never have looked at anyone ever again. I would have been happy beyond my dreams. Why do you ask these things. They hurt to think about.”

“I must ask questions” Dia-Kura explained. “You are being judged even now. Were you to remain here all your days. Would you marry again?”

“No. I gave an oath to Killian. I would never allow another man to enter my heart as he did. To touch me as he did. Oh no Priestess. I will not turn my face away from men, I simply won’t break an oath I made. An oath I am content to live with all the days of my life. Besides, Killian has told me that he is waiting for me. He and Babbet. I look forward so much to meeting her.”

“Babbet is?”

“Killian’s first wife.”

“Ah. Then this makes sense. Ruth will not be waiting?”

Helen shrugged. "Killian told me that she has already been reborn to her family. He told me that she was very thankful for what I did, that in some future life we would be a couple. I know it sounds like I'm nuts or something. It sounds like I need to be institutionalized for my own safety. But Killian does talk to me. He wants to see his child born. When his child is born, when he has seen us at home together then he will withdraw. He will wait with Babbet for me to come. You can call me crazy, I don't care. But it takes a lot for him to remain here. Only my love lets him manage it. He is not a Ghost. He says that your lands will not allow such."

"They do not" the calico agreed. "Tell me American. Will you truly leave behind your child? To be raised by savages?"

"Yes, though in all truth I have yet to meet a native savage on these islands. European ones yes. Even then less than a pawful. There are more savages in my home town than in all Spontoon I think. Yes Priestess. If this Allthing of yours denies me I will leave without even seeing my child. Without even knowing that I birthed a boy or girl. Without even knowing that the child lives. Yes I will do this. All that can occur to me is death. A painful, messy death yes. But only death. That our child shall live is more important to me than my own soul. Wither our child is raised a simple fisher or some great statesman is unimportant. Only the chance of life."

Dia-Kura stepped back, moving away from Helen. "You have answered my questions. Now I will speak with the Allthing. What occurs Mrs. Whitehall is beyond my simple abilities. For I am only a simple Priestess. I rule nothing but my own heart." She paused, reaching up to touch her mask. "Yet. I would like to be your friend. No matter the answer that awaits you."

Helen watched the woman walk away, still fingering that onyx black mask of her's.

Helen Whitehall sipped from the glass of water someone had brought her. It was long past sunset yet she still stood looking out over Meeting Island and the harbor beyond. Now new lights filled her vision. Spontoon was not as bustling as her college town, but a great deal more than that little town she had shopped in as a child. Still no one had come to her, had given her a decision. Her stomach growled, reminding her that breakfast had been a long time ago and that her child needed food.

"You will come with me please."

Helen dropped the glass in her surprise. She had barely time to look down when it shattered on the stones so far below. Red faced under her delicate fur she turned to apologize, to find herself looking into the face of a very old male serval. "Sorry" she stammered.

Raising one eyebrow the Serval walked to where he could see down. "I believe that you missed anyone of importance" he remarked. "Pity that. Actually Mrs. Whitehall" he continued as he turned around. "You are not the first. Why, I accidently dropped a potted plant just last month. Pity I missed Franklin. I really was trying my best. Shall we go?"

Soon Helen again found herself standing before those who would judge her. Interestingly neither star nosed mole or the little Priestess were now evident. Still all the rest sat waiting, including that insufferable fox. Helen was aware that he had and was doing nothing but his duty. Still did he have to be so good at it? "You have decided" she asked, her voice again under control though under her fur her emotions raged like a typhoon.

Instead of her judges it was the fox who answered. "In regard to your request of Asylum Mrs. Whitehall. Under strict restriction it has been granted."

"Those restrictions" Helen asked, though they were unimportant to her. At the moment it was all she could do to stand so great was her relief.

"You may never step foot upon Main Island without a native guide. You may never step foot upon Sacred Island without a Priestess's invitation. Should you break any law of our nation you will be deported to your homeland. You must agree to find gainful employment. It is understood that you wish to teach? That you have been offered a position?"

"Yes."

Glancing down at his papers the fox read for a bit. "S.I.T.H.S. has several openings. This will be acceptable employment. Just as becoming a fisher woman would be acceptable should that be your choice. Finally, no national secrets that you may discover may be spoken of to anyone. You may not speak of that group you discovered in China, or why you were accepted as a refugee other than in the

most broadest of terms. Is this fully understood?”

“Fully” Helen agreed.

“Then it is our great pleasure to welcome you to our nation, as an official refugee. Your child will, of course have multiple citizenship. His father being British, you being American and having been born here. This will of course make official paperwork a nightmare for our clerks.” He actually grinned, the first emotion she had ever seen her interrogator express. “That is a delightful thought.” His expression went neutral again. “If you will step outside one waits who will assist you in finding a place to live and work.” He was just beginning to look up when Helen collapsed in a faint of relief.

Why thought Helen as she later met her guide, was it a surprise to find a certain calico Priestess waiting her. That ever present mask held now in her paws. “You have mask fur” Helen noted gently.

“Truth” Dia-Kura admitted. “I am Dia-Kura. Di or Kura is acceptable. Dia-Kura only if you desire to irritate me. I am a Priestess of Meeting Island. Normally only once or twice a year do I leave this island, that to attend ceremonies upon Sacred Island. It is my habit this, no other reason. I may change that habit or not. Mrs Whitehall I was only one of your judges. I would like to be your friend. Is this acceptable, or should another be found.”

“You are more than acceptable” Helen agreed. “Under one condition.”

“That being” the feline asked.

“You take time to brush your face before we leave. I wouldn’t want a friend embarrassed by mask fur.”

“If you will wait.” Dia-Kura offered the mask to Helen, then entered a doorway. When she returned some long minutes later her fur was again smooth, other than strange symbols carefully placed within them. She accepted her mask, turning in the direction they had brought Helen from that morning. “You must be hungry. We will find a meal I think.”

“Your... Dia.”

Stopping the feline looked back towards the taller hound. “Yes?”

“Your naked” Helen blurted. “In public?”

Carefully Dia-Kura inspected her knee length grass skirt. “Mrs. Whitehall. This is all I have ever worn in my life. Other than a small scrap of cloth now and then. I think that there are many things you will have to become comfortable with. Shall we find food?”

“I bow to your superior knowledge” Helen agreed. “Until the day I am as smart as you. Then we cut cards to see who leads.”

Laughing, the feline Priestess lead her charge out into her new world.

The Beginning