

# ~ The Red Lotus ~

by Mavis Applewater

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A special thank you goes out to my beta reader Mountain Girl.

As always this is for Heather.

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On January 19, 1939 five Waffer-SS officers, on the orders of Heinrich Himmler, passed through the arched gateway of the sacred city Lhasa. Their mission was to find Shangri- La and the last pure Aryan Tribes capturing their gifts of magic and immortality for their homeland. Three days later a second expedition also passed through the arched gateway of the sacred city. Sent by the same government for the same purpose they arrived unnoticed and history would never hear of their journey.

Like the first expedition they were a group of five. Unlike their predecessor only two members were members of Himmler's shock troops. The remaining three were a triad of scholars forced to serve a dark master. Finding the lost city appealed to their quest for knowledge and each wondered if Shangri La or Shambhala was a real location or simply a state of mind or perhaps wishful thinking.

Normally being hand selected for such an expedition would have been a dream come true if only they hadn't been sent by the mad man who now ruled their homeland. Hitler's obsession with the occult drove him to seek out such wondrous mysteries only for the power it would give him. If the lives of their families and loved ones hadn't been threatened each of the learned scholars would have refused entering Tibet.

Petra Rolf, the only woman on the team, like her colleagues, regretted not leaving her home country when the political climate changed. Diana had warned her. Petra didn't listen to her friend. Now it was too late. It was a cold night just over a month ago. A loud crash alerted the Rolf family that all was not right. They were dragged from their beds standing out in the cold of night surrounded by men in black uniforms. Her parents, younger brother and baby sister knelt on the ground machine guns aimed at them. This was the Heir Himmler's way of inviting the brilliant young woman to join the expedition. They had her family. No, there was no other option but to serve.

Although she agreed she did drag her feet not eager to help deliver the mystical powers of

Shambhala to such undeserving hands. Once again she was persuaded. She stood in Heir Himmler's office and was offered a black cloth triangle and the names of two women both of whom she had known on an intimate level. One was Rose, the blonde she had been lovers with a year ago, and Diana who taught at the University. Diana was a dear friend who she shared only a few nights of passion with, it was all they sought from one another, and now it seemed the indiscretion might lead to Diana's imprisonment. "You do not wish to do your duty then so be it" he calmly offered. "Your family and these women will pay the price, and you will wear this and be sent on a trip." She stared at him horrified the bile rising in her throat knowing that she held so many people's lives in her hands. She would have sacrificed her own life, willingly boarded the train, but she couldn't allow her family and friends to be executed. She willingly agreed to serve without holding back.

The myth of Shangri La appealed to her still she prayed to a god she was no longer free to worship that they would never find the idyllic land. Yet, she understood that she had to do everything in her power to find the mythical land or others would pay the price.

The strange group sat in the room they had rented before they began their trek. "Pandora's Box," Giavanni began. He was the only one among them who wasn't German. The older Italian man had been a gift to expedition; he also had not joined willingly. Petra smiled shyly when he mentioned the book, which had brought her a small modicum of fame in the academic world. Boris and Pepin, their guards, simply stared blankly at them. "Do you truly believe that hope is an evil?" Giavanni taunted her.

"No," Petra sighed knowing that he was trying to bait her. "I simply found it strange that hope was in a jar that contained evil. Why? Is free will an evil or was it there to prevent evil? Is that why only hope didn't escape when Pandora opened the jar?" She explained knowing that the leader of her country probably clung to the misguided theory that hope shouldn't be a part of man's make up, and that destiny should be left in the hands of someone greater. "What do you think Manheim?" She questioned the older man who sat to her right. She had met the older scholar before she ever suspected that she would be offered the chance to exchange ideas with either of these great men much less for such an unworthy cause.

"You know what I think," Manheim sighed. "Pandora was the predecessor of the Christian story of Eve. I also think that you are correct we shouldn't try to reach the summit; the legend has it that Shangri La is hidden inside the mountains. Petra didn't miss the disappointed look in Pepin's dark emerald eyes. She could see the younger man's excitement each time he looked towards the mountains. He was a climber reaching the summit probably held much more interest for him than seeking out a myth.

They studied the maps carefully each pondering the correct route to take. "I wish there was someway we could escape," Manheim whispered carefully.

"Our families," Giavanni cautioned glancing over at Boris who always kept a gun aimed at them. In public he kept it hidden beneath his coat. In private he kept it in the open always pointing it at the trio. "Legend has it that the entrance is hidden in the caverns hidden inside of the mountains."

"Hidden behind the snow peaks," Giovanni concurred. "Pity we could just ask the Dalai Lama."

"If there is a city," Petra sighed keeping her voice low so the guards could not hear the discussion. "Shangri La, El Dorado, Atlantis we've theorized about them, written about them, and pontificated their existence. I never thought I'd actually be scaling a mountain looking for one of them. We'll head North just before dawn. People have been studying the Kalacarka for over a thousand years. If most of them don't know how to find the city, I have my doubts that we will be fortunate in our quest in finding the hidden kingdom in the short time we've been allotted. God help us if we do find it. Can you image if the myths are true about the powers the people of Shambhala possess, clairvoyance, the ability to move at great speeds, immortality and the ability to materialize and disappear at will? How can we deliver this place and these powers into the hands of the Gestapo?"

"They would be unstoppable," Giovanni muttered bitterly. "We would be giving them the key to destroying the world. I can't think about that, all I can focus on is my wife and children. I hate myself for being so weak."

"It isn't weak to love your family," Manheim interjected. "All three of us have agreed to this placing our loved ones above the fate of mankind. I'm not ashamed I'm just praying for failure. Given the lack of information I'd say the odds of coming back with nothing more than frostbite is in our favor."

"Let's face it these maps are useless," Petra growled. "All we know is that we should head north. Eight regions surrounded by a ring of mountains hidden in the mountains and connected by underground passageways. They've never been seen by any mortal or have they?"

"And if they do exist are they ruled by a lost Aryan tribe?" Giovanni sighed. "A superhuman race that would prove your country's leader's small world view is correct. And I thought the mad man who is running my country was twisted. How did we let them get this far?"

"We were blind ignoring the obvious truth until it was too late," Manheim explained as Boris began to loom over them. "Tomorrow we visit the monastery here," he continued pointing to the map. Boris seemed pleased that they appeared to be planning for the expedition.

"Then we go?" Boris barked angry that he had been reduced to the role of baby sitter.

"Boris all we know is that Shangri La is somewhere between the Gobi Desert and the Himalayas," Giovanni snapped ignoring the taller man's irritation. "Tibetan lamas spend most of their lives preparing for the journey. According to legend if you are not meant to find it you won't. In fact if you're not meant to enter the kingdom and you get too close to the border the mountain will swallow you up or if you're lucky you'll simply be swept away by an avalanche."

"Unsinn!" Boris snarled. "You have guidebooks."

"Yes, we do," Petra tried to placate the soldier. "The route is described in terms so vague that only those already initiated in the teachings of the Kalacarka can understand them. And before

you say it yes we were chosen because we have studied the Kalacarka somewhat."

"Den Mund halten!" Boris screeched glaring down at the tall blonde. "Lesbierin," he added with disgusted sneer.

"You know other than the threat placed over our families I thought the hardest part of this expedition was trying to mesh three enormous egos," Giovanni began thoughtfully. "Trying to follow the conversation while working as a team and trying to enlist aid from the locals with everyone speaking a different language should prove to be interesting."

"He told me to shut up," Petra translated quickly. "He also called me a lesbian."

"How incredibly rude," Giovanni bristled.

"Accurate," Petra confessed peering at the map searching for some clue that would provide the trio with an escape.

"Not the part about your predilection," Giovanni corrected. "In my country a gentleman would never tell a lady to shut up."

"I can assure you that this gun toting thug is not a gentleman," Manheim snickered. Petra smiled when she heard Pepin chuckle in agreement. "Ah it seems our younger captor understands French, perhaps we should try Latin?"

They walked for days searching every monastery they came upon seeking answers only to receive condescending stares in response. Petra walked the circle around the monastery Pepin following her closely. The others were inside trying to obtain knowledge and clues from the monks. "Why are you walking around this place?" Pepin inquired seemingly truly interested in her actions.

"It is said that by walking this path you can erase the sins you've created in this life time freeing your karma for the next life," Petra explained to the young soldier.

"And what sins could you have possibly created that you would seek redemption from?" He curiously inquired.

"We all sin at one time or another," Petra glumly supplied.

"Perhaps," he shrugged with a youthful arrogance. "Are you certain that this place we are seeking isn't at the peak?"

"What is it you did before you enlisted?" Petra inquired still following along the path praying for her salvation.

"I enjoyed the outdoors, climbing, hunting, fishing and looking for adventure," he sighed happily.

"You want to scale the mountain reach the summit?" She teased. "You want to touch the sky. To be where the earth meets the heavens?"

"Look at it?" He sighed looking towards the mountains looming beyond the horizon. "Don't you?"

"Perhaps," Petra sighed still plodding along the path that circled the monastery.

"What is this place Shangri La?" Pepin persisted.

"It is a legend, perhaps it is true," Petra carefully explained. "A utopian society, holding riches beyond your wildest dreams and the key to immortality. Why did you join the army?"

"It is my duty," he sputtered bewildered by her strange question. "The Fuehrer has promised us a better life."

She sighed even she had believed Hitler when he first began to speak. When they came for others she ignored it. The Catholics, Gypsies and the Jews. She barely noticed as her friends and neighbors disappeared in the darkness of night. Then the homosexuals were branded and she began to understand what her father had been saying. No one was safe, no matter what station you held in life or how good at heart you were the changes in the world were dangerous. The man leading the new regime wasn't a savior he was a menace. Now she finally understood it was too late. It was now her duty to discover the secrets that could give the mad men who ruled her land immortality. She shuddered at the thought of these men living forever.

"Have our sins been erased?" He teased in a playful manner not understanding why she needed redemption.

"We can only hope," she grimly responded. "It is good that you are an experienced climber we will depend upon you during our journey. Was the priest helpful?" She questioned the others as they emerged from the grand monastery.

"He said the answers we seek are inside of us," Giavanni grimly supplied. "If that is true then we could have stayed home where it is warm and dry. Just kidding Boris," he quickly clarified as the sound of a gun being cocked echoed.

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"Cold night," Giavanni teased as the group huddled by a fire the cold wind threatening to blow their tiny tents off the side of the mountain. "Boris isn't looking well."

"Altitude sickness," Manheim smirked as they huddled closer. "I don't think he appreciates the beauty of this place."

"So peaceful," Petra agreed, as she looked glanced around the barren surroundings. "How do you

think the first expedition is doing?"

"Who knows," Manheim shrugged. "I think they are more interested in Pokhara because of the strategic placement it will give troops. It would be a gateway to attacking British India. I keep wondering about the seven kings of Shambhala. The legend claims that when man has caused the world to fall into ruin a king from Shambhala will emerge with a great army."

"Ushering in a golden era of peace," Petra concluded. "How much more despair will happen in our world before he decides we've gone to far? I thought it was thirty-two kings each reigning for one hundred years. We should get some rest we'll need to get moving before day break."

"Where to?" Pepin eagerly inquired.

"North," Manheim sighed. "We need to find an entrance to the caverns that are rumored to run through the mountains. The gateway is there or so the legend claims."

"And if we don't find the entrance?" Pepin asked the trio who looked around nervously.

"We keep looking," Petra quickly explained omitting that the three of them had already decided that they would start to lead the soldiers closer to India in hopes of escaping. There had to be a way they could find freedom then return to save their families. Boris was already fading and the wondrous mountains distracted Pepin. If they could just keep climbing higher Boris would be unable to keep up and Pepin would be the only obstacle to overcome. Time would only tell if Pepin truly felt a sense of duty. "The legend also claims that the entrances and borders are guarded by snowmen. They are very tall guardians who can move with lightning speed and they are very protective. Perhaps that is why most people who seek Shangri La never return."

"Or they were inexperienced climbers who fell victim to the elements," Pepin gleefully theorized. Petra smiled more and more as she found the younger man's enthusiasm endearing. 'Oh if you only had a sister,' she sighed hopefully. Somehow Pepin's love for the mountains and his interest in the legend made the arduous journey more bearable. "Or perhaps they did find this paradise you speak of and decided to stay."

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Petra's body ached numbed by the cold and the hardship of scaling the majestic mountain. Boris' attitude was growing bitter as they scaled higher. Much to the trio's despair Boris' bitterness seemed to make him more determined to keep the expedition moving. They had hoped that he would fall by the wayside allowing them the opportunity to turn back or escape. Instead it only made him more determined to reach their goal. Each of them had received a beating during the two-week journey.

Petra's lungs seized her guide rope jerked. She cast a weary gaze up to see the others ahead of her nestling on a small cliff. Her knuckles were bleeding beneath her gloves as she pulled her body up onto the small ledge. At almost six feet tall she towered over her male companions. "What?" She sputtered her lungs refusing to adjust to the altitude. Pepin pulled his body up and joined the

group. "Did you see that?" She sputtered thinking she had seen a man standing above them. "Never mind," she shook her head thinking that the exhaustion and altitude were confusing her mind.

Her knees buckled under the weight of the pack that contained their equipment. Each of them was lugging an extra twenty pounds on their backs making the trek up the mountain even more arduous than necessary. "Cave," Giovanni gasped pointing to the small opening. Petra was slender enough to slip through the tiny opening but not with the bulk she was carrying. She eyed her companions wondering how they would fit through.

"We'll have to remove our gear," Manheim offered slipping his pack from his shoulders. "It won't be easy to carry everything and the lamps, we could try going higher."

"No!" Boris barked. "You said that it was hidden inside the mountain," he hissed. "The three of you will carry the gear Pepin and I will carry the oil lamps to light the way. I'll lead and you follow behind them," he instructed Pepin.

They grimly began to unload their gear each of their faces cracking and bleeding from the bitter cold wind they had endured during their journey. The cavern was dark, narrowing with each step. Petra's body ached each time the jagged rocks cut into her long lean body. 'At least we are out of the wind,' she silently laughed at her strange predicament. She stumbled into Manheim constantly as they crept along the narrow passage way.

They fumbled in the darkness for hours finding another entrance following along each trying to persuade Boris that they needed to rest. He refused even when they reached a crossroads. "Boris," Petra panted looking around the large area that led to two separate tunnels. "We need rest, time to decide which road to take. There is room here to put our gear down."

"No," the man growled. "You are the experts choose?"

"We could flip a coin?" Giovanni joked. His smile quickly vanished when Boris placed a pistol against the dark hair man's brow. "Or not," he gulped as Boris kept the pistol pressed against his flesh.

"Boris we would be better equipped to make a decision if we aren't afraid that you are going to shoot us," Petra fumed silently wishing she had pushed the man off the side of the mountain days ago. "If we choose the wrong path we could end up trapped inside the mountain."

"Then pick the correct path," Boris hissed seemingly angry that they didn't have the answers readily available. "If you are wrong we will have one less mouth to feed."

The scholars looked at one another each clueless and terrified that they would make the wrong choice. Petra took a cleansing breath deciding that they needed a higher power to guide them. She set down her pack her body tensing when she heard Boris cocking his pistol. She removed the prayer wheel from her pack. It was made of brass and had been blessed by one of the monks. She wrote her question on a slip of paper and placed it inside the wheel. Everyone held their

breath as she spun the wheel praying for guidance. She hummed a simple chant unable to believe that she was kneeling on the cold ground spinning a prayer wheel in an effort to pick between the cave on the right or the cave on the left. "The left," she offered without understanding why.

They stepped towards the entrance each of them suddenly stumbling backward as if some unseen hand had pushed them. Petra wiped the sweat from her brow as each of them stared into the darkness searching for some reasonable explanation for what had just occurred. "Vordere!" Boris demanded roughly grabbing Petra shoving her into the dark unknown.

The bewildered group trudged on uncertain if it was night or day. They had no idea how long they traveled or what day it was. The only reprieve was when the narrow inlet broadened allowing them to move more easily. Petra's body was weary she stumbled along unable to breathe normally. Every muscle in her body screaming with pain as they trudged along in an uneasy silence. She did manage to slip behind allowing the ever-determined Boris to lead the way.

She silently pleaded for Boris to stop and allow them to rest as she brought up the rear of the group only Pepin behind her. So weak in her movements she began to fall behind. "Es eilig haben," Boris screamed at her his voice so loud rocks along the walls fell pelting the group. Boris became irate blaming Petra for the occurrence. He grabbed her long braided hair and yanked her to the front. "Keep moving," he hissed his horrid breath assaulting her senses. "If you drag your feet I'll shoot you."

"If you fire that thing in here you'll trap all of us," Petra scowled. "The sound will cause a rock slide none of us will survive. If you want to die in here then go ahead and shoot me." She was mildly shocked that deep down she prayed for death if she died on the expedition her family would be free and the secrets of Shangri La would remain safely out of the hands of the mad man who had sent her on the lubricious journey.

"Go," Boris hissed shoving her forward holstering his gun.

"Fine," she groaned her mind and body screaming for release as she trudged along the darkened path. She shivered from the eerie silence; there was no wind and no other sound other than their footsteps. It was as if they were walking in a void. Then the cavern echoed with a loud creaking sound, the walls rumbling and the ground beneath her feet opening.

Her body was falling and the sound of faint voices echoing above her pleading that they be allowed to help her. Petra's screams were devoured by the void as she descended further into the abyss. There was nothing but darkness surrounding her as she kept falling. She stopped screaming allowing her body to fall. No one could hear her in the darkness. The only sound was her body falling deeper inside of nowhere. She felt a strange sense of peace as she gave into the fate that was encompassing her.

Her body flailed as a sudden flash of bright sunlight light assaulted her emerald orbs her body crashing into the cold snow. The blinding light was familiar; it was the same blinding light she had seen when they were climbing. Her body cried out in pain broken as her blood painted the

snow. Darkness returned as she passed out from the pain ready for death to claim her. "Sleep," she whispered allowing the cold to numb her body.

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Petra was warm and snuggled comfortably in silk. She sighed in her slumber blinking open her eyes. She jerked up expecting her body to hurt yet she felt no pain as she looked around her strange surroundings. She shook her head wondering if she was dead. She clutched the green silk blanket that covered her long, lean body. She ran her fingers against the material enjoying the softness that greeted her touch.

Petra looked around at the wondrous marble covered in gold and turquoise. Strange colorful birds and animals wandered about freely. She brushed back her long blonde hair studying the brilliant flora and fauna growing freely in her chambers. She jumped back when she spied the black panther nestled beside her bed. She clutched her chest as the panther's green eyes stared up at her.

She looked down surprised to find her body barely covered in a purple silk tunic. "Am I dead?" She sputtered.

"Are you?" A lilting voice called out to her. Petra's jaw dropped as the dark woman with almond shaped eyes approached her. There was something about this exotic woman's appearance that caused Petra's heart to beat faster. She shivered as the woman's violet eyes captured her gaze.

"He is very protective of you," the stranger smiled glancing down at the panther that was carefully watching her approach. "He arrived not longer after you did."

"Where am I?" Petra sputtered trying to drink in the vibrant colors that surrounded her.

"This place has many names," the stranger smiled scratching the panther behind his ear. "Shangri La, Shambhala and, to be more precise, Kalapa. It is not often we get visitors. Your arrival was quite unexpected."

"How?" Petra fumbled checking her body for injuries before climbing off the soft bedding. "This can't be real. I fell; I was hurt."

"Yes," the woman nodded. "And you found the key," she explained taking Petra by the hand and leading her towards the doorway. The panther followed closely behind them. "I am called Tira," the stranger explained as she led Petra out into the grand surroundings. A waterfall flowed freely in the center of the gold and coral palace. Mountains made of ice, which shined with a crystalline light, surrounded the walls. She looked through the ice her eyes greeted to a spectacular vision. The eight regions surrounding the capital, Kalapa, formed a lotus blossom. She gazed up at the ceiling, which was crystal clear showing the heavens clearly. She felt as though she could reach up and touch the stars. "This is your friend Pepin," she introduced the panther who remained at Petra's side.

"Excuse me?" Petra fussed as they stood before a large wall of ice which radiated warmth. The crystal clear ice clouded suddenly revealing a vision of the outside world.

"Look and you will find the answers," Tira explained waving her hand before the wall. The panther leaned against Petra's body as she watched the wall clouding over. She saw the dark passage way, the ground opening and her body falling. She watched as the others begged Boris to help her. The crass, older, blonde man spat into the hole.

"She's dead, keep moving," he sneered. The others, including Pepin, protested until Boris threatened to push them into the hole. The image changed to her crumpled body resting on the side of the mountain blood painting the snow.

"How?" She stammered. "If I couldn't walk how did I get here?"

"Stop thinking in the linear," Tira chastised her with an endearing smile. "Shangri La can only be found in your mind. To find the city you must leave the earthly plane behind. Only your spirit can enter the city. But if you still desire a scientific explanation astral projection would be the best way to describe how you came here."

"And the others?" Petra demanded. "What happened to them?"

"Boris was quite mad long before your journey began," Tira explained, the images changing to the group finding their way out of the passage way only to emerge on the other side of the mountain. "He pushed them harder, supplies began to diminish and his madness grew. Pepin fought to end the expedition and, in the end, he helped your friends escape. They are safe in India. Pepin went back to search for you only to succumb to the same fate. He found you only after he had passed from your world. The walk you led him on around the monastery freed his soul from sin. This is his karmic destiny. Sadly the one you called Boris was lost wandering the mountain until he died. Froze to death without even realizing he was in trouble."

"Then I am dead," Petra sighed thinking it was strange that the thought didn't trouble her.

"No," Tira corrected her with a coy smile. "Your body is still alive, slowed by the cold, but still alive. You can return to it if that is your desire. You simply need to wish it."

"Let me think about that," Petra quipped. "Alive in paradise, no war, no hatred and no evil or barely alive slowly dying on the side of a mountain. Tough call."

"It would not be that way if you wish to return," Tira smiled. "You simply need to wish to return."

"It is so peaceful here," Petra confessed feeling the warmth encompassing her.

"Unlike the world you left," Tira agreed as she guided Petra from the wall.

"The world I left behind is ugly," Petra concluded. "When is the King going to emerge and bring

about the golden age of peace? Hasn't mankind slipped into the depravity that was foretold?"

"Not yet," Tira corrected linking her arm in Petra's. "There is still hope which despite your writings is not an evil."

"I know that," Petra bristled. "Are you saying that things are going to get worse?"

"Yes," Tira sighed thoughtfully. "Many life times will pass before the last king, Rudra Cakrin, emerges. As long as there is hope mankind is left to live in the world it has created. We have no choice but to wait until mankind is consumed with war and the need for power and there is no longer goodness or hope left in your world."

"What about my family?" Petra inquired her body trembling fearful of the answer.

"Look," Tira instructed softly waving her hand before the crystal wall of ice. Petra's heart soared as she spied a dark figure cocking a bow and releasing an arrow taking down one of the soldiers who had kidnapped her family. The image quickly shifted to Diana's face. She offered her family freedom, but her father refused begging to know of Petra's fate. Diana remained firm informing him that Petra was walking the fate she was predestined to walk. "She saved them and they are in another land far from the sorrows that awaited them."

"Diana? But how?" Petra choked out brushing the tears from her face.

"Your friend was never who she pretended to be," Tira offered vaguely.

"When do I have to decide if I want to leave?" Petra managed to ask her mind muddled in a sea of confusion.

"Whenever," Tira reassured her. "Time is of no importance here. If you leave you can always return."

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Everything about the city was more than Petra's mind could have imagined. Part tropical paradise, part snow covered splendor and peaceful no matter what path she walked. The palace was covered with gold, diamonds, coral and turquoise. Everyone she encountered was filled with a sense of peace and wisdom and most of whom, like Tira, resembled the Tibetan people. "So much for Heir Himmler's theory that this was the land of the lost Aryan tribe," she sighed patting Pepin the panther who was purring from her touch. "What do you think should we stay? Don't give me that look I know that you will follow me," she laughed somehow knowing that the large, docile cat could understand her. "Might be difficult renting a flat with you in tow."

"He is house broken," Tira laughed as she sat down beside the duo that was lounging on a large boulder over looking a serene lake.

"How long have I been here?" Petra asked studying her friend carefully. She had been drawn to

Tira from the first moment they met. Leaving paradise behind would be hard enough, leaving Tira was unthinkable. Yet, she was troubled that the dark woman didn't share her feelings.

"In your time it has been decades," Tira explained much to Petra's surprise. The days and nights passed easily. She had no realization that decades could have escaped without her knowledge. "Time passes differently in our world," Tira quickly explained. "If you wish to return you could do so without losing the decades that have transpired. Or you could simply return to what is now the present."

"I'd be an old woman," she laughed stealing a glimpse at her companion's well-toned body. "With a big cat," she added as Pepin rested his head on her lap. She gazed up still amazed that she could see the planets orbiting and appearing clearly in the skylights. The rings of Saturn glowed brightly appearing as if she could simply walk through the gases and touch the planet just as easily as she could wade through the lake she was sitting next to.

"I am curious," Tira slowly began. "I've seen visions of your world, although some of it is appealing most of what I've seen frightens me. Why would you want to go back? Here you have complete peace and serenity; there isn't even a harsh thought among the people who live here. The most difficult challenge you've endured here is losing endless games of chess to Paramesh. Sadly a fate most of us have endured."

"It only ruffles my feathers because he is so young," Petra smiled.

"Not really in your time he would be an old man," Tira corrected her.

"Strangely that doesn't make my resounding defeats any easier," Petra laughed. "I wish I could explain my urge to return. How can I when I don't even understand it myself?"

Tira smiled sadly as they sat by the lake each lost in their own thoughts. Petra knew that what was missing in the paradise she now lived in was love. True she felt it every day from everyone, but the passionate love that burned in her heart belonged to Tira and the dark woman didn't share her feelings. She glanced across the lake spying a giant panda happily chewing on something. "The mysteries of the universe have been revealed to me, my quest for knowledge is complete, and I still feel empty. Why is that?"

"Not everything has been explained," Tira smiled brightly. "As I told you when you arrived not everything is linear. Some mysteries are just that a mystery. Like your friend here, a soldier who is happy living as a jungle animal, his only purpose is to protect you. This has brought him peace. Many would question the wisdom of his choice. I know you do."

"That is because you know what I am thinking," Petra blew out frustrated that her inner most thoughts were free for all who wish to hear them.

"Not always," Tira teased. "Soon you'll see with your inner self. I'll leave you to your thoughts." With a flash she was gone.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to the way people just pop in and out," she sighed patting Pepin. "Although she is right at times I know what you are thinking. I sense that you chose to protect me because you feel that you failed to protect me when we were in that cavern. You didn't fail me; you saved everyone and who knows what would have happened if you hadn't stopped Boris. Now my question for today is if Tira knows my thoughts then she must know how I feel about her, and if she does then why doesn't she say something? A simple thank you but I'm not interested would suffice don't you think?"

Petra was stunned when Pepin lifted his head his stormy green eyes capturing her own for a brief moment. "Red Tara?" She stammered in confusion. "Red Tara," she repeated as Pepin's head dutifully returned to her lap. She searched her mind trying to recall why the words seemed so familiar. A slight breeze swept through her a flower brushing against her cheek before she caught the red lotus in the palm of her hand. "Kurukulla?" She whispered staring at the lotus. "The goddess of love? What exactly are you suggesting my furry friend?"

"Nice pet," a strange voice greeted her. Petra looked up to find a tall brunette standing beside her.

"He's a friend," she shrugged as the tall woman sat down beside her.

"Good thing, then again I do have a way with wild creatures," the brunette smirked. "You should have listened to me when I told you to leave."

"Diana? How, why?" Petra stammered as her old friend's dark eyes smiled back at her.

"Petra Rolf philosopher and scholar from the thirties," Diana whimsically began. "She wrote about myths, legends, theorized about mythology and mythical places. Her body was discovered in the forties, everyone assumed she went in search for Shangri La after her family escaped the Nazi's. So you didn't die?"

"I'm not quite certain," Petra gulped thinking it was strange to hear about herself in the past tense. "Why haven't I've seen you here before now?"

"Me? I come and go," Diana shrugged. "This isn't my realm so to speak. Like you I walk in a world I don't really feel I belong in. A red lotus do you have a date tonight? Or simply hoping?"

"It just appeared," Petra tried to explain still holding the lotus in the palm of her hand. "I was having a chat with my friend Pepin here and suddenly I was holding this."

"So your discussion was about love then?" Diana questioned. "Be careful Kurukulla can be very seductive, she may not answer your query deciding to enchant you for her own amusement."

"Are you trying to frighten me?" Petra laughed at the woman's antics.

"No," Diana grinned sheepishly. "I came here to help you. If you wish I can take you to her. Someone is in your heart and you wish to know if you are in theirs? Tara's answers may not be

clear and might not be what you wish to hear. The heart is the one mystery that can never be explained."

"Are you real? How is it that you still look the same after all these years?" Petra challenged the unusual woman. "You're not human are you?"

"Not even close," Diana smiled. "Remember how we would study the stars together; I was always fascinated by the moon and wild life? I am Diana Goddess of the hunt. Perhaps that is why I was called upon to talk to you. Take my hand and I will take you to the goddess of love. Again be aware that she is the embodiment of love, both physical and spiritual. She is highly seductive and erotic; being in her presence can make you forget the one in your heart unless of course your love is pure. Take my hand?"

Petra blew out a nervous breath and clasped Diana's hand. Her body soared her mind spinning as she suddenly emerged in a temple littered with red lotus blossoms. "Diana? So far from Aricia?" The red skinned woman sitting in the lotus position greeted them. Petra stared her body warming at the sight of the goddess on her throne clasping a lotus flower in one of her many hands and a bow and arrow in the other. "Normally I can find you bothering Artemis or your twin Apollo."

"Just dropping in," Diana flippantly responded. "Tara goddess of love and wealth, enchanter of humans and gods so they will serve you."

"Why so formal?" Kurukulla smiled. "I see this is business by why send you to guide this lovely woman, she could have found me on her own? This is not the land of your people. Perhaps you are enjoying playing in my garden"

"Maybe I missed you?" Diana laughed. "As you know the Roman Empire once covered most of the earth. There are those from your land that worshiped me at one time. Not that it matters any longer. We are no longer needed no longer hold the power of their devotion as we did in the old days. Their loss of faith reduced us to nothing more than glorified magicians."

"If I had left when you told me too what would have happened?" Petra demanded. "You saved my family, but there was no way you could have known where they were? Are you really a goddess? Is any of this real or am I still lying on the side of mountain slowly dying my mind conjuring up all of this so my death will be less painful?"

"If you had listened to me someone would have taken your place on the expedition," Diana slowly explained. "That person would have been me. Yet it was not what was destined to happen. It was your destiny to come here. History forever marred by a painful lesson. I tried to change what was to come but even the Gods are helpless to stop what is preordained. We can try but mankind can be so stubborn. Petra you have a question the red lotus guided me to you. Kurukulla guided me to you once what we shared may have only been fleeting pleasure but it did bind us. I told you she enjoys enchanting humans and gods so they will serve her. Ask her your question or turn around and I can return you to your world the choice is yours."

"I Uhm," Petra's mind was spinning the encounter was by far the strangest thing that had

happened since her arrival in paradise. "Give me a moment," Petra sputtered her mind still reeling. "She brought a goddess to my bed and now I must choose between paradise and the coldness of the world."

"Focus on what it is you truly desire," Diana calmly offered.

Petra struggled to catch her breath her eyes narrowing on the red lotus still resting in the palm of her hand. "Tira? I want to know if she loves me as I love her that is the only thing that matters. If I am not in her heart I'd rather be dying on the mountain. Or back in what passes for civilization."

"Ask her?" Diana pressed.

"Diana, stop pushing the girl," Kurukulla cautioned. "She isn't prey for you to stalk."

"Kurukulla," Petra interrupted suddenly feeling like a small child trapped in a room filled with angry adults who were trying to talk around her. "Tira? I feel so much for her I don't know if it is real or if any of this is real, but is there a chance she cares for me?"

"The heart is such a mystery one that will never be solved," Kurukulla began her energy calling out to Petra. The blonde swayed slightly recalling Diana's caution of how seductive the goddess could be. "Know this you will never know what is to be or not to be unless you seek it."

Petra's heart hummed with desire the room filling with a red mist. Diana stood there calmly seemingly unaffected by what was happening. "I don't understand," Petra sputtered.

"Unspoken questions will always remain unanswered," Kurukulla smiled mirthfully and suddenly Petra found herself standing by the lake the constellations glowing above her. She was miffed to find that Diana was far more interested in what was happening in the heavens than her dilemma.

"That is my true home," Diana sighed wistfully gazing up at the moon. "She did answer your question."

"No she didn't," Petra fumed wondering why almost every conversation in this ideal land felt like an endless riddle.

"There are no riddles only unanswered questions," Diana taunted her. "Hunting is a quest the pursuit more gratifying than the end. Romance is not my way searching and hunting that I understand. Helping children enter the world by blessing their mothers these things I understand. Love is a mystery even to the Gods. Kurukulla has explained to you what you need to know to follow your quest. If you don't open your heart no one will enter it. I must go a lot has happened in your absence. I am needed elsewhere. Take care Pepin will watch over you as this is what he wished for with his dying breath."

"You sent him to me?" Petra questioned as the panther leaned against her body.

"He was brave of heart traveling the mountains searching for you it was my duty to watch over him and grant his dying wish," Diana softly explained with a knowing smile.

"Can I ask you something?" Petra fussed as Diana nodded her consent. "What do you deity's do all day sit up in heavens looking for a chance to screw around with us mere mortals? Was what happened between us a game for you and Kurukulla?"

"No," Diana denied a little too vehemently. "Okay fine on occasion we have a little sport. But our friendship wasn't a part of that. I was in Germany because I needed to inspire someone to look to the heavens or outer space to be more exact. This person went on to inspire another and another until one day mankind finally began exploring life beyond Earth. One life touches many. You and I becoming friends was a part of that and someday I will reenter your life and not to help with your love life. You will be called upon to assist me in a higher purpose. It was your thirst for knowledge that led you to here and me. Now I really have to go. The world you left behind is beginning the twenty-first century and I am needed." Before Petra could say anything more Diana disappeared in the mist.

"I must say you have some interesting friends," Tira's voice beckoned her. Petra's breath hitched as she spied the dark haired beauty approaching her. "It is not often a Roman deity enters our world. The mountains often call Diana yet she rarely visits the city. You must mean a great deal to her."

"She's my friend," Petra shyly confessed. "Looking back on what she told me when I thought she was just a quirky instructor it all makes sense. She said she loved nature, was overly interested in women who were pregnant, fascinated by the moon and she said she had a twin brother. Still I had no idea she was immortal much less a goddess. None of this seems real."

"A red lotus have you been expanding your acquaintances?" Tira nervously pressed. "Kurukulla rarely greets a mortal especially one not born from this land. Yet here you stand with a red lotus."

"Diana's idea or perhaps Pepin's I'm not really certain," Petra stammered mesmerized by the vibrant violet eyes watching her every move. She tore her gaze from Tira's when she felt Pepin's head nudging her hand. She almost dropped the red lotus as the panther kept nudging it.

"I think he is trying to tell you something?" Tira encouraged her lilting voice sending tremors down the tall blonde's spine.

"I know," Petra grumbled, as the panther's pushing grew more insistent. "I just don't know what it is I'm supposed to do. Pepin?" She fussed while he kept nuzzling her hand. 'Unanswered questions remain unanswered,' Kurukulla's voice taunted her inner thoughts. She blew out a terse breath finally turning toward Tira facing her fears. 'If I don't ask her how she feels I will never know,' her mind screamed in sudden understanding. "Here," she choked out placing the lotus in Tira's palm. "I think this is what I am supposed to do."

"Petra do you understand what it means to offer another a red lotus?" Tira's voice quivered. "It

means you are offering your heart."

"Uh huh," Petra squeaked as nervous beads of sweat emerged on her brow. Her knees quivered as Tira held the lotus between her palms. The silence that surrounded them seemed unbearable. Petra's heart was breaking as the dark woman simply stared at the flower. It was too much the blonde was ready to ask that she be returned to the outside world when Tira looked up at her with a brilliant smile.

"I have wished for this," Tira timidly confessed. "I feared Diana was the one who held your heart."

"Diana?" Petra almost laughed. "No, we did share passion but never love. I really adore Diana and her strange personality, but the thought of spending the rest of my life with her isn't something I seek. How did you not know what was in my heart when you can read my thoughts?"

"Not all of your thoughts," Tira blushed cupping the lotus to her breasts. "I never saw into your heart until now. Come with me? Please?"

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Petra followed Tira unaware of how quickly they were transported to another part of the lost kingdom. Petra inhaled the light aroma of jasmine as she glanced around the strange surroundings. She felt a sense of peace encompassing her drinking in the splendor of the vision of purple lotus blossoms blooming from crystal ice. "Where are we?" She inquired softly following her guide across the room to the bundled silk sprawled across the floor.

"My home, our home if you wish," Tira shyly offered turning towards the tall blonde with a shy smile.

"I wish," Petra accepted with a hard swallow. She brushed her fingers along the ice-covered walls her fingers tracing the design etched into the ice. "Brag-Srin-Mo, the goddess of fertility," she uttered softly glancing over at Tira with a curious look.

"I etched her image on that wall centuries ago praying for the one that would bless me with love and children would enter my life," Tira explained her hands coming to rest on Petra's broad shoulders. "I had almost given up when a strange nomad entered our land, a tall blonde with a heart breaking smile who was far too interested in the wonderment of this land to notice me. When I realized that you were close to a Roman I feared that it was not meant to be."

"Oh I noticed you," Petra laughed her hands slipping around Tira's slender waist. Her breathing hitched as Tira's hands slipped higher caressing the nape of her neck. Petra's eyes fluttered shut and she held her breath as her heart began to pound in a demanding rhythm. Petra's lips tingled when Tira's soft mouth teased her. It was a shy kiss that sparked the long dormant embers in her soul. She released a throaty moan as she quickly reclaimed Tira's lips this time in a searing kiss.

Petra's knees buckled when she parted her lover's lips with her tongue. She could feel Tira's hands roaming her body while her tongue explored the warmth of the darker woman's mouth. Her body tingled from Tira's touch. She laughed when the kiss came to an end and she spied Pepin retreating from the scene. "Liebhaber," she whispered tenderly her hands slipping down the slight curve of Tira's body.

"Am I?" Tira purred hotly in the blonde's ear. "Am I your lover? Will you stay with me?"

"Fur immer," Petra vowed. "Forever," she repeated her fingers playing with the knot on Tira's sari. She took a shy step backward unlacing the garment allowing it to fall from Tira's body. Her breathing grew ragged as she drank in the vision that stood before her. Tira's small, perky breasts and taut body warmed her senses making her pulse race with an unquenchable desire.

"Do I please you?" Tira timidly inquired lowering her body to the bundle of silk.

"Yes," Petra gasped as she stood before her lover, their eyes meeting while Tira's hands glided up the blonde's long legs. Petra's body swooned as she gave into the feel of Tira's shy caresses. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever or will ever see," she panted quickly shedding her own clothing. She felt shy as she stood before her lover revealing her naked body to Tira for the first time. She trembled fearfully until she was basking in her lover's brilliant smile.

Tira's hands glided up along her legs teasing her flesh with the tips of her fingers. Petra released a shudder while standing there allowing her lover to explore her flesh in a slow tantalizing fashion. She licked her lips as Tira began to kiss her firm thighs. Tira's lips and tongue teased her as she fought to remain standing. She laced her fingers through Tira's long, dark hair trembling from the feel of her lover's hot breath greeting her sex.

She guided Tira closer silently pleading for her lover to complete her. She moaned when Tira's fingers parted her before tasting the tall blonde for the first time. Petra's body swayed against her lover's touch. Tira murmured with pleasure feasting upon the blonde's passion. The insistent flickering of Tira's tongue against her throbbing clit was driving Petra insane.

Her hips jerked forward guiding her lover deeper inside of her. She cried out feeling Tira's fingers slipping inside of her. Petra's body quivered as she fought to keep her balance while her lover took her higher. Strange that in the middle of paradise Tira's touch seemed to transcend the definition of paradise. Tira suckled her clit harder driving the blonde over the edge. Petra cried out the passion overwhelming her climaxing against her lover's body.

She didn't pause to catch her breath; falling to her knees she guided her lover down onto the silk as she captured Tira in a fiery kiss. Her senses reeled as she tasted her desire on her lover's lips. She moaned deeply when she felt Tira's erect nipples brushing against her flesh. Her eyes were glazed over as she gazed down upon her lover. She caressed Tira's face their bodies melting together and their hips falling into a slow, passionate rhythm.

Petra no longer knew where she ended and Tira began as she gave a part of her soul to her lover. They rocked together each feeling the other's desire on their skin. Petra slipped her hand between

their bodies caressing Tira's trembling flesh. Tira held her captive in a smoldering gaze as Petra's fingers greeted the smaller woman's desire. "So wet," she murmured happily as she dipped into her lover's wetness.

Tira wrapped her legs tightly around the blonde's body as she pleaded with Petra to be hers. "I'm yours," the blonde vowed her nimble fingers dancing lightly across Tira's throbbing clit. She stroked her lover harder as Tira's body arched greeting her touch. Petra understood what Tira was asking of her, she wanted all of the blonde not just passion, but her heart as well. Petra smiled gladly giving Tira her heart praying to Brag-Srin-Mo to bless them.

Petra gently pressed her fingers against the warmth of Tira's passion. Her lover's body arched encouraging the blonde to slip inside of her. Tira cried out as Petra slipped inside of her warm, wet center. She felt the walls tightening against her touch. She was out of breath knowing that her lover was nearing the edge so quickly. She murmured her lover's name softly as she plunged deeper inside of Tira.

She could feel Tira's pulse quicken as she glided in and out of the brunette's wetness. Tira's body rocked steadily against her demanding touch. Petra captured her lover's erect nipple between her lips and she suckled her greedily. Her fingers taking Tira higher she fought against the urge to make Tira climax slowing her pace needing the moment to last forever. Tira pleaded with her for more and Petra was helpless to resist.

She stroked her lover harder whispering words of love as she felt Tira's body tightening against her touch. Petra was lost in the feel of her lover climaxing. Tira groaned when the blonde slipped from her embrace. "Not yet," Petra gasped licking her way down Tira's body. She nestled her long body between Tira's quivering thighs and suckled her throbbing clit between her lips. Her fingers and tongue moved in perfect rhythm as she drove Tira blissfully over the edge. She drank more of Tira's passion as her lover pleaded for mercy. She was adrift in Tira's nectar drinking in every last drop of passion until her lover collapsed against her.

"Now I know I'm in paradise," she murmured softly kissing her way back up her lover's body.

"Are you staying?" Tira tearfully inquired.

"Forever," Petra vowed her body matching Tira's sultry movement. She moaned when their wetness greeted the others. She could feel her desire becoming one with her lover's and soon their bodies took control until they were screaming out the other's name. Petra nestled her body against Tira's tracing the supple curves with her fingers as her lover sighed contently. Petra shivered thinking of Diana's words wondering if she would be able to keep her promise to her lover. Only time would tell, then again time in paradise passed so differently than it did in the real world. She could awake in the morning and another life time would have passed. She cupped Tira's breast teasing her dark nipple tenderly silently vowing to make the most of her time in paradise.

The End.

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