

Late Summer, 1936

Angelica Silberlindh sat on the narrow seat of the pearl-fishing canoe, eyes shaded and panting for breath as the summer sun poured down onto the glittering waters. An afternoon of hard work three or four metres underwater had brought her four buckets of oysters, at least some of which should hold a pearl.

The slender feline sighed, turning round to look back at the bay where a silver floatplane was now high and dry, hauled up on the beach by a team of villagers. She needed pearls to have any chance of getting away from this primitive place – it was September already, and soon the pearl diving season would be over. Although none of the villagers had said as much, she had gathered that she was welcome to stay here while their friends and relatives were busy with tourists on South and Casino Island, leaving them short-pawed for the two seasonal jobs that happened to coincide. After that – she shivered. From what she had heard, it would only take one complaint and the village constable would be obliged to stop turning a blind eye to a Euro who had never arrived through customs, and was working without a permit or visa on Main Island, where no work permits were usually granted anyway.

The days were slipping by, each one slightly shorter now. The moon had been almost full last night – the last full moon of Summer. When the tourist season ended and the entertainment workers reappeared having grown sick and tired of the sight of Euros to find one working illegally in their home waters – she would probably find all about the officialdom of these islands.

“Surely,” Angelica asked herself as she helped the fur-clad village girls paddle back shoreward with the catch, “things can’t get worse than this?”

On South Island, the secluded beach that faced the unknown waters of Sacred Island was loud with the noise of splashing and laughter as a water-polo match came to its riotous ending. The South Island Formation team were known by many names throughout the islands, some of them less complementary than the deliberately bland one they used for themselves, but there were two things everybody agreed on. They were the best formation swimming team in the Spontoon Isles or indeed most places up to Hawaii, and they definitely knew how to enjoy themselves.

“Eeh, another film part fer us. Grand, eh?” Prudence Akroyd shook herself dry vigorously on the beach, her long ears and tail flicking rainbow sparkles of spray through the streaming sunshine. “That Miss Melson, she knows a thing or two about casting.” The famous film Directrix had made two films already in the Spontoons, where the natural beauty of the isles combined with a suitable distance from the despised Hays Office censors in Hollywood to let her make the sort of films she loved.

“Oh yes. Next week she’ll be here again, casting. She can audition me as often as she likes.” Belle flopped down next to her, the rabbit’s long ears sparkling with water. Three hard-fought games of water polo after a morning’s formation practice in the calm waters behind the reef had given her a ravenous appetite, and her stomach growled as she got her breath back. The shadows were lengthening, the sun already slipping behind the rounded Southern summit of Mount Tomboabo as she watched, though it was a full two hours before it would be sunset on the Western part of the island. She stretched, watching with an appreciative eye as the other two dozen fur-clad swimmers shook oiled fur dry and slipped into their respectable beach costumes. “Still – first things first. Time to eat!”

The English canine chuckled as ears and tails perked up all round; having planned a whole day of vigorous swimming exercise they had all brought just a light lunch of fruits picked off the trees on the way and had worked that off hours ago. “They folk on Hotel Beach mun be pilin’ up the grub fer us by now; get through it like a Schneider Racer swallows hundred-octane, tha’ does!” She shook her ears dry as she rolled up the beach towel and gathered her things. “Don’t rightly know which is t’ wuss of you or Ada – as ravenous as a pair of sharks, the pair of ye!” It was not only food the pair were ravenous for, she reminded herself, one ear dipping wryly.

Forty minutes along the coral-sand road brought them back to the nearest major habitation, Hotel Bay with its water-taxis and tourist food stalls. But it was not to a tourist-priced hot dog or fried fish stall that the team headed, but to a fairly nondescript building on the service road behind the Topotabo Hotel, that the local cleaners and chambermaids rather than the guests ate at. What the place saved on garish advertisement it passed on in pricing; fish and poi featured largely on the menu, which was mostly written in Spontoonie to further discourage all but the most adventurous tourists.

Prudence looked round, ordering clay-baked fish and breadfruit then relaxing as the Samoan otter waitress waddled off back to the kitchens with a full notebook. They had cleaned and redecorated since last week, she noted with approval, having taken down torn or fly-specked advertising posters and replaced them with this season’s latest designs.

Suddenly her ears went right up. Right next to the kitchen door was an almost life-sized poster that some of her friends were already casting an appreciative eye over, promoting the “Tropicana

Banana Company” registered in Wanangaloa and Gothenburg. Oddly enough part of the picture showed snow-filled scenes, as if the main market was somewhere very distant from anywhere bananas actually grew. But it was not the background that was drawing the attention, but the figure on the front. Prudence knew enough about portraits to recognise an oil painting that had been made from a photographic original, and this was certainly one such. The subject was a tall, slender feline girl energetically dancing while wearing nothing but a skirt of tied bananas modelled on Miss Josephine Baker’s night club shows of ten years ago, but her pose concealed her other slender charms.

Prudence looked hard at the poster. The detail was exquisite, and there was something hauntingly familiar about the head-fur ... which could be styled differently, but that was not true of the ear shape, or those lustrous feline eyes...

She suddenly stood up, and grabbed Belle. “Take a good look, lass, tell me if I’m not seein’ things,” she urged, propelling a willing bunny to take a closer look at the poster. “‘Ave we or ‘aven’t we seen ‘er somewhere around about, for real?”

Belle stared hard for a few seconds, then her long ears went right up in shocked amazement. Her tail twitched, then slowly twisted aside until her dorm leader playfully batted it back into place. She nodded slowly, her eyes wide and whiskers twitching. “It’s her.”

“What’s the big thing with the poster, Pru?” asked one of the local girls, another lepine called Tobonule.

Prudence turned to her team and smiled, her long muzzle exposed to show a good collection of white and healthy teeth.

“We’ve swam about everywhere there is around South Island this Summer,” she announced casually, though her own tail was trembling with excitement. “What say we take a water-taxi to the North shore o’ Main tomorrow ?” One ear raised, mischievously. “Reckon water’s as good as here, no tourists to dodge and ...” Her tail thumped the wall energetically, “we might see a view tha’d appreciate, owwer there.”

Not three miles away, near the Southern tip of Main Island there was another copy of the poster being given a critical appreciation, though the audience was smaller and the mood far less riotous.

Exactly how Oharu had gained the copy of the poster of Angelica Silberlindh advertising her family company, was something she was unclear but incurious about. That is, Huakava had handed it to her with complements and the wry comment that it was going up on walls all over the island, but had offered no explanation as to who had first spotted the resemblance. At first Oharu had wondered if Huakava had been attempting some suitably subtle matchmaking, and indeed the feline was a joy to behold.

Watching, they are always watching, Oharu reminded herself. Some wear Customs or Police uniforms ... but most do not. Every face, every scent, of thousands who come through here ... they train their eyes, their wits, and the children in the street are taught the games that help that.

She had stored the poster in one of her bamboo art tubes like a temple scroll, with fine split bamboo clasping it at each end. Whoever painted the poster had been skilled, in the Euro tradition, and had worked well in translating from the original photograph. But to Oharu’s trained eye, there were a few things that stuck out like a sprained tail, as being wrong with it. And it was no fault of the painter, who had surely done exactly what he had been told to do given the original.

Should I have been commissioned to do such ... what is missing? Where is the flaw? The mouse sat cross-legged, permitting herself a smile as she remembered a dance she had seen the month before at the Double Lotus, late one night. They had been trained chorus-girls from Casino Island, who in the appreciative surroundings had kicked off their shoes and danced non-stop in their style to the gramophone till both had been almost collapsing, then had been revived with chilled champagne and a very appreciative audience. Their dancing style had been similar to the poster ... Oharu imagined capturing it on paper, her finger moving through the air as if she was wielding her brush. She would show the energy, the poise, the bursting joy of the performance in every line of the straining figures, leaving the expressions till last. She knew she could show the same even were the faces turned away from the viewer, just showing with line and weight the delight of the dancer in her work.

That is it! That is missing! Her ears rose, then dipped again. The problem had been in the original, not in the translation to the poster. She imagined one of those dancers being posed in the cold light of rehearsals the next day, possibly with a headache and sore paws, dutifully taking up the position and smiling her best for the camera. Nobody could say Angelica had been doing it wrong, and indeed not one in a hundred would look past the appeal of a lissom feline revealingly posed – but

whatever the circumstances had been, Angelica Silberlindh had not been happy modelling a skirt of prime bananas for her family company.

Suddenly she stood, packed a bark satchel with her notebooks and some fruit for a journey, and strode out down the Great Stone Glen, picking up the footpath that contoured high above the beach and crossed stone bridges that had once rung to the noise of steam engines. It was an hour's brisk walk to the village near Sacred Lake, where her three apprentices were still tending the local shrines until beginning their full-time work with her.

For a second she considered where they might be. *If they are not remiss in their duties*, she mused, *they should be – there, today*. Two hundred yards in the jungle there was a minor shrine, not one of the Nine Anchors indeed but a replacement one that Huakava recalled being established in her own childhood to protect the village near the river delta.

Arriving at the carved wooden structure, she clapped her paws abruptly. In ten seconds her three apprentices were lined up outside the shrine, all still carrying the brooms and hoes they had been busily clearing the weeds with. She nodded critically, like an officer reviewing a satisfactory parade, finding nothing to complain of but never eager to praise in public. For two minutes she stood there, her bamboo in her paw as she waited for one of them to speak out of turn.

"Apprentices," she said finally, unrolling the poster from its tube, tapping the dancing image with her largest bamboo brush. "Do you know who this is?" In another minute both the badger girls looked at each other and shyly raised a paw.

"Ote'he," she pointed to the oldest one, oldest by barely an hour according to their mother but always the leader. "Do you know?"

The badger's ears dipped. "No, Shishou," she began, while watching Oharu's bamboo twitch. "I do not know, for a certainty. But it looks to me very like Miss Silberlindh, who defiled our Sacred Lake."

The mouse's whiskers twitched in amusement, as she considered her reply. Had Ote'he claimed to definitely know Oharu would have asked her what definite proof she had – and without such, her busy work schedule would have included more rocks to polish. This was not a bad answer. "I think so too. Her figure and her nation are correct, and I am informed that this is indeed her family company." Exactly how this was known was another thing she had not enquired; Angelica might not officially be on the islands but that did not mean a certain grey-furred ferret would have kept his nose out of her business. The feline was strictly speaking there illegally, and would not be there a minute longer unless she had been quietly investigated and found to be harmless.

"Whether this is true or not, is not so important. Tehepoa, tell me why not." She nodded to the erstwhile leader, the fox. He took a deep breath, and looked at the picture again.

"If we can spot who she is, other people will. Even those who've never seen her on Main Island will recognise her as the model after they've seen this. She's going to have a lot of attention drawn to herself, and she can't afford it right now. Even if she doesn't go around dressed like that." His eyes flashed, and his brush twitched rebelliously for a second.

"Indeed. Apprentices, finish your duties, inform your families and be ready to leave in an hour. We have a walk ahead of us."

On the beach, Constable Pohova paused every day beside the big silver sea-plane and made a note of it in his book. He sighed.

The grey-furred equine took off his uniform cap and rested for a minute in the shade under the high wing, thinking about his village's increasingly long-term guest. Angelica had done nothing absolutely wrong, by all accounts – she was the equivalent of shipwrecked here, and Mama Popoluma had taken her in as a Guest, under Polynesian laws of hospitality that in many ways went beyond the local criminal code. And yet her continuing presence on the island was running up an increasing list of technical offences, that might suddenly turn nasty if anyone bothered to enforce the law as laid down in the Allthing's statute books.

"Item One; that she entered the islands without registering with due Customs procedures. Hrrmph." His ears twitched, and he tentatively crossed that one off. By the accounts of the folk Angelica had jointly charmed and irritated that day on Eastern Island the month before, she had only intended a refuelling stop, for which Customs clearance was not required. That she had not managed to get away, was not her fault according to both the Wise Ones and the mechanics at Superior.

"Item Two: that she is residing on Main Island, where no Euro settlement is allowed except in cases to be individually judged by the Althing." His tail swished, as if at an irritating insect. That was tougher, and if the aircraft was in working order he could give her a week to fly out in it or face charges. Unfortunately that was not an option, which meant the ancient customs about shipwreck

started to apply. By all accounts Miss Silberlindh would love nothing better than to fly away from the islands, which again made the situation nothing she could be charged with as regards intent.

“Item Three: that she is working for gain without a permit, and selling island pearls without licence.” He paused at that one. The feline was working for gain, but not for profit: any law student could point out that she was working to keep herself fed, and every cowry earned was going towards trying to repair and fuel her aircraft to escape her situation. Without money she could not leave under her own power, and she had been invited by the villagers themselves to dive with them, so she was scarcely taking jobs from islanders at this time of the year. But the second part of that charge, that was another matter. The Althing had decreed the market level for pearls, and anyone undercutting them certainly was undermining the local economy.

“Well now.” He put on his cap, pocketed his notebook, and headed back towards the village. “I’m sorry, Miss Silberlindh. It’s not you I’m after. But if I catch you and them together, it’ll be just too bad.”

On the Western side of Casino Island within pistol range of the Old China Dock, the salubrious establishment known as the Devil’s Reef was well known to the Spontoon Constabulary. It had been closed down twice, but the owners of neighbouring hostelries made official complaint when its distinctive brand of patron transferred their business to their own, relatively respectable shady waterfront dives. At the moment it was open for custom, though not the sort of “custom” the Spontoon Islanders showed to the paying tourists.

“Slim” Jan Van der Veldt was currently nursing a whiskey sour as well as a sore head from the previous evening. It was not every day he met up with fellow expatriates, and they had spent the evening toasting the health of the Transvaal and Orange Free State, with sublime indifference to them both having been wiped off the political map more than forty years ago. As one of the Boer boars had drunkenly proclaimed, Poland had bounced back after a century of foreign Imperial rule, and there was no reason their homeland could not do the same and better.

“Aaarg.” The lion turned his splendidly maned head rather too happily for comfort, as he spotted the diminutive shape of his employer entering the bar. He forced a smile, and looked down at the stubby crocodilian (actually a Cayman) who bustled in, fussily adjusting his dress coat. “Bass! Great to see you!” His fingers were not crossed, but he was glad that amongst many things “Baron” von Krokkm economised on was hiring a star-nosed mole who could sense the truth of what he said.

“Enough of that. Drinking again? I must be paying you too much.” Von Krokkm gave an unpleasantly feral grin. “Grain prices just went up, the social season starts in Europe this month. Do we have a consignment of barley ready to ship?”

Jan resisted the temptation to roll his eyes in despair. He at least was a professional smuggler, or as the locals had it, was involved in the “import-export trade.” The Baron’s code-words were as transparent as the Devil’s Reef’s watered beer, and it did not take a crossword champion to associate “pearl” with “barley.” The fact that barley did not grow in this climate had apparently quite passed his employer by.

“No, Bass,” he held his voice level. “We’ve got seventy good sacks, but that Krupmark consortium muscled in ahead of us. They got everything we expected to ship from the Mare’s Nest fields.” There were seventy fine white pearls ready to ship out, but adding “sacks” to every quantity was supposed to hide just what they referred to. *If there’s anyone of those sharp folk from the Interior Ministry or a Detective listening in here we’re sunk*, he thought grimly as he studied his drink. The Mare’s Nest Atoll definitely produced no grain crops, but a very abundant yield of pearls was harvested from beneath its waves, and a lack of permanent inhabitants to watch the waters made it a prime source for the illegal trade.

The Baron’s scaly tail slapped the bare wooden floorboard in irritation. Some low-priced bars followed the European tradition of having sawdust on the floor; in the Devil’s Reef rumour had it that the sawdust had been stolen. “No good! Get out there and lean on our suppliers. Official diving season ends this month, and that’ll be it till May!”

“Yes, Bass,” the lion finished his drink and threw a genuine half-shell piece on the counter. Despite what some folk might think, spending counterfeit currency here was an attempt nobody made twice and the wise not at all. The management were professionally qualified to spot fake money.

He gave his employer a thorough salute, clapped his bush hat on his head while adjusting his round ears through the brim holes, and headed out with a purposeful stride towards the water taxis. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the fly-specked mirror, and practiced his roguish grin. He would need that very shortly – that and the small glass ampoule he carefully patted in his bush-jacket pocket.

Angelica counted in thirty white, pea-sized pearls under the careful gaze of the village elder, who smiled and wrote her a signed receipt. The village co-operative would pass those onto the Allthing's trade committee, and in a week they would be heading out to jewellers in Asia and Europe to contribute to the island's trade surplus.

"Thirty. Too bad. I made forty-six today," one of her fishing partners, a local otter, sympathised. "You must have hit a bad patch."

"You're an otter, I'm a feline – and we don't practice diving for pearls back home. I'm amazed I find any." Angelica's ears blushed, but it was not in embarrassment. Her lava lava costume was cunningly folded to conceal a pocket where a dozen of the choicest pearls currently resided, one of them a rare rose pearl which had almost given the game away as she bottled out her tail in shock at finding. She smiled a secret smile. The thirty official finds were her rent to the village, but that was not going towards getting the Silver Angel repaired and fuelled; for that she needed a little private income. It was hardly stealing, she told herself; she had spent all afternoon working hard for this and her paws were sore with the sharp edged oysters and the pressure of holding the knife.

"Got to go – Mama Popoluma's got the pot warm, and these oysters won't keep!" With a wave she picked up the two heavy buckets and headed up away from the beach, towards the village. Her ears dipped as she passed her beloved Silver Angel, now high and dry. What had that mumbo-jumbo been about a curse? She didn't feel cursed in the slightest, but as she prepared to spend another night under a primitive thatched roof eating oyster stew out of a coconut bowl, she felt definitely irritated.

"Oyster stew and plantain mash. That's about all I eat." She drew the line at preparing food like a common kitchen-maid, and left that detail to the head of the household. Idly she wondered what sort of root vegetable a plantain was; back at school in England the gardeners had pointed them out as small wide-leaved weeds lying almost flat in the lawns, but the roots of those were surely no bigger than matchsticks. There were edible and inedible types of gourds, she knew; evidently there was some giant edible tropical plantain, though she had no idea what it looked like.

"Anything but banana." She shivered, delicately shaking the last drops of water from her elegant tail as she picked her way over towards the village. Banana, definitely not – but her hostess's speciality Fillypine dish of "Puso ng Saging" – now, there was a recipe worth taking home with her, whatever the mysterious ingredients translated as. Her father would be surprised.

"Psst!" A harsh whisper from the tree-line by the edge of the village made her ears prick up. She put the buckets down and shaded her eyes against the low afternoon sun, and her tail swished as she recognised the solid figure of Mr. Van der Veldt, the lion standing concealed in the shadows. Why some of his companions called him "Slim" she had no idea; although the lion was muscle and rawhide rather than fat, he was very solidly built.

Angelica gave a superior smile, looking back over the thatched roofs of the village. She hastily concealed the two buckets and slipped into the shadows to join her contact with the financial outer world. "Mister Van der Veldt – right on time. These stupid pearls are digging dents in my fur."

"I'll take them off your paws. Usual rates." The lion pulled out a roll of used Shell notes, and exchanged them one for one as Angelica brought out each good-sized pearl. "Only eleven? That won't buy you much petrol round here." He made to put the remaining money and pearls away, until he spotted the smaller feline's grin; more like the fabled Cheshire cat than a Swedish one.

"I think this one will, though," Angelica held the rose pearl up so a shaft of low sunlight angled through the leaves and struck it to display its lustrous glory. She snatched it away from the lion's suddenly trembling paw. "Oh no. You haven't got enough money there to buy this one. I want to meet your boss and negotiate a pay rise."

The lion's tufted tail twitched, even as his mane rose in shock. This was about the fourth rose pearl he had ever seen out of Spontoon waters, but he was definitely not going to tell Angelica that. "He might not want to see you. He doesn't deal with fish-wives." For a second he toyed with the idea of one good claw-swipe, grab the pearl then straight onto his waiting aircraft and away with the whole consignment before the hue and cry caught up with him. Then he remembered what had happened to the last robber who had injured someone protected under Polynesian hospitality on this island, and rapidly changed his mind.

"What good will it do you? I'll give you forty shells for it right now, but you go official and you won't get a cowry for it – they'll just take it off your paws and then try explaining why you didn't hand it in." His jaw jutted defiantly. "You won't shift that pearl this side of Krupmark – but yes, you'll find it's worth more than you are, if you go there. You won't get to spend it, damn straight – they'd take it and you too."

The Cheshire Cat smile increased, and Angelica purred wickedly. "I've heard about rose pearls, the girls talk about them around the fires at night. The Indian rajahs buy most of them, no

questions asked. I've a very good friend of mine in Songmark, and HER friend is a rajah's daughter. Do I have to spell it out? It'd take a few weeks to get the money, but I'd get it. And I will, unless you make me a better offer. Then I can get my aircraft fixed, and some clothing apart from this second-hand bed-sheet." Her tail twitched in annoyance as she returned the pearl to the fold in her lava lava dress.

Jan gritted his teeth, and forced his head to nod in assent. "I'll talk to the Bass. He'll decide. If that's all?" Suddenly his eyes lit up, and his paw went to his pocket. "You've outwitted me, Slim Jan. Take this, you deserve it." His eyes strayed to the slender girl's smooth neck fur, which showed no signs of appreciative company, and imagined radically changing that. *If not today then next month*, he promised himself, his tail swishing; *when the diving season's over we can find other uses for you*.

Angelica's eyes lit up as she saw the fine silken scarf. She bowed with mock politeness, and triumphantly tied it round her head-fur as a trophy. The scent was exotic, maddening almost, but in the open air surrounded by jungle flowers she hardly noticed it as she swept down the hill to retrieve her buckets and head into her landlady's hut, a new spring in her stride and a jaunty wave in her tail.

Had Mama Popoloma hailed from South Africa rather than the Fillypines she might have told Angelica that "slim" meant crafty rather than slender there. And had she come via Krupmark Island she would have known about triply-distilled catnip oil; absorbed into a feline's system almost immediately, but nearly impossible to detect after half an hour's exposure to the air. But Angelica did not ask anyway, and if her landlady noticed any effects that would normally have been odd – well, even the Euros knew the reputation of eating freshly harvested oysters, let alone a stew with two bucketfuls of them.

As Angelica settled down for her evening meal, she felt herself flush with the pride and excitement of having finally got a lever with her private employers – at least, that was how she explained the feeling as she proudly showed off her new scarf. Outside, the sun began to set as the last full moon of Summer began to climb in the Eastern skies.

Just over the narrow ridge from where Angelica was resignedly digging into her evening meal, there was a small bay where the South Island Swimming Team were busily building up a fire for a beach party. The Native Spontoonie members of the team had brought fishing nets along and demonstrated that a line of powerful swimmers holding the nets in just the right place on the reef could do quite as well as a boat, and was far easier to haul over from the far side of the island. This bay was narrow, its exit to the sea obstructed by jagged rocks and branching forests of stag-horn coral that made most commercial fishing far too hazardous to be worthwhile.

"They say the Pirates came here, into this valley," Tobonule waved a paw at the high ridge. "It wasn't just at J'dril's Bank, down the coast. Folk keep digging, but nobody's found any loot yet." She twitched her whiskers at the scent of roasting cabbages that was scenting the glen. "The elders say that Laura Shieling certainly looked, and spent a few pounds of guncotton around here." Her eyes grew wide in the gloom. "Now that's someone I'd pay to see the movie of! Hoop skirts and all."

Prudence nodded absently. The day had been a great success already, with them finding a perfect sheltered bay without the trouble of the tourists seeing them. Her own ears drooped at the memory of the photographer back in Easter, who had been at a loose end following the early completion of a Hollywood location shoot. Her team had appeared in films before, and their minor appearances could be written-up to fill a dull day in some film scandal sheet if a reporter had managed to snap them practicing in the Native style of (absent) swimsuits. He nearly got away with it, she mused – there had been that "accident" on the water taxi heading back to Casino Island where he nearly drowned: he had sworn someone had been holding him under but could not deny the three yards of kelp that were tangled around his ankles by the time he surfaced without his camera. The camera was dived for and recovered, of course, but in the struggle the film had apparently come loose and was presumably on the bottom of Main Channel.

"Any road," she stood up, looking at the fish being prepared on skewers and wrapped in clay "happen it'll be half an hour easy, till it's done. Belle, Tahni – tha's seen t'lass before, let's go invite her to us party!" She caught sight of her friend Ada looking that direction hungrily, and laughed. "Ada an' all, you can join us. The more the merrier, we allus say." With that, she slipped into her respectable beach costume and scrambled back up the steep pathway that led over to the village.

"Oharu Shishou," a badger-girl asked quietly, sitting two hundred paces up the hill, on a spur of rock commanding a good view of both the village and the secret bay "aren't you going to stop her?"

The mouse sighed, turning to Ote'he and her sister. "If she is unwilling, she will refuse them. She is in no danger. And if she is willing - it is whose curse that makes her so? In defiance of her nature?"

“Ours.” Both sisters bowed their striped snouts contritely. Their teacher nodded.

“Correct, students. You are to keep vigil here and see that no harm comes to her – I do not mean harm of the body, for those down there would shield her with their very lives if they must. For this you must reach out with your minds as I have taught you, to understand how the curse you wove has tangled amongst her spirit like a net caught in the coral. BUT.” – her eyes blazed with energy “you are not to do this for your pleasure, now or ever. As doctors you must be, seeing a patient unclothed to understand them, and nothing more. For abusing that power could be done. Oh yes. If you do that I will not dismiss you as my students. It will be nothing so easy. You will spend your lives sweeping the temple shrines and pulling the weeds, every minute knowing that the spirits will never, never speak with you, not though you were the last ones alive on Earth.” She relaxed, looking round at the fox. “Tehepoa. Why do I not ask you to share this task?”

The young fox tore his gaze from the distant beach party. “Because I could never resist the temptation.”

Oharu nodded, approvingly. “Correct, for today. One day, should you gain enough inner strength, it may be different. The Euros have a prayer that says in part “*lead us not into temptation*”, and to permit you to do so I would be a poor teacher indeed.” She looked at him, one ear half-dipped. “The great cat who visited her today. He is a threat to her, in a way those at the waterside are not. When next he comes here, you are to reach out to his mind. As a shadow you must be, saying nothing and casting no light to warn him. A male presence might understand him better, and what he plans.”

Oharu relaxed, her orders delivered. She knew what she was asking her apprentices to do was several years of hard work ahead of their level. But they had achieved almost as much before, with the aid of the Spirits, and if they failed using their own powers then it would be a salutary lesson to them. Should they somehow succeed ... well, she would cross that bridge when she came to it. Certainly she would give no hint she was pleased or surprised at their achievements; as their villages’ only natural Priests and Priestesses they had been praised and admired quite enough already for those so young.

Closing her eyes, she sent her concentration out on the wind to seek the proud spirit she had promised to protect. She reminded herself of what she had told Ote’he and Nuimba, that this was for Angelica’s benefit and the unravelling of the curse, and steeled herself to do the same despite the temptation. The Euros were not the only ones whose traditions included vampires, she knew, and it was not always the energies of blood that they sought to steal.

As the sun went down behind the dormant volcano in the West (extinct as the guidebooks reassuringly proclaimed, at least for the current tourist season) Angelica was to be found in the same place as always, sitting on the float of her beloved Silver Angel.

“I bet it’s the fuel that’s got you sick, poor baby,” she stroked the smooth aluminium beneath her. “That has to be it. You did fine till I gave you that tank full of stinking Native fuel on Eastern Island. Forget that silly thing about a curse – if I could just get you some Swedish petrol, you’d be all right again.” Her tail swished angrily. It had cost her every pearl she had earned just to fuel up and have the locals look her beloved aircraft over, and all that had been wasted.

“It HAS to be the fuel. And of course their own peasant engines can get by on it, like the natives get by on Poi. Their mechanics are used to using the cheap stuff, so of course they can’t see what’s wrong with it. But to get proper fuel sent in specially from outside ... what that would cost me ...” she felt the reassuring pressure of the locket around her neck, which amongst other things now held that once-in-a-lifetime pink pearl. It would take a hard bargain to get enough shells even from her precious find. She thought of her threat to get full value from it through Amelia’s friend the Maharajah’s daughter ... but that could take two months, she could only begin at the start of term when the Songmark girls were all back in contact. Instead, it had to be handled through Slim Jan.

Hastily checking nobody was watching, she unwrapped the silken scarf from her head-fur and scented it. Oddly enough, it had no scent she could easily determine, but it made her nose tingle like the way flavourless corn schnapps burned in her throat. She had outwitted him, and won this prize ... for a second she imagined claiming other rewards from him. He was a crass and boorish colonial, she told herself, but a hulking muscular feline and perfectly compatible for her to ...

After a few seconds she frowned. Nothing much happened. It was not quite like turning the starter key and getting a deafening silence, but it surprised her. Shaking her head moodily, she stretched and stroked her beloved aircraft a fond farewell as she prepared to head back for another boring evening trying to make small-talk with Mama Popoluma and the cubs.

It was just then that she heard a cheerful hail from behind her. Her ears went right up in delight at hearing a Euro accent, and recognising a helpful snout; Amelia’s friends Belle and Prudence who had done their best to help her with her aircraft the week before.

“Why, yes,” she said a minute later, having heard their invitation. “A party? Let me just tell my landlady and I’ll be right with you. I love parties – and I’ve seen enough Native ones to last me. I’m sure this one will be different!”

With eyes wide and a tail that was starting to twitch sideways unnoticed by her conscious mind, she joined the extremely friendly four as they headed over the ridge to the hidden bay, where cheerful firelight blended with the mellow, full moon, the last moon of Summer.

Sunrise lit the trees as Oharu stood and stretched, looking down over the peaceful scene. It had to be done, she reminded herself – thread by thread the tangled curse was revealing itself, and never better than when Angelica had happily yielded to its effects. That the feline disbelieved in curses was not helping matters – what was it that English canine Prudence had said? “*There’s none so blind, as them who will not see.*”

“Students. I believe we have learned all we can, at this place and time.” She nodded to the two badger girls, who were looking distinctly glassy-eyed, and hid a smile. Trying to track the progress of Angelica’s spirit that night had been like being tied onto one of those roller-coasters one saw in the newsreels; a night of that and it was a wonder any of them could stand up, let alone walk in a straight line. Riding a roller-coaster for fun was one thing, but to be strapped in and ordered to take notes would certainly remove any appeal. “Ote’he? Your first impressions, please.”

The badger blinked, and shook her head in an attempt to clear it. “Shishou,” she gasped “we did her a great wrong! All those others are ... perfectly suited to it, but though her body responded – her heart did not.”

“Correct.” Oharu turned to the younger twin. “Nuimba. Your impression?”

The badger was silent for a few seconds. “Shishou, we did wrong, but what real harm did she suffer? She was bored and angry about the idea of having to spend another evening with us “primitive natives” – and whatever else, last night she wasn’t bored.”

Oharu’s tail swished. She suspected it had been Nuimba rather than her sister who was responsible for some of the more troublesome aspects of the curse. “When she wakes, you are to observe everything. And then I will ask you again.” She stretched and addressed her other two students. “And for the rest of us – the village is awaking, and I for one would like some breakfast.”

Five minutes later they were in the next valley, where the fishing folk were making the best of a fine morning. Several boats were out already, and the previous evening’s catch was making the air fragrant as it roasted on beach fires.

“Wise one. You are welcome,” one of the fishermen bowed, a young feline. He glanced at the badger and fox behind her. “Will you share our meal?”

Oharu smiled, nodding assent. Half a year ago, she could not have stood so close to a powerful young male without the fur on her ruined back bristling in unconscious panic. To a very small extent, her dread was receding. *These are my people*, she told herself firmly, *I took this burden on myself when I accepted the task Huakava laid on me. I serve. And in their turn ...* she forced herself to think it through, what they would do to protect one of the Wise Ones at need. Miss Silberlindh was not the only one surrounded by folk who would willingly guard her with their lives.

“I would be honoured. For my students and if we may, some to take to one of us who is elsewhere.” Cold fish tended to turn greasy and unpleasant, but it was nourishing enough and might help Nuimba to get the message.

“Of course!” The feline smiled, striped fur gleaming with fresh waterproofing oil and sea spray. Oharu noted that he moved with an unconscious grace, quite unlike the strutting Euros in bathing costume she had seen on South Island. For those, exposing fur and figures to public view in the fresh air was always a boast of a sort, though true enough some would give a better impression covered up. Oharu’s tail twitched. *Miss Silberlindh, did she not look down on Natives, might like this one, And to be true to her nature, she should – not his sister, should he have one.*

Ten minutes later, teacher and students were resting their paws as they sat in front of a hot driftwood fire enjoying breakfast. “This is one thing I would never have tried, had I stayed in Cipangu,” Oharu commented. “Sardines. Poor farmers may eat cheap millet or go hungry, but these are not eaten even should the nets be full to breaking with them. Sardines are only rubbish, fertiliser for the fields.” She looked around. “Tehepoa, I learned something there. Can you think what it might be?”

The fox’s ears dipped. He was finding it hard to come to terms with being a humble student, after two years of leading his own self-appointed Guardians in defiance of the old Priestesses. There had been a film he had seen on Casino Island the month before where a reformed bandit chief on India’s North-west frontier had thrown in his lot with the Indian Army and had to learn to take orders; he knew now just how the proud Pathan chief had felt.

“That centuries of tradition are not always correct?” He asked slyly.

Oharu's whiskers twitched. "That is one lesson. Though you should think on the word "always", student. Most traditions that have lived so long have reasons behind them, even if they are forgotten, What other lessons are there?"

"That you shouldn't reject something until you've tried it?" Tehepoa asked innocently. He kept his head bowed respectfully, though his tail twitched.

Oharu sighed, and nodded. "Though again you may well find it is a bad idea when you do. There are no picnickers on Lotoaba Beach, though sometimes one ignores the notices and tries – and discovers about the quicksand. If there is a thing that nobody does, try to find out why not, before you attempt it. If few do such a thing – it may be suited to only a few." She had no need to bow, and glanced out over the ridge towards the smaller bay where Angelica had spent the night.

Tehepoa, she had realised at their first meeting, was going to be a difficult student. She had heard that Songmark often had most difficulties with new students who had already gained much flying experience, having learned bad habits and achieved much despite that. There was a deadly difference between "good enough" and "correct", and not only in flying. Recalling the history of the Crater Lake that her students had guarded, she felt a chill run down her spine. As Songmark strenuously hammered home to its students – you might have only one chance, so get it right the first time.

Angelica Silberlindh awoke with the morning sun in her eyes and an all-too-familiar tickling sensation in her throat. She closed her eyes and ignored it for a minute, luxuriating in the memory of a dream the like of which she had never remembered. Her body felt like she had been in a vigorous sauna; warm, satisfied and as relaxed as a damp towel draped over a radiator.

Suddenly the tickling could no longer be denied. She rolled over on her front, arched her back and coughed, a racking cough that was relieved instantly when she spat two large hairballs out on the soft grass of a beach bower. "Well, that's that," she yawned, and was suddenly wide awake when she looked down.

Her own fur was palest tawny, with golden-yellow head-fur. It was decidedly not red-brown, and indeed the second hairball had a mix like the floor of a fur-trimming salon after a busy day in the social season. Her ears went up rigid in shock, and her tail bottled out as the memory of last night instantly ceased being a dream.

Eyes wide, she looked round. The beach was ten paces away, but she was sheltered under a bower of living ferns that had been pulled over and tied at the top to keep the night breezes off. From around her, she could hear the quiet chatter of voices mixed with the splashing of water and the crackle of a breakfast fire.

"Well, good morning to you!" A voice that was mostly smile came from behind her. She felt her tail bottle out like a feather duster as she slowly turned, but to her shock she realised her tail was going sideways in association. At the same time her body was preparing to run, and relaxing to continue what she now remembered in extremely vivid detail from the night before. A drowsy canine girl was relaxed on the cut-grass bedding not a metre away, looking up with a tender but most frighteningly keen expression that Angelica suddenly remembered very well, and much else besides.

Ada Cronstein looked on in bafflement as the feline broke all standing start records and put in what would have been an Olympic performance if the Berlin games had included an uphill sprint through woodland. She sat up, scratching her tousled head-fur and her canine ears drooped as she watched the departing figure.

"I don't look my best before my morning fur-brush and coffee, few people do" as she sadly confided to Prudence and her friends over roast fish that breakfast-time, "But I've never had THAT reaction before!"

***** End Part Three *****