

## Chapter 1: The Centaurian Bud Vase

"Stop! I don't want to hear it!" His shout woke him from another nightmare. "Aloha Jazz" had been their song. His subconscious continued to taunt him, reminding him of his failure. He rolled over in his bed and, of course, Daiva was not there. Not now. Not ever again.

Pierre threw off his e-static blanket and stood nude, gazing out the bedroom window of the apartment above his antique shop. The rays of the rising Twin Suns sparkled from his silver scales. His black eyes scanned across the snowy blanket on the streets and sidewalks. Skinks disliked winter; Pierre Bordeaux hated it.

"Shall I fix breakfast?" said the shop's computer.

"No, Louis. I'll dress and do it myself," Pierre said. He was still shaking.

"You sound troubled. Was it the dream again?"

"Yes," Pierre said. "I'll be all right. Thanks for asking."

As if to provide a diversion for Pierre, Louis said, "Why do Waxonians cover yourselves with clothing in the day but not the night? The Mentecians cover themselves all of the time."

"Mentecians are lizards. Skinks are not Mentecians," Pierre said. His voice softened as he said, "I'm sorry that I snapped at you, Louis, mon ami. To answer your query, nudity is not a typical part of Waxonian culture. But legend has it that, if I sleep in the nude, someday I'll awaken and a female--a skinqui--will be in bed beside me."

"You hope that you'll wake up and find her there?"

"Well, no, of course she couldn't be there." Pierre stared out the window for several moments before continuing. "That sleeping in the nude stuff is just another silly bit of Waxonian folklore, like the return of Ramunus."

"Yes, your people's ancient King Ramunus. Pierre, why don't you visit Waxon? We both know that you're of..."

"Enough! I was hatched on Panjandrum. It's my world now."

Pierre leaned forward to press the window's auto-clean button before dressing. He glanced down at the sidewalk and hesitated.

"Think she might be down there?"

"Let it go, Louis. Sometimes clients come early." He was looking at a large lump under the snow outside the shop door.

"What's that? No one would make a delivery during the night. Someone left their trash bag. What pigs inhabit this city!"

He slipped into his gray woolen robe and trousers, went downstairs, and jerked on his boots. He picked up a whisk broom.

"Louis, unlock the front door."

He yanked the door open and glared out.

"Slob!" he said as he stooped and whisked away the snow.

"Mon Dieu! This is no trash bag. This is a skink like myself. Not dead, I hope. He is breathing, but only just."

Pierre picked up the inert form and brought it into the shop. He laid the body, coiled into a fetal position, onto the seat of an antique chaise lounge and began to carefully dust off

the remaining snow with his fingers. He left the dark blue robe's cowl covering the stranger's head.

"Yes. A skink. What could have happened to him? He's so cold the end of his tail is gray, not blue, but I can feel a faint pulse." Perhaps this one he could save. He would do his best.

His best hadn't been enough before. Still, they'd said he was a hero. He'd rescued so many others. But so what? She was gone, buried by the avalanche. Gone forever.

Disillusioned and heartbroken, Pierre had fled to Panjandrum and abandoned his life as a soldier of fortune.

The stranger needed warmth. Their distant reptilian ancestors, cold-blooded skink-like beings, evolved on Waxon, a much warmer world. Silver scales reflected the heat and their three-foot stature meant that their surface-to-volume ratio was large enough to maintain a proper body temperature with little trouble. These were not such wonderful adaptations here in Panjandrum City.

"Louis, turn up the heat." Pierre rushed up the stairs and returned with the e-static blanket from his bed. He turned up its thermostat and comfort thickness, then molded it around the figure on the lounge. From behind the shop's counter, he retrieved a bottle of Chardonnay Wasp Venom, filled a glass, and heated it in his antique microwave oven.

Pierre knelt before the inert form, holding the glass in a cosy, and watched for any movement. After about ten minutes, he noticed the head twitch. The stranger's breathing was still

shallow, but improving. Pierre placed a hand under the skink's head and raised it a little. He passed the glass back and forth near his visitor's nostrils. When he noted a slight sniffle, he touched the warm glass to the skink's lips. The tongue flickered out, into the glass, and back in. In a moment, it repeated.

Again, and again. The level of liquid in the glass decreased. Pierre noticed eyelids moving, but not opening. "Be still, mon ami. You are safe. Have no fear."

One eye opened a bit. Kneeling before the skink, he gave a reassuring smile. The eye opened more, then both eyes stared at Pierre as the head turned toward him.

Pierre held the glass up to the skink's lips. "More, mon ami?"

The skink brought up a hand, pushed the glass away. Pierre noticed a turquoise ring on his pinky. The skink pushed against the seat, struggled, and sat up. He pulled his knees up against his chest then reached out to take the glass from Pierre. The toes of his black boots and the tip of his tail protruded from under his robe as Pierre adjusted the blanket around him.

"Wonderful, mon ami. Your color is returning. What is this? Three bands of blue scales at the end of your tail?" Pierre gasped. "You're not a 'he'--but a 'she,' a skinqui!" His heart almost stopped. It was her, Daiva! No. He shouldn't be so foolish. It couldn't be Daiva. But, whoever she was, she needed his help.

"Mademoiselle, are you all right?"

"Do you speak Skinque?" she said

Nearly everyone here, even skink immigrants like his family, spoke French--French humans had settled this region of the planet after abandoning their doomed home world. Pierre spoke Skinque only when he went south, back to the family farm.

"Yes, Miss," Pierre said in Skinque. "Are you hungry? I have some punkin grubs in the incubator."

The store window rattled. The skinqui started. A sanitation truck roared by, sucking the snow from the street and sidewalk.

She looked back to Pierre. "Are you Mr. Bordeaux?"

"Yes, I am," he said, and drew himself up to his full thirty-eight inch height. "Pierre Bordeaux, at your service!"

She smiled and tilted her head to one side. "Then I would be pleased to share your food."

Pierre fetched a bowl of wriggling punkin grubs. She inhaled their sweet fragrance. Pierre knelt before her as she devoured them. She handed the bowl back when it was empty.

"Please tell me your name, Miss. What has happened to you?"

"It's Milda," she said. The skinqui pushed her feet forward, letting her boots slide from the chaise lounge to the floor. She reached into her robe and brought out a slender package. She tore away the paper to reveal a colorless glass bud vase and held it out to Pierre.

Milda leaned forward. Her large black eyes stared into his. She whispered, "It is The Centaurian Bud Vase. The Key to the Treasures of Ramunus."

He carefully took the bud vase from her and examined it. He turned it around, then looked for a mark on the base, but there was none. He examined the bird on the lip. Something tickled a memory from long ago, the feeling you get when you know someone's name, but can't quite recall it. He looked puzzled. "The key to what?"

Milda's eyes narrowed as she looked slowly around the room, as if searching for something. Then her gaze became more friendly as she looked back to Pierre. She tilted her head a little and licked her lips. "Have you more punkin grubs? Those were delicious."

"Yes, of course." He stood and hurried back to the incubator.

When he returned, he found only a faint outline, wet from melted snow, on the chaise lounge where the skinqui had been. The door to the shop stood ajar. Pierre rushed outside. If not for the Sanitation Department's efficiency in removing the snow, he might have found tracks.

The city did not usually experience much winter. A combination of the elevation of the Lorendonna Plateau and the location of the surrounding mountains brought cold air and snow for only five to six weeks each year.

For that time, Pierre's boots, trousers, and robe had to be electrically heated whenever he went out--if he went out. And why should he? His groceries came by teleportal and the city boasted little else that he desired.

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Holding the bowl of punkin grubs in one hand, the bud vase close to his heart in the other, he looked up and down the street. He shivered in the cold. In his haste to follow Milda, he hadn't turned on his heaters.

A bright flash. "Boom!" The concussion knocked Pierre back into his shop. Icicles rained down onto the sidewalk.