

A composite image with a dark, moody atmosphere. On the left, a man's torso is shown with intricate black tattoos, including a dragon on his chest and a scorpion on his arm. He is holding a small, dark object. In the background, a white swan is depicted in a misty, ethereal setting. In the foreground on the right, a cobra is coiled, its hood flared. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and blacks, with the white of the swan providing a stark contrast.

# Zenina Masters

POISONED  
PEN

# Table of Contents

## Title Page

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

## Poisoned Pen

### Chapter One

### Chapter Two

### Chapter Three

### Chapter Four

**Chapter Five**

**Chapter Six**

**Chapter Seven**

**Chapter Eight**

**Chapter Nine**

**Chapter Ten**

**Author's Note**

**About the Author**

A swan shifter suffering from ambush matchmaking attempt meets a quiet snake with an eye toward her articulations.

Ivy has dodged matchmaking for five years, but when her family bundles her off to the Crossroads, she hastily concocts a plan to stay away from males for the entire month. She is partially successful, but when the bartender creates something just for her and takes an interest in her work, she is falling fast.

Chuck has worked at the Crossroads for most of his adult life, so it is quite a surprise to meet a woman who isn't stalking a mate. When he sees a fascination for the written word in her, there is nothing for it. He has to get

closer to see what she will do when he opens the pages of his hear to her.

When the swan meets the serpent, it is a surprisingly fair fight.

**The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.**

**Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any

resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## Poisoned Pen

Copyright © 2013 Zenina Masters

ISBN: 978-1-77111-592-6

Cover art by Martine Jardin

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Poisoned Pen  
Shifting Crossroads Book 5  
By  
Zenina Masters



## Chapter One

Ivy Amelia Hector froze when she entered her parents' home. "Is this an intervention?"

Her mother scowled. "Come in and sit down, Ivy Amelia. We have something to discuss."

The use of both names was a warning sign that her mother was on the fine edge of her temper. Ivy stepped inside, removed her shoes and took the only available chair in a room full of her relatives. "So, what is up?"

Daisy Hector straightened. "We have spoken together and it has come to our attention that you have dodged every attempt to fix you up."

"I have been busy."

“For the last five years?” Her father frowned. David Hector didn’t speak often, but when he did, she listened.

“Well, I didn’t mean to dodge, precisely.”

Her mother lifted a clipboard. *Oh this isn’t good.*

“You have given alibis for every attempt to set you up with a nice male of our species and found any number of creative ones that no one could corroborate.” Her mother scowled at the clipboard. “You have had twenty-four menstrual cycles in the last twelve months, three ingrown toenails, four friends who needed emergency comforting after being dumped, nineteen lost cell phones in the last three years,

and then, we get into the not so plausible excuses.”

Her mother set down the clipboard. “This has got to end. You have to at least try to meet someone.”

Ivy sighed. It was an exhalation of resignation. “Fine. If you or Aunt Petunia have someone to set me up with, I will go.”

Daisy shook her dark head. “No, it has gone far beyond that. You are going to the Crossroads, Ivy Amelia. You will stay there until you find a mate, so take your time and make the right choice.”

Shock ran through her. “You are kidding. I can’t just take off to the Crossroads. I have a job to do.”

Her father smiled, “I have spoken

with your boss, and Quenella is willing to let you take one month off. Apparently, you are ahead in your reviews.”

Fear gripped her. “What if I don’t find the one for me in a month?”

Her parents, aunts and uncles looked at each other in silent communication. Her mother finally sighed. “You come home, and we will never speak of it again. You will be able to live your solitary life, and we will go on with ours. You will be welcome in the flock.”

Ivy sighed. “Then, I will go. Where is the transporter?”

David got to his feet. “She is in the kitchen. We have prepped a bag for you, and your mother will take care of your

plants.”

Ivy got to her feet and looked at the woman who was leaning casually against the counter, sipping a cup of coffee. “Hello.”

“Hello, Ivy. I know that this is a bit of an ambush, and the woman waiting for you on the other side will give you a full rundown of what you need to know. For now, here is your medallion. It will let you buy what you like in the Crossroads. Your family has provided feathers for your passage, but I need one from you. Just in case of emergency, I want to be able to find you.”

“Um, fine. What is your name?”

“Oh, where are my manners?” She extended her hand. “Krisia. Master

Transporter.”

Ivy shook her hand with her right while the left snuck behind her head to pull out a feather. She showed it to Krisia and smiled, “Will this do, Krisia?”

“Lovely. I haven’t worked with swans before. Your family must be desperate.” Krisia opened a vial and stuffed the white fluffy feather into it.

“Swans pair off early and stay that way, though the combinations occasionally change.” Ivy bit her lip. “What happens now?”

Krisia reached out and tied a small medallion to her wrist, a feather was embossed on it. “This is linked to a charge account your family set up. Bill

what you like to it, and it will be reflected in the normal world.”

“What about a place to stay?” She lifted her wrist close to her face and stared at the small object that was worth so much. “Will this shift with me?”

“Yes, it will shift with you, and your accommodations will be handled on the other side of the portal. Hug your family, get your bag and I will get you on to the next phase of this process.”

Ivy followed the directions, hugging her aunts and uncles before squeezing her parents tight. “I will see you in a month.”

David smiled, “Or sooner.”

“In a month, Dad. If it is sooner, you will have to accept that it is my mate for

the rest of my life and I don't know if any of us are ready to accept that.”

He hugged her again and whispered, “I slipped in your spare reader and a charger. They are in the side pocket.”

“Thanks, Dad. See you soon.” She kissed his cheek, hugged her mom one more time and picked up the bag before entering the kitchen.

Krisia put her cup down and levered away from the counter. “Okay, here we go.”

Ivy watched, expecting chanting and waving arms. Krisia merely opened her arms and a portal appeared in front of the dishwasher.

“Hop on in. The energy is nice this time of year.” Krisia smiled and



gestured for her to enter the tall, oblong gateway in the middle of the tile floor.

Ivy took a few cautious steps, held her breath and plunged through the gateway.

Sunset. The light of sunset was all around her. A woman stepped forward, and Ivy recognized the set of her head and the glide of her body. It was another swan.

“Hello, Ivy. My name is Teal. Welcome to the Shifters’ Crossroads.”

“Thank you. This is a bit of a surprise. Krisia said you would help me organize myself?”

“Of course. Where did you want to stay, a bed and breakfast or the avian hostel?”

“Hostel, please. My family is paying

for this, so I don't want to tax them too greatly.”

A male who was also a bird shifter stepped forward. “If you will come this way, I will scan your tag so you can come and go immediately.”

He showed her where to swipe the charm, and it glowed briefly. “There, now you have a room in the female avian hostel.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“Tony. Teal's mate.”

His movements were almost predatory, but it was the look in his eyes as her charm caught the light that made it all make sense. Raven.

She was proud of her ability to make out the distinctions, but she had to admit

that as a pair, they were the most powerful shifters she had yet encountered.

Teal made a small sound. “This way, Ivy.”

They walked out of a building made of honey-coloured oak and intricate carving. Ivy’s gaze caught every detail. She was good at details. It was why she was so adept at reviewing and editing books. The word on the page, the immovable pieces that everyone overlooked, those were what sprang alive to her.

The roads were paved lightly with gravel and bordered with green, lush grass. This entire place was wildlife friendly, which was good considering

the men and women who were running around.

Teal smiled, “So, another swan is in the Crossroads. Why are you here?”

“Family.”

“Ah. They couldn’t find a match for you?”

Ivy blushed. “Well...I sort of have been dodging their efforts.”

“Ouch. How long?”

“In total, five years.”

Teal stopped in her tracks. “You are a swan and you have avoided being set up for five whole years? By the first feathers, that takes nerve.”

“I don’t know if that is an insult or praise.” Ivy smiled and hoisted her bag on her shoulder.

“Both. I ran from my match, and after I was successful, I ended up running from Tony. He caught me.” Teal grinned and pointed at the café and the restaurant. “You can get food there, day or night.”

“How hard did you run from him?”

Teal shrugged. “Pretty hard. It led us here.”

“Is there a place to swim?”

“I can show you tomorrow. There is a pond or a lake depending on your preferences. Come on, let’s get your bags stowed so that I can give you the proper tour and introduce you to a few people.”

They walked together in silence, and once Ivy checked into the hostel with her own room and locker, they exited in

search of the Crossed Star bar.

“So, this is where I can meet just about anyone?”

“Most if not all of the men come through here. They need a place that takes some of the social niceties and chucks them out the window. Speaking of...Chuck! This is the newest guest of the Crossroads.”

A huge hulk of a man came toward them. His body was covered with tattoos, and his eyes wore the unmistakable mark of a reptile. He grinned, showing a bit of fang. “Welcome to the Crossed Star. What can I get for you?”

“Hi. Um, some juice?” she bit her lip.

He grinned. “Not much of a drinker,

huh?”

She shook her head and watched as his smile changed him from frightening to charming.

He mixed her a cocktail of juice with as much care as he would for alcohol. With a flourish, he presented her with a tall hurricane glass, complete with a wedge of orange and an umbrella.

“Consider this a Crossroads-colada. Order it any time.” He winked.

She wrapped both hands around the glass to cover the flutter in her heart. She found the details of the rind of the fruit fascinating and found herself noting the bubbles foam and break in the glass.

Ivy sipped at the juice and hugged Teal farewell. “I will see you in the

morning about that pond.”

Teal grinned. “It will be nice to swim with someone for a change. See you in the morning.”

Ivy waited until Teal was gone before she leaned forward to get Chuck’s attention. When he ambled over, she said, “I need to know where I can hide in here.”

He blinked in surprise. “Hide?”

“Yeah, I have been sent here under duress, so I am going to avoid the opposite sex as often as I can. It should work.”

“The darkest corner is over there. I can disconnect the lights, and you can sit there in the dimness.”

“Excellent. Thank you.” She smiled



brightly, and he seemed dazzled by it.

The corner in question contained a leather-padded bench in a high-backed booth. She scooted into place with her drink and settled in for a night of people watching and reading on her ereader. The Crossroads wasn't going to be so bad.

## Chapter Two

“What are you reading?” Chuck came by with another drink, and he lingered for a moment.

“This one is a rather torrid love affair gone wrong. It is a solid three and a half stars but nothing too exciting.”

“What do you do in the outside world?” He leaned on her table and fixed his wide-slitted eyes at her. His head was clean-shaven, which left plenty of room for more scalp tattoos.

“Half the time reviewer, half the time editor.” She sipped at her fourth drink. “You have done some time in the human world if that ink is any indication.”

He grinned, showing some serious fang. “I was abandoned as a child and

was raised in a circus as the snake boy. It was a hard life, but it gave me some charming skills that I have used as I matured.”

She tried not to stare at the bicep so near her own. There was a swan in a Celtic knot pattern wrapped around his arm. Her mouth was dry, and she wanted to trace that design with her tongue.

When he left to attend another patron, she tried to snap herself back into sensibility. There was no reason for her hormones to run out of control just because an ex-circus attraction and current bartender smiled at her.

She watched him. His movements were graceful, smooth and when he served the ladies at the bar, his

attentions were polite but didn't invite any further approach on their part.

Ivy got the distinct impression that when he looked at her, flirting was on his mind. She sipped at the new fruit juice concoction and scrolled to the next book in her review list. Now and then, she peeped up at Chuck, and to her surprise, his gaze was fixed on her.

\*\*\*

Chuck was resigned to his life in service to the Crossroads, but Ivy had caught all of his senses. He was holding back his tongue. He wanted to flick it out and taste the small pieces of her scent in the air. His eyes wanted to take in every inch of her dark honey-coloured hair, wrap it around his hands and use it to

pull her to him.

She possessed a cute, pert nose, lips with a lush curve and wide amber eyes that took every bit of the world in. His body responded to the soft swells and dips of hers, and she was wearing one of the ugliest shirts he had ever seen. If she ever wore something formfitting, his dick might just blow off.

Smiling at his fanciful thoughts, he continued to work though his true attention was with the woman in the dark corner. He was going to write about her tonight, he could feel it.

\*\*\*\*

After the bulk of the patrons had exited, Ivy gathered her things and got to her feet. She was halfway to the door when

Chuck appeared at her side.

“If you don’t mind, I will escort you to your lodgings.”

She blinked up at him. “Um, the streets are fairly safe from what I have been told.”

“They are, but I am due for my break, and I need to stretch my legs.”

“By all means, take your exercise at my side.”

In an oddly old-world gesture from a man marked by his modern life, he extended his arm to her, and she took it.

He slowed his pace, and they promenaded down to the Crossroads.

“Where are you staying?”

“The avian hostel. I am here on my family’s dime, so it was the best option

for a long stay.”

His dark eyebrows rose above his gem green eyes. “Really? You will be here for a while?”

“If I don’t find a man, I agreed to stay for a month before heading home.” She chuckled. “With a place to hide, I think I can stretch it that long.”

“You will be back at the bar tomorrow?”

“I can’t think of why not. I mean, I will have to get some food eventually, so I will spend some time at the café.”

He paused in his tracks. “Have you eaten this evening?”

Ivy grumped. “No. I was supposed to have dinner at my parents’, but they shipped me here instead.”

“Come along. Have a snack and then a good night’s sleep. The Crossroads will begin to seem like home in the morning.”

She smiled, “I doubt that, but anywhere there is an internet signal or a way to send one is home to me.”

“That is it?”

“Pretty much. I enjoy my work with an unwholesome kind of enjoyment. I wished that I had the imagination to write, but I don’t, so I try to help the writers bring their creations into the world, or I tell the world what the author did wrong. I get to satisfy two moods at my whim.”

He grinned, “You sound a little power mad.”

She shrugged. “That comes and goes.



It makes it hard to offer myself to a man who will crave my attention off the page. Selfish but true.”

“Very frank. So what about a man who could engage your senses on and off the page?”

“I would have to check out his writing skills.” She winked.

He opened the door to the café and ushered her inside. The bright light and cheery tables caught Ivy’s interest, and she turned her head around as far as it would go to take in all the details. The bustle of the waitress on duty marked her as a beaver. She moved smoothly and deliberately through the diners.

Chuck caught her attention, and she brought over two menus. “Welcome to

the Crossroads Café. You are new?”

“I am. Today in fact.”

“I look forward to seeing you frequently. Now, what would you like to drink?”

She ordered decaf and a glass of water.

Chuck ordered the same and smiled at her. “So, what do you do for fun?”

She giggled. “I edit outside on sunny days.”

“Wow. Wild woman.”

“I have yet to find a reality that matches the world inside the books. I just enjoy it more.”

He frowned as their beverages arrived. “Have you ever considered living a life instead of just watching

them in the books?”

She shrugged. “I have been alone my entire adult life. Spending that life having solitary adventures is not the kind of thing I want to do.”

“So, you are looking for someone to have adventures with out in the world?”

Ivy shook her head. “No, I am just looking for someone who doesn’t feel it necessary to demand my attention. I just want to *be* with someone and have them accept me for my bookish leanings.”

He nodded and smiled, but she saw a distant look in his eyes as if he was memorizing her words.

“It is a simple-enough desire. Why have you had problems so far?”

“It starts off fine, but when I get

immersed in my work, it becomes far more important than attending a movie or a dinner party.”

He grinned. “I understand what you mean. Sometimes, the life of the mind is far more enriching than the physical. Don’t get me wrong, the physical is still fun, but setting your imagination free is satisfying in a different way.”

Ivy stared at her barely human companion in shock. “That is exactly it! It’s like you read my mind.”

Chuck snickered. “I spend my own share of time lost in my own thoughts.”

“You don’t spend all your time at the bar?”

He smiled. “No. I don’t sleep much either, so when I have the chance to

spend time by myself, I carefully choose the form that my imagination takes.”

Ivy tried not to be coy. “You don’t... uh...have a mate?”

A flicker of pain crossed his features. “No. The mated folk here wear wristbands so that they are readily visible. That kind of confusion isn’t what we want for the Crossroads.”

“I see. Well, that would clarify things somewhat.” She smiled at the server and ordered some fries.

“That’s it?” Chuck was surprised.

“That is it. I am still a little nervous. Fries should stay down.” She smiled shyly.

“Still? I am not as suave as I thought I was.” He grinned. He ordered a steak,

fries and a salad and the server bustled off with a grin.

“You are trying to charm me?” She smiled shyly at him.

He blinked and gave her a slow smile. “I suppose I am. Are you amenable to charm?”

“Not to be mean, but I have never found a serpent charming before. This is a definite first.” It was bluntly honest.

“Have you met many of my kind?”

“A few anacondas over the years.”

He sneered. “Crushers.”

“Exactly. Not my favourite shifters.”

He cocked his head. “What are your favourite shifters?”

“Honestly?”

“It seems a night for it.”

“Porcupines. They usually have a sense of humour and enjoy their own skin. It is an admirable trait and I get along well with them.” Her boss was a porcupine, but she wasn’t going to tell him that. A shifter’s other shape was their own.

“Well, I can’t compete with that.” He sighed and their food arrived.

“It isn’t a competition. You still have a chance to make it into my top ten.” She squirted a puddle of ketchup onto her plate and dug into her fries.

She noted a stillness across from her, and when she looked up, he was staring at her. His shy smile sent a trip through her heart.

“I do?”

“It is just a chance. Don’t blow it. Now eat.” She pointed with a fry, and he worked his way through his evening meal.



## Chapter Three

After a night in the avian hostel, Ivy woke with a smile on her lips. Her time with Chuck had been wonderful, and when he kissed her cheek at the barrier to the women's areas, her heart had stuttered in her chest.

If she spent too much time around that snake, she was going to need a cardiologist.

Teal was waiting for her in the common room. "Are you ready to go for a swim?"

"I am very ready. Lead the way."

Ivy was in good spirits, and Teal looked at her slyly. "Did you have a good night?"

"I did. It was lots of fun once I found

a nice spot.”

“Did you meet anyone?”

Ivy thought about the twisting pictograms that covered Chuck’s arms and his hypnotizing eyes. “I did.”

“Does he have a name?”

Ivy didn’t answer.

They wound their way through the streets and walked along a path that took them through a thicket of trees. On the other side of the green wall was a beautiful pool fed by a foot-high waterfall.

Teal and Ivy giggled and shucked off their clothing, diving into the water and coming up in feathers to cruise around the pond. One black swan, one white in perfect harmony.

\*\*\*\*

Chuck rubbed his eyes as he wrote frantically.

*I am just looking for someone who doesn't feel it necessary to demand my attention. I just want to be with someone and have them accept me for who and what I am.*

He smiled. It was just the declaration his heroine needed, and Ivy had provided it without thought.

His publisher was pushing him for another book, but he wanted to do something different than the bodice rippers that Charlotte Penrose was known for. As an alter ego, it was a good one, but he was tiring of the same old story over and over. He wanted to

write a smart heroine, one with spine, and have her find a man worthy of her.

If he could spend some more time with Ivy's dry wit, he might just find his heroine.

\*\*\*\*

Ivy enjoyed splashing around and the slow meditation of paddling in her swan form. It both soothed and invigorated her.

When she and Teal waddled out of the water, they swiftly shivered the few clinging drops of water back to the ground.

Ivy headed for her pile of clothing, and she shifted back to human. Getting dressed after a shift was always weird. None of her limbs moved right, and it

took four times as long as it should.

Teal was sitting next to her and waiting. “I love doing that in the mornings. Tony likes a flight, but for me, there is nothing better than a swim with a companion.”

Ivy sighed and sat on the grass, watching the water. “It is nice to swim with the same species. I usually miss the group swims with my family. My schedule seems to interfere with it.”

“You make it interfere. There comes a time when you have to choose the important versus the inconvenient. Time with your family will not come again.”

Ivy sighed and wrapped her arms around her knees. “I know, but they nag me about finding a mate constantly, so I

avoid them.”

“Find a mate and you will no longer have to avoid them. It is just that simple.”

“Was it that easy for you?”

Teal snickered. “No. I ran from an arrangement and Tony found me along the way. Then, I ran from Tony and I ended up with an appointment to the Crossroads.”

“I don’t foresee that for me.” She chuckled and watched the water happily cascading over the rocks and into the pond beneath.

“So, what is his name?”

“Chuck.”

Teal literally tipped over with shock. She sat up slowly. “You are not

kidding.”

“I am not. I like him. He’s funny and sharp with a nice smile and surprisingly pretty eyes once you get used to them.”

“Oh, I know that. I am just surprised that a newcomer to the Crossroads can see it. It seems you look a little deeper than I first guessed.” There was respect in Teal’s voice.

Ivy shrugged. “I see what I see. He was nice to me, and he went out of his way to make contact with me. That puts him high up in my books, so to speak.”

Teal sighed. “Well, on that note, I am heading for breakfast. Care to join me?”

“Sure. I am a much larger fan of breakfast than dinner.”

They walked back down the path and

headed to the café. No words were necessary, they were two swans moving in unison.

After breakfast, Ivy returned to the hostel and grabbed her work pack. With a spring in her step and a bright smile, she entered the Crossed Star.

A stranger was behind the bar, and when she walked up to it, he introduced himself as Jim.

“Hello, Jim. Can I get a glass of juice?”

He blinked. “Just juice?”

“Yes. It is a little early for anything else.”

He shrugged and poured her a glass of orange juice. His wristband flashed silver in the dim light.



She took her plain orange juice and slid into the dark booth in the corner. It was three hours before Chuck showed up, and there was something about the way he looked around that was very familiar.

Chuck spoke quickly to Jim, and Jim looked at her in surprise. Without asking, he brought her a Crossroads-colada, and he slid into the booth next to her.

“Good afternoon, Chuck.”

He lifted her hand to his lips. “Good afternoon, Ivy. How did you sleep?”

“I dreamed about being trapped in a snake’s coils.”

He frowned. “Nightmare?”

She grinned. “No.”

His tanned skin coloured, and he smiled. “Would you consider allowing me to record some of our conversations?”

She blinked. Whatever she thought he would say next, that was not it. “Um, why?”

He sat back and rubbed his neck. “I have a hobby.”

She slumped. “Damnit. You are a writer.”

His expression showed his surprise. “How did you know?”

“The glazed eyes, the expression you get when I say something you want to write down. A dozen little things that add up to writer. Why didn't you say something when I mentioned what I do?”

He was sheepish. “I write under a pen name.”

“Who are you?”

“Charlotte Penrose.”

Her eyes widened, and she burst out laughing. He pulled her to him and kissed her, silencing her the only way he could without looking like a kidnapper.

He tasted like citrus and nutmeg with a hint of honey.

She slid her arms around his neck and held him close as he deepened the kiss. He gripped her hips and pulled her astride his lap as they continued making out.

Ivy felt his teeth scrape her lower lip, and her head spun. She pulled away and pressed her fingers to her lip. “Did you

mean to nick me?”

He blinked as he struggled to focus.

“No. Did I?”

She hung onto his shoulders. “I think so, because the bar is spinning and my heart is going a mile a minute.”

He cursed and the table she had been sitting behind went flying. He lifted her against his chest and snarled at Jim when a question was shouted.

Chuck walked quickly with her clutched against him. The medical centre’s door flew open when he kicked it, and he placed her carefully on the exam bed while the woman behind the desk was just standing up.

“Chuck, what is it?” The woman was trying to get around him, but he was

hovering protectively over Ivy.

She sighed. “His teeth grazed me, and now, I am all dizzy with a rapid heartbeat.”

She was a little turned on as well, but she didn't think that it was related to the bite. The make-out session had gotten her motor running before the debacle occurred.

“My name is Lee, and I am the first aide administrator around here. As such, I have access to some fun things. This won't hurt a bit.” Lee physically shoved Chuck out of her way, and she held up an amulet.

“This amulet is designed to give a visual representation of your health via a colour palette. It is good for venom

issues.” Lee smiled, and her tawny eyes danced with amusement.

The cold metal touched Ivy’s chest, and it warmed rapidly. A purple-red colour burst out and left no doubt as to the shade of infection.

Chuck was near tears. “How bad is it?”

Lee grinned. “What were you doing when she was bitten?”

Ivy sighed. “We were making out. I was on his lap.”

Lee’s curiosity shone through. “Where?”

“In the Crossed Star.”

Lee let out a snort. “Jim must have loved that.” The woman stroked her hair back from her face, and her wrist

sported one of those silvery bands.

Ivy took a guess at the spouse, because Chuck was mute with regret. “Jim is your husband.”

“He is. And Chuck injected you with an aphrodisiac. If you want to be technical, it is designed to make you easy prey.”

Chuck was miserable. “I am so sorry.”

Ivy asked, “So, how do we counteract it?”

“You either ignore it, waiting for it to wear off, or you make it wear off.”

“How?”

Lee lifted off the amulet and turned back to her desk. “Sex should burn it out of your system fairly quickly.”

Ivy looked at Chuck with narrowed eyes. “How long will this last?”

He looked like a whipped dog. “Three days at the most. I am so sorry.”

“Go and get my work kit from the bar and meet me back here. I have a decision to make.”

He almost ran out of the door, nodding to Lee on his way.

Lee sauntered over and helped Ivy sit up. “You are going to sleep with him, right?”

Ivy snorted. “Duh. This might be the only chance I have in my life for guilt-free sex. Who wouldn’t want to take advantage?”

Lee grinned. “My thought exactly. Now, about Chuck’s species...”



## Chapter Four

After a lecture on Chuck's specific kind of snake shifter, Ivy felt a little better prepared for anything that slithered up to her in the night.

She was on her feet, next to the exam bed, when he came back with her kit.

He immediately lifted her in his arms, cradling her carefully.

She felt tiny next to the wall of muscle that was his chest, and she sighed as her arousal clicked up a notch.

He strode off with her, careful not to jostle her as he moved.

“Where are we going?”

“To my home. You will be more comfortable there than at the hostel, no matter what you decide.” His tone was

low and so very caring. He was a bundle of emotion, which was amusing considering the cold reputation of snakes.

“That is thoughtful of you, but Lee said I could stay with her and Jim if necessary.”

His hands tightened on her, squeezing her slightly. “No, this was my error, and I will help you through it.”

Additional buildings flanked the row of bed and breakfasts. Tall Victorian-style buildings that offered space and civility.

Chuck entered a home that had a small snake emblem on the doorknob and carried her over the threshold. “Welcome to my home.”

She smiled when he carried her up the stairs, and he brought her into a very obvious guestroom. He gave her the rundown. “There are spare nightgowns in the drawer, and you should be able to find enough clothing in the wardrobe. If you truly need your things, Teal or Lee can fetch them.”

She shivered in his arms. Being away from him and wearing anything at all was becoming an intolerable idea. She groaned and nipped at his jawline. “I think I have chosen option B.”

He swallowed sharply. “What was B again?”

“Having sex with you to wear the effect of the venom off.”

“Oh. That option. Are you sure?”

She smiled. “There are very few times in a woman’s life when she is able to pursue sex without societal disapproval. Being bitten by a Naga counts as one of those times.”

He wasn’t just one snake. He was all snakes. Naga were lord snakes, gods if you will. They could master all bodies of all serpents as well as do the rare half-transformation.

He blinked at her. “Are you truly sure?”

“I am. I want you. The bite just rushed things. I would have gotten here eventually.” She licked at his neck, gnawing and kissing her way up to his ear where she used more teeth pressure to nip his ear. He flicked her workbag to

the floor and dropped her legs. His arm around her waist held her to him, and it was the only thing keeping her from the ground.

She kept working at his neck and stroking the rock-hard bulges of his chest. "I want to see you shift. Or half-shift. Whatever is easier."

He paused, going motionless for a moment. "Are you sure?"

"I am positive. I want to know what I am getting into. I want to know what will get into me even more." She giggled and held his shoulders.

He set her on the bed and stripped off his clothing. The tattoos covered almost every inch of skin, and there were several new inches on display.

He took in deep breath and scales erupted all over his form before he got control and concentrated them on his lower limbs. His serpent's tail extended beyond his normal body length, and it continued to grow and coil behind him. Finally, he reared up to a height of eight feet with his lower body completely that of a serpent. Even his erection was gone.

“Thiss iss me.” His fangs were now out of his mouth, extending over his lower lip.

“You are beautiful. May I touch?”

He lowered himself somewhat, and she put her hand on his ribs, stroking down to where the scales began. He was bright green with a vivid scarlet pattern outlined with gold. In other species, his

markings may have made him king. As a Naga, he was already a king.

She caressed his scales, feeling the heat, the smooth muscle beneath each inch and the ease with which he swayed toward her. She felt something against her legs and loops of his tail circled her legs, lifting her up to face him.

He pulled her close to him and kissed her, his teeth cool between them. She shivered and tasted that tiny drop of venom once again. Chuck had the ability to choose the function of what his venom did, and with her, he subconsciously wanted it to turn her on. *How sweet was that?*

The dry scales of his coils rubbed against her legs, climbing higher until

her waist was gently caressed by him and she had been lifted to face him without either of them stretching.

“Why, Chuck, what a long tail you have.” She smiled and stroked his neck, and she traced one of his tattoos down his chest.

He grinned, and his fangs flexed against his lower lip. “What a narrow waist you have and such an elegant throat.”

He stroked her neck. She tilted her head and moved her skin against his fingers. As a swan, her neck was her largest erogenous zone.

He kissed her again, his hand on her waist lifting her shirt to touch skin. “Oh, so soft.” He hissed on the s’s, but since



his tongue had shifted to match the rest of him, it was no wonder.

The forked tongue that flicked out moved over her features with the lightest of contacts as if tasting each inch of her as it passed. He was learning her so that he could find her under any circumstances. It was a strange feeling.

She closed her eyes and turned her face toward his. Different shifters had different mating rituals. Her species usually picked their mates as teens and grew up knowing who they would end up with. Like always, Ivy had been the odd man out. No dancing on the water for her. No listening to a mate croon to her, wooing her with a song. Now, she was at the Crossroads in the coils of a

snake, and she had the strange feeling that this was where she was supposed to be all along.

His arms held her to him, and she heard the dry slide of his scales as he shifted back into his human form. His fangs were shorter as he said, “You aren’t afraid.”

Ivy grinned and opened her eyes. “Why would I be? You want me, I want you and we are at the one place in the world where meeting and mating another species is expected and encouraged. Plus, I think you get how slipping into another world can be preferable to this one on occasion.”

“With you in this world, I think I want to stay here a little more than I usually

do.”

He stood her on the edge of her bed and left her there. He collected his clothing and smiled. “I am at the end of the hall if you need me.”

Her body throbbed in protest as he left her, and she sat heavily on the bed. It seemed that despite the foreplay, he was leaving her no excuse. If she wanted him, really wanted him, she was going to have to make the first move. No damned excuses.

She thumped onto her back and took a mental inventory of her body. She was hot, flushed, the folds between her thighs were slick and throbbed whenever she moved. She could manage the discomfort for a while, but why should she?

Ivy peeled off her clothing, folding them on the edge of her bed. She wasn't quite up for a naked walk through a hallway, so she dug around in the drawers until she bypassed the white cotton and found a tiny bundle of silk. It unfolded into a black slip with rich lace edging that would conceal and tease at the curves of her breasts.

She pushed away the question of the gown's original owner and enjoyed the feel of it as it slithered over her skin, clinging to her shoulders and hugging her curves. It was a perfect fit. The sides of the gown were slit to mid-thigh, so she was able to walk easily on bare feet down the hallway.

It was now or never, and she had

already had too much never in her life.

## Chapter Five

The door opened silently, and she saw his muscled back at his desk as he frantically typed away. It was no guess that his new heroine was bearing a startling resemblance to her.

She stood in the doorway and finally knocked on the frame.

He whirled, and his eyes widened in surprise. “I had forgotten about that one.”

Ivy ran her hands down the gown. “Was it someone important?”

He smiled and got to his feet. “No. I have the collection of gowns for the books I write. It is hard to guess the texture of female clothing of another era if you don’t feel it.”

She blinked rapidly. “Oh. So this?”

“Was featured in *Seducing the Harpy*.” He grinned. “I have to admit that you fill it out far better than the character in the book.”

Ivy blushed. “Thank you. I wasn’t up to wearing a muslin gown for this.”

He was still aroused, still naked, and he walked toward her with slow deliberation. “I thank you for your choice.”

She blushed. “You are going to have to come all the way over here. I made it to the doorway, but now, my courage is just about out.”

His room was divided into sections. There was a living space with a couch and a neat bookshelf full of books and

videos. His desk and workspace, which was a collection of chaos and inspiration in the form of images and notes stuck to a corkboard. His bed and wardrobe were on the far side of the room, and to Ivy, it looked miles away. Greens and golds were everywhere. The colours of serpents throughout history.

With a slow smile, Chuck reached out and took her hand, coaxing her into his realm one careful footstep at a time.

She swallowed as he drew her forward. “I am not one of the heroines in your books.”

He grinned, “No, you are all mine. In this, reality is going to far eclipse the imagined.”

Ivy lunged forward against him with a



thud, and she wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight. She muttered, “Sure, no pressure.”

He laughed as he sat down on the edge of his bed and pulled her into his lap, the silk sliding against their skin. “Don’t worry. From here on, I will take the responsibility for not screwing this up.”

“Are you sure? I am pretty sure that I can screw this up if I really try.”

He grinned and kissed her softly. “I have faith in your ability, but I will try to lead.”

His hand slipped over her waist and curled around her hip. His lips teased hers, waking the heat that had so recently been pushed back by nerves and fear.

She cupped his jaw and held onto his shoulder as she twisted to press her breasts against him. Ivy parted her lips, and he deepened the kiss, flicking his tongue into her mouth with rapid precision.

Her giggle was lost on a moan as he stroked a hand down her thighs to her knees, sliding the silk to one side before he reversed direction toward her sex. She held perfectly still until he flicked his tongue into her mouth again. She pulled her lips from his and pressed kisses to his neck and jawline. It would keep her from biting him when he touched her.

When he stroked her heated folds and parted her sex, she bit his neck. He let

out a deep hiss and his fingers stroked against her in slow, even pulses.

Her jaw worked at his skin, and she forced herself to release him. “Sorry.”

He chuckled. “Don’t be. My skin is thicker than it looks and that felt amazing. How does this feel?”

His fingers slid into her and his thumb stroked her clit. She bit him again and squirmed, trying to widen her thighs.

Chuck helped her, and she was soon straddling him, his fingers inside her as her hips rocked against him, riding his hand. She pressed her forehead to his shoulder and gasped with every shift of her body.

His hand moved with her, teasing her until she was on the edge. She began to

shudder, and to her shock, he bit her shoulder, fangs out. She screamed and bit him in return as the burning pain translated into pleasure. She bucked hard against his hand, her inner muscles clutching at his fingers until she rocked to a halt with a groan. She released his shoulder and pressed her forehead against his shoulder again.

She was panting, and sweat was coating her body.

Chuck ran his hands down her sweaty spine, and she heard him murmuring to her in a low hiss. He put two fingers under her chin and lifted her face. “So, not screwed up?”

She smiled shyly. “Doing good so far.”

He grinned, and she leaned up to meet him halfway in a kiss that ended up with a twist and her on her back. Her giggles died the moment that he stroked her through the silk, rubbing at her breasts and working his way down to her thighs. “As soft as this silk is, I think your skin is softer.”

He skimmed it up and over her hips, pulling her into a sitting position to whisk it over her head. His fingers immediately stroked her neck, and she twisted her head from side to side, wincing as she pulled on the site of his previous bite.

He paused. “I am sorry. Does it hurt much?”

She smiled. “It aches, but there is

another ache that is getting worse. It wouldn't have taken days to wear off, would it?"

He blushed and buried his face against her neck. "Hours. I fibbed."

She caressed his head and encouraged him to move lower. "That's okay. I am not that gullible."

He looked up at her with surprise and then tackled her back to the sheets.

"Is it just me or is the bed warm?"

He grinned. "I am a serpent, I like the heat."

She chuckled as he pinned her arms above her head and flickered his tongue over her neck. She arched against him and sighed. "You seem to know precisely where to touch."

“I have done some research on the subject, and the way you twist to offer your neck to me, there can be only two possible reasons. The first is that being a swan, you are proud of your neck. The second is that it is sensitive and you enjoy being caressed there. I am opting for the second.”

She blushed and blinked. “Well, it seems you are very attuned to what is going on.”

“I am. May I continue my explorations, or shall I continue a running monologue of your reactions?”

She snickered. “You are in danger of screwing this up.”

“Fair enough. I shall contain any comments until you request them.” He

kissed her swiftly and then worked his way down her body, using his forked tongue to taste his path until he rested between her thighs.

Squealing would have been undignified, but the sound she made couldn't have been described as anything but. Chuck slipped and slid his tongue around her entrance before delving inside with a hypnotic undulation.

She tried to move away from him, but he gripped her thighs with a growl. She grabbed the sheets next to her hips, and she twisted against him until her orgasm wound tight in her belly.

Ivy whimpered when he pulled away, but he moved up her body and surged



into her with a swift thrust of his hips. With his green slit eyes staring into her own, she watched his features as they approached release together.

She struck gold before he did, arching and clutching his sides as her body tightened around his, holding him tight. She let out a low groan, and she heard his hiss.

His tongue flicked out, thin and serpentine, as he thrust into her with savagery that culminated in a low grunt of his own.

He slumped against her, slowly covering her body with his. She kissed his ear and jaw, stroking her hands down his sweat-covered spine in mimicry of his earlier gesture to her.

She smiled and held him close. “If this shows up in a book, I am going to make you into a belt.”

She felt his smile against her neck. “Yes, Ivy.”

## Chapter Six

Being woken by caresses and kisses along her spine was a novel thing for Ivy. Her previous romantic liaisons had left her within an hour of their encounter. She preferred it that way.

On the other hand, she could get used to the delicate care with which he trailed designs over her back.

She shivered, and he gently eased her onto her stomach. He spread her thighs and pressed into her with slow deliberation.

Pressed into the sheets, she made fists and pushed back against him as he rocked into her slowly with the lazy beat of an ocean tide.

She sighed happily as pleasure rose

slowly in her, breaking in waves against her heart until her mind shattered apart in bright and glittering shards.

Ivy sighed and relaxed as Chuck thrust into her, holding his hips to her buttocks. He echoed her sigh as his muscles jerked and his thighs clenched.

Still inside her, he placed a hand on her belly and rolled to the side. He wrapped himself around her, and he did an amazing job for a snake in human form. She felt warm, protected and desired. Now, if he would take her to the pond in the morning, she would have the perfect man.

He hissed low and slow against her ear, and she fell asleep again with her living blanket surrounding her.

Ivy woke up alone in the bed. She pulled a sheet to her chest and looked around for a mirror to check her hair. There weren't any.

Chuck came through the door with a tray complete with a blush pink rose. He was dressed in a white button-down shirt and blue jeans.

“Are you also a butler?”

He was shy again. “I have never had a mate in my bed before. I want to make a good impression.”

She scooted up in the bed and rested against the headboard. She patted her thighs, and he settled the tray on her lap.

She viewed the tray of fruit, pancakes and sausages complete with coffee and what turned out to be a Crossroads-

colada. “Congratulations, Chuck.”

Ivy took a slice of strawberry and pressed it to his lips. When he took it, she said, “You didn’t screw it up.”

His relieved smile was genuine joy as he sat next to her and nibbled off her plate. “You have some pretty good moves yourself.”

She winked and ate her breakfast and drank her private juice blend. “So, when do you have to go in to work?”

He shrugged. “Whenever I like. Jim and Lee will fill in for me while we get to know each other. So, do you think you can live here?”

She looked into his eyes and saw the fear there. Fear that she would leave him. “I can do my job anywhere as long

as I can occasionally go home for family stuff. They will like you.”

He was surprised. “They will?”

“Of course. You are my mate. That is all that they ever wanted for me.” She grinned. “I have to say that your tattoos will make them think twice about ambushing any of my cousins with a trip to the Crossroads.”

Chuck grimaced. “I know they can be a little much, but I was in the circus as a snake boy for most of my early life. They enhanced my alien appearance.”

She trailed her fingers over his shirt, pressing the white fabric against the black ink etched in his skin. “I like them. I hope that every one of them has a fun story, but if not, I will simply make one

up for it. I suck as a writer, but I have a very good imagination.”

He smiled. “I think we are going to make an interesting team. I will write and you will edit me into a coma.”

She laughed. “I think that might work. What is your current project?”

He groaned and rubbed his face. “That is the problem. Sure, Charlotte Penrose has let me get into a writing rhythm, but I want to do more than bodice rippers. If I have to write one more fainting female, I am going to start yanking out my eyebrows one by one.”

Ivy sighed. “Well, let me get dressed, and I will join you at the computer. I can run over what you have so far.”

He grimaced. “That is just it, I can’t



seem to get started. I have a thousand ideas in my mind, but they won't get into any kind of organized pattern."

"Would you care to go for a walk?"

He grinned. "You want to walk? In public? With me?"

She chuckled. "You are my mate. I will wear you proudly. I think it is time you saw the other me since you showed me yours."

His eyes twinkled with amusement, "Of course."

"Good. Let me get dressed, and you will see the other me."

"Why not here?"

"Because swans look goofy on land." Ivy grinned. "I don't have the dignity of a half-shift under normal conditions."

He laughed outright. "Fair enough."

He took the tray, and she waddled to the room he had first dropped her in. Her thighs refused to take on their normal distance until she forced them, and the sticky residue made a shower a key point on her schedule.

Ivy grabbed her clothing and found the bathroom, quickly showering away the remains of the previous evening and the early morning. She had a flickering thought of birth control, but it never worked well for shifters. Life always found away.

The child of a serpent and a swan could be anything. Sometimes, she thought that it was the only reason for the ability to cross breed when few shifter

clans, flocks or herds were in favour of it. It took an act of desperation for a clan to authorize a cross-species breeding, and fortunately, for Ivy, her flock had been just that desperate.

Clean, dressed and in need of a hairbrush, she left the bathroom and smiled up at the waiting snake. “Hello, dear heart. Hisser. Pookie?”

He held up his hands. “I will answer to anything but Pookie.”

She grinned and patted his cheek. “Pookie it is.”

He sighed as she moved past him, down the stairs and to the door. “I am not going to answer to it.”

“Pookie?”

He grumbled. “What?”

She grinned as she opened the door. “Damn, you are easy to train, Chuck. I will contain my enthusiasm for pet names.”

They started their walk back toward the Crossroads, and Ivy took his arm.

“Thank you, Ivy. I am sure that we will revisit this at a later time.”

She grinned. “One day and you are already showing remarkable insight into my motivations.”

He sighed. “You would make a marvelous character. Maybe in a space opera.”

She laughed. “Naw, I am more the superhero type.”

They made a slow promenade to the pond, and Ivy kept her head high and a

smile on her face. Several members of local businesses stepped out and looked at them with startled expressions on their features.

Chuck puffed himself up with every one of his friends that saw him walking with his mate. Ivy could almost hear the joy swelling inside him until he couldn't contain it.

“How long have you been here?” Ivy tried to keep her tone casual.

“Over fifteen years. Time moves slower here, so it could be longer.”

Fifteen years watching couples pair up and move on, exposed to every available female in the Crossroads and none of the women chose him, it must have been very hard to deal with.

“Chuck, I have to ask, why choose me? Out of all the women who have passed you by, there must have been a few who rang your bell, so to speak.”

He smiled down at her. “I am a bit of a romantic, as you may have guessed. Despite the fact that I can create a romance with a formula, I wanted more for myself. I have to say that with you, I never know what will happen next and I like it.”

She laughed. “I am glad I can surprise you. That may pale with time.”

“Then, I will look at the shadow and remember the light.”

She froze in place. “That is beautiful.”

Chuck blushed. “I plan to use it in my book. I just don’t know where.”

They walked down the path and emerged at the pond. Ivy released his arm, kissed his cheek and quickly stripped, folding her clothing in the order she would need to get dressed.

Naked, she walked into the water and dove under, coming up as her swan self.

He sat on the bank and watched her.

She arched her neck, dove, came up, and then, she lifted her wings, flapping and building speed to take off.

Once she gained the air, she worked hard to acquire altitude until she could see the whole Crossroads from her vantage point. She turned on her wing point and dove for the pond. She folded her wings in and dive-bombed the water, surfacing with a pop and a flutter.

Perhaps she shouldn't have crashed, because Chuck was out of his clothing and half-shifted when she surfaced and shook the droplets free.

She paddled her way over to him and set her dignity aside. Ivy climbed out of the water on her gangly legs, and she waddled over to him, hissing at him in an effort to speak.

He looked down at her, scales covering his features. "Back in the water, stork. I can swim too."

She hissed and squawked at him before she waddled back to the pond, wiggling her tail feathers at him.

When the twenty-foot anaconda joined her for her swim it was a little startling, but they eventually found a rhythm that



had them meeting their heads in the traditional swan mating arches while their necks rubbed together. Snakes had some advantages as a mate to a swan after all.

## Chapter Seven

After hours in their shifted shapes, they crawled back onto the shore and Ivy had to wait while Chuck claimed the privilege of dressing her.

His moves were fairly hit and miss, but he got her back in her clothing. “I am going to have to go to the hostel to get a change of clothes.”

“You can bring your bags to our place. You are also encouraged to move or change anything you like in the house.”

“I have a few ideas, but they involve expanding your writing space. Maybe knocking a wall out to give the writing a room of its own?”

He chuckled. “Now that I have you to

occupy my nights, a little more room in the bedroom might be desirable. The things I could do to you on a backless couch with my body half-shifted.”

“Kinky. I have never had sex with a half-shifted anything.”

“What is your emergency shape?”

She wrinkled her nose. “You wouldn’t believe it.”

“Try me.”

She sighed and looked around. “Fine, but not here. I will show you tonight. Today, you have a job to do.”

“You are seriously making me go into work when I have a mate for the first time in a lifetime?”

“I have never had a mate either, but I understand the importance of the regular

routine. Writers need structure. Too much chaos scrambles your mind. You need to keep to a few bits of normal during your day if you are going to work on a book.”

He looked grumpy. “Will you be there?”

“Of course. I will get my bag from your house, and I will sit in that dark booth and work on my edits. I will be there when you leave as well, and I will come home with you. Then, I will show you my emergency shape.”

He wrinkled his nose and nodded. “Fine, but I will take you to the hostel, and you will get your bag and bring it to my house.”

“Done. So. We have a plan. Shall we

execute it?”

He got to his feet and hauled her to hers. With his arm around her, they walked back to the hostel, and she grabbed her luggage. Their next stop was his home where he put her bag in his room, and she went to the spare room to gather her workbag.

She returned to watch Chuck hanging her clothing up. He lifted a charming sundress. “Would you wear this today?”

She smiled. “Certainly. Any particular underwear?”

“None. I have a break later in the evening, and I intend to send you spinning into a morass of lust.”

“Oh, good plan.” She swallowed heavily at the image that formed in her

mind of her leaning forward, her skirt flipped up and Chuck thrusting into her from behind. She shed her clothing and reached for the dress.

“I need shoes to match it. Find them, please.”

He dug around in her luggage and pulled out a pair of pumps that went well with the white dress.

She laughed and slipped her feet into them, standing tall in the white pattered dress with the brisk skirt that would flare and shift around her.

“There. Now, you have a job to get to. Go and observe some background characters.” She grinned and put her workbag over one shoulder.

He offered her his arm, and they

headed down the stairs and into the Crossed Star.

Jim was at the bar, and he looked surprised to see Chuck and Ivy. “I thought you needed some time.”

Ivy smiled. “He needs work more. I will be in the dark corner.” She turned Chuck’s head and kissed him in front of his friend and boss, uncaring that Jim was staring in surprise.

Ivy slipped into her corner booth, and in less than two minutes, there was a Crossroads-colada in front of her with an umbrella in it and a cherry cut in the shape of a heart on the edge of the glass. Ivy blushed and sipped at the drink, smiling when it was still alcohol free.

She got back to her reading list and

made notes in her book. She completed three books for review before her pencil and reader were taken carefully from her hands.

“You need a break.”

Chuck smiled at her, and there was heat in his eyes.

“I think you are the one who needs a break. Jim came down then?” She peered past him to find Jim at the bar and Lee perched on a stool sipping something that looked involved.

“He is making an effort to give me time with you, and Jim is not a man who compromises easily.” He held out his hand. “Come on, you can put your things behind the bar.”

“How long have we been here?”



“Four hours or so. Are you enjoying yourself?” He tucked her bag behind the bar and took her hand to lead her out into the street outside.

“I am. I have gotten more work done today than I have in weeks. I have no idea what I will do once I finish the reviewing backlog.” She swung his hand a little and skipped at his side.

“You are in good spirits.”

“I am. It has been a very nice day.” Colour came into her cheeks, and she looked at the people slowly entering the streets. “It comes alive at night, doesn’t it?”

“It is traditional, though here, we don’t really need to stand on ceremony. People come and go as they will, but

societal norms are hard to escape.”

“What are you escaping by being here?”

He shrugged. “A life of solitude, a life of hiding. I never knew my parents, and my first memories are of being on display behind glass. The forced shifting locked my eyes, teeth and tongue. Learning to speak was an effort, but I managed it.”

She was quiet and then she asked, “Who got you away from it?”

“A clan of cranes took me in as a teen. The circus stopped in their town, they slipped me a note, and I shifted into a small garter snake that Mr. Talifor lifted off with. I remained in the shape of the small snake for weeks until the circus

was three cities away and their agents had ceased to look for me.”

“They wanted you back.”

“I was worth quite a bit of money.”

His tone was flat.

“Oh. Well, that is...horrible.” She moved close to him and gripped his arm with her free hand. “I hereby declare that I want you for the same reasons you want me. If you have something sinister in mind, let me know so I can concoct a sly plan of my own.”

She startled him into laughing, and Ivy breathed a little easier. His beginnings had been dark and that was probably why he fixated on happy endings and true love. You always wanted what you never had.

She lifted his hand and trailed her fingers over the scorpion tattooed on his arm. “Where did you get this?”

“It was done by one of the clowns at the circus. He marked me on my birthday so they could keep track of my age. The forms meant something to him, not to me.”

“They marked you as a child?”

“Yes.”

“Damn. I am walking in minefields. I am shutting up now.”

He put his arm around her. “You will learn it all eventually, and you have given me a new task to set myself.”

“What?”

“We are having a new start, so I will begin with a new skin. It might be a little

disturbing, but these old marks are leaving one way or the other.”

She stopped in place. “What? Normal snake shifters can’t do that.”

“I am not a normal snake shifter. I can take the shape of any serpent and several mythological creatures.” He grinned and got her walking again.

“Oh. Right.”

He laughed. “You promised to show me your emergency form.”

In moments, they were back on the path to the pond. Ivy made sure that they were alone before she removed her shirt and bra. “I have only used this shape once, and I was falling at the time.”

Chuck was watching her with interest. “I like how this is starting.”

Ivy snorted and concentrated on the shape she had taken on a school trip years earlier. Trips to the Grand Canyon were fun, but getting shoved off a cliff was hard on anyone.

She reached inside her soul and pulled her swan out, overlapping it onto her human form. When the wings burst out, she gasped and arched her back, extending the span out completely.

“You are an angel.” Chuck’s voice was reverent.

She swung one wing over and tickled him under the chin with her wingtip. “I am a swan, the same as you are a serpent. Things that make us what we are do not determine who we are. We can always choose.”

He grinned and stepped into the span of her wings, placing his hands on her waist. “That is what I am telling you. I am choosing you, you are choosing me, and when I shed this skin, we will have a fresh start with us, our bodies and our minds forging a new path.”

He suddenly got serious and knelt in front of her. “Ivy.”

She blinked and put her hands on his shoulders. “Yes, Chuck?”

“I, Charles Penderton, have a very serious question to ask you.” He looked up at her with his eyes entreating.

“I, Ivy Hector, am listening, Charles.” She stroked his cheek and smiled.

“Will you be my co-author? Will you become a new name with me and share

in my writing and my disasters, living your life in a series of plots and twists with me?”

She folded her wings around him and kissed him. “Yes, Charles. I will. I don’t know how good a writer I will be, but I will try to formulate with you, and at the very least, we can try out some of the more physical scenes in person.”

He laughed against her lips and stroked the base of her wings where they sprang from her skin. “That sounds like the best inspiration I have had all year.”



## Chapter Eight

“You know, if this was happening later in our relationship, I would kick your ass. You have been a right pain in the butt over the last week.”

Chuck frowned and scratched at the back of his skull. “It itches.”

She reached over and smacked his fingers. “It is your fault. You decided to shed your skin, and now, it is almost ready to peel.”

“It isn’t peel, it is shed or slough. Are you sure you want to be there?”

“If your body is undergoing any kind of change, I want to be there. I want to make sure that I recognize you when it is all said and done.”

She had been dealing with a cranky

child in a man's body for the last two days. His skin was not in great shape at the moment. Parts of his tanned skin had turned white under the tattoos and he looked so grumpy that Jim had given him a few days off.

Ivy sighed and took his hand in hers. "When do you peel yourself?"

"I think it is loose enough to do tonight. You can tend the fire while I work my way through the woods."

She nodded. "Yay. What are you going to do with the new unmarked skin?"

He grinned. "I have already made the arrangements. I will not be unmarked very long."

Ivy sat down. "What do you mean?"

“I am getting a new set of tattoos. These ones are going to represent my life at the Crossroads and my life with you.” He smiled and held her hand at the kitchen table of their home.

“Are you sure you want to wear the tattoos so soon after you get rid of the first set?” She frowned and tried to make sure that she was reading his emotions correctly. Even his face was peeling, so it was difficult.

“I want anyone who looks at me to know that I belong to you. It is also a celebration of finding a mate in a species I thought would never look at me. I mean, you are a swan. The very epitome of grace and beauty...while you are in the water.”

She snorted and glanced outside. Their brainstorming for the day was over, so the approaching sunset was a herald of the evening's events. "Where do I get the firewood?"

He winced. "Right. We should get going if we are going to have a large enough blaze."

"To burn all of your skin. Gotcha. I will grab the matches, you keep your skin on." She winked and opened the drawer, picking up the pack of matches and rattling them in the air.

He sighed and got to his feet. He was wearing a pair of jeans and nothing else.

Ivy was wearing a vest-style top and a blousy skirt. Running around the Crossroads in bare feet had come

naturally after two days. She enjoyed not only the feeling of freedom, but also the release from standard social stricture. She literally felt like a new woman in a world with nothing but other shifters.

Chuck took her hand, and together, they headed into the woods. Ivy sighed and walked with him, keeping close in case any of the males that were out on the crawl for the night decided to see her as a likely target. The first time it had happened, Chuck's bite had rendered the hawk insensate for two days. The second time, he had just punched the hapless leopard out.

Ivy had decided just to stick with him from then on. It saved unneeded bloodshed until their mating bands were

ready. With his moult progressing, his temper was short, his creativity was erratic and the only thing that calmed him down was touching her. It had been a weird few days, and she was ready to see the end to his temper, though it was never directed at her.

The clearing in the woods had a carefully arranged fire pit, one of the strange concessions that the designers of the Crossroads had made. There were odd bits like that everywhere. Ruins that were less than a hundred years old and could shelter and interest a pair of lovers.

The fire bowl was set in the small clearing, surrounded by trees. Ivy tucked the matches in her cleavage and headed

into the woods to gather stray branches, twigs and dry leaves.

She carried her armload of wood and bracken to the fire bowl and set up the basics of a burnable arrangement.

When Chuck returned to her side with enough wood to burn until dawn, she stood and kissed him. A last kiss on his original lips and he removed his jeans, shifting into his half-form and slithering away.

He had walked her through the procedure. He would shift into Naga form and use the wood and branches to snag the loose skin until he could simply back out of his human form. It was her duty to start the fire.

Ivy started the leaves, and when it

didn't catch properly, Ivy looked from side to side to make sure she wasn't being observed. She reached under her hair and made a slight shift while she pulled sharply. Instead of it being a down feather, it was a flight feather. For a swan, it was her only personal parlour trick.

She used the feather to fan the flame, and soon, she was sitting in front of a cheery blaze while a combination of hissing and cursing came from the woods around her. She hummed and continued to fan the flames with her feather. She felt a trickle down the back of her neck and frowned. Normally she didn't bleed when she yanked a feather. She sought a source of the feeling and



another strange feeling ran over her hand.

“Very funny, Charles.” She turned, and he was inches from her face with his face flushed and pink. He flicked her lips with his tongue, smiling at her as his coils slid past her to the edge of the fire pit.

“I thought sso, Ivy. You were waiting in silence and that isn’t like you.”

His coils made a dry hiss as he shifted completely next to her.

She blinked. “They are gone!”

He laughed, his fangs gleaming. “That was the idea, love. A fresh start with fresh skin. I don’t need to wear an unhappy childhood on me when I have such a glowing future to look forward

to.”

“You are very sure of that.”

“When you walk through shadows, you look forward to the light. Even dimness is a difference.”

“Are you calling me dim?”

He hissed happily and his coils rustled and looped restlessly. “Never. You are my glowing angel. Now, let’s start new.”

He extended his hand to her and the scraps covered with ink were in it. She took his wrist, and together, they tossed the moult remains into the fire.

He lifted her in his arms, and they sat together as his past burned and curled in the heat. The skin of a Naga burned very slowly, and all the wood was consumed

by the time the last fleck turned to ash and magic. As a final gesture, Ivy put her feather on the embers and watched it curl and join the singed dance of his skin.

“And as it ends, so it begins with a swan feather.” She nuzzled his neck carefully, not sure that his skin was up to much.

He rose up and whispered, “Can you grab my jeans?”

She blinked and leaned down to grab the fabric as the last ash dimmed and the embers faded away. He dragged his tail across it and scattered the traces of his previous skin into the grass.

“Are you going to take us home like this?” Ivy was both appalled and

amused.

“Why not? This is what I am, and I am finally embracing it.”

She grinned. “Go for it. Shall I pretend to be a poor human sacrifice in your arms?”

He chuckled. “Let’s save that for another day. Good thought though. I am going to remember that.”

Ivy laughed as he slithered in a slow sway toward the centre of the Crossroads. They were taking the long way home.

People froze in the streets as the king of serpents carried his bride home. Ivy wondered if they could work this into the book somehow.

Chuck whispered in her ear. “You are

thinking about the book, aren't you?"

She grinned. "Stop reading my mind."

"I am reading your expression. You get all narrow-eyed and plotty when you are scheming up a scene." There was pride in his tone.

Jim came out of the Crossed Star and met them in the street. "Well, Chuck. I have rarely seen you looking...I have no idea how to finish that sentence."

Ivy smiled down at Jim. "He is pretty, isn't he? Like an emerald topped with a male model." She stroked Chuck's neck and shoulder.

Chuck blushed and squeezed her tight. "Flattery will not get you out of doing dishes."

Jim nodded and clapped Chuck on the

shoulder. He had to reach up to do it as Chuck's head was at a seven-foot elevation with the extension of his tail.

“You look good, Chuck. When will you be back at work?”

Chuck looked to Ivy, and she nodded. “I need two more days. Tomorrow Arkenon comes to do some work on my new skin. He has been creating designs all week, and it will be a very long process for the work I have in mind. I might need four days in total.”

Jim was surprised. “Arkenon is coming here?” The eagerness in Jim's eyes was unmistakable.

Chuck nodded. “Yes. It is a favour that I asked of him years ago, and he said that if I ever had room for a tattoo, he

would be delighted to do it. I made room.”

“Do you have his contact information?”

“Teal has it. You can go through him to make arrangements. What do you want done?”

Jim grinned. “Butterflies.”

Chuck snorted and chortled as he made his way past his friend and toward his home.

Ivy sighed. “Are you going to explain that?”

“You will have to ask Lee. She will explain it better than I ever could.” He kissed her temple and swayed all the way home, his tail leaving a trail that led right to their door.

## Chapter Nine

“What do you mean you are stuck?” She blinked at him in shock. It would have been amusing if he weren’t so damned big.

Inside the privacy of their home, he had turned to her and whispered his problem.

“I mean that I can’t seem to locate the urge to shift back. I am stuck.” He crossed his arms and tried to look serious.

She stared up at him and put her hands on her hips.

He shook his head. “That is a cobra trick to make yourself look bigger, it won’t work on me.”

“Fine. I will try another more basic



tactic.” Ivy walked away from him to the large living room and stood in the centre as she unbuttoned her vest as slowly as she could manage.

He was staring at her and rose so high his head hit the ceiling. “Ow.”

“Stop daydreaming and pay attention.” She opened the row of five buttons and let the fabric hang.

He moved closer, but she put her hand up. “Now, I know you are thinking of what you can do with your hands and mouth and that would be fascinatingly fun.”

She worked at the tie of her skirt and let it whoosh to the ground around her. She slipped the vest off and let it fall to the floor. “But, love. I ache for you. It is

trite, and I wasn't quite sure what it meant until now, but you did this for me, and I want you with me in celebration.”

Ivy stepped toward him, mimicking the slow sway of his propulsion in this form. “You know, I love the feel of your scales against my skin.”

She rubbed her belly against him, and he lowered himself until she could reach his shoulders. He groaned and twisted against her, his coils shifting to pin her against his body.

“You are torturing me, Ivy.” His coils pushed her up, and she clung to his shoulders while wrapping her legs around the spot where his hips should be.

“You are doing the torturing. You only

need to shift and you will be inside me. Our celebration can begin the moment I feel skin between my thighs again.” She kissed his neck and bit a moment later.

He shuddered violently and dropped to the ground with her still wrapped around him. Standing in his human form, he whispered, “That did it.”

She laughed as his erection slid along her folds. She twisted against him until he slipped inside her, and she hung on as he pressed her to the wall and held her hands above her head while his body rubbed against hers in slow, rocking thrusts.

“I had forgotten what it felt like when the skin was new.” His chest rubbed against her breasts, and he groaned as

his body shook hard, his hips jerking into hers.

She sighed softly and held him tight. She was ahead of him on orgasms three to one, so it was about time he started catching up.

He looked up at her. "I owe you one."

"You owe me nothing except a day in bed and a hot meal. It has been a long night." Ivy ran her hand along his skull, and she grinned.

He exposed his fangs. "I can make the night last for hours more and you will crave me."

Ivy pinched his ear. "I already crave you, but I react better when I have had some sleep."

He cupped her ass and held her tight

to him as he walked up the stairs to the bedroom. His erection woke inside her, and the hike up the stairs started a reaction that she was too sleepy to appreciate.

She yawned against his shoulder as he lowered her to the bed. “Can you save that until I am awake again?”

He grinned. “It will be around when you need it. Go to sleep, angel. I will thank you properly when you wake.”

She smiled softly at him, caressing his cheek. “You had better. I had to sit around a campfire all night. You owe me.”

He chuckled and turned them, lifting her thigh to ride on his hip. “I will see you in the morning, after your beauty

sleep has failed to improve on perfection.”

Secure in his arms, she let his heat carry her into sleep.

She blinked awake to a startling taste in her mouth. “Did you brush my teeth while I slept?”

Chuck gave her a look as innocent as someone with serpentine eyes could. “Of course not. That would be considered extreme behaviour.”

She grinned and pinched him. “You are one twisted fuck.”

“You haven’t even seen twisted yet. Are you awake?”

“I am not talking in my sleep.”

“Good.”

His hands stroked over her skin,

waking her desire, using nothing more than his touch, his scent and his kisses. No venom, no tricks, just Ivy and Chuck rolling around in the sheets.

She finally pinned him on his back and eased him into her. She undulated her hips slowly.

He narrowed his eyes. “Where did you learn to do that?”

Ivy laughed and didn't answer him, rocking against him, her clit enjoying the pressure between their bodies as she rocked faster and harder, slamming against him while he gripped her hips and bared his fangs.

Bright daylight painted their bodies. She delighted in the golden-dappled skin over the hard muscle that she had come

to love. Her fingers caressed the ridges of his abs as she rode him, pleasure moving from her core outward until she reached the tipping point and her body jerked as she screamed.

“Thank the scales!” He shuddered and thrust into her, holding himself in place as his cock spilled inside her. He slowly relaxed and lowered her so that her knees once again touched the bed.

“You worship scales?” She blinked. “I just realized we have never discussed religion.”

“Of course. What do you swear by?”

Ivy blushed. “The first feather.”

“So, I follow scales, you follow feathers. Together, it would make for quite the piece of jewellery.” He smiled



and stroked his hand down her spine.

“I didn’t want to ask you before, but how do you know your last name?”

He sighed. “I had a friend look into it for me. Dira has far more contacts than you can imagine, and she has been around a long, long time. She found my family, and I have been in cautious touch with them.”

Ivy leaned forward and draped herself over his chest. “How did you arrive in the circus?”

“It was a simple matter of a young family camping and a bear attack. My mother was a constrictor and my father was a rattler. From what investigators determined, my mother was struck by a surprise attack, and my father bit at the

bear but he couldn't kill it fast enough. I was left on my own.”

“How old were you?”

“I was under three at the time. No one is quite sure as it was simply written off as camping mishap when their bodies were found. I think I was just two.”

“Wow. What happened next?”

“The bear gave in to the bite, and I stayed in my carrier until I got hungry. This is just a guess, but it is how young shifts happen. I changed and slithered out of my carrier and continued until I found food. I slithered into a tiny freak show and ate out of the garbage. Once I was full, I shifted back in front of humans, and that is when I was put in a cage and the signs went up. Because of

the early shift, I never quite fully shifted back.”

He shrugged, and she sniffled at the thought of a tiny Chuck looking for food.

“Don’t cry for me, Ivy. I survived and I grew up big and strong.” He ran his hand through her hair, lifting the strands. “Sometimes the highlights are black, sometimes red and sometimes brown. How do you do that?”

She chuckled. “Nice change of subject. Very graceful.”

“I aim to please. Now, how about a shower and that hot meal I owe you?”

She grunted and separated their bodies. “Shower it is.”

With the trail of cum sliding down her inner thigh, she headed for the bathroom

and turned on the water. When she stepped under the spray, she was crowded against the taps. “You could have waited your turn.”

He nibbled at her shoulder. “Yes, I could have.”

She laughed and started to soap him up. He returned the favour, and by the time the shower was over, her skin was hot and wet in every manner conceivable.

It was quite the start to her day.

## Chapter Ten

Arkenon was a true artist. He was also a member of the Talifor family, Chuck's foster brother.

He grinned as he prepared to work on Chuck. "I don't know how he did this, but I have you to thank, Ivy. It was his tribal artwork that inspired me to become a tattoo artist. I wanted to make art that didn't cause pain when it was seen."

Ivy was sitting in the meditation centre watching Arkenon prepare to work on Chuck. No one looking at him would think that he was a crane. He had the physical demeanour of a bulldog but the grace of a large feline. "You don't have me to thank. It was his decision to

peel himself.”

Chuck looked at her.

“Fine. Moults his human form.” She flapped her hand. “Whatever.”

Arkenon laughed and pressed the template to Chuck’s back. “Is he still fussy about terms?”

Chuck said, “I am here, you know.”

Ivy winked. “He is. It comes and goes though. He can usually be distracted out of his mood.”

After checking the placement, Arkenon prepared the inks. “How do you distract him?”

Giggling, she said, “You aren’t equipped to manage my kind of distraction.”

He blinked and then colour crept over

his cheeks. “Ah. Yeah, that wouldn’t work for me.”

Chuck grinned and then the process began.

Ivy kept her mate company as his foster brother worked on him. It took six hours to finish his back, and at Chuck’s instruction, Arkenon covered it up.

Next were his bicep tattoos.

“Aren’t you tired?” Ivy felt it necessary to ask, as it seemed a lot of detail work.

“This is what I do, Ivy. To be able to put the designs on Chuck and have his skin clean after all these years is an opportunity that I don’t want to miss.” He winked and set another stencil on Chuck’s right bicep. It was two large

cats twisted together.

The buzzing started up again, and when Arkenon paused, Ivy asked, “Do you have a mate?”

“I am not yet ready to settle down. My life is full and women come and go.” He grinned. “That is enough for me.”

Ivy sighed. “For now. You never know when the world will turn and you will find yourself craving the happily ever after.”

He snorted, but Chuck met her gaze and he smiled. “Sometimes, you find the woman for you just because you let yourself see her, and she is smart enough to make you admit it.”

Hours passed, and he now wore a brightly coloured pair of big cats. A



tiger and a lioness twisted on his skin.  
“Jim and Lee?”

Chuck grinned. “My first friend with no strings attached and his wife.”

The other arm was soon sporting a dragon and a unicorn cavorting in a twist. “Dira and her new mate.”

“That is all for today.” Arkenon rotated his hand. “Do you have a spare room for me?”

Teal came out of the shadows. “We have a place for you here. As you are not seeking a mate, you are not allowed to wander freely.”

“Fair enough. Dinner?”

Teal inclined her head. “Tony is bringing it.”

Chuck moved gingerly.

Ivy frowned. “If you can have those ones exposed, why not the one on your back?”

He grinned. “It is a surprise.”

Arkenon was talking quietly to Teal as he tidied up. He asked Chuck, “You will be back tomorrow morning for the rest?”

“Of course. We are putting on five years of artwork in two days. I will be here. Thanks again, Ark.” He shook his foster brother’s hand, and Arkenon hugged him carefully.

Ivy took his arm, and they walked out into the quiet night of the Crossroads.

“When do I get to see your back piece?”

He grinned, “When we are alone. This

is a big moment for me. I hope that Arkenon didn't turn it into something stupid.”

“There is a lot of trust in something like that, isn't there?”

“There is. It is a piece of art that you will wear all your life. If your artist is crap, the marks they make will be on you, and you will remember it every time you see the design in the mirror.”

“Wow. Heavy.”

“Indeed. I trust Arkenon with my life and my skin.”

“Perhaps I will get something done one day if he will be amenable.” Ivy had her mind on the possible designs she could request.

“Well, see what he created on me and

I will ask him for you.”

They arrived home, and he still wouldn't let her peek. She had to undress and kneel on the bedding to remove the tape and gauze that covered him up.

“Oh. My. Feathers.” She sat back on her heels and stared at the swan that cruised in a pond with a snake looped into a freeform heart on the bank. In the sky was a flying swan and next to it was an angel picked out in miniature. The detail was amazing. She could almost see the grass and rushes waving in a lazy breeze.

“It is lovely, Chuck.”

“I am glad you like it. It will be healed by tomorrow and my chest piece

can begin.” He smiled. “Tonight, I sleep on my stomach.”

They lay together in companionable silence. Ivy pulled the sheet up over her nude body and up to Chuck’s hips. He rested and slept with a smile on his lips. However much pain he had felt, it didn’t leave resentment behind.

She watched over him until he was firmly asleep and then stared at his back with tears running down her face. He might not see it like she did, but she knew it was there, and he knew she was with him. It was a powerful symbol of their union, and she liked it.

“I have never done this kind of combination before, but the Naga and the angel over your heart does look

stunning.” Arkenon smiled at his handiwork. “I love your skin, it takes the inks so well.”

Chuck looked in the mirror and smiled. “I like the tail wrapping around and between her legs. Suggestive but not lewd. Well done.”

The angel was wearing scraps of silk and the Naga was wearing his scales from the waist downward. It was a very PG13 tattoo.

“I like it.” She smiled brightly at Arkenon.

Chuck laughed. “I think Ivy wants one, but she isn’t sure what she wants.”

“Oh, I know what I want.”

Arkenon blinked. “Really? Do tell.”

“Well, a snake wound around a long

feather. On my calf.”

He moved over to the design table that he had brought with him, and he quickly sketched something out. “In colour?”

“Yes, please. A white feather and a green snake with a detailed pattern on its back.”

“If I do this, you won’t be able to shift until it heals, all right?” Arkenon looked up from his table.

“Sure.”

Chuck got up from the client chair and helped her prepare her left leg for the tattoo. When Arkenon held up the sketch, she grinned. “Just like that.”

“Do you want this?”

“Yup. It is now or never, so I pick now. It’s the same thing I said to myself

when I started flirting with Chuck.” She extended her leg as he ran the razor over it and then on went the stencil.

Chuck held her hand and it was a damned good thing that he did. She would have been out and down the street seconds after the first contact with the needle.

She breathed deep and kept calm as long as she could before she buried her face in Chuck’s neck. He held her tight as she got the symbol that she wanted to wear forever that matched his in artistry and colouration.

It wasn’t the engagement ring she had been taught to want, but their mating bands were on the way, and this was better than a ring that she would lose



when she shifted.

To distract herself, she suddenly blurted out, “It should be C. I. Hector. That is the name. Nice and generic and it sound a bit fantastical.”

He grinned. “Yes, dear. It does make sense. Well chosen.”

She chuckled and winced. “You are humouring me.”

“Yes, dear.”

Arkenon was laughing quietly.

She decided to make him interact. “So, Arkenon. I hear that you are much in demand amongst shifters. Do you think you would make a return trip?”

“Well, I will be working on James next. So after that, I think it is just a bunch of beavers.”

She snorted. “Not anymore. There are some exotics, some large cats, and of course, your foster brother. I think Chuck wouldn’t mind seeing you more frequently, and if he doesn’t get an invitation to your home, he has to make do here.”

Arkenon lifted his head. “He is invited to every single family event. He just chooses not to come.”

Ivy looked at Chuck’s face. “That is going to change. Keep sending the invitations. We will be taking some of them.”

After the piece was finished and she smiled at the glowing green serpent, she surrendered her place to an eager Jim.

Arkenon kissed her on the cheek and

whispered in her ear. “Thank you, he needs family.”

She whispered back, “He has it now whether he needs it or not.”

Walking back to their home, she sighed. “There, more binding than a wedding ring and far more pretty.”

“You are really going to haul me into the human world?”

“I am. I got this tattoo to divert my mother. She will be so busy being excited I am mated and horrified that I have a tattoo, you should be able to get past her in no time.” She squeezed his waist and leaned against him in exhaustion.

“You did that for me?”

“I did. And once my skin heals and I

can shift again, I am going to let you have sex with an angel. That is a once-in-a-lifetime deal, my love.”

He stopped in the centre of the street and kissed her until her toes curled.

They pointed toward the house, and Chuck said, “So, if we start it in space, we can use shifters and not worry about breaking any taboos.”

She grinned. “I was thinking the precise thing. Now, action or love story?”

“Why can’t it be both?”

So, they discussed their book into the wee hours of the night, and when dawn broke, they got to work creating their first collaboration.

It took two years, but the initial work

of C. I. Hector was finally contracted, and they were relieved. They had six books waiting in the wings, and once their first book broke free, the others soon found homes.

They both got what they wanted, Chuck became an action romance writer, and Ivy got all the editing she could handle and a paying audience for her sarcasm. Life was sweet, and Pookie was sweeter.

## Author's Note

To find out about Jim and the butterflies, see *Lion Time*. A wave of shifter combinations will be meeting at the Crossroads, and in *Bearing It*, we will meet the cousin of Buzz from *Owl's Fair*. It worked for Buzz, so why not her?

Hoping to see you next time, Pookie,  
Zenina Masters

[www.zeninamasters.com](http://www.zeninamasters.com)

## **About the Author**

Zenina Masters was born in Canada and lives in Canada. She has a regular job and does nothing particularly exciting with her life. She enjoys fishing, silence and the ability to pick and choose friends she can trust. Life is too short to watch your back all the time.

Her writing life is a teeny bit of escapism, she would probably chicken out if confronted by three naked men and looks forward to one day finding out.