

Chapter 1: The Centaurian Bud Vase

Under his e-static blanket, Pierre lay naked in his bed. He twisted, turned, and moaned in his sleep.

“Stop! I don’t want to hear it!” His shout woke him from the 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 blanket and stood nude, gazing out the bedroom window of the apartment above his antique shop. Icicles hanging from the roof dripped, dripped, dripped. Each drop a tiny jewel in the light from the rising Twin Suns of Panjandrum, each a reminder that he needed to have better insulation installed for the roof of the old building.

The light of the rising suns reflected from his silver scales, casting bright flecks on the wall. His black eyes scanned across the snow blanketing the street and sidewalks.

Skinks disliked winter; Pierre Bordeaux hated it.

“Shall I fix breakfast?” The voice of the shop’s domestic system seemed to come from the bedroom door.

“No, Louis. I’ll dress and do it myself.” He was still shaking as he turned from the window. His frill, blue-black when he awoke from the nightmare, began to fade to its normal silver.

“You seem 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 themselves with clothing in the day but not the night? The Mentecians cover themselves all the time.”

“Mentecians are *lizards*. Skinks are *not* Mentecians,” Pierre snapped, his frill darkening momentarily. His voice softened as he said, “I’m sorry, Louis, mon ami. To answer your query, nudity is not a typical part of Waxonian culture. But our folklore 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?”

“Yes. Well, no, of course *she* couldn’t be there.” Pierre’s head turned and he stared out the window for several moments before continuing. “That sleeping in the nude stuff is just another silly bit of Waxonian mythology, 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. Besides, I carry the gene for severe allergies to Waxonian pollens. If I went back for more than a few weeks I’d probably die.”

“Yes, but with medication...”

“Forget it.”

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

“Think she might be down there?”

“Let it go, Louis. Sometimes clients come early.”

“And sometimes late.” Louis chuckled.

Pierre ignored the not-so-subtle dig at his more hush-hush sales. *Sometimes AIs seem a bit too sentient* he mused as he looked down 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 *lizards* inhabit this city!”

He walked briskly to the closet, glanced at the travel poster of an olive farm in the south, and pulled the door open. He slipped into his gray 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 at the mound. It hadn’t been there at closing time. Must have been dropped during the early morning snow shower.

“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. He is breathing. Barely.”

He picked up the inert form and brought it into the shop, closing the door behind him with a flick of his tail. He laid the body, coiled into a fetal position, onto the seat of an antique chaise lounge near the back of the shop, and began to carefully dust off the remaining snow with his fingers. Pierre left the hood of the stranger’s dark blue robe covering his head.

“Yes. A skink. What could have happened to you? You’re so cold the end of your tail is gray, not blue, but I can feel a faint pulse.” Perhaps he could save this one. 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 an adventurer for the quiet existence of an antiques shopkeeper.

The stranger needed warmth. Their distant ancestors, cold-blooded reptilians resembling the skinks of Earth, 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 electrostatic blanket from his bed. He set its thermostat and comfort thickness higher, then molded it around the figure on the lounge. For several minutes he massaged the blanket, stimulating the modified argon-glass fibers in the blanket to increase their heat production.

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 cozy, 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 of aromatic liquid 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 a moment, it repeated.

Again, and again. The level of pink 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 stranger brought up a hand, shoved the glass away. Pierre noticed a turquoise ring on his pinky. The skink pushed against the seat, struggled, and sat up. He reached out to take the glass from Pierre. The toes of his black boots and most of his tail protruded as Pierre adjusted the blanket around him.

"Wonderful, mon ami. Your color is returning.

"What is this?" He gasped as he noticed two additional bands of blue scales at the end of the stranger's tail. He blurted out, "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?"

"Can we speak Skinque, please?" she whispered in French.

Nearly everyone here, even Waxonian 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 olive farm.

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

The store window rattled. The skinqui startled. A sanitation truck rumbled by, sucking the snow from the street and sidewalks.

She looked back at 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 glass cereal bowl of wriggling punkin grubs from his upstairs apartment. The tiny orange larvae were magnified by the rounded humps in the surface of the bowl. The skinqui 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. She reached into her robe and brought out a slender package. She tore away the blue crepe 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, still speaking Skinque, “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’d seen others like this. Most Waxonian families had one and would refer to it in the same way. He turned it around, then looked for a maker’s mark on the base, but there was none. He examined the bird on the lip. He was puzzled, for *this* bud vase was indeed *very old*, unlike others that had been brought to him.

Considering how he had found her, coming here must have been an act of desperation. But there could not be any truth in what she said, could there?

“The key to *what*?” Pierre said.

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 upstairs 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. Puzzled, he looked from the bowl of punkin grubs in one hand to the bud vase in the other. Then he saw the door to the shop standing ajar. Pierre rushed outside. If not for the Sanitation Department's efficiency in removing the snow, he might have found tracks.

Panjandrum 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 three or four weeks each year.

For those weeks, 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 this wicked city boasted little else that he desired.

He slipped the bud vase into the inner pocket of his robe as he looked up and down the street for Milda. He shivered in the cold. In his haste to follow her, he hadn't turned on his heaters.

As he pulled up the cowl of his robe he was stunned by a blinding flash and a thunderous boom. The concussion knocked Pierre back into his shop. Icicles rained down onto the sidewalk. Punkin grubs wriggled quickly out of sight.