

# Mystic Keepers 2: Crystal

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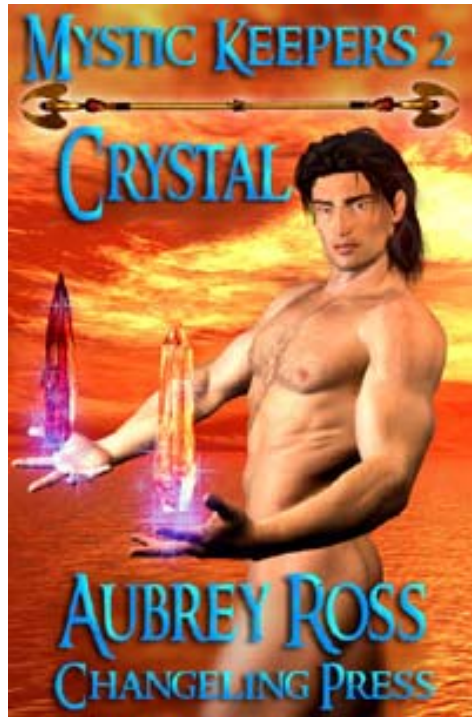
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## Prologue

"Move your hand, Severn, or you're going to lose it!"

Jax chuckled at the Veil Keeper's mostly-playful threat and reluctantly pulled his hand away from her nicely rounded ass. The silky fabric of her skirt was no real barrier. "But Minuette, *coming* through the Veil always makes me horny."

She laughed and pushed him back. "You were born horny. Inter-dimensional travel has nothing to do with it."

A quick jab of resentment cooled his raging hormones. He hadn't been born horny. He'd been abandoned by his bonded mate, leaving him in a perpetual state of rut from which he could find only the most superficial relief.

But the little Veil Keeper didn't know about his mate. Few people did. Which was the way Jax liked it. No one should pity a Shadow Keeper.

He watched her hips sway as she moved down the sun-drenched sidewalk. Fanning out behind her in a swirl of muted color, her flowing calf-length skirt and sleeveless tank top almost blended in with Earth's current fashion. She was headed in the wrong direction, but *prazot*, what a view!

"Which one is it?"

"That one." He pointed to the charming blue and white Victorian house on the corner across the street.

Minuette spun to face him, her waist-length hair whipping around her torso in gleaming waves of silver and gold. Her gaze lost even the hint of blue, clouding over like a stormy sky. "I'm really not in the mood to play with you."

"That's too bad. I think you'd enjoy playing with me." He was just teasing her -- mostly.

He might be restless and discontent, but he had principles. Seducing his best friend's sister crossed the line.

"It's never going to happen, so get over it." She brushed past him with obvious impatience and headed toward the house he'd indicated. "Is Malik expecting us? I don't want to spring this on him."

"He's expecting a report, but not necessarily today." He fell into step beside her. "He's definitely not expecting you."

She stopped, fists planted firmly on her hips, hair rippling in the breeze. "You make me sound incompetent. I've navigated the Veil before, you know. You weren't my first."

"But I'd be your last." He grinned. Provoking her was so much fun. He couldn't seem to help himself. "One night in my bed and I'd --"

"Do you ever think about anything but sex? *Prazot*, you're a pain in the ass."

His teasing rejoinder would only help prove her point, so Jax kept quiet. He opened the wrought-iron gate and motioned her into the front yard. Neat flowering shrubs bordered a lush green lawn and the massive tree centered in the grass gave off a pleasant scent. Early spring in New Orleans reflected well on this dimension.

Crossing to the door, he had his finger over the doorbell when he heard a throaty moan. A metal-framed screen door blocked the entrance, but the main door stood ajar.

"Sounds like they're training," he said softly, trying not to laugh.

"Training?" Minuette's face scrunched up in confusion. A sharp gasp followed the next moan and she turned bright red. "Oh, for heaven's sake. It's the middle of the afternoon."

Jax leaned toward the screen door, peering into the front room. Keeper training at its finest. Cayenne bent over the sofa's thickly padded arm, gloriously naked. Her fair skin gleamed with perspiration and her breasts jostled with each of Malik's forceful thrusts. Her mate held her arms crossed at the small of her back and pounded into her from behind, his knees bent for leverage.

"Can you see them?" Minuette whispered. He stepped back and swept his hand toward the door. She gasped. "I don't want to watch my brother..."

"Fuck his bonded mate? You should take a peek. You might learn a thing or two."

"You're disgusting."

He laughed. "Should we let them finish? Knowing Malik, this could take a while." Cayenne cried out loudly. "Or not."

Glancing back inside, Jax checked to see if they were finished or just repositioning. Malik stroked Cayenne's breasts as she slumped against the sofa. If they were contemplating round two, this was a good time for an intermission. Jax rang the doorbell.

"I can't believe they were... Are they naked?"

Jax looked at the flustered Veil Keeper and laughed. "You're still a virgin, aren't you? I thought celibacy was only required during training."

"My training is not yet complete."

"Let me know when it is."

"In your dreams."

Malik pulled the door open. He'd dressed, sort of. His black jeans were securely fastened, but he hadn't bothered to button his shirt. It hung open from his shoulders like a jacket.

"Jax," he greeted with a lazy I-just-got-laid grin, then narrowed his eyes. "How long have you been standing there?"

"I thought it only polite to let you finish."

"And you..." His words trailed away as his gray/blue gaze fell on his sister. "Minuette!" He flung open the screen door, forcing Jax to jump back. "Did *you* navigate the Veil? I didn't realize you'd finished your training."

She returned his enthusiastic hug. "I've been approved for solo ventures, but my training is far from complete."

"It's wonderful to see you."

Malik led them inside. Cayenne was nowhere in sight. "Are you hungry? Thirsty? Did you just arrive?"

"Not really, a glass of water would be great, and yes," Jax replied.

Cayenne strolled into the kitchenette as Malik handed Jax the requested beverage. Flushed and rosy from her recent exertion, she offered him an embarrassed hello before turning her attention to the other woman.

"Hi. I'm Cayenne." She proffered her hand in typical Earth fashion, but the Veil Keeper inclined her head and crossed her arms over her chest, tucking her fists against her body.

"Please don't think me rude. I'm of the Sacred Order of the Veil. Until my training is complete every time I touch someone, or am touched by someone," she shot Jax a meaningful glare, "it defuses my energy."

Cayenne's bright, red-streaked brown hair provided a striking contrast for Minuette's blonde beauty. Like his sister's, Malik's hair faded from rich gold at the roots to sparkling silver at the end of each strand. Minuette's waist-length locks displayed the color transformation even more dramatically. "Are you Minuette, Malik's sister?"

"I am."

Cayenne chuckled. "I pictured someone much younger. Evidently your brother still thinks of you as a child."

"I want to hear all about your training and what's going on back home, but Jax isn't here for a family reunion. What news have you from Matriarch Flame?"

Jax couldn't help but remember the conversation they'd shared in this very room two weeks before. He had hoped to know more by now, but Matriarch Flame refused to see him. "She's still playing the 'stay out of my face and I'll slip it to you under the table' game. But even the information she has provided is sketchy. I'm not sure she knows what's going on."

"What have you learned?" Cayenne asked.

"Lorran is your sister."

"My sister." She sounded doubtful. "I was ten when my parents died. I think I would have remembered a sister."

"She's two years your junior and she was sent away for her protection shortly after her birth. Few two-year-olds retain distinct memories."

"If my sister had to be sent away to protect her, why wasn't I in danger?"

Jax shrugged. "I don't know yet."

"What were they protecting her from?"

"Like I said, the information is still sketchy, but my money's on the mysterious 'he' in Matriarch Flame's first message." Jax watched Cayenne's expression tense. Malik slipped his arm around her shoulders.

"Do we know who 'he' is?" Malik sounded annoyed. Jax understood his frustration. Malik was hoping for answers, not more questions and mysteries.

"Matriarch Flame won't confirm anything at this stage, but I believe 'he' is Alrick, of the Order of Time."

Malik shook his head and raked his spiky hair with his fingers. "Why would the Time Master be threatened by the child of two Flame Keepers?"

"I never said he was threatened by her. I think his interest in Lorrان is completely different than his animosity toward Kayrin and Larot."

Cayenne released a short, sharp burst of nervous laughter. "Kayrin and Larot? Are you referring to my parents?"

"Yes. Were those not the names they used on Earth?"

"No. They called themselves Karen and Larry Dover."

"It's common practice to adopt identities appropriate to a Keeper's assigned dimension. We have to operate in anonymity or our missions are compromised." Jax looked at Minuette. She hadn't said a word, just silently took it all in.

"Back to Lorrان," Malik prompted. "Do you know where she is? Is she still in danger? Does she realize her true origin or was the information kept from her, as it was from Cayenne?"

"I have a pretty good idea, it's a very real possibility, and I haven't a clue."

“What?”

Jax laughed. “You have a bad habit of rattling off questions fifteen at a time. I have a pretty good idea where Lorrان is. I have no idea if she was kept in the dark like Cayenne or if someone has been secretly training her. I was sent a dossier right before Minuette brought me through the Veil. I’m not sure what triggered Matriarch Flame’s sudden generosity, but *something* happened.”

“What does the dossier contain?” Cayenne asked.

“Pieces to the puzzle. There was also a handwritten note. It said ‘while you fetch the girl, send Cayenne to me’.”

Her eyes widened. “Grandmother wants me to leave Earth?”

“She wants you to come home,” Malik clarified.

“That’s why I’m here.” Minuette spoke for the first time. “So few even know you’re alive. Matriarch Flame could trust no one else to escort you back to our dimension.”



## Chapter One

Crystal Yancy rushed into the spa on the Lido deck of the *Fantastique*, frantically pulling back her hair as she approached the reception desk. She managed to get the elastic band looped around her ponytail as Fern handed her the clipboard and surprised her with a smile.

“He’s been waiting twenty minutes. This would have thrown your whole afternoon off if your three o’clock hadn’t canceled.”

“My three o’clock canceled?” Fern nodded and Crystal sighed. “Thank God for small favors.”

“It’s your day for them, darlin’. You got yourself one hell of a favor waiting in there. I was about to turn the phones over to voicemail and massage him myself.”

“You’re not qualified.”

Fern laughed. “He doesn’t know that.”

Pausing outside the door, Crystal scanned her client’s preference card and smiled. ‘Rub me!’ he’d written in bold block letters and then proceeded to select every possible area to be massaged.

Crystal’s belly fluttered in anticipation. Was he as appealing as Fern said?

As a massage therapist, Crystal worked on every imaginable body type. It was all pretty routine. She raised her professional detachment and helped people relax for an hour. Fern’s uncharacteristic enthusiasm piqued her curiosity.

Knocking briefly to announce her entrance, she stepped into the private room. The man lay on his stomach, his arms raised, face surrounded by the hole in the padded table. Except for the towel draped across his hips, he was naked, and waiting for her.

*Oh my.* Fern hadn’t exaggerated. His body stretched the entire length of the table and then some, every inch of him sculpted perfection. Dark, wavy hair brushed the

table obscuring what little she could see of his face. Maybe he had the body of a god and the face of a gargoyle. She grinned, feeling foolish.

“Good afternoon.” She cleared her throat, trying to rid her voice of its tremor. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting. How are you enjoying the cruise?”

He mumbled something unintelligible. Okay, so he wasn’t going to be much for conversation. She’d dealt with a whole lot worse. The diffused lighting created a soft, relaxed atmosphere. Simmering potpourri perfumed the air with chamomile, lavender, and a hint of almond.

“My name is Crystal and I’ve reviewed your preference card. Is there any particular area giving you trouble?”

Again she couldn’t make out his words. He bent one knee, raising his foot off the table. She generally started with the torso and worked her way out, but she could be flexible.

Taking his foot between her hands, she went to work.

“Is this your first cruise?”

“Um-hum.”

She was pretty sure that was an affirmative.

“How are you enjoying it so far?”

Another mumble. His calf muscles were solid and well defined. She smiled. That pretty much summed up his entire body. Warmth curled low in her belly. Her skin tingled with sexual awareness.

*He’s a client! You’re here to help him relax. Stress is a silent killer. You are here to heal!*

Suppressing her unwanted reaction, she focused on the task at hand and applied firm pressure with each stroke. His body heat seeped into her palms. A slow melting sensation passed through her abdomen. What in the world was wrong with her? She never allowed herself to be aroused by her work.

She tried again to engage him in conversation, needing the distraction desperately. He offered another inarticulate jumble of sound.

As she reached his thighs, he moved his legs apart. Tension crackled in the room. Was he hoping she'd touch him inappropriately? She grinned. *Not a chance.* He might be temptation personified, but she needed this job. It had certain very important benefits, like never keeping her in one place very long.

She hesitated at the edge of his towel. He'd checked the box next to clunes. Buttocks was in parenthesis beside the selection, so he had to have known what he was asking her to do.

*Do you really want me to rub your ass?* She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

"Mr. Smith, your card indicates that you want a full-body massage. I'm going to move the drape now."

"Um-hum."

She lifted the towel to his waist and froze. High on his right ass cheek rested an all too familiar birthmark. Several shades darker than his lightly tanned skin, the mark so closely resembled lip prints that it had become a source of amusement for the man bearing the mark.

"Jax?" she whispered.

*This can't be happening.*

He rolled onto his side, nearly dislodging the towel. As he pushed his hair out of his eyes Crystal trembled.

"Hi there, sunshine. It's been a long time."

Swinging his long legs over the side of the table, he caught her wrist and pulled her toward him. The towel just barely covered his lap as he reeled her in. Crystal forgot to breathe, forgot everything but his intense dark gaze and his thought-stealing features. He was even more amazing than she remembered, if that were possible. Six feet, four inches of rippling muscle and sinew. She wanted to press her body against him, touch him, kiss him, and...

"Wait!" She gave herself a mental shake. "What are you doing here?"

"Setting a trap for a Light Keeper. Imagine my surprise to find *you* in my trap."

Anger made his tone brittle and those night-black eyes flashed with warning. Did he know about the Flame Princess or was he still angry about... It had been six years!

She'd never expected to see him again. Surely after all this time he'd moved on with his life. Her heart thundered painfully.

*Okay, Crystal, pull yourself together.* She had to figure out what he knew. "What's going on?" She tried to sound casual, confused. "Who sent you?"

"You know damn good and well who sent me. Where is Lorrان?"

"Can you please put your clothes on? This is a little distracting."

He laughed, hooking his heels around the backs of her thighs. His gaze caressed her face, intense and inscrutable. "My body never bothered you before. I remember a time when you couldn't wait to get me out of my clothes."

She remembered it too. Every touch, every sigh.

And the agonizing loss of leaving him...

"What are you doing here?" She made it a demand this time.

"I'm looking for Lorrان." He clasped her upper arms, dragging her up onto the balls of her feet. "And you're going to tell me where she is."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Releasing her arms, he kept his legs wrapped around her, while his knuckles caressed the side of her face, tormenting her with their gentleness. "The trail is so distorted with illusion I knew I was dealing with a Light Keeper. When I realized the intricacy of the illusions, I should have suspected it was you."

"There were reasons I --"

He snatched his hand back, his fingers clenched into a fist, and he lowered his arm. "This has nothing to do with six years ago."

He was wrong. The two events were connected in ways he couldn't imagine. "Will you please listen, or are you still determined to hate me?"

"I don't hate you. How could I? But I know better than to believe one word that passes those lying lips."

Before she could protest he framed her face with his palms and claimed her mouth in a harsh, demanding kiss. Crystal shoved against his chest and stubbornly clenched her jaw, preventing a more intimate invasion.

*Jax.* How had he found her?

No, he hadn't been looking for her specifically, just a Light Keeper.

His scent surrounded her, intoxicated her. Memories burned through her mind. His hands, his taste, his body moving inside her. She hadn't meant to hurt him. Leaving him had nearly destroyed her. But she'd had no choice. He was supposed to have been just another assignment. Becoming emotionally involved had put them in more danger than he could possibly imagine.

Tearing her mouth from his, she turned her face away. "Stop it!"

"I don't want to." He cupped her breast through the top of her powder-blue uniform. "I searched for you for years. I thought you'd been kidnapped, tortured, held against your will. What other reason could there be for your disappearance? I knew you weren't dead -- because I still burned for you!"

She covered her face with her hands, trembling. Coming through the Veil had lessened the agony of their separation, but she battled the yearnings every day. She ached for his touch. His image haunted her dreams. She loved him still.

"Gods, how I burn!" Reaching under her top, he found the front clasp of her bra and released it. "Why did you leave me?"

His harsh whisper tore through her heart. Loneliness. Desolation. She understood the emotions all too well.

He rolled her nipple, his breath hot against her cheek. Her core throbbed. She wanted him there, *needed* him filling her, stretching her, completing her. Nothing and no one could ease her body's elemental longing for her equal and opposite. Her mate. But that wasn't possible. They had never undergone *Pim Noctar*. They were not...

"Kiss me. Give me your mouth."

His lips brushed hers, slid against them. She'd never been able to resist his kisses. He'd spent weeks just holding her, sharing her breath, and tasting her mouth before he

ever touched her intimately. It had been his tender patience that broke through her professional reserve.

She opened to him, surrendered to the thrust of his tongue. Passion muddled her thinking as her senses came alive. His mouth moved over and against hers, his tongue delving deeply, caressing her.

Beneath her top, his hand explored her skin, gently squeezed her breasts. She arched into his touch, increasing the pressure of his palm.

Without releasing her mouth, he scooted off the table. The towel dropped to her feet, leaving him naked. He pushed up her top and bent her over his arm, his hungry mouth claiming her nipple. She cried out softly. The exquisite pressure, the wet heat! She needed this and more. So much more.

He licked and sucked until her head spun with pleasure. Her legs trembled. Cupping her breast in his palm, he raised his head and looked into her eyes. His gaze glistened hard, ruthless, cold. "Why?"

He pulled her into his arms, molding her breasts against his chest. His cock throbbed against her belly. She wanted him desperately, but not in anger, never as punishment. She arched away, but his hands cupped her ass, kept her lower body locked against him.

Pain and accusation burned in his gaze, knocking the breath from her lungs. She hadn't wanted to leave him. Staying would have hurt him more. Inhaling shakily, she whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" He made a snarling sound and pushed her away. Crystal stumbled back, tripping over a wheeled stool. She cried out sharply before his arm banded around her waist and prevented her from hitting the floor. He set her on her feet and caged her against the wall with his body.

A firm knock sounded on the door. Crystal tried to push him away, but Jax wouldn't budge.

"This room is occupied." Her voice sounded strangled, hardly recognizable.

"Is everything all right, Crystal? May I come in?"

*Fern!*

Gazing into his furious eyes, she called out, "Everything's fine. I'll be out as soon as I finish with Mr. Smith."

"Or as soon as Mr. Smith is finished with you."

She rested her head against the wall and closed her eyes. "What do you want?"

"Tell me about Lorrان."

Nervously licking her lips, Crystal opened her eyes. "You're too smart to believe one word I say, remember?"

"Where is she?"

Guilt kicked her in the belly. She didn't want to lie to him any more than she'd wanted to leave him. He'd think the worst of her regardless, and again she had no choice. "We're going in circles. I told you, I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this." His features clouded, distorted and his gaze glistened with Shadow *iede*. If he cast his Shadow upon her, she'd be trapped between dimensions, powerless and at his mercy.

Torn by the need to confide in him, to justify her actions for the past six years, she reluctantly manifested Light *iede* in her palms and threw it in his face. The powdery substance burst with luminescence as it struck his flesh.

"You vicious little *xalotte!* Have you lost your mind?" He spun in a circle, frantically rubbing his eyes.

Without a backward glance, Crystal rushed from the room, hastily pulling her clothing back into some semblance of order.

\* \* \*

Lost in a cloud of Light *iede*, Jax stumbled about until he found the massage table. He braced himself against it and waited for the vertigo to abate. She'd blinded him! Although he was stunned by her daring, reluctant admiration swelled within him. Crystal was nothing if not unpredictable. He melted into Shadow, a smile curving his lips. As his corporeal body dissipated, his sight returned.

*Damn her!* Did she really hope to elude him on a cruise ship? Unless she was working with a Veil Keeper! Wrenched to full alert by the disconcerting thought, he hurried from the spa, passing effortlessly through walls and hurling himself between decks. Physical barriers had no meaning in the Shadow realm.

The dossier Matriarch Flame had given him contained fragments of information and half-truths. Initially he'd thought the matriarch herself had manipulated the facts, but gradually he recognized the work of a talented illusionist, a Light Keeper. Once he'd realized what he was up against, he'd painstakingly unraveled the tangled information.

Crystal. Why did it have to be Crystal? So much was unresolved between them. He didn't need this kind of distraction. Any other Light Keeper would have been easily controlled. Crystal was the best. Skilled and wily, with the uncanny ability to anticipate her opponent's next move.

Worst of all she knew him, how he thought, how he worked. It made her dangerous. But he was dangerous too.

He went to the area of the ship containing the crew's quarters and began a cabin by cabin search. He knew who to look for now. It was only a matter of time.

\* \* \*

Crystal huddled in the back corner of the spa's storeroom, waiting silently to make sure Jax hadn't followed her. He'd be searching for her now, so it was imperative that she avoided anywhere she would ordinarily go. Manifesting Light *iede*, she carefully formed a comm crystal in the center of her palm. She breathed on the crystal, activating the conduit to her home dimension. Infusing the link with urgency, she sought out Matriarch Flame.

The matriarch's regal image appeared within the crystal. Her red-streaked dark hair had been pulled back from her face and bound at the nape of her neck. Though wrinkles marred her skin, her cinnamon-colored eyes were sharp, assessing.

"You know better than contacting me directly, so I presume your circumstance is dire."



That was a rather convoluted way of asking what was wrong, but Crystal suppressed her annoyance. "Did you send the Shadow Keeper?"

"He found you already?" Matriarch Flame arched her brow in disbelief. "Impossible. The information I gave him should have taken him weeks to unravel."

On second thought, annoyance was almost inevitable when this woman was involved. "You hired the best Shadow Keeper in the dimension. Why are you surprised?"

"Jax is a decoy. They passed through the Veil not long after him, and have been two steps behind ever since. You cannot let him near Lorrان or you will lead the others to her as well."

"Others? Who are you talking about? Why must everything be so secretive?"

"I have trusted you with a life more important than my own. You have done well, Light Keeper. Trust me a little while longer. Everything will be revealed in *time*."

Crystal noted the particular emphasis she put on the last word. If Time Keepers were involved, she was screwed. "If I lead Jax away from Lorrان, I leave her unprotected."

"Not so. The Shadow Keeper will follow you and they will follow him. I will send another to you for Lorrان as soon as I am able."

"Can I finally tell her what's going on? She is so vulnerable --"

"Her ignorance protects her more than you know. As does mine. They know what I know. That's why you must never tell me where she is. Never!"

"I understand."

"I hope so. Lure the Shadow Keeper away. Distract him any way you can. I shouldn't need more than a day or two."

The matriarch's image blinked out and the comm crystal disintegrated, coating her palm with glistening powder. "Perfect." She brushed her hand off on her pant leg and left the storeroom. No sense hiding now. The easiest way to keep Jax occupied would be to let him catch her.

## Chapter Two

Jax sensed her before he saw her. A scalding rush of desire coursed through him. Even intangible as he was, it made him restless and hot. If he manifested, he would be blind, so his best chance was to trap her in the Shadow realm.

She poked her head around the corner, her eyes wide and cautious. Who was she trying to fool? Her senses had to be as electrified as his. If they were anywhere near each other, you could hear the sizzle.

Creeping down the corridor, she continued her shallow pretense. She was dangling herself in front of him like bait, waiting for him to snatch her. Jax had intended to do just that, but her antics made him wary. Why did she want to be caught? It didn't make sense.

He fell in step behind her, watching and waiting.

She walked to the end of the corridor, then turned around and retraced her steps. He didn't know what game she played, but he had no intention of cooperating.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she looked around impatiently.

He grinned. *Sorry, sunshine, I'm on to you.*

She opened her mouth as if to say something, then snapped it closed. A cunning light ignited within her pastel-blue eyes. Plan B?

Crossing the corridor, she slid a cardkey into the electronic lock and let herself into the cabin. Jax followed. The room was tiny. He'd have to be careful or she'd end up in the Shadow realm regardless of his intentions. His essence served as a portal. All she had to do was pass through, even inadvertently, and she'd enter the Shadow realm.

He carefully stayed back from her as she moved about the cabin. She took off her shoes and tucked them inside the wall locker. With a rapid-fire popping sound she unsnapped the front of her uniform. Why was she undressing?

She took a slinky sundress from the locker and laid it across the bed, sheer thigh-high stockings following. Then with slow, teasing movements she stripped off her uniform. Black lace barely-there panties, with a matching bra supporting lush breasts and tormented his libido.

Every move she made was a silent challenge, a dare. *Come and get me, Jax. You know you want to.* He could almost hear her taunting voice.

The scalloped edge of her bra revealed the upper curve of one rosy areola. Her entire nipple was discernable beneath the lace, but that crescent sliver of tempting flesh made his mouth water and his fingers itch.

She walked into the bathroom, a definite swagger in her step. The more provocative she became, the more determined he grew to resist her. Taking a wide-toothed comb from the mirrored cabinet, she pulled the elastic band from her hair and bent over. Her thick silver-blonde hair tumbled nearly to the floor. Long legs and her tempting ass were displayed to perfection.

*Prazot*, she was asking for it. No, she was *begging* for it, and he needed to know why!

After working her hair into a sleek, silky wave, she tossed it back, her eyes heavy-lidded with pleasure. Oh, she was going to regret every teasing pose, every taunting little sigh. As soon as he figured out her angle.

Crystal slowly licked her lips and scanned the room for visual anomalies. The Shadow realm existed between dimensions. Shadow Keepers were able to release their hold on one dimension without transporting entirely into the next. They became intangible in both dimensions, a sort of living ghost.

After years of constructing complex illusions, Crystal had developed a hypersensitivity to anything not completely -- real.

She had no doubt Jax was in the room somewhere. The tight knot in her belly and her rapidly hardening nipples told her all she needed to know. Why hadn't he pulled her into the Shadow realm?

It was probably better that he hadn't. Whoever was following Jax wouldn't be able to follow them if he pulled her through.

Two days? Could she keep this up for two days? She nearly burst out laughing. The real question was, could he?

The ship had docked in Nassau this morning. Perhaps she'd go play in the Straw Market. She glanced at the sundress thoughtfully. It had a built-in support. Carefully maintaining a straight face, she unhooked her black lace bra. She carelessly tossed the undergarment onto the bed and picked up the phone.

She punched in an extension and stretched her back while the line connected. "Hi, Liz, is Lori there? Sure." While she waited for Liz to look for Lori, she rubbed the underside of her breasts, relieving the soreness left by the bra's underwire. Was Jax paying attention to the conversation or had her breasts distracted him? Men tended to forget everything when faced with naked breasts. Jax was no exception.

"Okay, can you give her a message for me? Just let her know I have a date." She scanned the cabin, but was still unable to locate her intangible visitor. "Why are you laughing? Is that so hard to believe?" He had to be here somewhere. "I may not be back until late, so tell her not to worry. Thanks, Liz."

Shaking her head at Liz's disbelief, she hung up the phone.

Warm hands cupped her breasts a moment before his body solidified behind her. Crystal smiled.

"Am I your date or is someone going to be disappointed?"

His voice washed over her, making her shiver. "That depends."

He rolled her nipples between his fingers, his mouth nuzzling her neck. "On what?"

"Whether you're here to interrogate me or..."

She turned to face him and gasped. The layer of Light *iede* still coated his eyes, shimmering like silver glitter. She gently touched the corner of each eye and the *iede* disintegrated. He blinked repeatedly, dislodging the silver flecks.

"That stings like hell, I'll have you know."

"You left me no choice."

His eyes narrowed. "There are always choices." They glared at each other for a strained moment, then he said, "I have a proposal for you."

"I'm listening." His hands caressed her shoulders as his newly restored gaze descended to her breasts.

"Truce."

"Are we at war?"

He arched his eyebrows, his dark gaze returning to her face. "If you stand between me and Lorrان -- you'll leave me no choice."

"What are the conditions of the truce?"

"No powers for one hour."

She grinned and ran her gaze down his naked body with the same deliberate thoroughness he'd just used on her. "It may take longer than an hour to get you out of my system. The toxin has been building up for six years."

"You're playing me, don't think I'm not aware. You're using that luscious body to distract me from my mission."

"So why are you letting me?"

He guided her hand to his cock, curved her fingers against his thickness. "Because the toxin has been building up for six years."

"Truce," she whispered.

"Truce."

She leapt into his arms, wrapped her legs around his waist, and trapped his cock against her mons. Their mouths came together in a deep, seeking kiss. His hands tangled in her hair, hers clasped his neck and shoulders.

Ravenous.

Their tongues dueled and danced. Their mouths clung. She ground her hips, rubbing her mound against his erect cock. Her core melted, soaking her panties and transmitting heat freely between their bodies.

She'd been hungry for so long, deprived of the only man able to satisfy her. His hands cupped her ass, slipping inside her French-cut panties. She wiggled and moaned, desperate to begin in earnest, yet knowing it would never be enough.

A lifetime with Jax wouldn't be enough.

Desperation ricocheted through her, making her whimper. She didn't want to lose him again, not after the reality of life without him. But she was trapped by circumstances beyond her control.

He placed her on her back and crawled on top of her. It was the only way the bunk would accommodate them both. He reached down, grabbing something near their feet. She was only mildly interested until he looped one of her stockings around her wrist and pulled it tight.

"Hey, I thought this was a truce!"

Straddling her hips, he quickly tied her to the nautical cleat bolted to the wall for decoration. She'd looked at the blunt metal prongs more than once thinking they were positioned perfectly for just this purpose. He dragged her other arm to the cleat's mate and repeated the process.

The position spread her arms wide, while leaving her shoulders resting on the bunk. She couldn't manifest *iede* with her hands this far apart and without *iede* she was powerless. "I agreed to the truce. This isn't necessary."

"You say that now." Heat curled into her core at his wicked grin.

Trailing his fingers along the underside of her upraised arms he sent tingles skittering through her torso. Her breasts quivered with each ragged breath. His dark eyes gleamed dangerously. Why was he doing this? She wasn't... the enemy.

*If you stand between me and Lorrán -- you'll leave me no choice.* His words echoed through her mind. This was no truce! She'd clearly underestimated him. Lust was alive in his gaze, but anger and ruthlessness shone there as well.

He pulled and pressed her nipples, increasing the pressure to the very edge of pain. "Where is she?"

She glared at him mutinously. There was a glaring hole in his strategy. She *wanted* his touch, craved his penetration.

Sliding down along her body, he bent over her breast and sucked one nipple deeply into his mouth. She savored the sting, arched into the forceful suction. *Yes, just like that!* She needed him so badly her whole body ached. His lips released her nipple with a distinct pop. Cool air wafted across the wet tip and Crystal shivered.

“Is Lori Lorrان?”

He’d been paying more attention than she’d hoped. “Who is Lorrان? Why are you looking for her?”

He kept her legs trapped between his, but tugged her panties down onto her thighs. Her clit swelled, anticipating his touch, his kiss. Using just his fingertips, he feathered ticklish caresses across her tummy. Her belly jumped and quivered, the tension inside her mounting.

“I only saw one toothbrush in the compartment when you pulled out the comb. You don’t have a cabin mate.”

She stared up at him silently. He’d never puzzle it out on his own and the longer he kept her here the better. If Matriarch Flame was correct. But what if the Time Keeper didn’t wait for Jax? What if he or she found Lorrان on their own? Did they realize how close they were?

Crystal should have lured him off the ship. This was a major miscalculation.

“We’re on the same side,” he coaxed with his deep voice and his night-black eyes. “I can protect you both, but you have to trust me.”

She was following orders. Always following orders. She didn’t have the luxury of making decisions for herself. She was a soldier, an underling.

His hand crept toward her slit, the threat obvious. “Don’t make me do this, sunshine. Tell me what I need to know.”

*Sunshine!* He mocked her with the endearment. He used to whisper it on a sigh as he came deep inside her body.

Parting her gently, he fingered her clit, keeping her thighs pressed together, accenting the demanding pulsation in her core. She gritted her teeth, trembling. His gaze assessed her face, the rise and fall of her breasts. He knew her well enough to sense when an orgasm was upon her.

He took her to the edge and stopped. She cried out. He did it again.

“We can do this all night.”

Sucking in a ragged breath, she furiously blinked back tears. “Wouldn’t you rather be inside me? You’re punishing yourself as much as me.”

“I’m not the one being stubborn. Just tell me how to find her and I’ll make us both very happy.”

She turned her face away. Admitting she knew Lorrان would compromise the mission. She could say nothing.

He wrapped his arms around her thighs, hugging her to his chest as he lowered his face.

“Oh gods, please don’t! I can’t bear...”

His tongue parted her folds and curled around her clit in the sweetest caress. Over and over, slowly, gently, his tongue moved against her swollen nub. Her pussy throbbed painfully, demanding release, demanding penetration. She whimpered and moaned, arching up against his mouth to no avail. His arms kept her thighs pressed together, preventing him from doing more than teasing.

“Jax!” she sobbed, hating him, wanting him, needing him.

“Is she a passenger or one of the crew?”

He hadn’t bothered raising his face, and his warm breath played over her sensitive flesh. *Damn him!* She twisted and thrashed, bucking against his restraining hold. Tears escaped the corners of her eyes. Her muscles knotted so tightly she felt nauseous. It would serve him right if she threw up all over him!

“Give me something and I’ll let you come. A clue. A hint. We can barter.”



Time Keepers were often clairvoyant. Whoever followed Jax through the Veil could be mind-linked with him right now his knowledge. Regardless of her body's desperate need, she could not surrender.

Why was she being so stubborn? Jax tugged off her panties, pausing when he felt how wet they were. He'd pulled them down before he started teasing her. Just knowing he was here had caused her to cream. His cock bucked at the thought. His balls had to be a delightful shade of blue by now. He'd never been this hard before.

He crawled off the end of the bunk and she started kicking. The frantic scissoring of her long supple legs offered him teasing peeks at her slick pussy. Raising her panties to his face, he inhaled her scent, his gaze boring into hers.

"How long has it been?" She didn't respond. He didn't expect her to. "Do you lie in bed aching for me or have you found a way to fill the void?"

She panted, her breasts quivering with each ragged breath.

"I won't pretend I haven't tried," he told her, "but everyone I fucked just made me more desperate for you."

"I'm here." Her voice cracked and she parted her thighs.

Fury shredded his discipline. This opportunity was too valuable to squander. Even as his mind registered the fact, his passion-deprived body took control. Launching himself at her, he lifted her legs, spread them wide, and thrust home in one violent drive.

She cried out, but her cunt clenched him rhythmically. Her wet heat assured him he wasn't hurting her. *Home*. This was home. His body knew it. His being craved her. Regardless of the forces keeping them apart, on an elemental level he recognized his mate.

Draping her legs over his shoulders, he cupped her breasts, greedy for their weighty feel, their heat and softness. Her nipples stabbed his palms, pebble hard and deeply flushed.

He rolled one between his fingers. Her pussy fluttered in response. "Yes! Gods, you feel good."

Her tight passage caressed him as he pressed and stroked her nipples. Tears swam behind her long lashes and her lips trembled. She didn't speak. Wise decision. He teetered on the brink of violence, ready to fuck her brutally for the six years of hell she'd put him through.

"Please."

Raw anguish infused her tone and his rage dissipated. The need to comfort her followed in the wake of his anger. His mate was in pain. She needed him as badly as he needed her. Shifting her legs to his waist, he balanced on his knees, grazing her breasts with his chest.

He pressed his mouth to hers. She yielded, lips parting in silent invitation. Exploring boldly with his tongue, he relished her taste, her texture, her heat. She wrapped her legs around him, keeping his cock deeply imbedded in her body.

He pushed into her mouth with his tongue. She moaned. Pulling his hips back, he savored the silken cling of her pussy. Then reversing direction, he entered her with sweet deliberation.

She trembled beneath him, her legs flexing against his back. Her cunt fluttered wildly. She was almost there. Did he have the strength?

*Could he be so cruel?*

Savage determination cleared his head and restored his control. Crystal could give lessons in cruelty. Easing his hands to the backs of her knees, he shoved her legs toward her chest and pulled out.

"No," she cried out desperately.

"Where the fuck is Lorrán?"

## Chapter Three

The blissful orgasm, which had just begun to form, sputtered out. Her cunt pulsed emptily. Crystal let out an exasperated cry. "I hate you. Gods, how I hate you!"

"Say the words and I'll fill you again." He passed his thumb teasingly over her clit. She kicked at him. "I'll give you pleasure like you've never known." Pushing two fingers into her pussy, he taunted her with a fraction of what she really needed. "I'll make it better than anything you remember."

"Why? Have you learned new tricks in the past six years?" Sarcasm was the only weapon at her disposal. He held her legs wide, his fingers gently stroking. The stockings bound her wrists to the wall, preventing her from accessing her power.

"What I learned in the past six years is what a sadistic bitch you are." He launched himself off her and manifested black leather pants. "Keepers bond for life! Mine has been a shambles since you left me. I --"

"We had an intense affair. That doesn't make --"

"Are you really that naïve?" Raking his hands through his hair, he stared down at her from beside the bunk. "I don't know who activated *Pim Noctar*, but you are my bonded mate. Are you going to pretend you don't feel --"

His features froze mid-sentence, his eyes clouded, and his body stilled. Even his breathing ceased.

A distortion formed directly behind Jax. Seeing it Crystal went wild, frantically tugging on the stockings and twisting against the bunk. The fabric of space bowed, bubbled, then separated. Two figures emerged from the rupture and she screamed.

Identical in face and form, the Time Master's sons moved with purposeful speed. One extended his hand toward Jax, while his twin stood at the foot of the bunk. The rupture closed and oppressive silence descended on the small cabin.

“What have you done? Why are you here?” Her voice sounded shrill and alien in her own ears.

“Karrick is holding him in the moment. No harm will come to him -- yet.” The Time Keeper at the foot of the bunk stared down at her dispassionately. His bright green gaze never left her face despite her nudity. If Karrick restrained Jax, then Warrick was speaking to her.

Mentally scrambling to decipher the situation, Crystal looked from Warrick to his brother and back again. Karrick was a Future Keeper. Warrick controlled the past.

“Let him go!”

“Answer his question.” Warrick’s gaze bore into hers. His classically handsome features revealed nothing but impatience. She was spread before him like a sacrifice and he didn’t so much as glance at her body. This was not about her. They were after the Flame Princess!

“What question?”

“Where the fuck is Lorrان?” Warrick perfectly replicated Jax’s ruthless tone.

“I don’t know!”

Karrick looked at his brother and fear twisted through Crystal. “Clearly she wants to play.”

Emerald fire erupted in Warrick’s gaze and sensation surged through her body. Scalding desire seared her skin, her core clenched, and her clit throbbed. Crystal screamed, turning her face away.

“You’ll only make yourself hoarse... What did he call you? Oh yes, sunshine. This cabin is in flux. We’ve created a temporal bubble where only we exist.”

She forced herself to look at him. “You are so far beyond regulations --”

“You’ll have to report my conduct to the Time Master. He responds to any abuse of Time Keeper abilities with swift and definitive action.”

His tone was sincere, his expression earnest, which made his mockery all the more bitter. They were the Time Master’s sons!

“Don’t do this to me.” She gasped, tossing helplessly on the bunk.

"I'm not doing anything. The Shadow Keeper created these sensations. I'm just allowing you to experience them again -- and again." He laughed as she writhed. "I can loop this moment for as long as it takes."

"Why?" she yelled, pressing her thighs together as her muscles contracted. "I can't tell you what I don't know. Don't you think I would have told Jax?" Crystal moaned, tears streaming from the corner of her eyes. She would not be responsible for them finding Lorrان!

"This isn't working," Warrick grumbled, releasing her from his control.

She sobbed, sagging against the mattress as the intensity receded.

"Who did she call?" Karrick maintained his hold on Jax while he studied her thoughtfully.

Warrick manifested Time *iede* in the palm of his hand and watched the scene. Shame heated her face as her half-naked image moved provocatively inside the crystal.

"You're a heartless cock tease, Light Keeper. No wonder Jax was so rough on you." A smile tugged at one corner of Karrick's mouth. His amusement compounded her indignity. "What was the extension she used?"

"One-four-six-nine-five."

Karrick moved to the phone on the nightstand and punched in the number. He hung up the receiver without saying a word. "What is a green room?"

She just glared at him.

"Let's go." Warrick nodded toward the door.

"-- the connection, the desire?" Jax snapped. Anger churned within his belly.

"Untie me now! Alrick's sons were just here. They've gone after her."

Crystal's face was pale and streaked with tears, her body trembling. Jax shook his head, trying to dispel the odd buzzing in his ears. "What are you talking about?"

She licked her lips and turned her face away. In a split second she had turned from a spitting hellcat to a terrified... What had frightened her?

Resting one knee on the bunk, he quickly unbound her wrists and pulled her into his arms. She clutched his back, molding herself against him, shaking. She'd said something about Time Keepers.

He brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her gently. "Did they hurt you? What happened?"

With obvious reluctance, she pushed him away and scrambled off the bunk. "We have to get to her before they do."

Her avoidance escalated his fear. "Why are you crying? What did they do to you?"

"I'm fine. We have to warn Lorrان." She grabbed the sundress off the bunk and pulled it on over her head.

"Why the games?" He would insist she tell him what the Time Keepers had done, but for now Lorrان must take priority. "What's really going on?"

"You were a decoy. They followed you through the Veil. Matriarch Flame sent you on what she thought was a futile search. Unfortunately for all of us, she underestimated you."

"I led them right to..." His mouth went dry. "Shit, I led them to you. Do they know where Lorrان is?" He manifested a shirt and shoes and followed her from the cabin.

"No. I knew you were listening when I called Lori. They took the bait. They're headed in the wrong direction."

He smiled. "Lori isn't Lorrان?"

"Please." She tossed her hair over her shoulders and hurried down the corridor. "Do you really think I'd be that obvious? Lori's sister is Lorrان's cabin mate. Lori will figure I couldn't get a hold of Julie or Renee, so I left the message with her."

"Is Lorrان Julie or Renee?"

"Renee."

“We can move faster as shadows. Take my hand.” Mistrust flashed in her pastel-blue eyes and he wanted to shake her. He wasn’t the one who’d disappeared. “I untied you, remember? I won’t leave you powerless any longer than it takes to reach her.”

She took his hand and Jax drew her into the Shadow realm. Her hand tightened around his as their physical surroundings dematerialized. He hardly noticed the shift from one dimension to another after so many years, but she was unaccustomed to the disembodied sensation. He could still feel her hand in his, yet he couldn’t feel the floor beneath his feet.

“Where to?” he asked, wishing they had more time.

She squared her shoulders and took several deep breaths, obviously fighting for composure. “There’s a workshop near the Showcase. Lori is in the cast, but Julie and Renee both work behind the scenes. Renee manages the costumes.”

“The Flame Princess is managing costumes on a cruise ship? How does Matriarch Flame feel about this?” Holding tightly to her hand he let her lead the way. “Don’t forget you can project yourself up and down as well as forward and back.”

“Matriarch Flame has insisted that I divulge as little information to her as possible. Time Keepers are often clairvoyant, so her caution seems justified.”

“Warrick and Karrick were actually in that cabin? Why don’t I remember any of it?”

“Karrick trapped you in the moment. He’s a Future Keeper, so he simply kept you from progressing along the time continuum.”

“While Warrick tortured you?” She didn’t even glance at him. Anger and protectiveness grappled within his chest, making him restless and anxious for the day he would meet the Time Keepers face to face. “Does Renee have any idea who she is?”

“We need to go up three decks. I don’t know how to do it.”

He smiled and slid his hand up to her wrist. “Grab my wrist as well. This might feel odd.” She held on tightly as he launched them vertically through the translucent remnants of Dimension 939-3. They could see and hear what transpired around them, but they were invisible.

“OK, across the atrium and to the right. We’re almost there.”

Following her directions, they hurried past a throng of unsuspecting humans.

“Renee started manifesting abilities at a very young age, so she had to be trained. I know very little about the two guardians who protected her before me, but I’ve --”

“How long have you been guarding her?”

She looked at him meaningfully. “Six years.”

“What?” His stomach muscles constricted as if she’d sucker-punched him. “You left me to --”

“We don’t have time for this right now. It won’t take the twins long to figure out they were duped.”

Pausing in the empty corridor outside the workroom, Crystal released her hold on Jax and solidified. He followed suit, waiting to see what she had in mind.

“Renee believes that she is being pursued by the ambitious staff of a nonexistent organization called the Foundation for Paranormal Research. I’m not going to correct that misconception at this point. She’ll respond without question if I stick to the masquerade.”

“You do the talking. Let’s just get her out of here.”

Nodding, Crystal pushed open the door to the cluttered workroom and walked in. Costumes hung on neat racks and shelves filled with baskets and bins lined one entire wall. Behind a wide worktable sat a lovely young woman. Jax stared at her suspiciously. Her hair, which was parted down the middle and French braided into two neat plaits, was an ordinary shade of brown. This couldn’t be Lorrان. Both Lorrان’s parents were Flame Keepers. Her hair should be shot through with bright red strands.

“Renee,” Crystal called and the young woman looked up over the rim of her narrow glasses. Glasses? A Keeper with poor eyesight? Impossible.

“Hi, Crys. Is this your date? Lori just stopped by.”

Her wide hazel eyes combined shades of green, gold, and the bright cinnamon of the Order of Flame. Was Crystal somehow altering the princess’ appearance?



"My date has been postponed. They're here. I don't know how they found us but I just saw two men from the Foundation. They're identical twins. Have you seen them?"

Lorran pushed back her chair and stood, shifting her glasses to the top of her head. "You're not joking, are you? What do we do?"

"We get the hell out of here. Now."

"I should let someone know --"

"Absolutely not. We can't risk it. We walk off the ship now and don't look back."

"But Lori and Julie will --"

"They'll forgive you." Crystal motioned her forward with an urgent wave of her hand. "You can explain what happened once we get you to safety. But we have to leave now."

She didn't argue after that. Glancing curiously at Jax, she followed Crystal from the workroom. Jax fell into step behind them. They emerged into the sunlit atrium and heard, "Halt! You have no right to take her!"

Acting on instinct, Jax grabbed the wrist of each woman and dragged them into the Shadow realm. Lorran screamed. Crystal cursed.

So much for the masquerade.

\* \* \*

"Renee, you have to calm down. Jax is not going to hurt you. He just saved your life back there."

"What the hell is he? How did he make us disappear? We sank through the floor like..."

Knowing the Time Keepers could sense them, perhaps even see them, Jax had dragged them through the deck and quickly found a vacant cabin before allowing them to solidify.

"We should lure them into Nassau," he said, ignoring Lorran's outburst. "The more area they have to search the less likely they'll be to find us."

Crystal shook her head. "That's what they'll expect us to do. This ship leaves port in less than an hour. If we can leave them in Nassau --"

"What is going on?" Lorrán's face was flushed, her eyes wide and frightened.

"We'll explain everything as soon as we lose the Time Keepers."

Jax gave her a quick kiss. "All right. Stay with Lorrán and I'll get them off the ship. I'll keep them busy until after the ship leaves port and then catch up to you. Wait fifteen minutes and then contact Malik Cendar in New Orleans. His mate had things she needed to do before they leave Earth, so they may not have departed yet. Ask Malik to send Minuette. She's a Veil Keeper."

He stepped into the Shadow realm and disappeared.

Lorrán stared at Crystal with wide, unblinking eyes. "Did you understand any of that?"

How did she even begin? Crystal took her friend by the hand and led her to the full-length mirror beside the bathroom door. "I'd like to introduce you to someone." She moved the younger woman in front of the mirror and disabled the illusion she had painstakingly maintained for six years.

Lorrán's hair flowed to her waist in gleaming waves of red-streaked chocolate brown. Her features morphed subtly, becoming more angular, more distinctive. The cinnamon speckles in her hazel eyes expanded until her irises shimmered with the reddish color.

"Renee, meet Lorrán of the Order of Flame. The people pursuing you are not from a secret government foundation, they're from our home dimension."

Their eyes met in the mirror. "*Our* home dimension? You are not... You're from another dimension?"

Giving her shoulders a reassuring squeeze, Crystal moved to the center of the cabin. "Unfortunately we don't have time for details right now. I'll answer all your questions as soon as Jax lets us know we're out of danger."

"What is Jax?"

"He's a Shadow Keeper." Crystal longed to finally say the words. "He's my bonded mate."

Lorran turned back to the mirror, clearly fascinated by her true appearance. Taking advantage of her distraction, Crystal manifested Light *iede* and formed a comm crystal. Establishing communications with Keepers she'd never met could be tricky. She needed to concentrate.

Breathing on the crystal, she infused it with what little information she had, New Orleans, Malik, and a Veil Keeper named Minuette. The crystal shimmered and then began to glow. Each fragment of information narrowed the scope of the search and intensified the crystal's radiance.

The image of a handsome Frost Keeper materialized within the crystal.

"Your signal is rather hesitant. Are you trying to contact me?"

"Are you Malik Cendar?"

"I am."

"I'm Crystal Yancy of the Order of Light. Jax told me to contact you. We're in dire need of a Veil Keeper. Is Minuette still with you?"

"Yes, but escorting Jax through the Veil weakened her far more than she realized. She's been meditating in preparation for our departure."

"I'm with Lorran and she's in danger."

"Transmit your exact location. I'll send Minuette to you."

The crystal disintegrated into sparkling dust. Lorran was watching her closely.

"What was that?"

Whipping the *iede* sediment off on her skirt, she debated what to tell her friend. Lorran had to be feeling completely overwhelmed and they had so little time. "That's called a comm crystal. They're one of the first things you'll learn to manifest. There is so much for you to understand, but we have to stay focused on your safety. Jax should return soon and hopefully Minuette will arrive shortly."

"Jax is a Shadow Keeper. You called Minuette a Veil Keeper." Lorran smiled despite her anxiety. "What sort of Keepers are we?"

"I'm a Light Keeper." Crystal was suspicious of Lorrán's apparent calm. No one could accept all of this without batting an eye. "My primary skill is manifesting illusions."

"That's how you disguised my appearance, even from me. Am I a Light Keeper too?"

"You are the rarest of the rare. Your *iede* -- the essence of your power -- is neutral. You can manifest the abilities of all the Keepers. You are virtually omnipotent."

Lorrán laughed, a short burst, a nervous release. "Is that why they're trying to kill me?"

## Chapter Four

The Bahamas had become indistinct shadows on the watery horizon when Jax returned to the cabin. "That was fun." He stretched, twisting his torso and rolling his shoulders. "Karrick is definitely precognitive. I'm not sure about Warrick."

Crystal crossed the cabin and wrapped her arms around him, surprising him with an enthusiastic hug. He tucked her head beneath his chin and stroked her long silky hair.

"Do you think they know where we are?" Lorrان sat on the sofa in the large stateroom. Jax noticed the change in her appearance and smiled. Now she looked like a Flame Princess.

"We played hide-and-seek in the Straw Market until Karrick realized it was only me. They stormed off together, but the ship had already left."

"They can't teleport like you do?" Lorrان sounded rather dazed. That was understandable. How much had Crystal been able to explain in the short time he'd been away?

"I don't actually teleport. Only Veil Keepers can move instantaneously from one point in space to another. It's hard to explain exactly what the Shadow realm is, but it frees me from the physical constraints of this dimension."

"You can fly?"

"I guess that's as good a description as any."

Crystal turned within his embrace, facing Lorrان. His arms lightly circled her waist. "He basically turns himself into a ghost."

"Were you able to contact Malik?" he asked, rubbing his cheek against her hair.

"Yes. Minuette is on her way."

"Where will she take me? Are we all going?"

Crystal didn't immediately respond, so Jax said, "It's probably best if we don't know."

"I agree." Crystal crossed to the sofa and sat beside Lorrان. "Your grandmother is the leader of the Order of Flame. She is the one responsible for keeping you alive and safe all these years. But part of her strategy has been to never know your exact whereabouts."

"The Time Keepers are psychic?"

"Psychic is a broad term that can mean almost anything." Crystal spoke calmly, her gaze intent on the younger woman's face.

There was something almost maternal about her demeanor. Six years was a long time to spend protecting someone. Jax envied their obvious closeness. Lorrان had stolen six years of his mate's life, six years Crystal should have spent with him.

"Warrick is a Past Keeper. He can access and manipulate memories. I've heard it said that he can travel to any point in the past, but I don't know if he's able to affect events once he gets there."

"What can his twin do?"

"Karrick is a Future Keeper. He's aware of things to come. Time Keepers are supposed to work in teams of three. The twins are operating without a Present Keeper. They're breaking every rule known to Time Keepers."

Lorrان's face drained of color and she fiddled with the bottom edge of her blue T-shirt. "What do they want with me? Aren't there Time police or something to keep them from breaking all these rules?"

Crystal looked at Jax, clearly uncomfortable with her next admission. "The Time Master is their father. The only hope we have of curtailing their behavior is to keep you out of their hands until the Steering Committee can intervene."

"What's the Steering Committee?"

"The ultimate authority in our dimension. Sort of like the United Nations here on Earth." She gave a little chuckle. "Only they actually enforce their decisions."

A flash of light preempted Lorrán's response. Minuette materialized with a soft cry and sank to her knees. Jax rushed to her side, helping her stand. "Are you all right?"

"Don't touch me!" she yelled and he immediately let go. Trembling visibly, she struggled to remain standing. "I think you guys are trying to kill me." She panted harshly, her hair streaming across her face.

"What's wrong with her?" Lorrán asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"I'll be fine as soon as my levels stabilize." Minuette combed her fingers through her hair, revealing her pale face. Dark circles ringed her eyes and her lips pressed into a grim line.

"What's plan B?" Crystal asked. "She's obviously in no shape to take Lorrán anywhere."

Jax had to agree. "Are you ill or just fatigued?"

"I'm not sure. I've done multiple maneuvers before and never had this reaction. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Can you escort her to a different location without leaving this dimension? Would that be easier on you?"

Minuette straightened, her gaze seeking out Lorrán. "She doesn't look much like Cayenne."

"Who is Cayenne?"

"Your sister," Crystal responded.

"I'll take her --"

"Don't tell us where. It's vital that we not know."

"I have a sister?" Lorrán digressed, her angry gaze focusing on Crystal. "You've known all along that I have a sister? Why was I kept in the dark about all of this?"

"Everything has been done for your protection. You have to believe that. You aren't out of danger yet. We have to get you away from the Time Keepers."

"Fine." Minuette rolled her shoulders. "I'll take her somewhere nearby until I can recover enough to navigate the Veil."

"You can't take her home." Jax wasn't sure he was comfortable with Minuette attempting even a short-distance maneuver. She looked terrible. "Maybe we better wait until --"

"I'm fine, really."

"I can retreat with her into the Shadow realm."

"Don't patronize me. If I didn't think I could handle this, I'd tell you."

"All right. When you arrive at your final destination, contact me without revealing your location."

"I understand."

"Well, I sure as hell don't," Lorrان snapped. "Is someone going to explain what the hell's going on?"

"The Time twins are here?" Minuette asked, a bit of the color returning to her face.

"Yes. We've managed to elude them for now, but they can't be far behind," Jax told her.

"Okay, Princess, let's get going. I'll answer your questions as soon as we arrive at our temporary destination. It may take me a day or two to recuperate enough to navigate the Veil."

Lorrان looked at Crystal. "Why did she call me Princess?"

"Your grandmother is Matriarch Flame. She has no other progeny. You and Cayenne are joint heirs to the Order of Flame. You are in essence a princess."

Lorrان shook her head. "This just gets better and better."

\* \* \*

Crystal stood on the private balcony staring out at the endless ocean. Vivid blue stretched as far as the eye could see. Billowy clouds helped distinguish the water from the sky. The sun had just started its lazy descent into the far horizon.

After Minuette departed with Lorrان, Crystal and Jax fell into an awkward silence. He wanted to give the Time Keepers until morning to reappear. If they hadn't



seen the twins by then, they'd head to New Orleans. He'd gone to change the ship's registry, assuring they wouldn't be interrupted.

Letting the breeze play through her hair, she thought about the hours to come. Happiness waited; a shimmering promise on a distant shore. Between her and that shore stretched a vast sea of misunderstanding and distrust.

A warm tingle danced down her spine and Crystal smiled. Jax. He hadn't materialized yet, but she didn't need to see him. Her being recognized him, longed for him.

"Are we official passengers now?" she asked without turning around.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith joined the cruise while the ship was docked in Nassau. I also sent a message to Julie letting her know that you and 'Renee' had a personal emergency and had to leave the ship. So, Mrs. Smith, shall we order room service? It's complimentary, you know."

Smiling despite the anxiety churning within her, she turned to face him. He lounged against the door leading back into the cabin. A violent shiver shook her whole body. Sensory overload. His dark gaze consumed her, his handsome face muddled her thinking and focused her attention entirely on him.

"What happened in the cabin? What did Warrick do to you?"

She closed her eyes for a split second and he moved, pressed her against the balcony with his warm body. Why wouldn't he let it go? He couldn't change the past. Another distinct shiver escaped her, but this time revulsion inspired the tremor.

"I will kill him if --"

"He... used what you were doing to... He took the moment in time when I was ready to kill you and replayed it over and over."

Cupping her cheek with his palm, he stared deeply into her eyes. "I am so sorry."

She laughed. "I said that to you and you looked like you wanted to hit me."

"I would never hurt you. Surely you know that. Are you still willing to explain?" His thumb brushed her lower lip. "I'm ready to listen."

She nodded and his hands moved to the railing on either side of her. Did he fear she'd run away? She'd waited six years to tell this tale. There was no way she was going anywhere until he understood what had really happened.

"My family isn't rich and powerful like yours," she began, "but my abilities brought me to the attention of some very influential people. Before my training was even complete, I was recruited by your uncle, Tilden."

"You're not a Death Keeper. What did Tilden recruit you for?"

"You don't think it would be beneficial for an assassin to work with an illusionist? Odd, the Death Keepers were more than happy to exploit my abilities."

He absorbed this for a moment. "How long did you work for the Death Keepers?" He didn't try to touch her, just remained near, his gaze intent upon her face.

"Until I was given to the Shadow Master."

Jax's eyes widened and his lips trembled. "My father --"

"For an *assignment*, Jax. I didn't mean it like that." She laughed and shook her head. "Has it really been so long that you've forgotten our first night together?"

He scrubbed his eyes with his fingertips, shaking away his momentary panic. He was such an ass! She'd been a virgin the first time they made love. How could he have forgotten? "What assignment did my father have for you?"

She didn't answer for a long, strained moment. "He wanted me to spy on his son." She paused. "I was told he suspected you of conspiring with Alrick to overthrow him."

Jax pushed off from the rail and spun away. It was worse than he ever imagined. Anger and betrayal tore through him, shredding his calm and ripping open half-healed wounds. "I was an assignment? My father paid you to sleep with me?"

Anger sparked within her light blue eyes. "I'm not a whore. Your father paid me to monitor your activities and that's what I did. The rest... just happened."

Memories, bittersweet and intense, assailed him. He couldn't speak, couldn't think, could only remember.

“Why did he mistrust you? Two weeks into my assignment I knew his suspicions were unfounded, and told him so. Still he insisted I continue.”

“My mother had an affair around the time she became pregnant with me. Jerreth has never been completely convinced that I am his son. I knew he resented me, but this...”

“You said something while you had me -- tied up that started me thinking.”

He leaned against the cabin door, too upset to touch her. “What did I say?”

“You claimed that we are bonded mates. I’ve been in denial about that aspect of what happened. Is it possible that your father activated *Pim Noctar* to make sure we couldn’t resist each other?”

Hating the dead was such a waste of time, but every word she uttered only deepened his resentment of Jerreth Severn. “Not only possible, likely. He knew I wouldn’t keep secrets from a lover, so he sent me a woman I couldn’t resist. Gods, I never realized what a bastard he really was.”

She turned back to face the ocean. Her pale blonde hair rippled in the breeze. He wanted to bury his face in the silken strands as he undressed her slowly. But the story was only half-told. She’d explained what brought them together, not what tore them apart.

“Why did you leave without saying goodbye? Why let me wonder what happened to you for six long years?”

“What was the first thought that crossed your mind when I explained that I worked for your father?”

He’d accused her of being a whore, paid to seduce him.

She didn’t make him admit it. Still facing the ocean, she said, “And that was after six years. Think how much more passionate your reaction would have been if I’d told you at the time.” She finally turned around. The setting sun created a golden nimbus out of her hair. “Matriarch Flame approached me with this mission. She said it was ‘a cut all ties and disappear’ assignment. I had to make up my mind right there and then. I

knew no matter how I tried to break it to you, you would never forgive me, so I accepted her terms.”

It all made perfect sense and yet it did nothing to eliminate the aching loss they had suffered during their years apart.

“I’d never been in love before.” Her voice caressed him, but her gaze darted away. “I thought it was that intense for everyone. It was only after I came through the Veil and the cravings began that I suspected I’d made a horrible mistake.”

“You honestly didn’t realize we had bonded?” He had experienced casual sex. He recognized the difference immediately. She’d had nothing to compare it to.

“I figured the depression and the loneliness would have happened when you ended our relationship, so I just concentrated on the job and toughed it out.”

“And you’re so sure I would have ended our relationship?”

“Your father hired me to spy on you. You would have tossed me out on my ass.”

So much had happened in the past six years, Jax was inclined to agree. It wasn’t until after Jerreth’s death that Jax had begun to mature and mellow. When his brother, Jarek, took over as Shadow Master, Jax had finally been able to put the past behind him and move on. At least the portions of his past that his father influenced. The thought brought him up short.

This was all Jerreth’s doing. His father’s irrational suspicion had set this fiasco in motion.

“You never tried to contact me. Not even once.”

“It was forbidden. My broken heart was nothing compared to Lorrán’s life.”

“Was your heart broken? Did you mourn for me?”

## Chapter Five

Crystal took his hand and led him back into the cabin. "I know that we can't actually change the past. But for tonight I want to pretend. I want to go back to our last night together and rewrite the ending. Then we can continue on in the direction our lives were meant to go."

He smiled and her heart lurched within her breast. Gods, how she'd missed his smile!

She let go of his hand and summoned her power, centering her energy and coating her palms with a thick layer of Light *iede*. Searching her memory for every detail, the tiniest nuance of their lover's hideaway, she meticulously constructed the illusion. The *iede* coalesced, rapidly expanding until the silvery sphere encompassed the entire room.

She took a deep breath and released the illusion, allowing it to take shape and solidify.

Jax turned around in a slow circle, his handsome features alight with wonder. "It's identical." He strolled to the window and gazed out into the starry night. "You even got the view right."

"How could I forget?"

"I remember everything about that night." He crossed the room, his gaze locked with hers. "I've relived it hundreds of times in my dreams."

"We'll revel in the good parts. But you won't wake up alone."

He seemed hesitant to touch her. Desire burned brightly in his gaze but something held him back, kept him just out of reach. She nervously licked her lips, overcome by a sudden rush of awkwardness.

"I don't want to relive the past." He took her hands between his and raised them to his lips. "We aren't the same people we were six years ago. That's not good or bad, it just is."

With a silent nod, she burst the illusion, showering the room with flecks of Light *iede*. He held out his hand, admiring the sparkle. "I'd like to see you in this, and only this."

She could disperse the glitter with a wave of her hand, but the silver specks glistened in his dark hair, making his eyes appear endlessly black. Pulling the sundress off over her head, she manifested more *iede* and tossed it into the air above her head. With no mental command to power it, the powdery substance dusted her naked body, making her skin shimmer.

He disintegrated his clothing with the blink of his eyes and grinned. "There's nothing between us now. My father is gone and your mission is complete. Let's make new memories." His gaze roamed over her body, intense with desire and male appreciation. "You are so beautiful covered in *iede*, I'm afraid to touch you."

"Touch me. I'll make more."

With just his index finger he drew an undulating pattern across the upper swell of her breasts.

"What does it taste like?"

Capturing his gaze, she smiled. "What do you want it to taste like?"

"Sweet. No, spicy --"

"Done." She arched her brows challengingly.

Intrigued, Jax lowered his face and licked her nipple. Cinnamon and sugar, sweet and spicy, just like he'd requested. "Damn, you're good," he murmured against her skin.

"Tell me when you're ready for something else."

"I haven't even begun to enjoy this flavor yet." He trailed his tongue up her throat, pausing to explore the underside of her chin before tracing her sparkling lips. The brighter the glitter, the more pronounced the flavor. This could be fun.

He caressed her with his lips, absorbing her heat and softness. Then he pushed into her mouth with his tongue, sharing the sweet/spicy *iede*. She made a muffled sound in the back of her throat and returned his kiss with equal fervor.

His hands stroked her breasts, fascinated by the fine sediment coating her smooth skin. Tingles erupted in his palms and his lips. "Are you doing that on purpose?"

"Doing what?"

"Your *iede* is making me tingle."

Her chuckle was low and wicked. "Are you sure it's the *iede*?"

She had a valid point. Parts of his body not yet touched by *iede* were tingling like crazy. A sudden rush of desire made him dizzy, desperate to be inside her, to reestablish the connection they had lost six years before.

He lifted her in his arms and placed her on the bed.

"At least this one is big enough for both of us," she said as he stretched out beside her.

"You don't like having me on top of you?"

"Not when you're determined to... or rather determined not to let me come."

"I never apologized properly for my boorish behavior." Slipping one arm under her neck, he kissed her deeply, slowly, while his hand descended along her body with obvious intent. Her skin was so soft. He would never tire of touching her.

Her thighs parted, making room for his hand. They were both beyond pretense. They had waited too long, they needed too much to be anything but eager. Hot and slick with desire, her body told him explicitly how much she wanted him. He parted her folds and traced her slit with his middle finger, all the while savoring her sweet mouth.

He dipped into her pulsing core with his middle finger and groaned at the wet heat awaiting him. It would be heaven. *Not yet!*

Moving his slick fingers to her swollen clit, he circled and flicked. She groaned, clutching at his shoulders, oblivious to her long nails. He welcomed the pain. Knowing she was desperate for him was worth a few scratches.

“Come for me, sunshine. Let me feel you melt.” A few more circles and her body arched into his hand, shaking as her orgasm burst within her. Hot cream soaked his fingers and Jax grinned. The scent of her arousal sped his pulse and stirred his hunger. “I want to taste you. Bring that sweet pussy over here.”

She hesitated only a moment, then moved to straddle his face, positioning herself directly over his eager mouth. He inhaled deeply, prolonging the anticipation. He’d waited so long to touch her and taste her. He didn’t want it to end. Parting her with his thumbs, he found her clit with his tongue then moved his hands to her hips.

A soft cry escaped her with his first persistent stroke. His chest tightened, the wave of tenderness almost painful. Each gasp and moan made him more determined to take his time. Her essence coated his tongue and filled his mouth. Honey. She tasted like warm honey. He drove his tongue into her cunt, finding cream unaffected by the illusion. Honey was nice, and he was ravenous for her!

Crystal arched backward, bracing herself against his thighs as his mouth adored her aching pussy. He licked and sucked, devouring her cream as fast as her body produced it. Abandoned completely to the pleasure, wild with sensations she had suppressed for six years, she spread her legs wide and angled her hips, giving him access to anything he desired.

“Turn around.” He spoke the words against her heated flesh, his breath a distinct caress.

They’d only done this once before, but the memory sent tingles all through her body. Giving pleasure made receiving it even sweeter. She reversed position and bent over him, keeping her sex aligned with his mouth.



His cock arched away from his body, begging for attention. Closing her lips around the head, she slowly sucked him into her mouth, savoring his throaty groan. He tasted of cinnamon and sugar. Nothing had ever tasted sweeter or thrilled her more. *Jax*. They were finally together as they were meant to be. She swirled her tongue around and around. She hadn't realized her mental command had transformed all the *iede* in the room.

Keeping her lips firmly sealed, she slid her mouth up and down along his thick shaft, pausing at the end of each stroke to suck firmly on the sensitive head of his cock. He groaned again, praising her efforts.

His mouth moved against her folds, tongue burrowing, lips gently sucking. Tender. He touched her so tenderly. She was so close to the edge. One light touch would trigger her orgasm, and he loved to make her wait, to prolong the pleasure until they both ached for fulfillment.

He rubbed her ass, delving into the crease with his fingers. She moved faster, knowing what he intended, wanting it, yet fearing it. He raised his knees, spreading his legs, offering his body in the same way he intended to take hers.

She quickly licked her fingers, and waited for him to begin. He pushed two fingers into her throbbing cunt, then moved the moisture back to her tightly puckered anus. The ultimate intimacy, absolute surrender. Positioning her finger, while she worked his cock, she pushed as he pushed, and they breached the tight rings of muscle at exactly the same time.

His cock bucked wildly and feminine power intensified her pleasure. He shook with his need for her, making her shake in return. Gradually he relaxed. His tongue settled over her clit. He pulled his finger nearly out while he flicked her with his tongue. She matched the slide of her mouth to the movement of her finger, desperate for more of him, needing all of him. He moved faster. She pushed deeper. Wet mouths slid, insistent fingers thrust, their movements perfectly synchronized. They breathed as one. Their heartbeats aligned.

Twisting his hips, he dislodged his cock from her mouth. "Too much." He panted, but his mouth resumed its tender assault.

She left her finger inside him, unwilling to lose the tangible connection of being part of him. Resting her cheek against his thigh, she concentrated on the sensations unfurling inside her. His finger moved, while his tongue alternately flicked her clit and rimmed her core.

Hard spasms of pleasure released and she pressed her face into his thigh, muffling her scream. He licked and sucked until he wrung the last tingle from her trembling body.

"Let's go into the Shadow realm."

"Why?" Feeling replete and lazy, she didn't want to move. Easing her finger from his body, she smiled at his groan.

"You'll see." He lifted her off him and stood beside the bed, eyes shining with warmth and mischief. Holding out his arms he said, "Wrap yourself around me, arms and legs."

She grasped his shoulders and lifted one leg to his waist. He pulled the other into position and she locked her ankles behind him. His whole body was so warm. She wanted to rub against him like a cat.

"Ready?"

"I guess. Why can't we just..." Her protest trailed away as his cock sank into her pussy. Hard and incredibly hot, he filled her emptiness. Blissful pressure. She welcomed the fullness, craved it.

The cabin faded, dimmed until only they existed in the velvety Shadow realm. All she could see was Jax. His scent filled her head. She felt only his hands, his lean hips and his thick cock, stretching her, filling her.

Intensified by the absence of other stimuli, each sensation focused exquisitely. The brush of his hands sent heat swirling through her torso. Pleasure lanced through her pussy with each firm thrust.

"Keep your legs wrapped around me, but let go with your arms."

She hesitated only a moment. Unfettered by gravity, she floated in midair as he surged deeper. Closing her eyes, she concentrated entirely on the steady slide of his shaft, the elemental blending of their bodies and souls.

Perfect.

Complete.

Tension mounted and pleasure built.

He angled her downward, his hands firmly grasping her knees. Her hair floated around her face, silky and ticklish. Spreading her legs wide allowed him to thrust more aggressively. She clenched her inner muscles, unable to touch him in her upside down position. She offered him everything. He gave back just as generously.

Harder and harder he thrust. She reveled in the freedom, the precious luxury of having no one dependent upon her.

Jax was her equal and opposite -- her mate.

They would take care of each other.

His cock thickened, throbbing wildly. She caressed him with her cunt, absorbing each thrust with her whole body. He ground against her, crying out sharply as he came in shuddering waves. The hot jets of his release triggered her orgasm and she followed him into the sensual void.

Long moments later, Crystal felt a bed beneath her and Jax expanding within her. "That was incredible," she whispered against his lips. They lay on their sides facing each other. He held one of her legs up around his waist while he slid in and out with lazy, teasing strokes.

"The Shadow realm offers all sorts of possibilities."

"I see that now. Feeling nothing but you is amazing."

He stilled, lodged as deeply as their position allowed. "What do you feel right now?"

"I feel the missing piece to my puzzle. I feel my mate right where he belongs."

He kissed her softly, slowly, communicating all the tenderness swelling within his heart. "I love you seems almost inadequate after craving you for so long."

“ ‘I love you’ is a very nice place to start, and we have the rest of our lives to indulge our cravings.”

## Epilogue

"You don't know where they went?" Malik grumbled, arms folded over his chest. Cayenne didn't look any more at ease with the news. She sat beside him in their cozy living room, her hand resting lightly on his thigh.

Crystal recognized Malik from their brief comm, but her gaze kept drifting to Cayenne. As Minuette said, the sisters had very different features. Cayenne's delicate face could only be described as beautiful, while Lorrان's true appearance was striking, exotic.

"She's lost before I even got to meet her," Cayenne complained with a half-playful smile.

"She isn't lost. Minuette will contact us as soon as they're settled," Jax told them.

"But even then we won't know where she is. Why are the Time Keepers after her?"

Crystal hesitated. She'd guarded Lorrان's secrets for so long it felt odd to speak about her openly. "Your mother was born with neutral *iede*. It's very rare and very powerful."

Cayenne looked at her bonded mate, confusion obvious in her expression. "Translation, please."

"A person with neutral *iede* can be trained to manifest the gifts of any of the Keepers," Malik said.

"It's actually more complicated than that." Crystal scooted to the edge of the loveseat she shared with Jax and said, "If a person's *iede* is truly neutral they can manifest the gifts of *all* the Keepers. It's not like they have to pick one."

"If my mother was so powerful, how were they able to... Why wasn't she harder to kill?"

"I don't know the details surrounding your parents' death. I do know that she was never trained. Your father was a Flame Keeper with only rudimentary --"

A blinding flash of light preempted the rest of Crystal's explanation.

Matriarch Flame and High Priestess Sacha of the Sacred Order of the Veil solidified in the middle of the living room.

What would necessitate two of the most powerful leaders in Dimension 290-2 visiting Earth? This couldn't be good.

"Grandmother." Cayenne stood and embraced Matriarch Flame.

"We meet at last. I only wish it were under better circumstances. This is my sister, Sacha."

Cayenne inclined her head, careful not to touch the high priestess. "It's an honor to meet you."

"You must pardon our brusqueness, but something is dreadfully wrong," Sacha said. She turned to Jax. "Do you have any idea where Minuette may have taken Lorrان?"

"No, Your Eminence. Knowing Karrick's abilities, we thought it best if we didn't know."

"Ordinarily I would have agreed with you, but I received an emergency transmission from Minuette this morning. It was garbled and incomplete, but she was clearly terrified."

"What were you able to learn?" Jax asked carefully, his dark gaze darting to Cayenne.

"Lorrان is alive, or was when Minuette sent the message. But they're in trouble. We have to find them immediately."

"They could be anywhere. How do we even begin such a search?" Malik asked, clearly distraught.

Sacha's gaze collided with her sister's, the conflict between them crackling. "There is only one way, but Sierra won't hear of it."

"I will not ask *that man* for help!" Matriarch Flame reinforced.

"Then ask his sons. They have a legitimate reason for seeking out Lorrان and you know it. You've been wrong to hide her from them."

"What are you talking about?" Cayenne asked, her tone demanding.

"Tell her," the high priestess prompted.

Resentfully, Matriarch Flame provided the information. "When Alrick realized that Lorrان had inherited Kayrin's neutral *iede*, he enacted the right of substitution."

"Here we go again," Cayenne muttered. "What does that mean?"

Sacha moved to stand directly in front of Cayenne. "Alrick signed a contract with your grandfather giving him the right to court Kayrin. My sister in all her romantic wisdom allowed her daughter to run away with her lover before the Time Master had the opportunity to execute the contract. When an Order is in breach of contract it is within the wronged party's rights to demand restitution. Alrick has chosen to substitute his broken betrothal agreement with one for Lorrان."

"But how did the Time Master even know about Lorrان?" Crystal asked passionately. "I've spent half my life guarding the secret of her existence."

"The same way they trailed Jax," Sacha said. "Karrick has powerful precognitive abilities. Even for a Future Keeper his visions are unusually accurate."

"The Time Master wants to bond with Lorrان?" Crystal shuddered. She had only met Alrick once, but that was enough to chill her to the bone. He was a ruthless man with the coldest eyes she had ever beheld.

"No. The contract is between Lorrان and his sons."

"Sons?" Cayenne nearly choked on the word.

"Time Keepers work in teams of three, past, present, and future. Alrick's twins are past and future. They are hoping to mold Lorrان into their present." The high priestess spoke in a calm, informative tone.

Crystal felt nearly as stunned as Cayenne looked. "I've never heard of a bonded triad."

"They are very rare and incredibly powerful."

“They are not going to mold my granddaughter into *their* anything!” Matriarch Flame asserted.

“Is it better that she die?” her sister challenged. “They’re in trouble, Sierra, and we can’t find them without Karrick’s help.”

“He had my daughter killed!”

“You’re talking about his father, not Karrick. Besides we can’t prove it. One of my Veil Keepers is involved now. You’re not keeping me out of this any longer. If you don’t ask Karrick for help, I will!”

Matriarch Flame glared at High Priestess Sacha, and silence descended upon the room.

**The End...**

**For now.**



### **Mystic Keepers 3: Lorrان**

Powerful Time Keepers Warrick and Karrick prepare to claim their bonded mate, Lorrان, Princess of the Order of Flame. Determined to find the sensual ecstasy only possible with bonded mates, they set out for Dimension 939-3 (Earth). Before the brothers can begin their courtship, Lorrان is whisked away by a Veil Keeper and stranded in a primitive land of dark sorcery and danger.

Rescuing their reluctant bride from the clutches of an evil sorcerer is only the beginning. They must overcome her inhibitions and earn her trust before secrets from the past destroy them all.

## **Aubrey Ross**

Multi-award winning author Aubrey Ross writes under several pen names, according to Genre. Though her stories can take unconventional turns, they're filled with passion, intrigue, and emotional realism. Whether her stories are set in Hell, Valhalla, or on an alien planet, Aubrey's sure to entertain.