

Mystic Keepers 4: Rammi

Aubrey Ross

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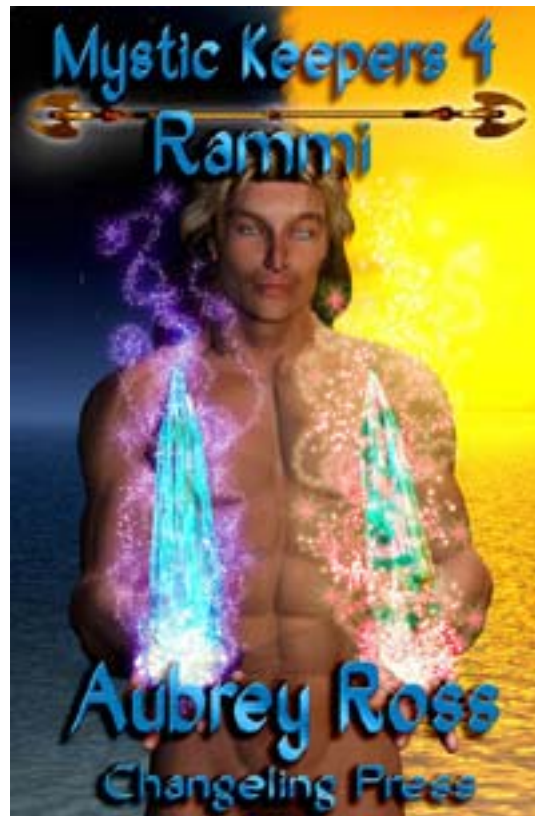
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Editor: *Maryam Salim*

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Prologue

Tantalizing and sweet, the scent of wild flowers drifted to Rammi Severn. She turned her face to the sun and pulled her skirt higher, keeping the hem from the cool water swirling around her knees.

"Did you miss me?" a husky male voice asked from behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder and found Gaverel watching her from the shore. Trees lined the stream, their ancient branches reaching toward the clear blue sky. He leaned against one thick trunk, arms folded over his chest, mischief in his leaf green eyes.

"Not at all." She flashed a flirtatious smile. "I just started without you."

Sexual awareness leapt between them. Her nipples hardened against the sheer fabric of her underdress. She wore nothing else, having dissolved her Shadow *iede* garments before wading into the stream.

"Did you now?" He licked his lips, his gaze focused on her mouth. "Did your fingers bring you as much pleasure as mine?"

"More." She turned and kicked water at him, laughing as droplets showered his tall form.

He strode into the stream fully clothed and scooped her up in his arms. "You little tease." His mouth sealed over hers, his tongue delved deeply. Rammi pushed her fingers into his thick golden hair. *Gaverel!*

Without separating their mouths, he carried her to the shore and placed her gently on the grassy bank. "Well, I missed you," he whispered against her kiss dampened lips. He stretched out beside her, one of his legs angled over hers, his arm her pillow. "I could think of nothing else."

She smiled into his eyes. "You've only been gone five days."

"It felt like five years. *Prazot*, did you not miss me even a little?"

Guiding his hand to her breast, she pressed his palm against her rapid heartbeat. "Does this feel like I missed you?" She whispered the words with all of the longing in her soul.

He moved his hand lower, his thumb skimming her hardened nipple. "*This* feels like you missed me."

With a weary sigh, she pushed his hand to her waist. "We have to wait until the elders decide."

"I don't need the elders to tell me how I feel." His gaze narrowed on her face and his hand returned to cup her breast. "Do you need some ancient ritual to make you want me? I burn for you without *Pim Noctar*."

It was forbidden and he knew it. Why was he pressuring her? "I'm tired of waiting too, my love, but there must be a reason for the elders' hesitation."

He sat and raked his fingers through his hair, staring off into the distance. "Aren't you going to ask how the assessment went?"

In her excitement to see him, she had nearly forgotten the reason he'd been gone. Each year the twelve most promising Light Keepers were tested. One was chosen to be trained as a Life Keeper, the most honored of all Keeper gifts. His posture and tone told her the answer before she posed the question. "Who was chosen?"

"Who else? Tavon!" Bitterness hardened his handsome features.

"The Death Master's son is to be the new Life Keeper?" She sat as well, moving closer. "How is that possible?"

"His mother is a powerful Light Keeper. The Light Master is his uncle. Why are you surprised?"

Rammi sighed. Gaverel had grown up in Tavon's shadow, continually finishing second to Tavon's first. Gaverel wanted this honor, had trained long and hard with one of the existing Life Keepers in preparation for the assessment. "I'm sorry. I know how much this meant to you."

He stared at her for a long moment. A wealth of longing and uncertainty shone

in his eyes. "You are the Shadow Master's sister." He looked away. "Perhaps I'm not worthy of --"

"That can't be it." She turned his face back toward hers. "You are elite. There have been seven Light Masters in your ancestry." Pressing herself against his side, she wrapped her arms around his waist. "We only need to wait a bit longer and --"

"You don't know that." He pulled her into his lap, his expression tense, urgent. "What if they deny our petition? I have wanted two things in my life, *only* two things. One was stolen from me today. I will not lose the other!"

Fear tingled down her spine. He couldn't mean what he seemed to mean. Without *Pim Noctar* it wouldn't be a true bonding. The ritual strengthened Keeper joinings, allowing them to meld on a mystical level. She wanted Gaverel as her bonded mate not just her lover. "I love you. Nothing can change that."

"Then join with me now." He took her hand and pressed it to the bulge straining the front of his pants. "I need this, Rammi."

Their gazes locked. Her heart ached as his expression revealed a staggering mixture of pain and expectation. She licked her lips, tension coiled deep in her belly. Her mate was hurting. He needed her comfort. How could she refuse? When the elders approved their joining, and Rammi knew they would, *Pim Noctar* would only strengthen the union they forged today.

She turned, her underdress bunching high on her thighs, and straddled his lap. Framing his face with her palms, she kissed him softly, slowly, communicating her tenderness, her love.

He parted his lips and welcomed her tongue. She filled her lungs with his breath, slid her tongue against his, caressed him. At her urging, he sent a cleansing pulse along his torso, dissolving his tunic as she dispatched her underdress in a glistening burst of powdery *iede*.

Sunlight bathed her naked skin. Rammi paused, reveling in the freedom and the warmth of the late summer sun. He combed his fingers through her long, thick hair. She arched her neck so the curling ends brushed his thighs.

"You have such beautiful hair, like blue/black silk. Never cut it. I want to feel it slide all over my naked body."

She laughed, exhilarated by his praise. "Won't you have to be naked for that?"

"Good point." Clutching her against his chest, he disintegrated the rest of his soggy clothing. "You make me crazy. I've wanted you for so long."

He kissed her then, his mouth moving over and against hers, his tongue thrusting boldly. Cupping her breasts and stroking her back, he explored her supple body. They had kissed and brought each other to orgasm with their hands, but their love play had always stopped short of penetration.

Supporting her back, he eased her to the grass and spread her hair. She gazed up at him in awe. Heat curled from her core to her heart and back again. Tall and sleekly muscled, Gaverel's body made her ache, made her impatient to touch. His cock rose thick and proud from its golden nest of hair, his heavy balls promising virility.

She licked her lips. Would he let her taste him? He had used his mouth to pleasure her once, but they'd been interrupted before she could return the favor. He parted her thighs and knelt between her legs. Maybe next time.

"I'll do my best not to hurt you, but it will probably sting."

If she were burning with the mystic fires of *Pim Noctar*, it wouldn't hurt. Her senses would be so desperate for their joining even the rending of her hymen would have been a blessed relief. He stroked her thighs, easing them wider, making room for his hips between her legs.

They shouldn't be doing this! The elders never denied a petition without good reason. Trepidation ran its icy fingers down her spine. "Maybe we should wait. I'm not sure --"

He silenced her protest with his mouth, one hand tangling in her hair. Each thrust of his tongue foreshadowed his intentions. He was beyond caring that she was unsure. Concentrating on the heated slide of his naked body against hers and the familiar movement of his tongue in her mouth, Rammi suppressed her fear and responded to the raw hunger in his touch. He needed her. He needed *this*, and she

loved him enough to surrender.

He cupped her breast, squeezing, rubbed the nipple until it stood high and tight. His fingers pinched lightly, then harder and she cried out.

"Sorry," he muttered, replacing his fingers with his mouth. He suckled urgently, forcefully. She arched, uncertainty surging again. Where was her gentle lover? The man who had touched her so tenderly?

His fingers parted her folds, moving immediately to her clit. Again his touch was rough, hurried. She was slick, her body trying to cooperate, but after only a few token caresses, he pressed his cock against her entrance.

"Gaverel, I'm not --" He thrust into her brutally and Rammi screamed. She'd expected a sting, but searing pain lanced through her entire body.

Grasping her hips with hurtful hands, Gaverel thrust again and again. "Damn him!"

His expression twisted with rage, his eyes squeezed shut. Rammi recoiled from the bitter hatred emanating from Gaverel. *He's not fucking me, he's fucking Tavon!*

She panted and gritted her teeth, waiting for the fiery pain to recede. He moved in her, his features contorted. Rammi turned her face away, choking back a groan. She could be anyone! This was not a bonding; she was Tavon's whipping girl.

Tears trailed down her cheeks, and a ragged sob escaped her mouth. "Stop it!" She punched his shoulder, trying to shock him from his hate-induced stupor.

"Gods damn him!" He grabbed both her hands, interlaced their fingers, and dragged them over her head. "I worked my entire life..." He thrust hard and deep. "It was all I ever wanted."

Fury surged through Rammi, a dark, strange stirring she'd never felt before. The sensation coiled tighter, gaining momentum, building velocity. Gaverel thrust to the hilt, crying out as he came. His hands clenched hers.

The dark coil sprung, twisting through her, bursting out through her palms. Gaverel screamed, his body jerking. Writhing beneath him, she frantically tried to disentangle their hands.

The smell of burning flesh filled her nose. Bile rose into her throat. Gaverel collapsed on top of her, their fingers still entwined. She screamed and screamed until her voice failed. His breathing shuddered, shallow and uneven.

"Help! Somebody help me!"

What had just happened? What had she done? Throwing all of her terrified frenzy into one mighty lunge, she rolled Gaverel off her and peeled their hands apart. Her stomach heaved and her head spun. His palms were charred and blistered, while hers, though blackened, appeared unharmed.

She pressed her trembling fingertips against his throat and released a ragged sob when she found a pulse. *He was alive.* Reaching out along the common telepathic link shared by all Shadow Keepers she screamed her anguish and fear.

Summoning Shadow *iede*, the essence of her mystic energy, she manifested clothing for herself and a tunic she draped over his nudity. With a flash of light the Veil parted. Her brothers Jax and Jarek rushed past the Veil Keeper, running toward her. Jarek reached her first and she threw herself into his arms.

"What happened? Are you injured?" The Shadow Master eased her away, his dark gaze searching her face. Her hands tightly fisted, Rammi collapsed against his chest, sobbing too hard to reply.

"He's alive," Jax said. He stepped over the unconscious man and joined Jarek at Rammi's side. "Did he hurt you? Is that why you burned him?"

"I didn't mean to!" she cried. "I don't know what happened. I was... We were..."

"Let me see her palms."

Rammi glanced beyond her brothers and found Tilden Delmont standing on the other side of Gaverel. Tall, dark, and sinister, the Death Master's appearance perfectly suited his gifts. She trembled. No! This couldn't be happening. She didn't want to be a Death Keeper!

Just as a select few among the Order of Light became the Keepers of Life, a select few from the Order of Shadow became the Keepers of Death.

"I'm *not* a Death Keeper!" she shouted, pressing her face against her brother's

chest.

“Let me see her palms.” Tilden repeated the directive and Jarek gently unfolded her hands. Glistening like black diamonds, Death *iede* coated her palms.

“No!” Tears streaming down her face, Rammi sank to her knees.

Chapter One

Fifteen years later

Stifling a yawn, Rammi Severn scrubbed her fingers through her short spiky hair and glanced at the massive, elaborately carved door behind which the Steering Committee argued. They had ten more minutes, then she was out of here. She had better things to do than --

The doors burst open and Tilden Delmont stood framed in the threshold. On a good day the Death Master looked ferocious. This was not a good day. Swept straight back from his sharp features, his gleaming dark hair flowed to the middle of his back. Eyes, the same inky black as his hair, pierced her with their intensity.

“Join us.”

Rammi ambled past him, her boot heels ringing on the highly polished floor. She’d only been in this chamber once before, and that was a lifetime ago. Fifteen years before she’d sat here stunned and silent as the course for her life was detailed. She was told she would become a Death Keeper, an assassin, a spy. Everything she’d dreamed about, everything she’d planned for, died within her that day. Motivated by grief and bitterness, Rammi never looked back. She embraced her new destiny and became the best damn Death Keeper this dimension had ever seen.

A large oblong table dominated the room. Her gaze moved immediately to her brother, Jarek, but his expression offered no information. What did they want with her?

“Have a seat,” High Priestess Sacha directed. A stunningly beautiful woman, the high priestess had always made Rammi uncomfortable. Beauty as a whole held no appeal for Rammi. She dealt in reality, justice, and death.

Choosing a chair directly across from her brother, Rammi pulled it out and sat.

The Death Master lowered himself into the chair at her right and Rammi began to relax. As long as Master Tilden was on her side, she could deal with anything. Master Tilden was one of the few people in existence Rammi trusted without reservation. During the ten years of her Death Keeper training, he'd earned her respect as well as her friendship.

"We have a rather unique assignment for you." Matriarch Flame spoke from the other end of the table. Rammi's gaze moved from the high priestess to her older sister. Matriarch Flame looked more like the high priestess' mother. Time had not been as kind to Sierra Flame as it had to High Priestess Sacha.

Speaking of time... Alrick, the Time Master, stared at her silently, his expression as inscrutable as Jarek's.

"I'm listening." Rammi returned her gaze to Matriarch Flame.

"Tavon Delmont has been accused of a horrible crime." The matriarch pushed a pink crystal toward her. "All of the details regarding the accusation are contained within this data crystal."

"There's no accusation about it. The murder was witnessed by three people, one of them your granddaughter, Lorrان!" Alrick burst into the conversation, his deep voice echoing off the highly arched ceiling.

"Her mission is to apprehend Tavon, not assassinate him," Matriarch Flame shot back just as vehemently.

Oh, this is fun. Rammi watched the drama unfold as she tucked the crystal into the pocket of her uniform. The accused was her mentor's son. The Time Master obviously wanted Tavon dead, and Matriarch Flame was just as adamant he be apprehended alive.

"Who did he murder?" Rammi hadn't meant for her question to sound so amused, but damn, this was priceless.

"Who is he *accused* of murdering!" the Death Master snapped.

She cringed and inclined her head toward her mentor. "Of course, Master Tilden. I meant no disrespect."

"I requested you specifically for this assignment." His tone was grave, his gaze intense. "I trust you will not disappoint."

"I always do my best, sir."

"Tavon is to be apprehended and returned to Dimension 290-2 for questioning. Is that fully understood?"

Why was Matriarch Flame so insistent? Rammi would understand the condition coming from Master Tilden, but what was the matriarch's interest in Tavon Delmont?

"And if he resists?" Somehow Rammi didn't think a man accused of murder by the Steering Committee would throw his hands in the air and calmly follow her into the Shadow realm. "How much force is acceptable if I must subdue him? Search and destroy is more my style."

Master Tilden grabbed her arm, demanding her full attention. For the first time in her life, she saw fear flicker in his night-black eyes. Chills raced down her spine.

"If this were a simple retrieval mission, we would have summoned a Shadow Keeper. I love my son with my whole being and that is why I can trust no one but you. If there is any validity to these allegations -- which I don't believe for an instant -- Tavon will do everything in his power to avoid capture. It is imperative that you find out what really happened."

"We know what really happened!" Alrick boomed. "Your son and one of the Veil Keepers murdered Kayrin and her lover, Larot. That fact is not in dispute."

"But who was the Veil Keeper and upon whose *authority* did young Tavon act?"

Ah ha. Rammi glimpsed the true conflict. Matriarch Flame believed the Time Master had ordered the hit. Kayrin and her lover? Rammi searched her memory. Kayrin had been heir to the Order of Flame, Matriarch Flame's only child. Kayrin's two daughters had recently returned from Dimension 939-3 where Matriarch Flame had hidden them.

"How long ago was this supposed to have happened?" Rammi looked to her brother for the answer.

"Eighteen years," Jarek supplied.

"Before Tavon's Life Keeper training began?" Rammi's brow furrowed as she mentally assembled a timeline. "He would have been seventeen."

"Tavon began manifesting Light illusions as a toddler." Alrick folded his burly arms on the tabletop and glared at Master Tilden. "With great power comes great temptation to misuse that power."

"The voice of experience?" Before the Time Master could respond to the provocation, Matriarch Flame rushed on. "The point is we have much to learn about the events of eighteen years ago. What the Time twins witnessed is but a piece of the puzzle."

"I have interrogated my Veil Keepers extensively." The high priestess spoke as her sister lapsed into silence. "Either the culprit is incredibly clever or the person involved was one of eleven Veil Keepers to pass on in the ensuing eighteen years."

Now wasn't that convenient. Rammi studied the high priestess. Damn, she was beautiful. It was hard to concentrate when you looked into her reddish brown eyes. Flame Keeper eyes.

Veil Keepers were chosen from the best and brightest of all the other orders. Only those with the most powerful *iede*, the basic essence of mystic energy, were trained to be Veil Keepers.

"Do you understand what we need from you?" Matriarch Flame dragged her attention back to the other end of the table.

"I understand."

Rammi wasn't surprised when Master Tilden escorted her from the room. "I know my son, Rammi. He couldn't have done this."

"Then what did the Time twins witness? I'd heard rumors of their investigation, but I had no idea your son had been implicated. I know Warrick and Karrick. They are honorable men."

Master Tilden clenched his fists and turned his face away. "If Tavon is involved, there has to be more to the story than we know. You must learn what really happened before you deliver him to the Steering Committee."

"I'm an assassin, not an investigator. Why did you request me for this case?"

He grasped her shoulders, his grip nearly painful. His gaze bore into hers. "I trust you, as I trust no other. You must find my son and interrogate him. If you cannot learn the answers, then you know where to take him."

She looked around and lowered her voice, dread tightening her stomach. "You want me to take Tavon to *him*?" The situation was dire indeed for Master Tilden to even make the suggestion.

"We must learn the truth. I can't help but feel all of this is connected. He is already involved with our other investigation. As Matriarch Flame said, this is one piece of a much larger puzzle."

"And if it is revealed that Tavon was involved?"

"If I am blinded by a father's love..."

She spoke the words for him. "I will learn what drove him to murder. Then, I will end his life."

* * *

"Master Tavon, when will you teach us to operate one of these machines?" Shifting the nondescript sedan into park, Tavon turned off the engine before he addressed his trainees. "This was our first interdimensional exercise. Driving lessons will have to wait until you've mastered some of the rudimentary skills of being a Life Keeper."

"Why didn't the Veil Keeper bring us directly to the medical facility? Why bother with this machine at all?"

Two days into the training cycle Tavon realized Maling's incessant questions were going to be a challenge. If her potential powers weren't so impressive, he'd have recommended her termination from the Life Keeper program. The other trainees avoided her, which was counterproductive for everyone.

Focusing on his over-inquisitive student, Tavon rested his forearm on the steering wheel. "Being a Keeper comes with very specific responsibilities. Each of our assignments is crucial. There are no routine missions. We are the unseen guardians of

countless dimensions."

"There are lots of humans who know we exist." Maling's tone snapped with derision. "We don't even attempt to conceal our abilities in dimensions --"

"Maling." The only thing more irksome than her tendency to badger him with questions was her delight in arguing with his answers. "Each dimension is different. We must avoid anything that draws attention to ourselves. Emerging from the Veil in plain sight of most humans would be a little hard to explain."

"So the Veil Keeper is going to meet us here?" Maling gestured toward the woods beyond the windshield.

"There's a clearing a short hike up that trail. We're scheduled for retrieval in," he glanced at his wristwatch, "fifteen minutes."

"What made the man at the hospital so special?" one of the other trainees asked.

"The Time Keeper council unanimously agreed that his life should be saved. That's all the information I was given."

"And it doesn't bother you to blindly obey the Time Keeper council?"

Tavon tried not to reprimand one trainee in front of the others, but Maling's attitude was seriously hindering her potential. "Many, if not most, of our missions are instigated by the Time Keeper council. Anyone unwilling to submit to their authority will fail as a Life Keeper." A soft snicker came from the back seat and Maling lapsed into silence. "Let's head for the clearing. I'll continue our lesson as we walk."

Tavon and his trainees piled out of the car and started for the trailhead. A brisk wind ruffled his hair. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the fresh scent of pine and the tang of impending rain.

Tingling awareness assailed his senses, making him restless and wary. *Someone was watching them.* He scanned their surroundings with his gaze, intensified his hearing, and sent out pulses of mystic energy. There had been no other cars in the small gravel lot, nothing to support his anxiety.

Keeping his senses attuned to the rhythm of the forest, he continued down the trail. "How many of you can manifest tangible illusions?" Maling and one other raised

their hands. "Has anyone attempted a direct exchange of *iede*?"

They all shook their heads.

"Forming communication crystals is a basic Keeper skill but have any of you experimented with range? Can everyone contact other Light Keepers?" Their grumbling assured him the skill was beneath them. "Has anyone attempted interdimensional communication?"

The youngest trainee, a fresh-faced boy, admitted, "This is the first time I've been offworld."

"I've received a message from another dimension, but I've never sent one."

Maling was suspiciously quiet. "Have you tested your range, Maling?"

"My father is a Veil Keeper. We've been communicating interdimensionally since I was a child." A certain sadness in her tone piqued Tavon's interest. He needed to learn more about her father.

They reached the clearing and Tavon allowed the trainees to relax as they waited for the Veil Keeper. He scanned more intensively. Someone was out there, but he couldn't isolate their location. Someone or *something*.

"Gather around," Tavon called. They assembled facing him. "I spoke of the *iede* exchange. Offering *iede* is easier than absorbing it, but you will learn to do both. Let's begin with this." His gaze continued to sweep the clearing. "Everyone hold out your hands and manifest as much *iede* as you are able." He quickly arranged their hands on top of each other and clasped them between his fingers and thumb.

"What's wrong?" Maling asked, obviously sensing his anxiety.

Tavon boosted his Keeper awareness, drawing *iede* from his students' hands. Switching to the telepathic link shared by all Light Keepers, Tavon explained. *We're being watched.*

I don't sense anything, Maling objected.

That's why he's the teacher!

Listen. This is what we're going to do. Cup your hands and fill your palms with iede as quickly as possible. On my signal toss it into the air.

What will that do? Maling asked.

You'll see.

At least Tavon hoped they'd all see. *Now!*

They moved as one. Tossing Light *iede* high into the air, they showered the entire clearing. Turning in a steady circle, Tavon spotted a Shadow figure frantically shaking off the sparkling flecks. He cast a Light web around it and pulled the figure out of the Shadow realm.

Tangled in the Light web, the Shadow Keeper ended up on her hands and knees. Despite the Shadow Keeper's short spiky hair, the sleek black leather garments revealed lushly feminine curves.

"Who is she?" Maling asked.

Tavon crouched before the struggling Shadow Keeper. His hands itched to explore every swell and hollow outlined so temptingly by her uniform. He raised her head and felt surrounded by her liquid silver gaze. She glared furiously. Tavon smiled. Why wasn't he surprised? "Well, hello, Rammi."

"How the hell did you do that?" she demanded.

"Why are you following me?"

Chapter Two

"But, Master Alrick, you know I cannot."

The little Veil Keeper squirmed away from him, but Alrick was not deterred. "Your clever high priestess has imprisoned your virginity, but there are many other things we can do."

"The mystic shield is there to *protect* us, not imprison us," she objected.

Anger made her dark eyes shine, and color blossomed on her smooth round cheeks. Alrick could hardly wait to get his hands on her, to feel her writhe beneath him and cry out his name. This one had caught his eye several weeks before. He seldom waited this long to partake once his interest was aroused. *They are yours to do with as you will, so long as their mystic shields remain intact.* His bargain with the high priestess had served him well down through the years!

"Protect you from what? Pleasure? Why should you be denied what every woman in the dimension enjoys?" Ah, there it was. The predictable flicker of curiosity. Her dark gaze traveled from his face to the distinct bulge in the front of his pants. "Have you ever seen a man's cock?"

Shaking her head, she crossed her arms over her breasts, fidgeting visibly. She was so ready to be seduced, and seduction was Alrick's specialty. "You want to, don't you? You want to look and touch, perhaps even -- taste." He added the last word with dramatic inflection. "Two years! You're expected to deprive your body of its natural desires for two full years. It's cruel. And so unnecessary."

"Master Alrick!"

He turned as a lovely blonde came sailing into the small chapel. Damn! He didn't want the dark beauty to bolt. He'd just begun to weave his spell. "Sister Celeste," he greeted the blonde. "What an unexpected surprise." The chapel was seldom used, but

the potential for discovery always added to the excitement of Alrick's trysts.

Her high round breasts swayed beneath the diaphanous material of her multicolored robe. His mouth watered. He'd ridden Celeste's tight ass more times than he could remember. She'd been far too easy to tame, eager for everything he'd done to her. It was so much better when they resisted, when they had to be convinced.

"I didn't realize you'd arrived." Celeste's blue eyes moved over the younger woman, her disapproval obvious. "Surely you didn't come to see Sister Janna. She's not what you need at all."

Janna gasped, her dark eyes flashing. "Apparently, Master Alrick disagrees. He requested me."

"Oh really?"

Alrick bit back a grin. This was better than he could have imagined. It had been ages since two lissome beauties vied for his attention. Being Time Master had definite advantages. Few women dared refuse him anything. Still, nothing thrilled him like blazing a trail through *virgin* territory.

"There is a simple solution, my dears." He waited until they looked at him, then flashed his most charming smile. "I'll pleasure you both."

"But, Master Alrick," Celeste objected, producing a pretty pout, "I wanted this to be special. I passed my final exam last week. My mystic shield has been deactivated." She lowered her long lashes and whispered, "You can ravish my pussy at last."

Desire slammed into Alrick like a fist. He'd fuck Celeste's virgin cunt and then ream Janna's virgin ass! His cock bucked like a wild thing and his balls burned for release. "I'll make it special for you, sweet Celeste. I'll make it special for both of you."

Does she realize what you're going to do? Celeste used the private link he'd established during their repeated bouts of passion.

Alrick grinned. *Probably not.*

Celeste stared at Janna, a calculative gleam in her eyes. *She goes first, and I get to help you break her in.*

They pivoted to face Janna and the younger woman backed away. Her

frightened gaze darted from Alrick to Celeste and back again.

"I'm not ready for this." Janna ducked under Alrick's arm and ran down the center aisle.

"Now see what you've done!" he snapped.

Celeste casually dissolved her robe and stood before him naked. Her boldness annoyed Alrick. He could bend her over the altar right now, fuck her senseless without any foreplay, and she'd love every minute of it. Where was the challenge in that?

Cupping her breasts, her thumbs rubbing her nipples, Celeste licked her lips in silent invitation. "Why bother with a skinny little waif when I can satisfy you so much better?"

She had fabulous breasts, high and full, crowned with large coral-colored nipples. Alrick watched as she caressed one into a tight peak. The musk of feminine arousal swirled around him. Already she was creaming for him.

The mystic shield reinforced a Veil Keeper's hymen during the first two years of training. Through trial and error, Alrick had discovered what he could and could not do with these mystically guarded virgins. Generally their clits were unaffected, but occasionally the shield was powerful enough to protect even that delightful little nub.

"Your shield is gone? I can fuck you properly?"

With a sultry smile she hopped up on the altar and spread her legs wide. "I've waited so long for this. Come, master, claim your prize."

Intoxicated by the sheer carnality of her offering, Alrick knelt beside the altar, ready to worship. Her pussy glistened with cream, deeply flushed and swollen, and her clit peeked out through her folds. He inhaled her scent, exhilarated by her arousal. "By the gods, look at this jewel." With just his fingertip, he circled her clit. Celeste jumped, then giggled. He leaned in close and flicked her with his tongue. She gasped, her thighs flexed. He slid his tongue between her folds, savoring her essence. Licking and suckling, he took her right to the edge, then quickly pulled away.

"Master Alrick," she cried.

He turned her, aligning her body with the altar. "Lay back." She didn't hesitate.

Lifting her feet to his shoulders, he bent her knees and angled her legs outward. If she were lying about her mystic shield he'd whip her. He'd ventured too near her core three weeks before and her shield engaged. The blisters on his cock had finally healed; it was not an experience he cared to repeat.

Parting her folds with one hand, he eased his middle finger into her cunt. Tight, hot, wet. No stinging pain, no searing intensity. He panted. Desire twisted through him, making his balls ache. Each moment of anticipation made his release that much sweeter.

Celeste trembled, her inner muscles fluttering around his finger. One flick of his thumb against her clit and she'd come. He wasn't ready for that. He wanted her wild, desperate, for whatever he commanded.

"Sacha is looking for you," a deep male voice interrupted them.

Alrick knew who he'd find before he turned his head. Tall, dark, menacing, Brodi lounged in the open archway. Celeste gasped, covering her breasts. She tried to pull her legs together, but Alrick's hand was between her thighs.

"I'm a little busy right now." Alrick thrust his finger deep, illustrating his point.

"I can see that."

"Was it urgent," Alrick grinned, "or do you have time to join us?"

"Master Alrick, I --"

"You said you wanted this to be special." He covered her clit with his thumb, applying pressure as he gazed into her eyes. "What could be more special than this? Don't you find Brodi attractive? I've been told most women do."

"We don't have time for this," Brodi drawled.

"There's *always* time for this."

Brodi's dark gaze moved over Celeste and a slow smile curved his lips. Celeste had deprived Alrick of his challenge, but now the challenge had returned. She was about to get more than she'd bargained for, a whole lot more.

"You will pleasure Brodi with your mouth, until I tell you to stop."

"But, Master Alrick --"

"You will do as I say or we both leave. Make your decision now."

She gazed at Brodi with interest and uncertainty. "Won't High Priestess Sacha disapprove?"

"Sacha will never know." Brodi unlaced his pants and freed his cock. Celeste's eyes widened and he smiled. Only semi-erect he was already impressive. He guided her arms above her head, holding both wrists with one long-fingered hand. "Now part those luscious lips."

Alrick watched in fascination as Brodi's cock disappeared into Celeste's mouth. The idea of commanding her had excited Alrick. He hadn't expected to enjoy the actual act.

Brodi licked his fingers and teased Celeste's nipples. Alrick pushed a second finger into her core. She moaned, the sound hampered by Brodi's cock. Hot tingles erupted all over Alrick's skin. Stars, this was thrilling! Why hadn't he thought of sharing a woman before?

Draping her legs over his shoulders, Alrick bent between her thighs. He wasn't the only one excited by this new situation. Cream literally dripped from Celeste's cunt. With his fingers still wet from her pussy, Alrick impaled her ass. She cried out and he chuckled, closing his mouth around her swollen clit. Her anal passage squeezed him so hard he feared she'd bruise his fingers. He licked and sucked, sliding his fingers in and out with tantalizing slowness.

Her strangled cries and rhythmic spasms warned of her impending orgasm. He withdrew in one smooth stroke and lifted his mouth from her clit. She could only whimper with Brodi still moving in her mouth, but Alrick knew he'd stopped in time.

"Enough," Alrick ordered. "I have something else in mind." Brodi pulled out of her mouth, his cock gleaming in the candlelight. Alrick felt his own cock jerk at the sight. "Grab the back of your knees, Celeste, and hold yourself open for me."

Brodi caressed her breasts, his cock resting against her side. Celeste did as Alrick instructed, her gaze fixed on his face. He coated his cock with her cream and pressed against her entrance. "You're very wet, but you're also tight. This may sting a little." Grasping her hips, he thrust to the hilt in one forceful lunge.

She screamed, back arching off the altar. Alrick stiffened, afraid he'd hurt her badly, then felt the deep pulsations ripple around his cock. "You were supposed to wait for me," he chided and Brodi laughed.

Panting harshly, Celeste pushed her hair out of her eyes. "I've wanted you there for so long."

"Apparently." He slid in and out, amazed at how wet she was. If he hadn't felt her hymen tear, he would have doubted her virginity. She gasped and rocked her hips, already far too eager. Bored by the easy conquest, Alrick pulled out.

"Why do you keep doing that?" she shrieked. Brodi pinched her nipples and she groaned.

"Watch your tone," the other man cautioned and Alrick smiled.

"I want you to ride Brodi."

"But I want to ride you." Her voice was soft and pleading, but she still questioned his authority.

"Do you want to bring me pleasure?"

"Yes."

"Then do as I command."

He lifted her from the altar and Brodi took her place. Both men were fully dressed while Celeste was naked. The contrast amused Alrick. Everything about this amused Alrick. Brodi's long legs hung nearly to the floor and his hips were at the edge of the altar. He obviously knew what Alrick had in mind; this would position sweet Celeste perfectly.

Alrick lifted her atop the other man. She parted her legs and straddled Brodi's hips. Emboldened by a sudden rush of power, Alrick took Brodi's throbbing cock and guided it to Celeste's entrance. Brodi gasped, but didn't protest as Alrick manipulated their bodies to his liking.

"Now, slowly lower yourself onto him."

Spellbound by the erotic beauty, Alrick watched Celeste's delicate flesh stretch, accommodating Brodi's thick shaft. She made a soft mewling sound. Another wave of

tingles coursed through Alrick's body. Her muscles flexed, her knees bent, and she sank onto Brodi's cock.

"Oh gods, this is amazing. Fuck her, Brodi. Fuck her hard!"

Grasping her hips, Brodi thrust up into Celeste's eager body. She leaned forward, her breasts brushing against Brodi's chest. Alrick moved to the foot of the altar and watched.

Unable to drag his gaze away from the sensual display, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a vial of oil. He liberally coated his cock, then drizzled some into Celeste's delectable ass crack. She glanced over her shoulder, eyes wide and concerned.

"Oh yes, sweet Celeste. This shall be special indeed." Brodi's deep chuckle encouraged Alrick. "Hold her, while I join the celebration."

Brodi thrust deep and held Celeste still. Alrick parted her velvety ass cheeks and worked the oil into her puckered hole. Determined to savor the moment, he pushed his cock just past the tight collar of muscle and paused. Heat and the firm clamp of her sphincter dragged a groan from Alrick's throat. He drove deep, burying himself to the hilt.

Trembling between them, Celeste let out a keening cry. "It's too much. I --"

Brodi ended her protests with a slow withdrawal. Alrick shivered. The subtle motion of the other man's cock nearly buckled his knees. Never had he felt anything so erotic. Alrick pulled out as Brodi thrust in and Celeste went wild. She arched and twisted. Alrick wasn't sure if she was overwhelmed with pleasure or trying to dislodge them.

Reaching beneath her, he cupped her breasts, squeezing firmly to get her attention. "Calm down. Let us move. We will pleasure you." She expelled a ragged breath and relaxed. "Good girl."

Synchronizing their movements, they passed her back and forth. Slick with oil, Alrick's cock moved freely in her snug anal passage while Brodi deftly worked her core. She arched, taking them deeper, her hands clutching Brodi's shoulders.

Alrick gripped her hips and pumped into her ass. Heat, friction, and the

countermotion of Brodi's cock combined in a sensual storm. Alrick's head spun and lights danced before his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he let out a strangled moan.

Orgasm tore through Celeste. Her body shook and she screamed. Massaging his straining cock, her forceful spasms drove Alrick over the edge. His fingers dug into her hips as he thrust to the hilt. Pleasure crashed over him in thundering waves and he gifted her with his seed.

"You're taking advantage of my hospitality."

Celeste yelped as the high priestess spoke from the open doorway. Burying her face against Brodi's chest, she trembled.

"I've stayed within the boundaries you set. Has even one mystic shield been disturbed because of me?" Alrick stroked Celeste's smooth ass, her sleek hips, her slender back. His remorseless actions taunted the high priestess. "We were celebrating her accomplishments."

"Get rid of her. We must talk." Sacha remained in the archway, her bearing rigid, yet regal. Alrick withdrew from Celeste and lifted her off Brodi. Trembling visibly, the Veil Keeper manifested a robe and rushed from the room.

"There is a bed in her private quarters. Why must you defile my altar?"

Alrick shrugged and righted his clothing.

"And you," she turned her angry gaze on Brodi, "I expected far better from you!"

"What is so urgent you must interrupt my pleasure?" Alrick drawled, his gaze moving over the high priestess. They'd been lovers once, ages ago, but their relationship was different now. They were bound together by forces that transcended physical desire.

"Rammi failed." She delivered the simple statement with the impact of a slap.

"What!"

"I just received word. Tavon outsmarted her."

"Impossible. Rammi is --"

"He used his trainees to bolster his power and snatched her right out of the

Shadow realm. We seriously underestimated him. He sent the trainees back with the Veil Keeper and stayed on Earth to deal with Rammi.”

Alrick just stared at her, stunned beyond words.

“My thoughts exactly.” She shook her head, disgust clear in her cinnamon colored eyes. “Play time’s over, boys. We have work to do.”

Chapter Three

Rammi thrashed within the Light web, unwilling to accept that she was trapped. It was impossible. Only Shadow Keepers could see into the Shadow realm. Glistening fibers bit into her shoulders and thighs, stinging her exposed skin. Tavon had dismissed his companions, sending them back to their home dimension with a Veil Keeper. Now he stood in the sunny clearing, hands clasped behind his back, watching her writhe in the grass.

"Answer a few questions and I'll let you go," he said calmly.

Rammi lay on her side glaring up at him. Sunlight played through his wavy blond hair and curiosity gleamed in his sky-blue eyes. Had the Death Master really sired this golden, pretty boy?

"How were you able to see me?" She managed to sit, though the Light web restricted her movement and hindered her abilities.

He crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head. His gaze narrowed. That stubborn jaw, those sculpted cheekbones, though softened by his mother's Light Keeper coloring, were evidence of the Death Master's stamp on Tavon's handsome face.

That's how he'd seen into the Shadow realm! She closed her eyes, shocked by her foolishness. He might look like a Life Keeper, but he was very much the Death Master's son. Could he manifest Shadow *iede*?

"Sometimes it pays to play nicely with others."

She opened her eyes. "What the hell is that supposed to mean."

"I sensed you watching me, but were it not for my trainees, I wouldn't have been able to locate you."

Bright and endlessly blue, his eyes scrambled her thoughts to the wind. What was wrong with her? She'd developed a permanent immunity to physical beauty fifteen

years before. Averting her gaze, she gave herself a mental shake. Did Tavon have Shadow abilities or not? He was a Life Keeper. So how had he... Why did she feel so muddled?

"Why were you following me?"

She ignored his question, staring off into the distance. Tavon Delmont. Just his name made her whole body stiffen. This man had systematically ruined her life without lifting a finger. She tried to focus on her bitterness, build her anger, and drive away the woozy haze, but the world spun faster. Her body swayed and a ringing erupted in her ears.

"If I leave you in the web much longer, you'll be unconscious. Answer my questions and I'll turn you loose."

"I can't answer your questions if I'm unconscious." She shrugged unsteadily. "Guess I'll wait it out."

"Who sent you after me?"

She just stared at him.

"Your objective couldn't have been assassination, or I'd be dead."

The scene swelled in and out of focus. Rammi blinked, her eyelids heavy. Overwhelmed by the web's power of sedation, she slumped into the grass. The ringing in her ears became a roar, and darkness claimed her.

Tavon released the Light web with a negligent wave of his hand. Why was she being so stubborn? Death Keepers could strike from the Shadow realm without revealing themselves. She must have been ordered to apprehend him. But who would give such an order?

Of what am I accused?

Dread knotted his stomach as he knelt in the grass beside her and gently touched her face. He felt as if he knew her, yet this was closer than he'd ever been before. For fifteen years he'd watched her, ached for her broken spirit and wounded heart.

Tavon's first assignment as a Life Keeper had been to heal Gaverel. When he

entered the unconscious man's mind to ascertain the damage, Tavon had inadvertently witnessed what happened in the meadow. Rammi had been ravaged, her dreams shattered -- because of Gaverel's obsession with him.

Guilt inspired his interest in the defiant girl. Her grief and fury cried out to the healer in him. He wanted to soothe her, protect and care for her, but she would never accept affection from the enemy.

Tavon watched as his father challenged Rammi, helped her channel her anger into strength. She became confident and proficient, one of the best Death Keepers ever, according to his father. Tavon expected his fascination to wane, but the more dangerous she became, the more he thought about her, dreamed and fantasized about claiming her for his own. Light was attracted to darkness. Keepers longed for their equal and opposite.

He'd started to approach her countless times, only to realize the futility of his desire. She hated him, with good reason. How could he combat what she had suffered because of him? Fate had finally brought them together. Only he was her mission, not her mate. With a soft chuckle, he eased her to her back, arranging her limbs more comfortably.

The irregular spikes of blue/black hair only drew attention to the delicate purity of her features. Her supple uniform clearly outlined full breasts and rounded hips. He was tempted to kiss her awake, to capture her shocked gasp in his mouth and open the front seam of her uniform, baring those tempting breasts. She'd be groggy and disorientated...

Wait a minute! He couldn't seduce her. Those few moments of confusion might be his only opportunity to figure out what in blazes was going on. She'd never confess the details of her mission to him, but she'd report without hesitation to her superior. Manifesting Light *iede*, he encased himself in the illusion of his father.

Leaning over her, he cupped her shoulders and shook her firmly, mimicking his father's stern tone. "Rammi, wake up. What happened? Report, Severn!"

She blinked rapidly, tossing her head as if to clear the cobwebs. "Where am I,

sir?"

"Dimension 939-3. The Veil Keeper returned with Tavon's trainees. Where is he? Explain what happened."

Reaching for his shoulders, she pulled herself out of the grass. Was she always so comfortable touching his father? Most people were too intimidated to look the Death Master in the eyes much less touch him. Tavon frowned, thinking of the endless hours Rammi had spent alone with her mentor.

How absurd. Was he jealous of his father? She struggled to her feet. He stood as well, placing his hands on her waist to steady her. Her gaze stared past him wide and unfocused.

"I feel so strange."

"Gather your thoughts, then report."

Her legs trembled and her hands moved to his chest. Tavon's pulse leapt and his breath hitched. This was ridiculous.

"I tracked him, sir." She glanced at him and her eyebrows drew together. Tavon stiffened. Had she sensed the illusion? "I needed to get him alone. I..." She looked around the clearing. "He must have..."

Her silver gaze returned to his clearer now, bright -- beautiful.

She swayed against him, and her arms encircled his neck. "Oh, Tilden." Sighing the name, she rose to the balls of her feet and pressed her mouth to Tavon's.

Not Master Tilden, not sir, just Tilden and then the soft kiss. Tavon's head reeled. Was she his father's mistress? Shit! She rubbed her breasts against his chest and pushed her fingers into his hair -- his father's hair!

Warm and soft, her lips teased his, stroked, touched, slid. "What's the matter?"

Her moist breath caressed him. He wanted to shake her. *What's the matter? You're fucking my father!* Careful to hide his shock and anger, Tavon moved his hands to her ass and pressed his burgeoning erection against her belly.

He'd begun this game; he'd see it through to the end, but damn this just got twisted. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her boldly, stroking the roof of her

mouth with his tongue. "Where did he go?" he asked against her sweetly parted lips. "Tavon could still be about."

"He left me here unconscious. I'll pick up his trail as soon as we're done."

Easing away from him, she casually opened her uniform to the waist. The black material gaped, framing her spectacular cleavage. Tavon gazed at her creamy flesh, stunned. She was really going to do it. She was going to undress and fuck his father!

Rammi sprang. Knocking his legs out from under him with a sweeping kick, she came down on top of him hard, her knees pinning his shoulders to the ground, her hand clutching his throat, limiting his air without strangling him. In the next instant, her hand blaster pressed against his temple.

"Slowly -- and I mean slowly -- move your arms above your head."

He didn't argue. Not that he could with her fingers compressing his throat. He released the illusion and slid his arms along the grass until his hands touched above his head.

She'd known all along. He hadn't fooled her for an instant. Reluctant admiration swept away his anger. His father always bragged about her skill, cunning, and calm.

Keeping the weapon pressed to his head, she snatched something out of her pocket and slipped it over his hand. Securing the pouch around his wrist, she repeated the process with his other hand, then cuffed his wrists together. He didn't need to see his hands to understand what she'd done. If he couldn't manifest *iede*, he was virtually powerless.

"Why are you here, Rammi? Who wants me dead?"

Rammi looked into Tavon's perfect face and felt tears burn behind her eyes. *Tears!* She never cried. Why couldn't he be more like his father? Terse, hard, mean?

The first brush of Tavon's fingers had brought her senses back to life. Places long numb began to ache, banked embers ignited to flame. She wanted him, wanted to bask in his Light, revel in his Life. Damn him! It had taken years to vanquish the pain, to erect her emotional barricade. And this Life Keeper shook the foundation of her

defenses with one passionate kiss.

Clearing her throat, she climbed off him, keeping her blaster trained on the center of his chest. "Men are so easy." She ignored her thundering pulse as well as his question. "Show a little skin and you all go soft in the head."

"That's because all the blood rushes to other parts of our bodies." He chuckled.

How could he laugh at a time like this? She righted her uniform while he struggled to his feet, watching him warily. He was a Life Keeper. She'd never been assigned to one before. Covering his hands should limit his abilities, but she wasn't foolish enough to think him helpless.

A Life Keeper.

All her life she'd dreamed of bonding with a Life Keeper. She shook away the confusing thought. "Let's go."

"Don't we need a Veil Keeper?"

"Not where we're going." She grabbed his bound wrists and pulled him into the Shadow realm. "I intend to move fast. If you jerk your hands away, you'll emerge into some random dimension."

"I've traveled through the Shadow realm before."

Of course he had. He was Master Tilden's son. How could she keep forgetting who he was? Light receded to gloom, color faded to gray. She rushed through the swirling mist, allowing her Shadow senses to guide her. She navigated the Shadow realm naturally, at home in the dense fog.

"Who hired you? Does my father know you're involved?"

She didn't respond, anxious to reach the nexus chamber. They'd talk once she had him secured and she could relax her guard. The nexus chamber served as a gateway between three dimensions: their home world; Dimension 290-3, better known as the Kingdom of Zylott; and the Shadow realm. Few knew of the chamber's existence and, to her knowledge, she was the only one Master Tilden had entrusted with the mystic key.

Her Shadow senses spiked as they reached their destination. She summoned a

doorway with a quick incantation and hurried Tavon inside.

"Sit there." She motioned toward the stark metal chair situated in one corner of the triangular room.

"You have got to be kidding." He tugged against her hold. "You're not binding me to an interrogation chair."

Raising the blaster she stared him down. "This isn't a negotiation."

"What the hell am I accused of? Who hired you?"

"Sit and we'll talk."

Defiance burning in his gaze, Tavon sat. Rammi unfastened his wrists and moved his covered hands to the chair's arms. "*Insa enk ta.*" Shadow fibers coiled around his forearms and calves, binding him to the chair.

"Do you feel better now?" he sneered.

She snapped the blaster back into its holder on her thigh and rolled her shoulders. "Actually, I do."

"Why am I here? Who hired you?"

"We'll get to that, but I have a few questions first." She faced him, hands clasped behind her back. "Don't you know your father at all?"

His bright blue eyes narrowed, but he didn't respond.

"Master Tilden would never fuck one of his Death Keepers."

"Not even if she wanted him to?"

She gasped. "You're deluded. I have never treated your father with anything but respect."

"It's disrespectful to desire someone?"

"It would be dishonorable for the Death Master to take advantage of his authority and... Forget I brought it up. I'm not your father's lover."

"Glad to hear it." His tone caressed her and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Did you bring me here to play or are you under orders?"

"I brought you here to save your life, *if you're innocent.*"

"Innocent of what?"

“Murdering Kayrin and Larot.”

Chapter Four

Tavon stared at Rammi unable to believe what she'd just said. "I'm accused of murdering the Flame Princess? I'm a Life Keeper, a healer, a --"

"Three people witnessed the crime."

"Who are my accusers?"

"The Time twins and their bonded mate, Lorrان."

"This doesn't make sense." His mouth went dry and he stilled within the Shadow restraints. They only stung where they touched his bare skin, but he couldn't budge them. He knew the Time twins; they had collaborated on numerous missions.

"Why would they lie?"

"I don't believe they did."

"You believe I killed two people?" The question burst from him propelled by hurt and disbelief. How could she think him capable of murder? His stomach lurched. Was he upset by the thought of being accused of murder or by Rammi making the accusation? *She doesn't know you like you know her.* He may have been a silent observer, absorbing every detail of her life, but she was unaware of his interest, his longing.

"I didn't say that," she corrected him. "I believe they reported what they saw, or what they honestly think they saw."

He let out his breath in a ragged sigh. "Do you think I killed them?"

"It doesn't matter what I think."

"It does to me."

Confusion creased her brow and she turned her face away. "It was eighteen years ago. If you were capable of such violence, it would have happened again." She would have to do better than that. He needed her to believe in him, to *know* him.

"In my entire life there has only been one person I wanted to intentionally hurt

and even then, I could not have ended his life." He hadn't intended to tell her, but he didn't regret the words.

"What happened that made you so angry?" Her tone was light, inquisitive. She clearly had no idea what he was about to say.

"Gaverel hurt you."

She staggered back a step, her silvery eyes wide and suspicious. "How did you know about..."

"I was there when they brought him to the Life Master. Healing Gaverel was my first assignment as a Life Keeper."

"He told you --"

"I saw it in his mind. I know why he did it."

Their gazes collided. She crossed her arms over her breasts, her expression tense, yet inscrutable. "I blamed you. For many years I blamed you. But you weren't there that day in the meadow. Gaverel was. Gaverel hurt me, because he was weak and cruel, and he was punished accordingly."

Gaverel had been stripped of his mystic abilities and banished to Dimension 542, a dismal, barbaric wasteland with few inhabitants.

"I got over it." She shrugged, but he saw grief in her eyes. "I don't blame you anymore."

She might no longer blame him, but she wasn't "over it." Her wounds had never healed. She just ignored the pain.

"This is all irrelevant." Her hand trembled as she waved away the issue. "Do you happen to remember where you were the day the murder took place?"

He laughed, resting his head against the tall chair back. "I only know about the murder because the entire dimension has spoken of little else since Cayenne and Lorrان returned. I have no idea where I was eighteen years ago."

"A Past Keeper could regress you, but I have strong suspicions Master Alrick is involved. It's better if we don't contact anyone with ties to the Steering Committee."

"Every member of the elite has some sort of tie to the Steering Committee."

"I know." She flashed a secretive smile and formed a dark comm crystal in the palm of her hand. Breathing *iede*-laced breath over the crystal, she activated the link. She pivoted, shielding the crystal with her body as an image formed within the sphere. "I'm sorry to disturb you, my lord. Would you have time to meet me in the nexus chamber? I need your assistance."

"I'll be there directly," Tavon barely heard "my lord" reply.

"Nexus chamber?" he repeated as she dissolved the comm crystal. "Where exactly are we? We can't be in the Shadow realm. You aren't touching me."

"We are nowhere and everywhere." She flashed an unexpected grin. Tavon's heart leapt in approval. Gods, she was beautiful when she smiled. The simmering outline of an archway appeared in one wall of the triangular room. Tavon was nearly certain they'd emerged from one of the other walls. Was "my lord" from another dimension?

Light penetrated the wall as a doorway materialized. Silhouetted against the light, a tall, broad-shouldered form moved into the nexus chamber and the doorway blinked shut. Emerald green symbols sparkled against the man's long black robe. Sharp-featured and oddly familiar, the visitor assessed Tavon with eyes the same bright green as the symbols on his robe.

"Do I know you?" Tavon heard himself ask, though he hadn't meant to speak the question out loud.

"Is this Tilden's son?"

Rammi nodded. "Lord Nyx of Zylott, this is Tavon Delmont, the Death Master's son."

Lord Nyx of Zylott? Tavon's mind whirled with information. This man was rumored to be part deity and part devil. A crusader by some accounts, a bloodthirsty villain by others. All agreed on one point: he had no use for Mystic Keepers.

"Why is he here, Rammi? What business have you with..." He looked directly at Lord Nyx. "You called my father by name. How do you know my father?"

"Our fathers are cousins. What does that make us?"

"Confused as hell."

Lord Nyx's gaze drifted back to Rammi. "What do you need from me?"

"I need to know where Tavon was mid-morning, May twenty-fourth, eighteen years ago."

"Why?" He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Tavon.

"I'll tell you after."

It was obvious these two knew each other. What in blazes was going on? "You'll tell him after what?"

Lord Nyx was silent for a moment. His gaze bore into Tavon's. "He was alone in a room lined with books, sketching the face of a girl when he should have been studying. Why is this memory important?"

An image flared within Tavon's mind. He'd been in his father's library and he'd been sketching Rammi's face. He looked at the sorcerer -- there was no doubt that's what this man was. Mystic energy unlike anything Tavon had ever encountered pulsed from Lord Nyx.

"He is accused of murder. Could you sense where the room was, which dimension?"

"A Life Keeper accused of murder, how very interesting." The faintest hint of a smile curved one corner of his mouth. "He was definitely in your dimension. In fact I think he was in his own home."

An occasional Keeper had attempted to scan Tavon's mind. Those he couldn't keep out entirely, he'd sensed as they intruded. He'd felt nothing as Lord Nyx pinpointed an exact moment in his past. Extraordinary.

"Then the murderer had to have been a Light Keeper using Tavon's image." Rammi scrubbed her hair with her fingers, renewing the spiky non-style. "*Prazot*, how do we even begin?"

"You're closer than you realize." Lord Nyx waved his hand and the doorway to his dimension rematerialized. He paused, looking directly at Tavon. "Does she know?"

His heart leapt within his chest. How the hell did the sorcerer know? Had Lord

Nyx recognized whose face Tavon was sketching, or was it something more... mystical?
“Not yet.”

The sorcerer’s gaze shifted to Rammi. “This all leads to the same place. You already know the answers. Tilden has known for years. Get the Time Master to confess. It’s your only hope.” Lord Nyx turned back to Tavon. “Claim her tonight. If you’re not bonded when you face Alrick, neither of you will survive.” He hesitated a moment longer, his lips compressed in a grim line. “Tilden never should have kept the truth from you. Brodi is alive.”

With a wave of his hand, Lord Nyx freed Tavon and disappeared.

Tavon flew out of the chair and pinned Rammi against the wall with the weight of his body. She cried out, shrinking back from his aggression.

“What is your connection to Lord Nyx?” His vivid blue eyes demanded answers. Flutters erupted deep in her belly and her nipples tingled. He was innocent of murder, but how far could she trust him? Master Tilden was obviously keeping secrets from his son.

The pouches were gone; Tavon’s hands were free. Why would Lord Nyx do this to her?

“Why is my father interacting with Lord Nyx?”

“They’re distant cousins, isn’t that what he said?”

He cupped the side of her face, his thumb raising her chin. “We’re in this together whether you like it or not. You trust my father, don’t you?”

“I trust Master Tilden, not his son.”

“He sent you to me.”

“He sent me *after* you,” she clarified stubbornly.

“He knew I was innocent. He sent you to me.”

She took a deep breath. He was right. Master Tilden had wanted her with Tavon. But why? Was it more complicated than the murder allegations? What were they supposed to do now? “It doesn’t matter what I believe. It matters what we can prove.

Even if Lord Nyx testified before the Committee, they would never believe him."

"But you believe him."

What was Tavon getting at? Lord Nyx had said so many things right before he left, so many confusing, disturbing things. "His information has proved accurate in the past."

"He told me to claim you. Why would he say that?" Soft and deep, barely more than a whisper, Tavon's voice caressed her.

Because I've always known I'd bond with a Life Keeper. A demanding pulse erupted in her core, shocking her, thrilling her. *My equal and opposite.*

"Who is Brodi?" she countered, desperate to escape her own desire.

"When was the last time a man touched you?" He eased his fingers under the neckline of her uniform. The seam separated, revealing the upper swell of her breasts and her frantic heartbeat.

"This morning. Your father groped me."

"You knew I wasn't my father, so why did you kiss me?"

Heat curled through her. She'd used the ploy to regain control of the situation, but she hadn't expected to enjoy it so much. "It got you here, didn't it?"

His fingers played against her skin, teasing her with feather-light touches. "You weren't kissing my father. You were kissing me." His lips brushed hers, stroked, caressed. "Admit it. There's something between us."

"It's called an erection and a cold shower will help." She turned her face away.

"Claiming you will help more."

"I'm not your bonded mate! I will never... go through that again."

Covering her mouth with his, he surrounded her with his scent, his heat. Her skin tingled. He slipped his hand inside her uniform, cupping her breast. Her nipple gathered against his warm palm. No! She would bond with no man! Never again would she make herself so vulnerable.

"I've dreamed of you since I was a child." His lips moved against hers, and his thumb rubbed her nipple. "Gaverel was courting you. You seemed happy, so I pushed

the longings aside.”

She shook her head. The ache within her soul gaped, throbbed. She’d dreamed once too. Dreamed of love and laughter, of sunshine and light. Tears blurred her vision and she tried to shove him away.

“You were never meant for Gaverel. You were meant for me.”

A sob shattered her composure and she covered her face with her hands. She’d dreamed of being a Life Keeper’s mate. Tavon was a Life Keeper.

“You are my bonded mate. I’ve known it for years.” He eased her hands away from her face and waited for her to look up. “But I know what you suffered because of me. How do we reconcile the two?”

“We don’t,” she sobbed. “I can’t go through that again.”

His eyebrows drew together. “Is Gaverel... Has no other man touched you intimately?”

“I nearly killed the only man who ever made love to me. I don’t dare.”

“Oh, Rammi.” He spoke her name with such sorrow, a fresh flood of tears coursed down her face. He brushed them away, then kissed her gently, tenderly. His lips caressed hers, his tongue stroked, soothed. “What that bastard did to you had nothing to do with love. Let me show you the difference. Let me make love to you.”

“I can’t think. You’re confusing me.”

He chuckled. Wrapping his arms around her, he guided her head to his shoulder. “I’m confused, too. Let’s go somewhere and sort this out. Who knows where you are? Am I safe anywhere in our dimension?”

“Manric Cendar was the only member of the Steering Committee not present at the meeting.”

“You were dispatched by the Steering Committee?”

She looked up at his shocked tone. “I’ll show you the data crystal when we get settled for the night.”

“Do you have somewhere in mind?”

“My family has a summer cottage high in the mountains. It’s only accessible

through the Shadow realm. My brothers will sense my return. Can you shield your presence from them?"

"I can shield myself from everyone but my parents."

"Then we should be safe for a while."

Chapter Five

A film of dust coated every surface, making it obvious the Severn family seldom utilized their mountain retreat. Rammi sent a cleansing pulse through the cottage and laughed nervously. "Maybe we should have gone to a hotel. It's been a while since anyone had time for a holiday."

"Hotels require registration. You're harboring a fugitive."

A fugitive who claimed to be her bonded mate. Every touch, every heated glance built the tension inside her. Only the elders could activate *Pim Noctar*, so why did she feel so odd?

They stood in the main room of the cottage, moonlight casting a silvery glow. Three bedrooms lay off to the right, a dining area to their left. Floor to ceiling windows dominated the wall directly in front of them, showcasing the spectacular view. Tree-covered hills created a jagged horizon against the blue/black sky. Moonlight glistened off a light dusting of snow.

"How did you meet Lord Nyx?"

Tavon didn't seem affected by whatever was stimulating her senses. He smiled, his gaze warm and caressing. And he kept touching her. He pressed his hand to the small of her back. His fingers brushed her hip, her arm, her hair. Each casual contact heightened her discomfort, her restlessness.

She crossed to the massive windows, needing something to occupy her mind. "Your father has been helping him investigate the Steering Committee. Lord Nyx suspects one or more of the members are practicing the forbidden arts."

"*Setti-iede?* Black magic?" He sounded incredulous. She met his gaze and nodded. "How is that possible? If someone were moving in the *Setti* arts it would disrupt the balance of our entire dimension."

"The source of Death *iede* resides closer to the *Setti* realm than any other. Master Tilden is aware of things no one else can sense. He's felt the distortion growing, but so far he has been unable to determine who's to blame."

"Why has he told no one, and how did Lord Nyx become involved?"

"I don't know the details. I'm basically a courier. Master Tilden is investigating the most powerful people in our dimension. It isn't surprising he sought assistance from an outsider."

"This is why he's stopped using Veil Keepers." He stroked his chin, his expression distracted and thoughtful. "He trusts no one."

"We've found few places we can't get to utilizing the Shadow realm and the nexus chambers."

"There is more than one?"

She just smiled.

Tavon faced her, his gaze intent upon her face. "This is huge. If Father is right --"

"He has to have proof before he can act. You don't accuse a member of the Steering Committee without tangible evidence."

Accepting this with a nod, he stared out into the night. She studied his profile, fascinated by the masculine beauty of his features. He was everything she'd wanted in a man, before she abandoned her dreams. Was it possible? Could he be her true mate? The other half of her soul?

Her body pulsed to life, hungry to explore the possibility. She leashed her desire, focusing on the other things Lord Nyx had said. "Who is Brodi?"

He turned toward her, his gaze suddenly guarded. "Brodi can't be alive. Lord Nyx is mistaken."

"All right. Who *was* Brodi?"

Fidgeting, he glanced out the window, then met her gaze. "Before my father bonded with my mother, his mistress bore him a son."

"How is that possible? Keepers can only conceive with a bonded mate."

"My father was not yet a Keeper. His lover wasn't even elite. She never expected

a permanent relationship, but Brodi wasn't as understanding as his mother. He claimed my father treated her like a whore and condemned him to the existence of a bastard."

"From which order did his mother come?" Tavon didn't want to consider the possibility but, to her knowledge, Lord Nyx had never provided false information.

"She was of the Order of Light." He moved away from the windows, his stride stiff and mechanical. "I know what you're thinking, but there has to be another explanation. Brodi was my half-brother. I would sense it if he were still alive."

She didn't push him. His resentment obviously ran deep. If Brodi had been the result of a youthful indiscretion, it wasn't surprising that Master Tilden had never mentioned him. Tavon sat on the large sofa situated against one wall. Rammi joined him there, at a loss for words. A tense silence descended on the room.

"You think Master Alrick is responsible for the Flame Princess' death?"

She nodded. "He was the only one with a real motive. Kayrin spurned him, made him look the fool. I don't think Alrick committed the murder, but I think he sanctioned it."

He sighed, extending his arm along the back of the sofa, lightly brushing her shoulders. "How in the world will we get him to confess? He's had eighteen years to practice his story."

"I don't know." The simple pressure of his arm against her shoulders sent a hot wave of longing through her body. His gaze suddenly brightened, his pupils dilated. He felt it, too! She wasn't imagining the heightened awareness. He was just better at concealing his reactions.

"Lord Nyx said our only hope is to face him as bonded mates."

She smiled. "That may be the oddest come on I have ever heard."

He framed her face with his warm palms. "You are so beautiful when you smile it makes my whole body ache."

"That was better."

"I think your sorcerer friend activated *Pim Noctar*," Tavon whispered. "If I don't claim you, I'll go mad."

Covering her mouth with his, he ended their conversation. Warm and gentle, his lips moved against hers. His fingers caressed her face while he coaxed his way into her mouth. She opened wider. He delved deeper, her tongue curled around his.

Her pulse raced and each ragged breath filled her head with his scent. He tasted of Light and passion. She couldn't get enough. He pulled her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. On and on he kissed her, mingling their breath. She traced his jaw with her fingertips, relaxing in his embrace. Patient, gentle, he let her set the pace.

She'd dreamed of a Life Keeper mate, known him instinctively. Gaverel had blinded her with lies, dazzled her with his handsome face. He'd convinced her with whispered promises that he was the man of her dreams. Her dreams hadn't been wrong; she had been deceived.

Her world narrowed to Tavon, to this one moment in time. Her mate. Her true mate. All these years she'd forsaken her heart's desire, thought she'd been betrayed by her dreams.

Liberated by the truth, need surged through Rammi. Hunger and longing combined in a heated rush. She splayed her fingers against the back of his head and reversed the kiss. She filled his mouth with her tongue, boldly tasting him.

Tavon groaned. His hands slid up and down her back, molding her to his chest. She sent a cleansing pulse down her body, dissolving her uniform in a puff of gray dust. He followed suit and they came together skin to skin. Rammi sighed. It felt wonderful. She rubbed her breasts against his naked chest.

Easing her away, he gazed at her naked body, hunger burning in his eyes. "So beautiful."

He cupped her breast. His thumb lightly abraded her nipple. She tried not to think about Gaverel, but memories hovered, threatening to destroy the fragile bond beginning to form.

"Rammi, look at me." She met Tavon's gaze, allowing him to see her uncertainty. "I love you." The words spread over her like a healing balm, warm and soothing. "I think I've always loved you."

She parted her lips as his mouth covered hers, needing to taste him, to abandon herself in his tenderness. His palm covered her breast and she arched into his touch. Heat pooled low in her belly. Her core throbbed, empty, hollow, incomplete. Laying her back against the arm of the sofa he nibbled and licked at her mouth. This was safe, comfortable.

Distracted by his tender kisses, Rammi jerked when his hand covered her mound. He continued to kiss her as his fingers insinuated themselves between her thighs. She'd been touched before. This part was nice.

She parted her thighs, making room for his hand. His fingers rubbed, sliding easily through her creamy folds. He groaned into her mouth. Encouraged by the needy sound, Rammi opened herself wider.

He pushed two fingers into her slick core. Rammi tore her mouth from his, panting harshly. "Stars, that feels good."

"You'll get no argument from me."

His mouth fastened onto her nipple as his fingers began a rhythmic slide. Each time he dragged his fingers out, he sucked hard. Rammi tossed her head against the sofa's arm, lost in the sensual storm. Tension coiled inside her, making her internal muscles pulse.

He pulled his fingers out and she grabbed his wrist. "I was almost there."

Smiling into her eyes, he circled her nipple with his tongue. "I know, but you're not coming until I'm inside you."

"Then... come inside me now."

Chuckling, he shook his head. "You're not ready yet."

She laughed. "I beg to differ."

"The begging will come later too."

He lifted her and swung his legs onto the sofa, arranging her astride his hips before he lay back. "Come here."

His hands grasped her hips, dragging her forward. What was he... oh! He positioned her directly above his face and gently parted her folds. Heat spiraled

through her pussy with the first brush of his tongue. Rammi arched, her head thrown back. Stars, it felt wonderful!

He circled her clit, licking and suckling until she trembled. His tongue traced her slit over and over, lapping up her cream like a hungry cat. An orgasm gathered within her. She gritted her teeth, her thighs flexing. If he realized what was happening, he'd stop again. He'd said he wasn't going to let her come. But she needed this. Gods, how she needed it.

His fingers dug into her hips, anchoring her over his face as he drove his tongue into her cunt. Rammi cried out, powerless to stop the burst of sensation. Hard spasms of pleasure gripped her inner muscles. Her nipples pulsed in time to the throbbing of her core.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, collapsing against the arm of the sofa.

He scooted out from under her, licking her essence off his lips. "For what?"

"You didn't want me to come until you were inside me."

"I *was* inside you. My tongue was inside you."

"So were your fingers," she protested.

"All right, so I got carried away. You just taste so damn good." He stood and took her by the hand, leading her toward the dining room table.

"There are three bedrooms." She pointed in the opposite direction.

"And we'll try out each one, but this first time has got to be special. I want nothing to remind you of before." He lifted her to the table and parted her thighs. "I want to be able to see you and touch you without any hesitation in your eyes."

Gaverel had been on top of her, pressing her down, making her feel weak and helpless -- used. Tavon's concern warmed her, eased her uncertainty. She raised her legs, hooking her ankles behind him, opening herself wide.

"Take me," he whispered. "Touch me. Show me where you want me to go."

Her hand trembled as she closed her fingers around his cock. Hot, hard, throbbing, he bucked within the loose circle of her hand. She sighed, her pussy melting, wet, wanting. Guiding him to her entrance, she raised her gaze to his.

He penetrated her slowly, filling her, stretching her. His balls pressed against her bottom and he released a hissing breath. "You okay?"

"I'll be better when you start moving."

Needing no further encouragement, he hooked her knees over his elbows and lifted her hips to a better angle. She clutched his shoulders. He pulled out completely before plunging back in. Unlocking her ankles, she gave him room to move. He claimed her with slow, deep thrusts, filling her completely with each new drive.

She arched, tightened her inner muscles, and watched his eyes. Bright, glowing with love and tenderness, his gaze surrounded her.

Her heart swelled with unfamiliar emotions. Tears welled in her eyes. What was wrong with her? This felt like paradise. Why was she crying?

He thrust harder. The pleasure built.

Her lungs burned, her chest tight and aching. He filled her again and again. She needed more. She needed all of him! Tangling her fingers in his hair, she dragged his mouth down to hers, kissing him with passion and demand. He filled her mouth as he filled her core, his hands firm upon her hips. She sucked his tongue deeper, squeezed his cock tighter, and still it wasn't enough.

She was ravenous, desperate, incomplete. Pressing her back across the table, he lifted her legs to his shoulders and pounded into her cunt. Her breasts rocked with each forceful thrust. She covered them with her hands.

"Now, my love. Come for me now!"

He thrust to the hilt and her body obeyed, exploding with spasms of pleasure. Tight as a bowstring, she arched off the table as her inner muscles caressed his cock. His hot seed burst into her, detonating another series of contractions.

Panting, stunned, utterly replete, she gazed up at him with tear bright eyes.

"Why are you crying?" He kissed her gently then waited for her answer.

"I didn't realize how empty I was until you filled me with your Life."

* * *

True to his word, Tavon made love to Rammi in every room in the cottage. Each

time they tried a new position, experimented with different stimulation, their bond grew steadily stronger. They could soon hear each other's thoughts.

Will you hear everything I think or can I block you out? She tested their telepathic link as they showered for the third time. They could cleanse their bodies with a mystic pulse, but the warm water helped them relax.

Why would you want to block me out?

She snuggled against him, cupping his butt with both hands. *I don't know that I want you to hear everything that goes on inside my head.*

Can you speak to your brothers mind-to-mind?

Yes.

And do they hear every thought in your head or only the ones you send them?

Only the ones I send them.

Our link is a bit stronger, but I still have to intentionally touch your mind or you have to send your thoughts.

They kissed as he pressed her against the slick shower stall. *That's cold!* She shivered violently. He lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he surged inside with one deep thrust. *And that's hot.* She gasped, resting her head against the stall. He just held her there, pinned against the stall, impaled on his throbbing cock. She squeezed him tightly and he groaned.

I've been thinking about something your friend said.

She laughed. "Do you often think of my friends while you're inside me?" she asked out loud.

He grinned, pushing deeper. "Lord Nyx said we must face Alrick together or we wouldn't survive."

"True and now we're bonded." She smiled into his eyes. "Does this give you an idea?"

"Bonded mates can access each other's power."

"So how will that help us get Alrick to confess?"

Squeezing her bottom, he flexed inside her, then offered a mischievous grin. "I

think the skeletons in Alrick's closet should go pay him a visit."

"Not until they finish playing in the shower!"

He laughed and thrust hard, covering her mouth with his. She clung to him with her arms and legs. Her core pulsed rhythmically. He slid his tongue in and out of her mouth, mirroring his deeper penetration. She reached for him with her mind, drawn by the Light of his mystic power. Sizzling sensations raced across her nerve endings. Her whole body tingled.

I love you, Rammi. Tenderness saturated the thought. She tightened her body possessively.

I love you, too.

He paused, throbbing deep inside her. His eyes opened and their gazes locked. "I don't want you to say those words until you're certain you mean them."

She nodded, fighting back her beaming smile. "All right. I'll say them when I'm certain."

His kiss gentled, but his thrusting went wild. He kept her pressed to the stall and pounded into her. She surrendered to the power of his passion, gloried in the strength of his desire. Tension built to a fever pitch and Rammi dragged her mouth away.

"I love you," she cried. He shook, flexed, and filled her with his hot seed. Thrilled by his loss of control, she grinned and said the words again. "I love you."

Chapter Six

"Have you ever done this before?" Rammi led Tavon through the Shadow realm.

"I don't know if what we're about to attempt has ever been done before."

She paused and looked into his eyes. "You made it sound like..."

"Theoretically it should be simple. You now have access to my abilities and I have access to yours. All we're doing is combining the two."

Heart hammering within her breast, Rammi tried to find comfort in his nonchalance. "Let's have a trial run, shall we? I'm going to let go of your hand. See if you can stabilize yourself by accessing my abilities. If you start to fade out, I'll grab you."

He nodded and she slowly released his hand. As soon as their fingers separated he wavered, rippling like an image on a swelling wave. She felt him sink into her mind and tingled with memories of his body moving inside her. The undulation ceased, his form solidified, and he smiled.

"A Life Keeper unescorted in the Shadow realm. This has got to be a first."

"Don't get too cocky. You're all of three feet away. When you start navigating the Shadow realm alone, I'll be impressed."

"Oh, you seemed pretty impressed a little while ago." She slapped at him as heat crawled up her neck. "You were definitely impressed in the shower."

"And you were definitely cocky." She laughed. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply, thoroughly. "We don't have time for this." His hand cupped her breast and she moaned. "The entire dimension is hunting you. I want this settled tonight."

Sexual awareness sizzled between them as he eased her away. All he had to do was brush her skin with his hand and a new cycle of arousal built. *Pim Noctar* had

officially elapsed, but her body craved his.

“Soon,” he whispered, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

Focusing on their destination, Rammi entwined their fingers and flowed through the Shadow realm. A surge of awareness told her they’d arrived. She coated her hands with *iede* and parted the mist, allowing them to see into Alrick’s chamber without revealing their presence.

The chamber’s outer wall glistened like iridescent crystal. Rammi gasped. “This isn’t his palace. He’s in the Temple of the Veil.”

Tavon leaned closer peering through the small opening in the mist. Alrick, or at least she presumed it was Alrick, knelt beside the bed. He was naked and a dark-haired woman’s legs draped over his broad shoulders. His face was buried between her thighs and his hands cupped her breasts.

“Are you sure that’s him?”

She heard the laughter in Tavon’s tone and smacked his arm. “This isn’t funny.”

“I thought sex was forbidden to Veil Keepers.”

“Only for the first two years of their training.”

“Should we come back?”

“No.” She glanced into the chamber. “Cast your illusion, let’s go.”

“With the woman still here?”

“It may work to our advantage. Hurry.”

Tavon struggled to manifest Light *iede* in the Shadow realm. Rammi opened her being to him, offering mystic energy in its purest form. His palms filled with the glistening manifestation of power.

“Thanks.” He brushed a quick kiss to her brow. “Ready?”

She nodded and he showered them with *iede*. Waiting for a physical sensation, she watched Tavon morph into the likeness of Larot. “Do I look like Kayrin? I don’t feel any different.”

“You look just like the image in the crystal.”

“How long can you maintain the illusion?”

"As long as it takes. Form the data crystal now. I don't want anything to distract from our performance."

They didn't want Alrick to realize their performance was being recorded either. Rammi created a data crystal and activated it with her breath. She placed it carefully between their clasped hands. "Don't press too hard, it will muffle the sound." Tavon nodded, glancing down at the small gray crystal. "Let the games begin."

Stepping closer to the opening she'd created in the mist, Rammi called out to the Time Master. "Alrick."

"What was that?" The woman pushed him away, scooting to the middle of the bed.

Alrick grabbed her ankle and pulled her back toward the edge. "I wasn't finished."

"Alrick." Rammi used a sharper tone.

The brunette jerked her foot out of his grasp. "You had to have heard that, Master Alrick. Someone is calling you."

"You've gone daft. I didn't hear a thing."

Rammi slipped from the Shadow realm and into the crystal chamber, Tavon a step behind. The Veil Keeper shrieked, diving beneath the covers until only her eyes peeked out.

"You vile coward." Rammi lowered her voice, making it raspy and tremulous.

He scuttled back across the bed, nearly trampling the woman. "What sort of trick is this? How are you..."

"You know who I am, who we were! How can you live with our blood on your hands?"

"Light Keeper tricks! I'm not frightened by --"

"They came through the wall," the woman cried and Rammi wanted to hug her. "How did they get beyond the crystal shield?"

Alrick's eyes widened and color drained from his face. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"Believe what you like," Tavon snarled. "We've come for justice."

"I did not kill you. Tavon Delmont is the one --"

"Insa enk ta." Shadow fibers coiled around his throat. It was a Death Keeper chant, but Alrick wouldn't know that. Few who heard the syllables lived to repeat them.

"No, my love, not like that." Tavon was a fabulous actor. How often did he assume fictitious roles? "We cannot pass beyond until we understand his motivation. Let him speak."

Rammi commanded the fibers to expand, but didn't dissolve the coil. "Speak while you still can, Time slug."

"You spread your thighs for that commoner when you were meant for me!" He gasped out the words, his fingers clawing at the Shadow coil. "I would have cherished you. I would have --"

"You coveted my neutral *iede*, the power that would have passed to your children. You didn't even know me!"

His nostrils flared and color flooded his face. "You subjected me to public ridicule. No one slanders my name and --"

"And lives to tell the tale?" Tavon finished for him. "You spoke of Light Keeper tricks. Is that how your assassin struck? Why use Tavon Delmont's shape? What had he done?"

"It amused me. It amused us." Rammi tightened the coil for a moment. Alrick gagged and choked. "No one slanders my name. *No one!*" His voice strained and broke. Why was he so determined to make this point?

Why not. He thought he was arguing with the vanquished spirits of his victims.

"Who is your henchman?" Tavon demanded. "Speak his name."

Rammi shot him a cautioning glance. There was too much authority in his tone.

"Tavon Delmont." Alrick grinned. "Have your revenge or step back through the Veil and tell your high priestess this wasn't amusing."

He thinks we're Veil Keepers. She sent the thought directly to Tavon's mind. Let's leave it that way. He will say nothing more.

Mimicking the hand gestures Veil Keepers used to access the Veil, Rammi opened a portal into the Shadow realm. She paused for one heated glare before following Tavon through the opening.

"Is this damning enough to present to the Steering Committee?" Tavon asked as Rammi deactivated the data crystal. They'd returned to the mountain cottage to review the recording. "He basically admits the murders were in response to Kayrin's rejection."

" 'No one slanders my name.' He said that over and over. Who else has crossed Alrick?"

Tavon shook his head. Dawn was still several hours away. "How were you able to penetrate the crystal shield?"

"I wouldn't have been able to if Alrick hadn't been in the Temple. I used basic Death Keeper skills to guide me to my target. My target just happened to be inside the crystal shield."

"Well, his misconception will buy us some time." He chuckled. "High Priestess Sacha is going to have hell to pay."

"Why was he there? What business has the Time Master in the Temple of the Veil?"

"You saw them. He was *aveiling* himself of the temple amenities." She shook her head and turned her face away, hiding her smile. One day he would see her smile freely, her eyes shining with laughter -- and love.

"There's more to it than that. Lord Nyx said your father has known what really happened for years. I say we confront him with the recording and put an end to all of this."

"If Brodi is alive, then it all makes perfect sense," Tavon grumbled. "Brodi would like nothing better than to cast doubt upon me."

"You said his mother was from the Order of Light. Was he able to create illusions?"

"Yes. But why would my father lie about his death?"

"We'll find out in the morning."

"So, how shall we spend the next few hours?" He sauntered toward her. "It would be rude to wake him in the middle of the night."

"I agree." She grinned, sidestepping him. "But we started on the couch, we've tried out all the beds, the table, and the shower stall. There is nothing left for us to do."

"Oh, I disagree." He caught her wrist and led her toward a large heavily padded chair. "This fabulous piece of furniture has been completely neglected."

"How could we have been so cruel?" He sent out a cleansing pulse strong enough to dissolve both their clothes and Rammi giggled. "That's not fair."

"The injustices have just begun!"

He scooped her up and placed her in the chair, hooking her legs over the arms and pulling her bottom to the very edge of the seat.

"Why, this is positively indecent," she cried, the laughter in her tone completely ruining the effect.

"I like indecent, but I like obscene even more. Tell me when I'm being obscene."

He knelt in front of her and cupped her breasts. "That's nice."

"Oh, nice will never do." He slipped his hands beneath her bottom and raised her pussy to his mouth, tracing her slit with his tongue. She murmured, arching into the torrid kiss. "How's this?"

His heated breath wafted over her creamy folds. "Fabulous."

Chuckling, he pushed two fingers into her core and focused his tongue against her clit. Hot, twisting sensations assailed her. Rammi cupped her breasts and cried out, shaking.

With his fingers deep inside her, he stroked her clit with his thumb, drawing out her orgasm until she sagged against the chair. His gaze caressed her flushed face. "Not obscene yet?"

"Sorry. That was nothing you haven't done before."

Her soft chuckle ignited a dangerous fire in his eyes. "You want new and inventive?"

"I thought we were going for obscene."

"Obscene it is." In a flash he scooped her up and sat in the chair himself. "Up you go." He lifted her hips, guiding her knees to the chair's tall back. She braced her hands against the seat while he turned her upside down. She shrieked, then moaned as his hot breath caressed her inner thighs. Bending her elbows, she settled her forearms against the seat on either side of his hips.

"This is definitely obscene."

"So glad you approve."

Her thighs framed his face, positioning her pussy right over his mouth. Her head was in his lap, leaving no doubt what he had in mind. She teased him with her tongue, swirling around the plush head of his cock without taking him in her mouth.

He moved her knees as far apart as the chair would allow, lowering her onto his waiting tongue. He pushed deep and Rammi groaned. She sucked him into her mouth with the same tender care he showed her. He led, she followed, stroke for stroke, lick for lick. A carnal dance of pleasure and desire.

Another orgasm tightened within her. Her legs trembled and her core clenched his tongue. His approving growl vibrated her sensitive folds, prolonging the rippling pleasure. He licked and sucked until the last tingle faded, then moved with undeniable urgency.

Grasping her waist, he guided her to the carpeted floor. She ended up on her hands and knees. He followed her down, kneeling behind her, thrusting home with one forceful lunge. Echoes of her orgasm tingled through her as his thick cock stretched her tight.

Rammi gasped, her head reeled, her body throbbed, her heart overflowed with love. How had she lived so long without him? She hadn't lived, she had merely survived.

Arched and open, she gave herself to him, clasping him tightly each time he drove deep. His hands grasped her hips, his harsh breathing filled her ears, and his scent surrounded her.

He strained against her, into her, one with her. Passion burst and together they soared.

Chapter Seven

The woman paused outside Brodi's chamber, shocked by her own hesitation. Her affection for the assassin caught her by surprise. It had been so long since she felt anything. He'd amused her. He'd been useful, but he posed too great a danger to her now. She had no choice but to end it and clean breaks were always best.

She'd find someone else to amuse her. Concealing herself in illusion, she triggered the chime announcing her presence. The privacy panel raised and Brodi stood before her. Danger emanated from this man. His brutality excited her. What a waste.

"Celeste." He cocked one eyebrow and smiled. "What brings you by?"

She lowered her lashes, not wanting to appear too self-assured. The Veil Keeper slut would be intimidated by him. "I have never known pleasure like I felt with you. I... If you were to approach Master Alrick and suggest..." She raised her gaze and slowly licked her lips. "I want to do it again."

Brodi chuckled, stroking her cheek with his knuckles. "Go to the chapel. We'll meet you there."

Men were such fools. Dissolving her robe, the woman sighed as cool air wafted across her naked flesh. Candlelight flickered off the smooth walls of the chapel, accenting the purple marbling. Such a lovely setting, it was almost romantic.

She must remember to act like the simpering slut or Alrick would see through the illusion. The men arrived a few minutes later. She offered them a sultry smile.

"Didn't get enough yesterday, sweet Celeste? Well, good. Neither did I."

She ran her hands over her body, grazing her nipples and skimming her mound. "I want to ride you, while Brodi fills my ass. Can we do it that way this time?"

Alrick frowned. "I like being on top. You should know that."

"I do, Master Alrick, but just this once." She strolled toward him, hips rolling, breasts swaying. "Please."

"Maybe you can convince me -- on your knees."

Without hesitation, she knelt and loosened the laces of Alrick's pants. Brodi knelt behind her, trailing kisses across her shoulder and cupping her breasts. She sucked Alrick's cock into her mouth, thrilled by his ragged gasp. Brodi pinched her nipples hard. Ah, yes, he knew just how to drive a woman crazy with his mixture of pleasure and pain. Taking Alrick deep into her throat, she worked him mercilessly. His hands tangled in her hair and he thrust into her mouth.

Brodi pulled her away with a soft chuckle. "Aren't you convinced yet?"

"She's getting better at that. She's never taken me that deep before."

The woman stood and moved toward the altar, hoping Alrick would follow suit. He pushed her hips against the cold stone and played with her breasts, squeezing each mound and pinching her nipples. The woman did her best to moan at the appropriate times, but she was restless, eager for the real fun to begin.

"Brodi, lick her pussy, but don't let her come."

Still on his knees, Brodi moved closer and lifted her leg to his broad shoulder. He feathered kisses along her inner thigh, then covered her mound with his mouth. Sweet, passionate Brodi. His tongue moved with skill and daring, but she was too distracted to respond.

"Enough. Lift her up here. I want that tight cunt gripping my cock."

Turning to the altar, the woman smiled. Alrick lay on his back, his erect cock exposed, waiting to be mounted. She was tempted. The image formed within her mind. She watched herself moving, impaled on his powerful cock, while Brodi buried himself in her ass.

No. Alrick wasn't worthy of the ride.

"Do you always get what you want, Master Time?" she asked sweetly.

Before he could answer, she placed her hand over his nose and mouth. Manifesting *Setti-iede*, she sealed his airway. Spinning on the ball of her foot, she

grabbed Brodi's face as well.

I'm sorry, my love. I shall miss you.

She didn't linger to watch him die. Retrieving her bundle from its hiding place beneath the altar, she took the shredded Veil Keeper robe and set it in plain sight. Alrick had stopped struggling by the time she turned to him with the long, sharp dagger. Disintegrating the *Setti-iede*, she brushed the sparkling flecks off his lifeless face and thrust the dagger hilt deep into his chest. Blood gushed as she withdrew the blade. She watched it saturate his tunic with dispassionate interest.

Unwilling to look at Brodi's face, she moved behind him and slit his throat. Her heart lurched and her stomach knotted. She thought herself beyond these tender feelings. Why did she have to care for him? After she dissolved the *Setti-iede*, she noticed the sparkling residue on her hands. Damn! This wouldn't do. She sent a cleansing pulse through the chapel, destroying every trace of *Setti-iede*.

She stood and assessed the scene. Not her best work, but it would suffice.

Manifesting a robe, she left the chapel, bloody footprints trailing in her wake. Now to plant the knife and scramble a mind, concluding this sacrifice.

* * *

"This is going to be a hard sell," Master Tilden said. "He alludes to a lot, but doesn't actually confess anything."

Rammi nodded. "That's why we brought it to you instead of the Steering Committee." She sat beside Tavon in his father's spacious office. "He stresses that no one slanders him without repercussions and I don't think he meant Kayrin and Larot. Who else was hurt by their murder? Did he have other reasons to hate Matriarch Flame?"

"You're slightly off target with that line of reasoning. The question should be who was hurt by Tavon's implication?"

She glanced at her bonded mate. They had agreed not to bring up Brodi initially. Tavon wanted to see how long it took for his father to confess. "You've lost me, sir."

Master Tilden relaxed in his massive chair, his dark gaze moving from Rammi to

his son and back again. "After Kayrin ran off with her lover, Alrick went on a ruthless campaign to replace her with the most powerful female he could find. His first choice was the Light Master's sister."

"Alrick courted Mother?" Tavon sounded aghast.

"Courtied indicates participation. Alrick pursued your mother. She finally had to make a public scene before he was humiliated enough to choose another victim."

" 'It amused me, no, it amused us'." Rammi paused a moment to emphasize the quote. "Who else would be amused by Tavon's implication?"

Never before had she seen Master Tilden fidget, but he fidgeted now. "Has Tavon told you about Brodi?"

Tavon's features tensed, his gaze clouded. "Brodi is dead."

"The fire left his body unrecognizable. He claimed he could access the Veil right before a fire mysteriously took his life."

Tavon scooted to the edge of his chair, his hands clenched into fists upon his knees. "Is Brodi alive, yes or no? I can no longer sense his existence. Can you?"

"There are times when I sense -- something. It's as if his nature has been changed. It is Brodi and yet it is not."

A vivid purple comm crystal materialized in front of Master Tilden. "It's from High Priestess Sacha and it looks urgent. Don't speak. She doesn't need to know you're here." He scooped up the crystal and breath-activated the link.

"What can I do for you, high priestess?"

"I never thought to request your assistance, but I appear to need your expertise." Her tone sounded brittle and thin, filled with anxiety.

"What is the nature of your situation?"

"My temple has been defiled." Her voice was shrill, edged with hysteria. "One of my Veil Keepers has committed murder."

Rammi's startled gaze flew to Tavon. Master Tilden kept his attention carefully focused on the comm crystal.

"Are you in danger?" the Death Master asked. "Has this Veil Keeper been

apprehended?"

"I will send an escort to you. Tilden, please come now."

The crystal disintegrated into dust.

"Did she just say one of her Veil Keepers *committed murder*?" Rammi couldn't believe her own ears. Veil Keepers were notoriously pacifistic.

"You will come as my assistant. Tavon, disappear."

"I'm not sure I can maintain the illusion in the Veil. I've never tried before."

"We'll keep you behind us until we emerge. I suspect this will interest all of us. I should have told her I'd take a shuttle. She knows I avoid the Veil."

The escort arrived before Master Tilden could reconsider. Tavon blinked out of sight in a flash of Light *iede* as a Veil Keeper parted the Veil. Careful to keep Tavon behind them, they followed their guide. The Veil Keeper faced them, placing one hand on Tilden's shoulder and one hand on Rammi's. Tavon held tightly to their wrists.

The Veil swallowed color, light, and sound until utter darkness remained. Rammi closed her eyes. The absolute nothingness was disconcerting, but not knowing whether or not they could trust their guide compounded her anxiety. She hung suspended in the void for a heartbeat, then momentum assailed her, rocking her head back on her shoulders and whipping at her clothes.

They emerged in the massive vestibule of the Temple of the Veil. The pressure of Tavon's fingers eased. Rammi tried not to react. The Veil Keeper inclined his head and left without a word. Light passed through the faceted crystal shield, creating beautiful prisms of color. Rammi glanced behind her, but saw nothing.

I'm here, my love.

High Priestess Sacha rounded a corner in a flurry of diaphanous purple robes. The material floated around her body hinting at her shape without revealing the details. Her red-streaked dark hair circled her head in a braided coronet and her reddish brown eyes brimmed with tears.

"These happenings are... beyond my comprehension." She rubbed her bare arms, her hands trembled visibly.

"Show me."

She nodded at Master Tilden, then turned her attention to Rammi. "Were you successful in your mission, Death Keeper? I'm surprised to see you."

"I'm in the process of preparing a full report for the Steering Committee." Rammi said nothing more.

The high priestess led them down one gleaming corridor after another. The walls and smooth floor were marbled in purple and blue. Excluding their clandestine visitation, Rammi had never been in the temple before. It was really quite beautiful.

"They were found when three trainees went to meditate." She motioned to the ornately carved archway leading to a chapel.

Rammi sensed death long before she saw the bodies. She could smell its acrid breath and feel its icy fingers against her skin. A man lay on the altar fully clothed but for his exposed penis. His face turned away and blood darkened his tunic. His sable brown hair and muscular build struck a familiar chord within her mind.

Alrick.

She moved closer, but Master Tilden turned to her right.

Circling the altar Rammi confirmed that the Time Master was the first victim before joining her mentor beside the second. This second man was younger, his coloring darker.

"Do you know him?" High Priestess Sacha asked.

Rammi looked at Master Tilden, shocked to find grief contorting his harsh features. She touched his arm. He twisted away.

"His name is Brodi. He was my son."

"My condolences. I had no idea." She sounded sincere, but Rammi couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right about the situation. *Two men are dead, Severn. Of course it feels wrong.*

It's more than that. She nearly gasped when Tavon responded to her mental grumbling. *Trust your instincts, Rammi. This was staged.*

"Who do you believe did this?" Rammi asked the high priestess.

"We found Celeste in her chamber, curled up in a ball, the knife still clutched in her hand. She hasn't spoken since. All she'll do is sob. I believe that's her garment. She was naked when we found her."

Rammi glanced at the torn robe, but made no move to examine it.

"Master Tilden, I was told you can look into the eyes of the dead and see their murderer." Her lips trembled and tears escaped the corners of her eyes. "I would never have asked this of you had I known he was your son."

The Death Master said nothing. He knelt next to Brodi's body and looked into his lifeless eyes. Moving to the altar, he did the same with Alrick. "I see a comely woman, with long blonde hair. Her eyes are a pale shade of blue and there is a small mole to the left of her mouth."

"You have perfectly described Celeste. Shall I take you to her now?"

"No. Contact Master Jarek. I must excuse myself from this case and leave it to the Shadow Master."

"I understand."

She led them back to the vestibule and summoned an escort to return them to Master Tilden's office.

"Why did you let me believe Brodi was dead all these years?" Tavon asked as he dissolved the Light illusion.

"It gave you peace to believe him dead. I saw no reason to enlighten you."

"What really happened in that chapel?" Rammi crossed her arms over her chest, feeling contaminated, dirty. "No mere Veil Keeper could have killed those two men."

"I agree, but someone went to a great deal of trouble to make us believe it was so." Master Tilden took several deep breaths. "There is a more significant connection between Alrick and Brodi than a tryst with some random Veil Keeper. The Time twins have reluctantly cooperated with my investigation. They admitted Alrick had a private Veil Keeper who was able to cloak them in Light illusion. I believe that person was Brodi."

"Is it possible they killed each other?" Tavon asked.

They stood in the center of the room, too stunned even to sit. Master Tilden raked his fingers through his hair. "It's possible. The mind imprints the last image it sees. That image isn't always the murderer."

"What should we do now?"

"We let the Steering Committee draw all the expected conclusions." Master Tilden moved behind his desk and sat. "Alrick ordered the Flame Princess murdered because she had spurned him. Brodi was Alrick's henchman. Brodi masqueraded as Tavon to punish us for treating him so ignobly. And both died at the hands of this crazed Veil Keeper."

"Then an innocent woman will be punished for the crime," Rammi pointed out.

"I will intervene before that happens. Whoever set this up needs to believe they succeeded. We must do nothing to indicate otherwise."

"How will we continue our investigation if the Steering Committee closes the case?"

"We won't." He tapped his thumbs against his desktop. "Lord Nyx approached me with his allegations and I agreed to cooperate. Some of what he said corresponded with what I already knew, so I suspected we could assist each other."

"Toward what end?" Tavon asked. "What does Lord Nyx suspect?"

"He believes the *Setti* arts are being practiced within the Temple of the Veil."

"Evil permeated that chapel. It felt worse than death," Rammi said.

"You can't turn Lord Nyx free in our dimension, regardless of what happened today," Tavon objected. "Lord Nyx despises Mystic Keepers. He will declare war on the Order of the Veil."

"If the Veil Keepers have gained access to the *Setti* realm, a war with the Kingdom of Zylott will be the least of our concerns."

Epilogue

"Why did Tilden send you, golden boy?" Lord Nyx asked as he stepped into the nexus chamber. "It's a good thing I'm not easily offended."

Tavon's eyes narrowed, but he manufactured a smile. "My father wanted you to have this information as soon as possible and he had other obligations today."

The sorcerer's emerald gaze shifted to Rammi. "You needn't have bothered. Rammi knows the way."

"My bonded mate will no longer interact with you alone."

"You don't trust her?"

"I don't trust you."

"Enough!" Rammi stepped between the two men. Snatching the data crystal from Tavon, she handed it to Lord Nyx. "Alrick is dead, as is Brodi."

"You've been busy, Death Keeper."

"She didn't kill them."

Tavon's voice snapped with indignation, but Rammi recognized the twinkle in Lord Nyx's eyes. She had connected with the sorcerer the first time they met, sensing a kindred spirit. Even Master Tilden didn't always understand the subtle humor in Lord Nyx's banter.

"Foul things are afoot in the Temple of the Veil."

The sorcerer snorted. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Master Tilden is offering to assist you in any way he can. He is demonstrating his willingness with the information contained in the crystal."

"And what does he want in exchange?"

Rammi squared her shoulders and swallowed past the sudden tightening in her throat. "You must release your hostage."

"Which hostage would that be?" He cocked one dark eyebrow, his gaze mocking her. "I have hundreds."

"We are only concerned with one."

"I'd rather have the Veil Keeper." He tossed the crystal back to her. "Minuette is mine."

"Shit," Rammi muttered as he disappeared. "Master Tilden is going to be pissed. He promised the Frost Master he would get her back." Glancing down at the data crystal she repeated the obscenity.

"What's the matter?" Tavon stepped up beside her.

"It's empty." She laughed. "Damn his clever hide. How did he absorb the information so quickly? He had the crystal all of two seconds."

Tavon took the crystal from her and held it up to the light. "Are you sure it's the same crystal?"

"I'm not sure of anything where that man is concerned." She shook her head, unable to hide her smile. "I don't envy Minuette."

"Are you sure?"

Hearing the jealous tinge in Tavon's voice, Rammi faced him. She looped her arms around his neck and kissed his lips. "I like Lord Nyx, I admit it, but you have nothing to worry about. My heart, soul, and body belong to my bonded mate."

He took her in his arms and kissed her hungrily. His hands rubbed her back and he pressed his rapidly hardening cock into her belly. Rammi guided him backward as they kissed. The back of his knees met the edge of the interrogation chair and she pushed him onto the seat.

"*Insa enk ta.*" Shadow fibers coiled loosely around his forearms. She made sure none of them touched his bare skin. "Now, you will tell me all your secrets, or I will torture you."

He laughed at her melodramatic tone. Kneeling on the floor, she parted his legs and smiled into his eyes. Her agile fingers worked the laces of his pants and freed his cock.

"If this is your idea of torture --"

Her warm mouth interrupted his words. Her hands stroked his legs, his hips, his arms, while her mouth lavished *torture* on him.

"I will tell you nothing," he insisted breathlessly. Her tongue swirled around him and he groaned. "Except how much I love you." She took him deep into her mouth. "And how glad I am the Death Master chose you to capture me."

The End.

For now...

The Zylott Wars: Revenge

After a Veil Keeper rapes and murders his wife, killing their unborn son as well, Lord Nyx of Zylott feels nothing but anger and emptiness. When Veil Keeper Minuette literally falls into his life, Nyx vows to seduce her and replace what the Order of the Veil took from him -- his unborn child.

Minuette is fascinated by her captor. She senses his desolation and loss. He touches her with passion and longing, overwhelming her mistrust and fear. A mystic shield guards her virtue, but what will protect her heart?

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.