



## Praise for the writing of Alicia Sparks

### *Desert Moon: Ah-ten*

Ah-ten is a hero to beat all heroes and Caire is a ruler of intelligence in a fascinating story. Everything combines to create an excellent novel that I recommend to all lovers of romantic fantasy.

-- Anya Khan, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

I haven't read sex scenes as erotic as these in a long time. Ms. Sparks has created a fascinating universe in her Desert Moon series, one that I hope to revisit very, very soon.

-- Tanya, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

This book is awesome and so good you won't put it down until you finish it. Ah-ten is sexy and bold with an alpha attitude that will rock your world... Lovers of fantasy must pick this one up.

-- Angel Brewer, *The Romance Studio*

I recommend this book to anyone who enjoys stories of fantasy and the paranormal. *Desert Moon: Ah-ten* is most definitely a keeper!

-- Susan White, *Coffee Time Romance*

Alicia Sparks has woven a great erotic romance with *Desert Moon: Ah-ten*. My temperature rose after reading the first few chapters. The many sexual encounters throughout this novel were very intense, frequent, hot and passionate in nature.

-- Contessa Scion, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

*Desert Moon: Ah-ten* is now available from Loose Id.

# DESERT MOON: CAEL

Alicia Sparks

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

# Desert Moon: Cael

Alicia Sparks

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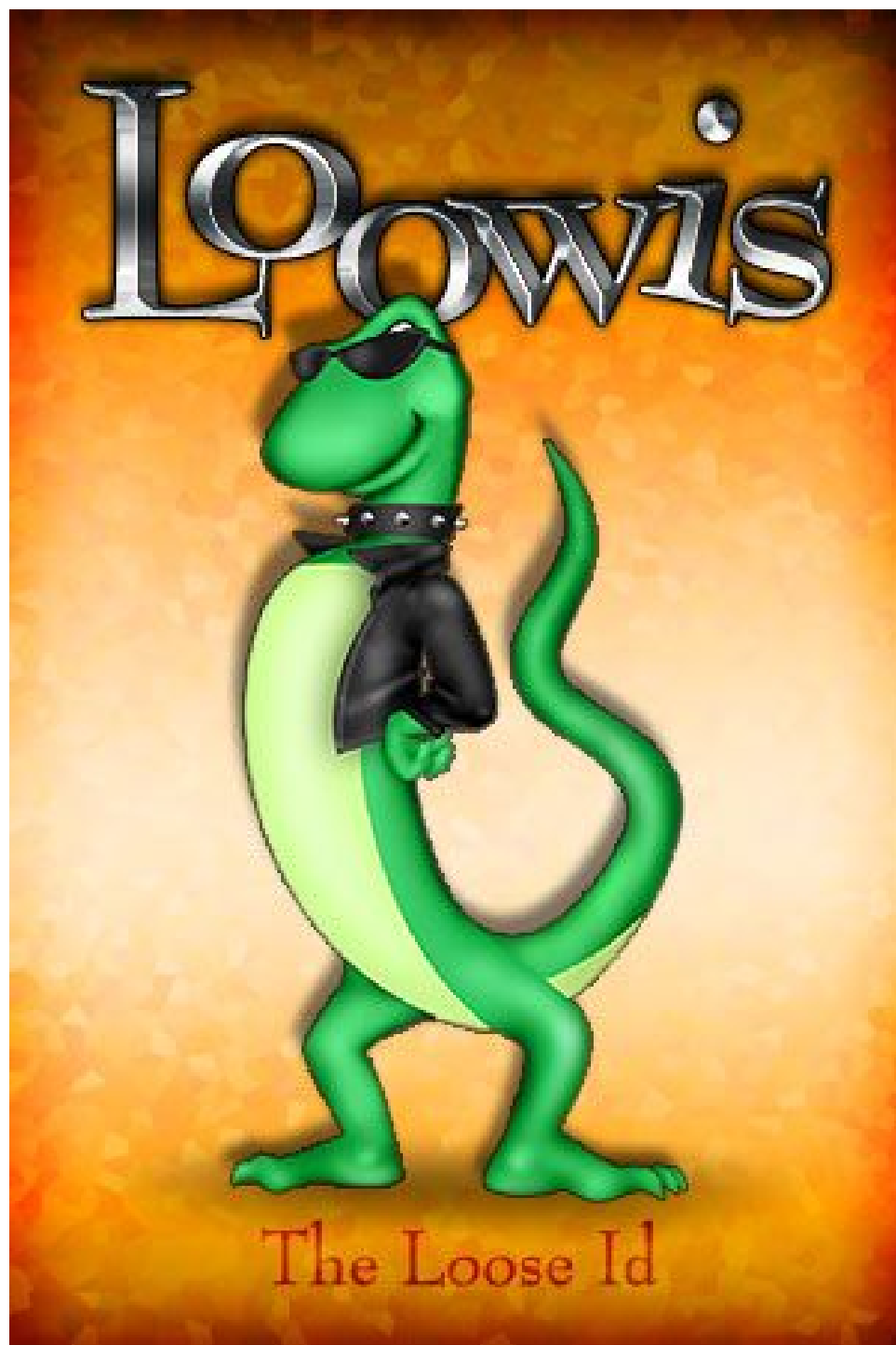
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## Chapter One

“Do you come to me willingly?”

“Yes.”

“Do you understand that I own you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what that entails? That I shall not harm you, but that I do control you. You are mine: your body is mine, your soul is mine. Do you agree to this?”

“Yes.”

She had not yet looked at him. He needed to see her eyes, needed to see the honesty there. If she did not come to him freely, he would not have her. He had no room for a woman who did not wish to bend to his will.

“Look at me.” He tipped her chin, bringing her eyes to meet his. They glowed golden.  
“Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She licked her bottom lip as she spoke.

“Then tell me what it is you understand.”

“I am yours. You have brought me here to be your slave, to be yours. I shall obey you and honor you.”

“Do you sincerely mean that? If you don’t, you shall be set free. I want a woman who is willing ...”

“I am willing.”

“Then do not interrupt me again.” He let a slight smile curl his lips as he spoke. “Once more. Do you come to me willingly?”

“Yes. What is it you wish?”

“I wish for you to undress and serve me dinner. I wish to eat it from your naked body. Will you do that for me?”

“Yes.”

“What else will you do for me? What have they taught you? What skills do you possess?” He still had not released her chin and knew she wouldn’t move until he did so.

“Whatever you want. I am yours.”

“Do you have no desires of your own? Tell me what you wish.”

“I wish to serve you, to please you, to bring you pleasure. That is my only purpose.”

“And what do you get in return?”

Her plump bottom lip refused to stay dry as her tongue darted out once more. “I get pleasure beyond any you could imagine.”

“For being my slave?”

“Yes.”

He moved his hand from her chin. “Then please me. Undress.”

He took a step back and watched as she moved. Her hands went to her blouse, which she slowly, torturously began to unbutton. One ... two ... three. Creamy flesh emerged from beneath the blue silk. As if undressing for a stranger were the most natural thing in the



world, she tossed the blouse aside and stood there in her see-through undershirt, her nipples, pink and puckered, standing at attention.

He let out an audible moan before he could stop himself. Her hands went to the fabric, to lift it over her head, when he stopped her. “No. Leave it on.”

Obedying, she moved her fingers down to her long, willowy skirt. Bending forward, causing her breasts to spill forward, she pushed the skirt to her ankles, leaving a wisp of lace behind. The V-shaped outline of her pubic hair practically glowed beneath the white fabric. His cock grew hard as he imagined how it would feel to nestle in that foliage and sink into her depths.

“Take those off,” he said, his voice catching in his throat.

When her fingers hooked into the sides of the lace and began sliding it down her legs, his throat went dry. Clearing it, trying to shake the cobwebs from his head and remember that he was the one in charge, he took another step backward, as if in retreat.

“Let me look at you.”

She stood there, her hands at her sides, and as if she felt his desire, her eyes locked to his, the golden glow deepening.

“No. I want to see all of you.”

She reached for her undershirt.

“Leave that on. I want you to turn around and bend over. Spread your legs for me so I can look at you.”

His back touched the wall as she turned away from him. Her long, red hair brushed against her bottom the second before she bent from the waist, spreading her legs, raising her copper-colored pussy so he could see her labia, her clit, her inner walls. The light caught the wetness that was already building on her lips. The muscles surrounding her pussy clenched, causing her opening to wink at him, practically inviting him inside.

“Shall I spread it open even more?”

“Yes. I would like to see you do that.”

Reaching between her legs, she placed a finger on each side of her wetness and opened her lips, widening her hole, making her juices more visible. Her scent wafted up to him as he stood there, dumbfounded.

She didn’t move. He knew she was waiting for his next command, even though her last action had been her suggestion. He had never controlled a woman before, but he knew the need to have her do his bidding was seeping into his cock, forcing his mind to race.

“I should like dinner now,” he announced finally. “I want you to serve it to me.”

“As you wish.”

She still did not move.

“You may stand.”

She stood, taking her luscious pussy and tucking it back between her thighs, leaving only her copper hair to tease and torment him.

“Where is your kitchen?”

“What?”

“Where do you keep the food on this tiny ship?”

Oh. Food. He had to think. “Just through those doors you will find a hallway. It is the third door on the right. So you will know, there are only two people on this ship: you and me. I expect you to remain naked while you are here.”

She gave a little bow. “As you wish.”

He watched as her heart-shaped ass turned and she moved toward the door. He had not yet told her to remove the undershirt, an item that seemed more tempting on her body than it would in a pile on the floor.

“What would you like to eat first?”

She sat on top of the table, her legs spread, her feet planted on his thighs. Her pussy was almost level with his mouth, as the table in his ship was built very high off the ground. He inhaled her scent, wondering how he could possibly eat dinner with the main course staring at him, still covered in its own juices, teasing him.

“You choose. Feed me.”

She leaned to one side and took a roll, one of the hard ones he had packed when he'd started this journey. Placing it in her hand, she brought it to his lips. “Would you like this?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like it better if it were wet?”

“Yes.”

His breath caught in his throat as she took the roll and moved it to her pussy, rubbing it in tiny circles in her wetness, moaning a little at the contact. When she brought it to his lips this time, her scent was there, strong, womanly, like everything he had ever wanted to taste, tantalizing him. When his lips made contact with the bread, it no longer tasted like a reminder of home. It tasted like the woman whose satisfied smile taunted him almost as much as the need to be inside her did.

“How about this?”

Hard meat from home. The long link was probably six inches in length, and as she took it into her hand, almost lovingly, it became the most erotic piece of food he had ever set eyes on. The tough outer shell was designed to hold in the flavor during long trips. His eyes locked onto hers as she leaned backwards, the movement opening her cunt.

His breath hung in his throat as she brought the meat down to her opening and in one smooth motion took it deep inside her body. She let out a low moan as she filled herself, leaving only two fingers' worth outside. Her lower lips stretched around the sausage, and her clit stood at attention as she lay there, his dinner buried in her body.

“How much of it do you want?” she asked.

“I want all of it.”

“Take it, then.”

He brought his lips down to meet her pussy, circling them around the sausage that wouldn't fit inside. His teeth bit into the flesh only enough to grip it. Her copper pubic hair tickled his nose, inviting him to probe her body, to learn her secrets. Moving his head back, he pulled the sausage inch by inch from her body, eating as he moved. Her juices coated the meat, showing him what she would do to his cock if he only had the courage to take her here and now.

He had wanted control, had wanted a slave to bend to his every desire. Now that he had her, he wasn't sure what to do with her. She seemed to be more in control than he had ever been. Her satisfied moans indicated how much she enjoyed goading him.

When he finally pulled the remainder of the meat from her pussy, he knew he'd had enough. If he planned to use her, to really have her as his love slave, his sex slave, then he was going to have to be the one in charge. She had delegated too much already, and now it was his turn to take control.

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

“Mmm. Yes. Oh, yes!”

“Good.”

He ran his fingers along her labia, coating them with her juices. He teased her cunt as if he would shove his fingers inside, but he didn't. His cock protested the thought of not coming inside her right now, but he took in a deep breath in an attempt to quell the raging ache deep inside his body.

He heard her breath, her heaving, her low moans. No, he *would* control her. He would bend her to *his* will. He would not fall victim to her softness.

“How do you want me to fuck you?”

“Any way you want.”

“Any way I want,” he repeated. “Stay still, then. I’ll be right back.”

He returned shortly with four pieces of rope. It was temporary rope, the kind he would use to tie packages. Lacing one piece around each wrist and ankle, he placed the ends around the table legs, tying her in place. She lay against the table, her hands and feet bound, her pussy open.

“What are you going to do to me now?”

“I’m going to let you lie there, thinking about that sausage, thinking about my cock. I’ll be back soon to untie you if you’re a good girl.”

Cael shook the sleep from his head just as the warning signals began to flash. Within seconds, the alarm sounded and all visions of the woman from his dream vanished to be replaced by the darkness of space as he stared out of the ship.

He had been on board this ship for weeks. The trip was necessary even though he feared for the worst at home. His planet was in trouble, and though he knew that peace was inevitable, it would take time. The pieces were falling into place, and soon, he hoped, the old order would be restored and the Mer and Djinn could again live in peace. It was a plan that had been set into motion thousands of years ago by his people and the then king of the Djinn. After the Djinn king’s death, the High Council had taken over and apparent order subverted the underlying chaos.

But it was time now for things to be as they were planned so long ago. In order for true peace to rule the land, a union must be forged between the alliances. He would have to marry a Djinn to ensure this order.

His head throbbed when he thought of the woman from the dream. How long had he dreamed of her? He knew her skin, her velvety touch, every inch of her luscious body. She might have been younger when he last saw her, but his intended bride, Hyla, now displayed womanly curves and the promise of lust unleashed somewhere in her eyes.

And the things he did to her in his sleep! He was both confused and disgusted by the acts. Why would he want to take control of her? Why would he feel the need deep in his system? Thoughts of taking Hyla had been part of his soul ever since he first set eyes on her so long ago, but now, these thoughts ruled his mind as he made his way toward the planet where things were not as they appeared to the outside world.

Flipping off the automatic pilot, he pressed a series of buttons on the navigational screen and prepared to land on Eden Four. According to the sensors and his maps, the planet was cloaked with a shield that made it appear invisible. He would signal ahead, make his identity known, and wait. If luck were on his side today, he would be allowed entry to the elusive planet that held more mysteries than any other in this solar system.

The information about Eden Four had been slow in coming, but the truth was stranger than any fiction he could have created. Eden Four was known throughout the galaxy as a planet of sexual slaves whose only purpose was to please those who sought their services. If his information was correct, then Hyla was not a sexual slave. Instead, she was a sexual goddess, a woman whose skill in seduction and lovemaking were unmatched on this planet.

Worse, she was a woman who longed to give up control to a man. The women on Eden Four were submissives, each carefully chosen for their particular wants and needs. No woman endured forced captivity; all were there because they wanted to be.

This thought sickened him worse than any other. Hyla, the woman who had been promised to him, chose to live life on Eden Four rather than with him on Desert Moon. In the past weeks, he had traced Hyla's progression since her disappearance from their home. She had been on Eden Four for five years. Her time before that was spent in a religious academy on Luna Star, some million miles from Desert Moon. When she was released from the academy, instead of returning home, she had chosen a life of confinement on a planet of pleasure.

Had he known this and fully understood it when he left Desert Moon, he would have never taken on this task. Hyla clearly had no desire to return home and marry a man she

didn't love. His marriage to Ah-lia could have been formalized and the bond between the Djinn and the Mer completed.

But this was not the way to end the underlying strife back home. The only way to do that would be to marry Hyla, whose brother was the destined Djinn leader. If Creed chose not to accept his role in the government, then Cael would take his place. With Hyla as his wife, his control would be complete, and any who tried to overthrow him would find it a difficult task.

A voice came over the speaker. "State your business."

"I am Cael, prince of the Gen-ru, emissary of Desert Moon. I have come to seek audience with your leader."

Laughter filled the cabin. "We have no leader. Surely you know this, Prince Cael. Tell me, is there a certain someone you seek? We do not allow entry uninvited."

"Rundar of Darten sent me. I bear his seal. He said he would vouch for me on my quest." Rundar had promised safe passage to Cael in return for rare spices from Desert Moon.

"Rundar," the feminine voice practically purred. "Are you here on business for him? Perhaps he seeks a new companion."

"He has sent me for one named Hyla. Do you know her?"

"Hyla has no desire to leave this place."

He swallowed hard to alleviate the lump in his throat. Again, rejection. "I would speak to her on his behalf."

"Rundar is a valued ally. If you speak falsely, you will be handed over to his army. He dislikes deception."

"I do not deceive you, madam. I speak the truth."

"Turn off your engines."

He complied and immediately felt the planet's tractor beam pull the ship forward. Within seconds, the planet itself came fully into view. This was his final chance to retreat. If

he did not wish to face her rejection, he should leave now. But the need to see her coursed through him. It was more than the dreams driving him forward; it was his unfulfilled need. It was the way she looked at him in his dreams, her eyes filled with passion, her body so soft, so inviting.

If she rejected him, he would live with the consequences, but he had to see her one last time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hyla lounged by the pool, enjoying the life of luxury afforded her on this lush planet. She wasn't usually one for such self-indulgences, but when she had left the religious world of Luna Star, she swore she would find her freedom no matter the cost.

Okay, so she had been sold to the highest bidder and ended up in paradise. She could never have imagined the amount of control she would have on this tiny planet. Nobody here knew who she was, or that she was unwanted on her home planet. There she had been a tool in a political fiasco in which she'd never wanted a part. Then fate had intervened, and she was handed over to Luna Star, her brother's signature gracing her papers. There was no doubt that he had turned her over to the cruel zealots whose only wish was to make her life a living hell. They had taken away all of the things she took pleasure in, including her long, silky hair, which had been shorn to look like a schoolboy's. And they had forbidden her use of magic, which she needed to keep her sanity. Taking away her medallion had been bad enough, and regaining it had been a task, but keeping her from her potions and spells was downright cruel. Seeking vengeance for her enslavement there would have been sweet but costly. Instead, she chose a life of leisure away from those who would use her for personal or political gain.

Here, she called the shots. Entertaining emissaries and dignitaries from galaxies near and far, she was worshiped as a goddess. However, none of them ever got close enough to her



to touch her heart, and she preferred to keep emotion out of her dealings with men. Doing otherwise would only cause her heart to break, as it had once before.

Those days were over now. Eden Four afforded her everything she had ever wanted. She had the quiet solitude to think and relax, as well as a full social life at night when entertaining was on the agenda. She wasn't missing anything at all.

She sighed as she gazed across the sparkling blue water. Few knew her secrets. Sometimes, she wasn't even sure if she knew them all. There was something hidden deeply inside that she couldn't define. She felt it when a hand grazed across her flesh and some handsome stranger whirled her across the dance floor.

She felt it even more intensely when the handsome stranger collapsed in her bed, thinking he had just experienced world-renowned lovemaking, when in fact he had fallen victim to her other charms. The vow she had made to herself so long ago ruled her actions. No man would control her again. Not even if it meant denying herself the pleasure she sought so desperately.

On this world of pleasures, no one would believe that she did not have sex with the men who sought her out. This was another of her secrets. When she wore her Djinn medallion, she had the power to control those around her, something she did at will. However, she only used the medallion's powers when it suited her needs. Today, it lay tucked away safely in a locked box in her bedchamber.

"You have a visitor." Jean-Luc, one of the many men who served as protectors, sat next to her as he spoke.

"Who? I am not expecting anyone."

He shrugged his tanned shoulders. "I don't know. Someone sent by Rundar."

"Rundar?"

"Yes."

Rundar had been like a father to her during her escape from Luna Star. It had been his suggestion that she find peace among the kittens on Eden Four. At first, she had been skeptical, but now she knew she had made the right decision. Since the day she'd become a member of the planet's pleasers, he had asked her to leave many times, to become his consort, but she had made it clear that she would never relinquish control to him.

"Who has he sent this time? Someone whose secrets he needs?" They had worked out a deal. Hyla fooled men into revealing their battle plans; then she exposed their plots to Rundar. In return, he played a role in maintaining peace on this side of the galaxy and helped keep her identity and location secret.

"No. No spying tonight. He has sent a foreign prince. Someone who seeks a woman from his past."

"And he thinks I know the way to this woman?"

"He thinks you are this woman."

Her stomach knotted. If Creed had come in search of her, she would kill her brother with her bare hands. His signature on her papers at Luna Star was enough to make him dead to her.

"I assure you I am not the woman he seeks."

"How can you be so sure? Will you meet with him?"

"I would have his name first." And a short trip to her chamber to recollect her medallion.

"Prince Cael of Desert Moon, the prince whose people fled Earth so many thousands of years ago, according to legend."

"I place no stock in legends." It was an automatic response, not one that was based in fact. And it was the only thing she could think to say as her mind reeled with possibilities and her heart leapt at the thought of Prince Cael's sea-blue eyes and curly blond hair. Giving

herself a mental shake, she erased his face from her mind. That same face had haunted her dreams more nights than she would ever admit.

“I can read your mind.”

“No, you can’t. I don’t know this man and have no desire to meet with him.” She avoided Jean-Luc’s eyes as she spoke, just in case he could see into her thoughts.

“It is his desire to meet with you. And we are in the business of desire.”

“Send him a message that I will meet him in one hour in the garden on the east side.”

“Try to smile when you see him.” Jean-Luc stood and offered her a hand, which she reluctantly accepted.

Her knees felt like jelly, and she refused to think that it had anything to do with Cael. Her past was caving in on her. The land she’d thought she could forget had invaded her private paradise. Worse, the man whom she had been destined to marry had come for her. So why did that thought excite her to her very core?

## Chapter Two

“What do you wish?” The voice lingered all around him as Cael fell into a light sleep while he awaited his meeting. Lucinda, the hostess here on Eden Four, had assured him that Hyla would meet with him later. Until then, she had suggested he get comfortable and then led him to a room.

The white linens and breezy interior called out to his insomnia, expelling it as he fell to the bed. In no time, the vision of the goddess lingered before him, threatening his sanity while sleep overtook him.

“I want you to come with me.” The words came so easily when he spoke to the dream woman.

“I am here to fulfill your fantasies. You can be more creative than that.” She smiled, as if daring him to reveal his soul, to unveil that dark side he fought down day after day.

When it came to her, he wanted everything, every ounce of her. He wanted ultimate control. “I want you to undress. Slowly. I want to watch you move in the light.”

She obeyed, removing her shirt, then sliding her skirt down her thighs. The light danced between them as she swayed, spreading her legs with her movements. Her mound

called out to him, begging for his touch. He could sense it from across the room as he folded his arms in false indifference.

“Now, what do you wish?”

“I want you on your knees in front of me.”

She moved the three or four steps to him. He lost count of the sensations that ran through him. She was his for the taking, there to do his bidding.

“Untie my pants.”

She looked up at him, licked her lips, and obeyed. His cock sprang forth, lined with purple veins, throbbing beneath her breath.

“Take me in your mouth.” The words were like velvet as they slid across his lips. Never had he commanded a woman. Armies, yes. Enemies, yes. A woman? Never ... save with her, and only in his dreams. But the heat of the sensation filled his head, forcing him to command her, forcing him to take the control he so desired.

His breath caught in his throat as her lips wrapped around him. His back stiffened as his cock jerked in her mouth. She hummed against him, slowly urging him forward. One hand covered his balls, gently pulling them, as the other wrapped around his backside, forcing him further into her mouth.

His hands rested on her shoulders as he braced himself for the force of her mouth, tongue, and teeth. She worked magic on his cock as she licked, sucked, and stroked. Glancing down, he watched as her fiery hair spilled forward, covering her movements. He wanted to watch, wanted to see what she was doing to him. Closing his hand around her hair, he pulled it away from her face, revealing her luscious lips as they loved his cock.

“Oh, yes.” He moaned low and deep as she continued to take him into her mouth and deeply into her throat.

Fisting his fingers in her hair, he held her head still as he thrust into her, filling her mouth, parting her lips with his cock and the force of his movement. Rather than resisting, she melted into him, practically falling against him.

His orgasm built, and he knew his release was not far off. He quickly pulled out of her mouth.

"Turn around," he managed through clenched teeth. She obeyed, turning on her knees before leaning forward. Sunlight streamed in through the window as her pussy glittered, calling out to him, covered with her cum. Her plump lips were the manna he needed as he positioned his cock at her opening.

"Fuck me." She twitched her hips, guiding him into her depths.

"How hard do you want it?"

"Hard," she moaned.

Her word was the only thing he needed to drive him over the edge. His fingers dug into her hips as he began to pound into her so hard she moved forward with each thrust. It was all he could do to hold on to her as he fucked her sweet, tight hole.

"More," she demanded.

His hand came into contact with her backside before he could stop himself. The sound of his palm slapping against her skin echoed in his mind and drove him to repeat the action again and again. Each contact of skin to skin wrangled a moan from her throat, a squeeze from her tight pussy.

"More!" The word sounded as if it were ripped from her chest as she began to quake around him, milking his seed from deep within his body.

"NO!" He called out in his sleep, the word loud enough to shake him from his dream. Sweat covered his body, and the sacred haven that afforded him the sound sleep was now tainted with his wicked thoughts.

Trying to still his racing heart, he sat up and took in his surroundings. The veritable paradise was indeed a den of pleasure. Everything about this place called out to his animal instincts. Everything made him fear that if he set eyes on Hyla, he would not rest until he had complete control over her, body and soul. And he could never allow himself to completely control a woman. He was afraid that if he did, he would not be able to control the barb that shot from his penis during ejaculation. It was nothing more than a series of suckers that attached themselves to the vaginal wall, causing complete unity. But it scared the hell out of him.

The first time it had happened, he had been downright terrified. Since then, he'd known that he must control the animal lust that came out when he truly felt on the brink of dominating a woman. It was simply part of his genetic makeup. He couldn't control it, and it branded both him and his lover, binding them to one another in a way he couldn't explain. It caused slight pain, but it also managed to destroy trust. It had happened only once before, and the woman had been so frightened by it that she had disappeared, leaving him wondering how the hell to handle this oddity.

The barb only appeared when he took control of a woman, when he unleashed his need to dominate. Then, the scales on his cock would release themselves and turn inward, becoming tiny pearls along his shaft, and the tiny suckers would shoot from the tip of his penis. This was an ancient evolutionary design passed down from the days of Atlantis, when his people, the Mer, lived and loved in the water.

He had always remained in control of his emotions, never allowing himself to go over the edge toward domination. He controlled the change and always pulled out in time, never spilling his seed into a woman's body. But with Hyla ... he feared that if he ever got the chance to sink his cock into her body, he would not be able to control the need to mate, to create life, to join bodies in such a permanent manner. She would be his forever if she ever allowed him to enter her body.

In fact, she was meant to be his destined bride. She had been his in name long before they met, but from the moment he first set eyes on her deep-red hair and lush curves, he had known there would be no other for him. After Hyla had disappeared, along with their betrothal, the council and his father had deemed that he must marry to bring peace to their people. He did not argue and had agreed to marry Ah-lia, one of the high councilors' daughters; however, due to conflicts within the council, the marriage had not yet come to pass. Too many were concerned about the alliance with the Mer.

He had never again felt such unbridled lust as he had with Hyla, and he knew that whoever took her place would not be in danger of his strange anatomy. He had been able to control it every time, except for his first, but he knew Hyla would bring it out of him. Part of him wanted to see her reaction; the other part just wanted to fall into her thighs and never come up for air. But he knew these thoughts weren't getting him anywhere. He needed to concentrate on his mission. First, he had to figure out why she was here and what he could do to get her to leave with him.

He shook the thoughts of sex with Hyla from his head and sat up, moving to the edge of the bed. This was not the kind of place he had expected. Eden Four was a reputed slave-trading planet. However, this lush, tropical land looked more like a safe haven than anything else. There were no guards to speak of. Even when he had landed his ship in the hangar, he had been met by peaceful women adorned with flowers and wearing little more than smiles. Everyone had been accommodating; they'd allowed an unknown to walk in, announce his intentions, and be welcomed. But no one as of yet had offered him anything other than basic hospitality. There were no young sex slaves here to massage his muscles, fan his face, or attend to any other more basic needs. Instead, he was left alone in a pristine room to contemplate his meeting with his bride-to-be. It was as if they knew he was here for this purpose alone.

\* \* \* \* \*



“Prince Cael, why are you here?” Hyla tapped her bottom lip as she stared into the mirror. Anyone from her past could easily wreck her future here on Eden Four, and having Cael here was worse than having one of her good-for-nothing brothers show up. He could be nothing but trouble.

She opened the gold box that sat on her dresser. Inside it was the key to her happiness. Lifting the medallion from its velvet bed, she placed it around her neck and fastened the clasp. Her Djinn medallion connected her to the land of her heritage, but it also allowed her to control so many facets of her life that she would have been lost without it. She never met a stranger without first placing it around her neck. It gave her the advantage over both friends and foes as she was able to see inside their minds and learn how to make their wishes come true. But it came with danger. Each time she used her medallion, she opened herself up to the Djinn. If one of them ever decided to seek her out, the aura from her medallion would call out, alerting him of her presence and revealing her location. Still, there was no other way to live life on her terms.

This was yet another part of her secrets. It was easy enough as a Djinn to plant ideas and suggestions into the minds of others, to make them imagine what could have happened without actually giving them physical satisfaction. In short, they thought she fucked them, when all she did was use Djinn magic and various potions.

No one here knew she was a Djinn, and she quite liked it that way. The world was at her mercy, and she was ultimately in control of her fate. Creed would never control who she loved or who loved her. She would never again be a bargaining pawn in a marriage of convenience or an annoyance to be tucked away at a religious academy.

Her first mistake, so long ago, had been falling in love with Prince Cael before she ever knew him. As it turned out, he'd only wanted her for the connections she would bring and the peace that would come to their people. She was no longer a naïve schoolgirl; she would guard her heart very carefully this time. In fact, she was now a full-blown woman who knew exactly how to handle men like Cael.

Pulling the brush through her hair, she made a vow. She would seduce Prince Cael and break his heart just as he had broken hers. Then she would turn him over to the highest bidder to show him how it felt to lose control. If only she could find a way to exact revenge on Creed. That would be the icing on the proverbial cake.

“Just remember not to look into his eyes,” she warned herself as she inspected her makeup in the mirror. Cael’s eyes, she recalled, were as blue as the seas and twice as deep. His soul resided there, which had been one reason she had fallen for him. The way his skin crinkled up just around the edges of his eyes when he smiled was only a bonus. But tonight, she would be in control. And she would make him wish he had not come to Eden Four looking for a quick lay.

“He’ll never know what hit him,” she mused as she closed the door to her chambers and stepped out into the night air. Luckily for her, she had a private patio that led out to the gardens. There was no need to see anyone or for anyone to see her as she walked slowly down the hidden path that led to the main entrance. She didn’t have time for small talk when there was a prince waiting who desperately needed to be taught a lesson!

He must have sensed her walking toward him, because the moment she stepped off the hidden path and out into the main garden, the man dressed in white stood and turned. Damn. Double damn. She bit her bottom lip. He looked exactly as she remembered. His unkempt blond hair had been tousled by the wind, as if a lover’s fingers had just run through it. His golden skin spoke of hours out in the deserts of their home planet, while his eyes -- heavens help her, those eyes -- looked like the most inviting things she had seen in a very long time.

Licking her bottom lip, she took a step forward and tried to act nonchalant. “Prince Cael.”

“Hyla. There is no need for formalities.” His smile lit up his eyes, also just as she remembered.

“I am sorry. Do I know you?” Damn, this was going to be hard. *Difficult*. It was going to be difficult. She folded her arms across her chest and waited for his response, and damn him if he didn’t drop to his knees in the garden right in front of her.

“I am Prince Cael of Desert Moon, and I am your humble servant.”

She was sure her mouth was wide open in shock. Trying to be inconspicuous, she placed her hand below her chin, just to pick it up off the garden floor. “I need no servants, especially those of royal blood. Are you here for my services?”

That ought to shake him up a little. The Cael she had known was far too honorable to ever use a woman for her “services,” but there had to be an explanation for why he was here. The heavens knew she had tried more than once to sneak into his bed, and each time he had turned her away, citing some kind of nonsense like, *You don’t know me; there are things about me you wouldn’t understand*.

“Your services?” He still had not risen. Instead, his white pants remained firmly planted against the gray path.

“Yes. Are you here to fuck me?”

Was that red she saw beneath the golden glow? It looked very much like a hint of embarrassment when he finally stood, now towering over her. Triple damn. That’s what you got when you tempted a lion.

“Yes. I am here to fuck you. Would you like to begin here in the garden, or shall we take it elsewhere?”

It wasn’t very often that she was left speechless, but the prince had managed to do it twice in as many minutes. Standing over her, looking like some sort of bronzed god, he was exactly what she didn’t need. And for some reason, the word *fuck* sounded so sensual coming from his pouty lips. She knew women who would pay out the yin-yang to have lips like that.

“Well?”

She hadn't answered him, and she didn't realize she was staring until he smiled at her again. Joking. He was only joking. But there was something serious in his eyes. This time, the smile didn't crinkle at the edges. Instead, it went all the way to his eyes, then stopped while the blue there deepened and flashed with something that halfway looked like a dare.

"Your place or mine?" She smiled back as calmly as she could muster. She was not going to fuck Prince Cael. Instead, she would do what she had done countless other times. She would use the medallion that hung around her neck to make him think they had fucked. He'd leave happy; she'd take his money. Life would be good.

"I think here. Now."

She opened her mouth to protest but wasn't fast enough. Before she could move, he had encircled her with his big golden arms and pulled her to him, crushing her breasts against his wider-than-average chest. She knew that was not a moan escaping her lips as he lowered his head, taking her bottom lip between his teeth. He gave a gentle tug before licking her lip and then delving his tongue deep inside her mouth. All she could do was breathe. Stand there, cling to him, and breathe like a damned schoolgirl.

Okay, she did a little more than breathe. She whimpered. But there was more still. She also writhed against him, her pussy growing hot at the thought of taking him to her room. And her hands refused to stay still, too. They were in his golden hair, twining in the curls; then they were on his broad shoulders, seeking out skin beneath the thin linen shirt that was always provided to the guests on Eden Four.

He reacted, too. She felt his cock beneath the thin pants as it made itself known, pressing against her abdomen. And his breathing became labored as he twined his fingers in her hair and held her head still so he could dip his tongue further into her mouth.

No touch had ever felt as intimate as the kiss she was sharing with the man of her dreams. That was when she stopped her thoughts. Thinking of Cael as the man of her

dreams, whether it was true or not, was dangerous business. Using all her strength, she pushed against him, breaking the kiss, and damn near fell over backward in the process.

“You think an awful lot of yourself, don’t you?” she managed beneath her panting breaths.

“You’re the one who offered.” He smiled. Damn him.

“It is my job to offer.” She recovered quickly, straightening the bodice of her gauzy white gown, purposefully adding acid to her words with her tone.

“And it is my job to accept your offer. I am, after all, a guest here. And you are here to keep the guests comfortable.”

He was bluffing. There was no way the Cael she knew would be so forward about sex. Not when he had resisted her every attempt in the past. In fact, now that she thought about it, she didn’t know of anyone Cael had had sex with. Most of the royals were known for their affairs -- they had had quite a reputation -- and even though she had not known him for very long before she was sent away, he hadn’t seemed to have a reputation as black as theirs. It was possible that discretion had been his friend.

“Paying guests, yes. Are you a paying guest?”

“I am here on a pass. Rundar sent me. He told me to look you up, that you are more than accommodating. Was he right?” He reached out and touched her cheek, and she couldn’t help but look into his eyes. Even though sheer terror flew through her bloodstream right now, there was a softness in his eyes. He didn’t mean to take her here in the garden or anywhere else.

What should have relieved her only confused her more. Damn him again. If he were the asshole she’d thought he might be just seconds earlier, it would be easy to erase those man-of-her-dreams fantasies, but with the teasing light in his eyes, it was difficult to take him seriously.

“You are full of shit.”

“Where did a princess learn such language?” His smile turned into a laugh, and the sound was a delight to her ears.

“I’ve traveled a lot and met a lot of interesting characters. And I am not a princess.”

“We’ll see about that. Have dinner with me tonight. I have so much to tell you. Your brothers have been looking for you for years.”

She couldn’t suppress the indignant humph that came out at that suggestion. Her brothers? Looking for her? Sure they were.

“They have. Creed ...” he began.

“Creed is the reason I am here in the first place.” As soon as she said the words, she covered her mouth with her hand. Damn him, damn him, damn him!

“I thought it was you. You can’t fool me by pretending you don’t know me, Hyla.” Again the damned smile.

“So, I’m Hyla. What do you care?” She pushed past him and walked over to the stone bench sitting near the fountain. Not so princesslike, she flopped down on it and wished she had sat a little more smoothly.

“I care a lot.” Back to the softness in the eyes. She rolled hers at him when he sat down next to her. “They’ve been worried.”

“Then why did they send me away?”

“They didn’t. The council did. A lot has changed back home since you left. A lot. Ah-ten is married now, and Creed has taken his rightful place as ruler.”

“And Ari?”

“Ari. He is ... he and your other brothers do not see eye to eye. He left Desert Moon.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re lying to me?”

“I’m not lying. I’m just not telling the whole story. You’re a Djinn. I know that’s your medallion around your neck. Why don’t you look into my eyes and tell me I’m lying?”

“There’s no point.” The last thing she wanted to do was look into his eyes and use her Djinn powers. Doing that could be more dangerous than sitting this close to him.

“There is a point. We need you back home. I need you. I want you to return with me and fulfill the bargain you and I had so long ago.”

“We had no bargain.” She stood and attempted to walk away. He caught up to her and slowed his pace so that they walked side by side.

“We were betrothed. I would like to honor that vow.”

She stopped and looked at him. Could he be serious? He thought he could just walk right in here, kiss her, then ask her to honor some oath? He was out of his mind. “I have no desire to marry you.”

“How ’bout you just fuck me, then?” He smiled all the way up to his eyes.

“Go to hell.”

“Hell doesn’t exist. It’s a mythical Earth creation.”

“Then go to the dark ends of the universe, or do they not exist either?”

“Tell me something, Hyla. Why is it that this virtual paradise has no guards? I see your eyes darting around, looking for an escape. Are you expecting someone to save you?”

“I don’t need guards. I can save myself.”

“Still, a paradise such as this ...”

“There are plenty of guards. Paid to be invisible, if you must know. Think of them as hotel staff with muscles and weapons.” Hopefully, her excuse would suffice. In truth, the guards were everywhere, but if he had made it in on a pass from Rundar, then he would not be bothered by them. It was no wonder he hadn’t seen any of them.

“I see. Dinner at eight,” he called from behind her as she turned to walk away.

She gave him the universal signal for “I’m not interested.”

*What the hell was he doing?*

She was the most intriguing woman Cael had ever met. Her hair was long, thick, and a deep red. Hair had no right to be that color. It was mesmerizing. It looked like hair that a man could lose his mind over. And her eyes were no better; they were a deep blue, the color of the oceans. They sparkled when she was being playful and clouded when she was angered. For all of her fire, she was a small woman; her waist was tiny, no bigger than both of his hands put together. She could not be much more than five feet tall. He towered over her. And yet, her presence was larger than life.

He folded his arms and smiled as he watched her walk away, noticing each tiny little movement of her ass in that white gown. He never should have kissed her. But she had reacted to him just the way he had known she would. She could deny it all she liked, but she wanted him. There was only one problem. He didn't know how he could possibly have sex with her and still remain in control of his cock. Sinking into her soft flesh would be enough to drive him over the edge, but he had to try. He had to have her just once. And if she decided not to go home with him, he would let her go.

He could let her go, couldn't he?

When she held up her hand in protest to his dinner suggestion, he threw his head back and laughed. Hyla had been interesting and tempting as a young woman, but now she seemed to be just what he needed.

But he knew that because of her brothers' supposed betrayal, she would not go willingly with him back to Desert Moon. Unless he could give her a good enough reason ...

What Hyla needed was adventure, something to shake her out of her life of luxury here. He could give her that. He had an entire kingdom at his disposal on his home planet of Kalsaeia, as well as a court filled with intrigue. It had been years since he had set foot on Kalsaeia, the land where some of the Atlanteans had settled after they were driven from Earth, the land where his father served the king, as ruler of one of the principalities. But he



could go now under the guise of solving a mystery. Hyla would go right along with it because, like it or not, she seemed incredibly bored of the life of leisure.

Rundar owed more than one favor to Cael's father, who had saved his life on at least two occasions and who had spoken to him at great length about Hyla's gifts as a spy. Cael's smile widened as a plan formulated. He would convince her to meet with him tonight. Hell, he'd break into her private quarters if he had to, but he would convince her to leave with him.

She would balk if she knew he was indeed here to bring her back to be his bride. She hadn't believed him when he attempted to be honest with her, so why bother trying again? Instead, he would play up to her need for answers and revenge, and he would take her from this place. His arrogant side assured him that she would be his. All he had to do was play the game and wait.

### Chapter Three

A short knock interrupted Hyla's thoughts of home. It was better not to think of things she could never have nor see again. Desert Moon and Cael were right at the top of that list. So why did her heart sink at the thought of never returning and never getting to the bottom of Cael's story? He'd said her brothers had searched for her. If they had searched, then that meant ... The knock came again, forcing her to cross the room to answer the door.

"What do you want?" Her nasty mood came out even though she had hoped to keep it contained.

"Room service."

Like hell. She could see right through that ruse. Still, if he had sought her out, then maybe his story was one worth listening to. "Just a minute." She went back to her dressing table and lifted the lid from her box. Her medallion shone brightly against the red velvet lining. It was similar to her brothers' medallions, symbols for the elements of air and water gracing it. Slipping it over her head and resting the charm between her breasts, she smiled. Tonight, she would seduce Cael into sharing his secrets with her.

"Come in." She opened the door, a sweet smile on her face.

"You're looking lovely." He smiled, balancing a silver tray on one hand and holding a bottle of wine in the other.

"Thank you. Please, come in." She showed him to the sitting area and closed the door. This would be as easy as seducing secrets out of a senator.

He wrinkled his brow before taking a seat on the white divan. She draped herself across the chaise, allowing plenty of leg to show beneath her white linen gown. "What kind of game are you playing, Hyla?" His blue eyes twinkled.

"None. And yourself?"

"I am here with a peace offering. Since you wouldn't accept dinner, I thought I'd bring dessert." He reached for the tray, which he had deposited on the table. Lifting the lid, he uncovered a mountain of exotic fruits. Great. Her favorite. She groaned as he smiled and then worked on the cork to the bottle.

"Dessert, eh? And what would a man like yourself know about sweet things?" She ran her hand up her leg, drawing his eyes to her.

"I know plenty. And I know what you're doing."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Now come here and get a bite." He held out one of the luscious red fruits. Between his fingers, it looked like sin, but she couldn't resist leaning forward and taking it between her teeth. Their eyes locked as she bit into the fruit.

*You are mine.* She sent the message telepathically.

*Not yet,* she swore the smile on his lips replied.

"Would you like something to drink?" His words swept across her cheek.

She was too close to him, had fallen somewhere into those beautiful blue eyes. "Yes, please." She had to get a hold of herself if she wanted this plan to work.

"Where are your glasses?"

“I’ll get them.” She stood. Thank the gods for a tiny break from his piercing eyes. It was as if he could see straight into her soul. She didn’t like it one bit. She had always been in control in these situations. Then again, she had never tangled with one of the Mer, who were supposed to have similar powers to those of the Djinn. Where the Djinn controlled air, the Mer controlled water. Both were able to control human thoughts. And she and Cael both were, unfortunately, part human.

The bar had been strategically placed by the window overlooking her own private garden. It had been meant as an escape when such situations arose. She could look out over her land and get her head on straight while her guest stared at her backside as it was lit by the sinking sun. Tonight, she was falling victim to her own trap.

Cael walked up behind her and circled her with his arms. “Beautiful view you have here.”

“I like it.” She twisted in his arms but only managed to rub against him in the process. His cock pressed into her lower back as his arms held her captive.

“You are incredible,” he whispered against her neck. “To think you were supposed to be my bride.”

“Let go of me,” she managed while gasping for breath. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she lost all ability to think when his breath blew against her ear.

“Not yet. I think I’d like to hold you all night, in fact. That is why I’m here. And why you’re acting so sweetly, isn’t it?”

In one motion, he had turned her so that they were now face to face as her backside made contact with the bar behind her. His hands clung to her wrists, holding her hostage once more.

“What do you mean?” she managed.

“I mean you are wearing your Djinn medallion. Unlike the people here, I know your little necklace is more than an accessory. I know its powers well, my dear. I know what you are trying to do to me.”

“And what is that?”

“You’re trying to seduce me without touching me. You want me to think that you want me. You’re playing this little mind game so that, in a while, you will have me completely at your mercy. Then I’ll imagine spending the night with you. I’ll sink myself into your body over and over. And it will be heaven. The only problem is I will never touch you.”

“You have quite an imagination.” She struggled against his hold on her.

“No. I am well trained in the Djinn arts. I live on Desert Moon. I know the High Council. I was once your betrothed.”

“Your point?”

He pulled her into his chest and captured both wrists in one hand. His free hand sank into her hair and forced her to look up at him. “My point is, I will not fall for your tricks. I am here to offer you a proposition, but if you attempt your masked seduction, we will both lose out.”

“You seem to be here to seduce me.”

“No. I am here to take you away, but I will not seduce you unless you wish it.”

“Never.” Even as she spoke the word, she knew she was lying. Ten minutes in his presence seemed to wipe away all those years they had been apart. All she wanted was for him to turn her around, bend her over the bar, and take her wildly.

He laughed. Shit. Could he read her thoughts?

Finally, he released her wrists. She pulled them to her chest, rubbing them both, not because they hurt, but because she could still feel his effect on her body. Damn him.

“Wouldn’t you like to hear my proposal?”

“What is it you want?”

“I want you to come with me to Kalsaeia. I have a mission for someone of your talents.”

“What talents would those be?”

“I need a spy. And a temptress. Someone who can make a man weak in the knees. Someone who can bring down an empire.” He smiled wickedly.

“And you think I can do all of that?” She backed away from him and attempted to focus on her garden. Anything but the words he was saying. He was full of double meanings.

“Yes. I do think that of you.”

“Whom am I supposed to seduce?”

“My cousin is married to a man named Lionel. He is a Djinn, like yourself. He lives in my father’s palace on Kalsaeia, and he is the last of the nobles to refuse to sign the Djinn treaty with the Mer. He is a danger to my family.”

“So you want me to break up a happy home?”

“It isn’t exactly happy. And yes, I want you to interfere. I want you to weave your way into his life and shake things up. But I want him to sign the treaty or be gone from my family.”

“Sounds easy enough.” Her stomach knotted up at the thought of going anywhere with Cael. Resisting him would be damned difficult.

“Easy for someone such as yourself. You know, with your talents.” He smiled.

“So you want me to fuck him?”

“No.” He said the word too soon, and she smiled at his slip. “I want you to weave your magic around him and make him think you have. I want you to do what you had planned to do with me.”

No, he didn’t. Because what she wanted to do with him was as far away from what she would do with a stranger as Desert Moon was from Kalsaeia.

“What’s in it for me?”

He licked his bottom lip. Oh, if that were her reward, she'd be a happy woman ... She turned away from him again, hoping to focus on her task at hand, which was not thinking about having sex with Cael.

"What do you want?"

No one had ever asked her that before, at least not in the same heartfelt, sincere way Cael had just asked her. And she had no answer for him. To tell the truth, given the opportunity, she had no idea what she would wish for. Sure, she'd like to make her brothers pay for their treachery, but to do so, she'd have to return to Desert Moon. Or send an ally. She smiled.

"I want revenge on my brothers for sending me away."

"Hyla, they did not send you away." His eyes softened as he spoke.

"Explain the papers I found."

"The council was responsible for your leaving. They took you from your home, from your family. They tricked you into thinking your brothers had abandoned you. And they fooled them into believing you were dead."

"No."

"Yes. Please, you have to believe me." He took a step forward and reached for her. She pulled away. Being close to him was clouding her mind. She almost wanted to believe him.

"I saw the papers."

"You saw a forgery. Creed and Ah-ten have been worried about you. And Ari -- he's insane with grief. You have to go back with me. You have to see them for yourself."

"No. I can't go back."

"Fine. Then go with me to Kalsaeia."

She bit her bottom lip and contemplated his offer. Go with him. Yes, she wanted to go with him. But then what?

“You asked me what I wanted. I just want my freedom. I’ll go with you and do this for you, and you’ll give me the means to go wherever I want and to do what I want.”

“Don’t you have that already?”

She didn’t answer. Her life here was a big ruse, one that took a lot of magic and cunning to pull off. “Just promise me.”

“I promise.”



## Chapter Four

Hyla clung to the sides of the ship, cursing the fact that she'd never traveled in such a manner before today. All her adventures thus far had been across land or in spaceships, the way people were meant to travel. Her stomach twisted and knotted and threatened to make her breakfast reappear as the large ship rolled over the blue waters.

They had landed on Kalsaeia this morning and chartered this damned ship hours later. It would take a few days to reach the capital of Kalsaeia, a watery land that housed most of the more prominent Kalsaeian and Atlantean families, some of whom utilized their gills and scales in order to stay underwater for long periods. Cursing the rocking of the ship again, she set her jaw. She would not be defeated by something as simple as an unsteady ship.

She had come too far to let the rocking motion of this vessel destroy her plans for revenge. She didn't trust Cael, but she did long for vengeance, and that made a very powerful and persuasive tool ... if she could keep her mind off Cael during their journey.

Her eyes sought out the tool of those plans as he stood on the deck, not barking orders as she would have imagined, but taking in the sea, looking like a god in all his glory. His curly blond hair blew into his eyes. Oh, to sink her fingers in those curls and pull him down to her. She could imagine his deep-blue eyes clouding over with lust as he entered her body.

“Enjoying the view?” Cael’s cocky tone interrupted her thoughts.

She turned, shielding her eyes from the violent sun, which stood at Cael’s back. “It’s magnificent.” She batted her eyelashes, flirting more than she should have, considering the situation.

He moved next to her on the railing. “Best not to let it distract you, spy. You have a job to do.” Cael’s sun-kissed hand rested next to hers on the edge of the ship as his open shirt blew in the breeze, revealing the turquoise-blue scales that ran up his sides.

“I always do what I’m expected.” She glanced at his profile.

“I have a feeling you never do as you are told. When we reach the capital, you shall be transformed from vixenish spy to lovely socialite.” He ran a finger along her cheek, stopping at her lips. She pulled away at the contact.

“Don’t touch me, Prince.” She smiled sweetly, the warning hanging between them.

“If I wished to touch you, you would be in my bed right now, throbbing, writhing beneath me.” The promise in his eyes was clear, and his words were sensual enough to make her wonder how it would feel to cling to him.

She had never before been attracted to a man in this way. She had seduced many men; she had kissed many men. However, she had never felt as compelled to know someone as she did with Cael. She glanced at him again. He was standing only inches away, but he might as well have been back on Eden Four.

Hyla looked over the edge of the ship and wondered if Cael would save her if she were to fall into the water. He still had the Atlantean scales climbing up his sides, proof that he belonged in the water. She liked the thought of him rescuing her. She could almost see his face as she fell, could almost feel his arms around her, strong, saving her. The thought was too delicious. Of course, she did not give in to it.

“What evil are you plotting?” Cael’s breath blew lightly against her neck as he looked down at her.

She froze and tried to shake off the shiver that threatened to erupt from her body. Smiling, she faced him. “Why, Prince Cael, I assure you I have nothing but the best intentions.”

“Hyla, I don’t think you have ever had an honorable intention.”

He was too close to her, pressing against her, trapping her against the side of the ship. In an attempt to create space between them, she placed her hands on his chest, only to be thrilled by the rock hardness that waited there. “Ah, but you don’t know me. You only know what you wish me to be. I, my prince, am a master of disguise. I make you think I am nothing but wicked, when in reality I am completely sincere.”

“No, you are not,” he whispered, his voice sending a shiver up her back. “You are an evil woman.” He ran a finger along her bottom lip and pulled it away when she pretended to try and bite him.

“No, I’m not,” she purred. “You can’t figure out what I am. That is why I drive you crazy.”

Cael walked away as calmly as he could. She had him figured out, or at least she thought she did. The nagging voice in the back of his head told him he should have never brought her here; his deception was bound to catch up with him. One day, he would have to confess. He could only hope that when he did, she would accept his reasons and understand he had had the best of reasons.

Hyla wasn’t like most women, though. Cael could tell this about her instantly. He knew she was her own master, so it was difficult to decide how she would react. She was fearless and the boldest woman he had ever met. She had a self-confidence that he had never seen matched even in the strongest of soldiers, much less in a mere wisp of a woman. She was daring, not afraid to tease and torment, but she remained true to her own rules and standards, not necessarily adhering to those of society. He had to admit that he admired her

for all this. He smiled and hoped they reached the capital soon. He would not last long if they didn't.

Hyla had never been with a man. In spite of what everyone believed they knew about her, and that she had kissed so many men their names were jumbled in her head, she had never truly known a man's touch. She had never felt anything for the men she had entertained; they had served a purpose and were a means to an end. She'd established a process with the men: she would get them drunk, act promiscuous, kiss them, flatter them, gain her information from them, then slip a potion into their drinks that rendered them defenseless and filled their heads with naughty dreams. She always disappeared within moments of their slumber, leaving behind some kind of memento to help them "remember" what had taken place. They always recounted the stories of their supposed conquests the next day. However, Hyla had always emerged unscathed, her virtue, for what it was worth, intact.

Hyla scanned the deck for Cael. He was now at the head of the ship, looking over the blue water of the river.

"How much longer, Prince?" Hyla asked, coming up behind him.

"Not much longer. We should be there by sunrise."

"What is this land like?"

"It is the most beautiful place in the galaxy. Well, not quite as beautiful as the motherland, but close. It's lush and tropical. We grow fruits and weave silks and trade profusely with other lands, but we wish to have a route to the North. Our neighboring king will allow us passage in return for his daughter's marriage to me. Quite a happy arrangement, if you ask me."

"Then why don't you marry her? And why did you pretend to want to marry me?"

“I apologize for my deceit. Truly I do. I had hoped you would return with me to Desert Moon.”

“Why do you live there? Why stay on such a dry, rotten planet when you have a home here?”

“I am one of many nobles here. On Desert Moon, I am a ruler.”

“Yet you could marry a king’s daughter.”

“One of many. On Desert Moon, I was to marry the princess of the Djinn.”

She turned away as he spoke. She would never again be princess of the Djinn. Her brothers had sealed her fate. Of course, she still used her Djinn powers to sway her enemies and to change any potential threats to her favor, but she would never be one of them again.

“I think you will enjoy the capital,” he said, changing the subject. “I cannot wait for you to see her shores.”

“I can’t wait, either. Something tells me that this will be an adventure of a lifetime. I hope he does not bore me.”

“My lady, it seems that anyone would bore you after a time. I cannot see anyone holding your attention long enough to gain passage to your heart. That is, if there is a heart to be had.”

“Oh, do not fool yourself,” she said. “There is a heart to be had. It is of solid gold. Just as precious and just as cold. Of that, I assure you.”

## Chapter Five

As the sun rose over the river, the capital came into sight. Hyla had awakened before dawn to see the magnificent sight. Every fiber of her being was on fire, as if her nerves were naked and baking in the sun. She breathed in the air. Her destiny was over there, just past the water, somewhere in the capital. She could feel it. She didn't sense Cael coming up behind her until he reached her. All she could focus on was the sun caressing her skin with its first rays of the day.

"Breathtaking, isn't it?" he whispered against her bare shoulder. The morning seemed to demand a whisper. It was too perfect for a louder tone.

"Yes," she whispered back. Cael put his arms around her waist and rested his head on top of hers. She was unexpectedly taken aback by his gesture. Her hair blew into his face. And her stomach suddenly tied itself in knots.

Prince Cael was too familiar with her. She could not figure out why he wished to be close to her here on the deck of his grand ship, but she could grow to like this man. They could become partners in crime. As long as he kept his hands to himself.

She didn't move from his embrace, disturbed by it though she was. Instead, she stood there, feeling his hard chest against her back, trying to concentrate on the water and the sun

and the land that lay ahead. Hyla did not wish to analyze the situation. Instead, she chose to revel in the beauty of the horizon and the sky and the startling beauty of the man who stood behind her.

Cael finally broke his embrace with Hyla. It felt too comfortable to her, but she was determined not to break the hold until he did.

The capital was completely in sight within the next few minutes. Cael stood at a distance from her. She felt his eyes on her back as she watched the shore come closer. She knew her face lit up when the city came into sight.

Hyla turned back to look at Cael. "It's magnificent!"

He smiled and nodded in her direction as he stood with his arms crossed in front of his bare chest. His feet were spread slightly apart. Hyla's heart caught in her throat again at the sight of him. She decided that he must be a sun-kissed god who wandered the earth shirtless; he could very well lead to her destruction.

She spun around to see the city as it came closer to her, trying to keep her mind off Cael. It didn't take long for the ship to reach the shore. The land was even more breathtaking up close. The structures were huge, looking like giant gardens and rising up like steps. She had heard of legendary hanging gardens that seemed to reach up the heavens. These must be those very gardens. Waterfalls were spread throughout the city, also. They crashed into large white rocks. Houses were strewn around and woven within the gardens and waterfalls. They were more than mere houses; they looked like grand villas. She had to stop and catch her breath at the sight of everything.

"Which one is yours?" she asked Cael, lips curving upward.

"None of these," he answered. "I don't live inside the city. I have a fortress not far from here. An hour's ride, at the most."

"Of course you have a fortress," she said. "I would expect no less."

“We shall stop in town, though, so you can purchase anything you need for your stay. I will also introduce you to the shopkeepers and tell them to allow you whatever you wish and send the bill to me.”

“You are too generous.” She turned to wink at him.

“No, I am not. You are in my employ, remember? I told you that I will give you whatever you wish. Just be sure you do not lose sight of the task at hand.” He put his hand under her chin as he said this, then looked as if he wished he hadn’t made the gesture.

“I guarantee you that I will not.”

“Good. Shall we?” He offered her his arm and she took it, letting him lead her off of the ship, feeling the heat from his arm the whole way.

They continued to walk this way, arm in arm, into the city. As he had promised, he introduced her to the shopkeepers. The first shop had the finest silks she had ever set eyes upon, containing as they did elaborate designs within the threads. They were absolutely stunning.

“This one would be nice.” Cael held out a deep-blue silk robe to her.

“For what purpose?” she asked, fingering the material that was much too delicate for everyday wear.

“Seduction, my dear,” he whispered into her ear. “I thought you were skilled at this.”

“Yes, my lord, but I have never been so lavishly dressed when seducing.”

“Ah, but you shall be this time.” He took the robe and wrapped it around her. “As a cover-up,” he said. “Wear it to hide your ... secrets. You will need no undergarments with this.”

She smiled. Yes, it really was lovely. He took several silks and held each one to her, discarding a few along the way. She watched as he picked up a white lace nightdress. It was see-through and magnificent, and probably cost a small fortune.

“And this,” he said. “This shall lay easy waste to the target.” He held it up to her face.



“There is barely anything there. I cannot very well reveal all of my secrets,” she insisted.

“No, but you may have use for it. Take it,” he urged.

She took the garment between her fingers. It felt divine. She imagined it would feel like wearing a cloud or a whisper. She would indulge herself even if no one else ever set eyes on it. “Thank you.”

“You need gowns, too. Nice, lavish gowns. I will have Elsie size you and draw up some designs.” He signaled to the woman at the counter.

She came and stood next to him. They spoke in a strange language, probably his native tongue. The woman then disappeared behind a large curtain and came back with measuring tape and pins in hand. Before Hyla knew what was taking place, she was being measured. The woman made notes to herself on a pad of paper. She spoke to Cael again for a few minutes, then took all of the garments they had chosen and began wrapping them.

“What did she say?” Hyla asked.

“She will come to call on you in the morning with gowns. You may choose all that you like. I told her the colors I prefer and think you would enjoy. She will have so many, your head will spin.”

“How will she make them all in one night?”

Cael laughed. “She has assistants. You will be her priority.”

“Oh.”

“Come, let us begin our journey home.” He took her parcels in his arms.

A carriage awaited them outside of the shop. Hyla watched as he placed her bags into it; then he turned and offered her a hand. She took it and stepped into the carriage.

Cael's house was a fortress. It was heavily guarded and surrounded by a large stone fence and a large lake. The walls of the fortress seemed to touch the sky. It was by far the most splendid home she had ever had the pleasure of viewing.

On the way there, Cael informed her that she would be staying here as his guest. He explained that the fortress was more than just one home. It was several connected and interwoven homes, and there was a main hall that connected all of the individual households. Most of the nobility lived within the walls, including the target of her trip.

According to Cael, Lionel was one of the last members of the nobility who refused to sign the treaty with the Djinn who lived on Kalsaeia. His refusal had cost Cael's family local protection from the Atlantean king, who also lived on Kalsaeia. Lionel had married Cael's first cousin, Selia. However, the marriage -- as well as the family name -- were in danger unless he agreed to sign the pact. According to Cael, only a Djinn could convince him.

She knew there was more to her trip than this. Cael wished to end his cousin's alliance with Lionel. The thought didn't sit well with her, but for some reason, the idea of being close to Cael was seductive enough to cause her to go along for the ride. Besides, he had been correct to say that she did need some adventure in her life.

"Welcome to my home," he said as he helped her down from the carriage. "We will see to your bags, and I will show you to your room."

Hyla took his arm again and let him lead her. Her room was just as grand as the rest of the house. In fact, it was a suite. The main room was a sitting area complete with a fireplace and a small library. There was a small desk to one side and a large window to the other. Through a short hallway, there was a huge bedroom. The bed was made of dark cherry, required a step to climb into it, and almost completely filled the room. It was covered with white sheets and pillows and looked heavenly. Off to one side of the bedroom was a small bathing area that contained a large marble bath.

He leaned in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. He cocked his head to one side as he watched her turn on the water to the bath. "Are you pleased?"

"Very," she exclaimed. "It is perfect."

"I'm glad. You are going to enjoy your stay here."

"Yes, I am," she said, turning off the water.

"I must go. I will send dinner to you. I would like for you to remain hidden until tomorrow night, if you do not mind. I thought you could rest and ... plan."

"Yes, I will," she said. "Thank you again, Cael."

"I will see you soon," he promised.

Hyla watched Cael leave; then she ran into the bedroom and threw herself across the large bed, laughing the whole way. "This is going to be exciting!"

## Chapter Six

As usual, Cael's father was in his drawing room with a glass of wine. He stood when Cael entered. "Son, you have returned. With good news, I hope." He embraced his son as he customarily did.

"Yes, father, I have good news. The situation on Desert Moon is resolved. As he should, Creed has stepped forward and taken the Djinn throne. His brother, Ah-ten, has returned and is married now to Caire, the Queen of Tu'at. And I am here because I am now a free man."

"How did you manage that?" His father seemed unsure whether he should believe him.

"A woman helped me." He smiled. "She is here with me, resting. She wished to visit the land of the prince whose rear end she saved. I thought we would hold a feast in her honor tomorrow night."

"A woman? Who is this woman?"

"She is Hyla, from Desert Moon. The Djinn king's sister."

"Hyla? But she is ..."

“She is quite a woman,” Cael said. “She has been in hiding for years, in part because she believes her brothers sold her to the sisterhood. Now, she seeks revenge for wrongs her brothers never conceived.”

“I see. And I shall meet her ...?”

“Tomorrow evening,” Cael said. “I promise.”

“Do you have the documents from the council? Is there official word from Creed himself?”

“Not official. I left prior to his oath. When I discovered that Hyla was alive, I had to see her for myself. She is so filled with hatred for her brothers, I could not take her to Desert Moon.”

“So you brought her here? In hopes of what, exactly?”

“My wish, if you must know, is to reinstate the pact between her family and ours. But I need time to do that. For now, she believes she is here on a mission.”

“I do not like deception,” his father warned.

“It is only temporary. I assure you all will be well between us.”

“I do hope you are correct. So what is it that she thinks she is here to do?”

“Break up Lionel and Selia. And convince Lionel to sign the pact with the Atlanteans.”

“Gods, son. You shall bring exile upon us all.” His father ran a hand through his gray hair.

“No. I shall bring honor to us. Just wait and see.”

Hyla had bathed and rested. Now she paced across the ancient Persian rugs in her gilded cage. She did not want to annoy Cael by leaving the rooms, but she did wish to stretch her legs a bit. She went over to the large window and peered out, immediately spotting Cael as he walked through the garden. This man remained a big mystery to her.

When she'd met Cael again after so many years, she had not liked him. Although he remained a very handsome man, strong, tall, muscled, and fascinating, everything about him reminded her of home. She also had been quite annoyed by his arrogance. Things had changed, though.

That day on the ship, when Cael had put his arms around her and they had watched the capital come into sight, something had changed between them. They had an unspoken bond now. They connected. They were moving forward toward a common purpose.

A soft knock sounded on the main door to her chamber. When she opened it, Cael was standing there with a tray of food in his hands. "Cael."

"I saw Margaret on her way with your food, so I thought I would bring it instead."

"Come in," she said. He entered the drawing room and placed the tray on the short table in front of the divan. "I thought you would be with your family."

"I already spoke to my father," he said, handing her a glass of wine, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"What are you thinking, you wicked prince?" She smiled at him.

"I was thinking that I like the robe."

"Me, too. I like the way it feels against my skin, like heaven."

"Heaven doesn't exist. It's just a myth made up by Earthlings," he teased.

She laughed. "Bastard."

"You still look incredible." He smiled again.

"You said that already."

"It is worth saying twice. Are you hungry, or do you wish to drink yourself full?" He motioned for her to sit before taking a strawberry in his hand and holding it to her lips. Their eyes locked as she bit into it.

"I prefer to drink. Why are you here?"

"I'm here to ask you to go for a walk. In the garden."

"Not interested. I'm here to do a job, and you are not it."

"I could be."

"Cael, why are you here?" she asked again after the second strawberry. "Do you wish to discuss Lionel with me, or are you testing me?"

"I thought I would ..." He leaned toward her and placed his hand under her chin, drawing her face close to his. "I thought I would taste for myself just how delicious you are." He moved in to kiss her. She moved away.

"Sir, you do not understand me at all, do you?" she whispered. Then she abruptly stood up, leaving him grasping the air. "You may leave now, Prince Cael."

"I have offended you," he said.

"Did you think you would not?" She did not raise her voice, though she wanted to bitterly. Why was it that men always seemed to think they knew what she was about and that they knew how to handle her, when in reality they knew nothing about her at all?

"I do apologize. I thought ..."

"You thought just because you have hired me to seduce Lionel that I am a whore. You thought that I am yours for the taking -- or tasting, as you put it."

"No, I did not."

"Yes, you did. I am a spy. I am talented at seducing men for information, not at sleeping with men for money. There is quite a difference." She sat back down. She would not let him know how badly he had hurt her. This insult after she'd decided they had some kind of understanding ... Perhaps she would rethink her opinion of Prince Cael.

"I am sure there is. I never meant to imply ..."

"Yes, you did, Prince Cael. You meant every word. Now, leave me in peace," she reiterated. "I will eat and entertain myself."

“Forgive me?” he asked. “Can we start over?”

“No, I do not forgive you. You speak pretty words that mean nothing. Perhaps in time you will come to understand me, but not today. Leave me.”

“This is my home. I stay.”

“As you will.” She picked up some of the bread on the tray and began to eat. She returned to the window, ignoring Cael for the moment, hoping he would leave so that she could vent. She was angrier with him than she wanted to admit. She did not want to play games with him.

She did not understand this man ... or herself. She was angry with him, and yet, she really did not want him to go. She enjoyed his company, harsh as he could be at times. She could feel his eyes on her back. If he were any other man, she would sway seductively in the moonlight and allow his imagination to run wild. Not with Cael, though. She did not wish to seduce him anymore. Not yet anyway.

She turned to him. “Are you going to stare at me all night?”

“No. I will leave soon. Then I will probably have very nasty dreams of you.”

“Have you no honor?”

“I have plenty of honor. Unfortunately, I also have had a touch of wine. Wine tends to make me think with a southern part of my anatomy.” His smile was devastatingly beautiful.

“Then we shall take you off the bottle. I do not wish for you to think with anything other than your mind. Especially when you are around me. You have not forgotten our purpose?”

“No, I have not.” He was reclining on the divan now. “I know our purpose.”

“Grant me a wish,” she said suddenly, feeling her share of the wine, too.

“I’ve told you I will give you anything you wish.”

“Take me to the garden. I wish to see it at night. Under the moon.”



“Why now? Is it only a good idea now that it falls from your lips?”

“Of course. Is this a problem?”

“No, I just wish you would make up your mind about things. You are a damned contradictory woman.”

“I suppose I will stay here tonight, then. Alone.”

“I didn’t say it was a bad idea. Just that it was your idea.”

“Then take me now.”

## Chapter Seven

“This is it,” Cael said.

“It is amazing. I thought only the gardens on Eden Four were beautiful. This is beyond even them.”

It was an enchanting place. Lanterns lit the garden. The waterfalls gave a melody unlike any that she had ever heard. There were even the sounds of owls and other night birds. She saw roses and other exotic flowers that she had only found previously in books. She closed her eyes and breathed in the scent of the place.

“I am glad you like it.”

She slipped off her shoes and put her feet into a pool. “Join me.”

“No, that is quite all right. I do not bathe in the pools.”

“You lack excitement.”

“I have plenty of excitement,” he argued.

The pools were actually quite deep. She was in to her waist now, and her robe was getting soaked. He continued to watch her.

“Do you now?” she asked. “Come here.” She beckoned him toward her. When he was within reaching distance, she splashed him.

“What are you doing?” He appeared horrified as he looked down at his shirt.

“Trying to get you to loosen up.” She laughed. “You should see your face!”

“Do not laugh at me,” he said in all seriousness.

“I can’t help it. You look so shocked.” She could hardly contain her mirth.

“It is not every day I am assaulted in my own garden.”

“Assaulted?” She came out of the water a bit, stopping when it came up to her knees.

“Come, Hyla. You will catch a cold out here.”

“No, I will not.” He obviously did not notice the evil grin that crossed her lips. “My foot seems stuck.”

“Hyla, come now,” he insisted.

“I’m serious. I think I have found a hole.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed, then went toward her. “Give me your hand.”

She reached for him. He took her hand ... and she pulled him into the pool with her. Unfortunately, the force of her jerk set her off balance. She laughed hysterically as she fell backward and he fell into her. Her entire body was now soaked. He had landed on top of her and was soaked as well, but he did not appear to be amused. Instead, a whole other kind of light showed in his eyes. She had seen this in him before. Desire. Pure and simple.

“Your foot is stuck,” he said.

She laughed again. “Yes.” She even threw more water in his face.

“You will pay for this.”

She splashed his face again, but he caught her hand this time. She stopped laughing when his hand gripped hers, her heart pounding in her chest. He pulled her to him.

“Are you going to punish me now?” The thought thrilled her for some reason. She could practically feel him push her into the water, take her with wild, rough abandon.

Instead, he lowered his head, his lips brushing against hers, the kiss no more than a whisper, ending before she wanted it to end.

“No,” he grumbled suddenly. “Now, get out of the water.”

He turned his back to her as she fought with the images assaulting her mind. She wanted Cael, and she wanted him in a way that frightened her to the core. The thought of being punished by him was one that held some kind of wicked appeal. She could imagine his lips taking from her, driving her to the edge of sanity, his body towering over her as he commanded her to come for him.

She stood on shaky legs and walked to the edge of the pool.

“I was only trying to have fun,” she managed.

“Did you think I would hurt you?” he growled, anger filling his voice.

“No. I know you would never hurt me. I feel it. My medallion shows me things.” She licked her bottom lip as she moved toward him. “That’s the appeal, you see. You are so strong, so capable of causing pain, but you would never hurt me.” She reached out to touch his arm, but he moved away.

“It’s late, and we are both wet. I don’t have time for your games.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. Very well. She’d find her way back to her room without his help.

Cael stood at her door for a few minutes before he finally retired to his own room. He wanted to stay and say something to her, to make things right, but he didn’t. He couldn’t reveal to her why her words had caused him to turn on her. Because to punish her was exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to fuck her the way he did in his dreams. He wanted to tie her up, to have her there for his pleasure. These thoughts scared the hell out of him.

He couldn't do that to her. He was growing to care even more for her. He felt like he understood her a bit more every minute. Worse, he was falling in love with her all over again.

## Chapter Eight

The palace was buzzing the next morning. Word of Hyla's arrival had spread to the main house, and news of the party had been broadcast in town. The nobles were all preparing for the party in honor of the woman who had helped forge a treaty with the Djinn. Of course, they didn't realize all this was a ruse set up by Cael in order to make his own plans come to fruition. The townspeople were all preparing food and clothing and were getting ready for their part in the festivities. That was the wonderful thing about parties on Kalsaeia -- everyone was invited to enjoy the celebration. Of course, the nobles were the only ones who would attend the late-night party in the palace, but everyone would be involved in the early evening festival that would be held outdoors.

Cael was in charge of overseeing the masquerade ball that night. He loved the atmosphere of intrigue surrounding such an event. It would be the perfect opportunity to present Hyla enshrouded in an air of mystery.

Cael knew that Elsie was already there with Hyla, showing her the gowns that she had made and brought with her. There were five gowns, all in different jewel tones. One was the color of emeralds, one like sapphires, one like turquoise, one like rubies, and one like amethysts. He wondered which one Hyla would wear tonight, and his curiosity about the

color of her gown was continually distracting him today. The red one would make her look like a siren. The green would accent her lovely hair. The blue would darken her eyes. The turquoise would complement her creamy skin. The amethyst would make her look like royalty.

“Prince Cael.” Frances, the decorator, was calling out to him.

“Oh, I’m sorry. What do you need?”

“I don’t know which flowers you prefer,” Frances said, holding up a bunch of white flowers and another of pink flowers.

Cael thought back to Hyla’s dress. “The white ones,” he said. “And please do me a favor.”

“Yes, my lord. What do you wish?”

“Send a bouquet up to the guest room in the west wing. Some of the most beautiful, most fragrant flowers.”

“Ah, is that where the guest of honor is housed?”

“Yes, but that is a secret until tonight.”

“Of course it is,” Frances said. “I will send them immediately. Shall I tell the lady who sent them?”

“Yes, tell her they are a peace offering.” Cael smiled.

Hyla loved all of the gowns. Each one was stunning. She was wearing the purple one when the knock came. She feared it was Cael. She could not face him this early today. Not after last night. He had haunted her sleep through the long hours.

She retreated to the bedroom and let Elsie’s assistant, the only one who spoke her language, open the door. She tried to hear what was being said but could not. The girl was only gone for a minute before she entered the room carrying a large bouquet of white flowers.

“How lovely!”

“They are for you.” June handed them to Hyla. “From Prince Cael. He says it is a peace offering.”

Hyla took the flowers and held them to her face. They smelled divinely. A peace offering, eh? She wondered what he was making peace for. Was it for the comment about the men, or for the attempted kiss? She smiled as she wondered.

They heard the door open and close in the main room. June ran out to see who was coming in unannounced.

“You cannot go in there!” she heard June say. “You must not ...”

Hyla turned to see Cael standing there. She did not know who was more astonished, her or Cael. “Cael!” She tried to hide her gown.

“It is stunning,” he said.

“Well, now I can’t wear this one!” She was unable to hide her surprise.

“I see you got the flowers.” He nodded toward them.

“Just minutes ago. What do you want?”

“I came to see you.”

“Why? To work out the details for tonight?”

“No, to see you,” he repeated and sat on her bed.

“Get out,” she said. “You must not see me like this.”

“You are dressed, are you not?” He now lay across her bed on his side.

“I wanted you to see the dress later tonight.”

“Why so secretive? Shouldn’t I give my approval?” He smiled his usual devilish grin.

“You do not trust my judgment?”

“I wanted to be able to spot you so that I may have the first dance.”

“I am not here to amuse you. I have a job, remember?”



Cael looked past Hyla to see June and Elsie standing there, open-mouthed. "Leave us."

They both quickly left.

"I also have an apology."

"What would you, the arrogant prince, have to apologize for?"

He laughed. "I deserve that. I want to apologize for last night. I was horribly rude to you."

"Horribly," she agreed. She sat down in the small chair that stood in front of the vanity mirror.

"You make this so easy," he said.

"I intend to savor it," she replied.

He stood and walked across the room to where she sat. He got down on one knee and took her hand in his. "Hyla, I apologize for what I said last night about the men. I had no idea. It was rude of me."

"And hurtful," she added.

He smiled. "And hurtful. I throw myself on your mercy."

"Is this your version of an apology?"

"Yes." He looked into her eyes.

"Then I accept. Get up," she said.

He laughed as he stood up. "You are something else."

"Yes, I am. And I'm going to be without a gown if you don't leave and let me choose one. You ran off my seamstresses." She was feeling more in control now. She had liked having him at her feet.

"I will bring them back in. I suppose you will not be wearing this one?"

"No, I will not."

"A shame. It truly is stunning." He threw her another smile before leaving the room.

After he left, Hyla could not help but feel warm all over. He had apologized for his moodiness last night. He was one of the few to ever admit to bad behavior. She smiled at this thought.

Hyla finally chose a different dress, the turquoise one. It was an unusual color, and there was probably not another dress like it in the entire kingdom. It reminded her of the blue waters of the river she had seen while on the ship. The mask that she selected was covered with jewels and feathers. It was not the kind that one held up, but one that stayed on even when the wearer danced.

She let June help her with her hair. They'd decided to sweep most of it up off her shoulders. Several braids were woven around the crown of her head, and June left a few curls to hang down her back. The girl took some of the flowers that Cael had sent and wove them within the back of Hyla's hair. The result was beautiful.

Hyla received the itinerary an hour before the event. She would arrive at an hour past sundown. The dance would have already begun, and she would join in the festivities unannounced. Everyone would dance for an hour, and then she would be introduced. After which she would remove her mask and dance with Cael. He would then turn her over to Lionel and let her work her magic.

## Chapter Nine

Hyla felt the butterflies in her stomach when she entered the room. People were everywhere. No one seemed to notice her slip in through a side entrance, which Cael had showed her last night on their way to the garden. She mingled through the crowd and sought out her first victim, or dance partner. She tried to find Cael in the crowd. A friendly face would help calm her nerves, but she did not see him. All she saw was a conglomeration of masked faces.

She decided to have a glass of wine to calm her nerves. Cael had told her about a bubbly wine that was produced in Kalsaeia, and she was dying to try it. She had almost made it to the table when someone grabbed her hand and swept her off onto the dance floor.

Though she could not see his face, she was sure it was Cael. Who else would be so forceful with her? He held her close to his body and spun her around and around in time to the music. The music slowed, and he rested his head on hers. She put her head against his shoulder.

“Cael, you surprised me,” she said, looking up at him. He did not answer. “Are you going to remain silent?” Still no answer. “Oh, I see. You are the dashing, mysterious man, here to sweep me off my feet. Well, look elsewhere. I like having my feet on the ground.”

“Let’s get some air,” he said and led her out the door and into the garden.

When they arrived outside, he removed his black half-mask. When he pushed it to the top of his head, it caused his hair to stick up a bit, perversely making him appear more attractive. Hyla settled her nerves enough to drink in the sight of him. He wore a red cloak and black clothes. The black shirt was open to the waist, in the style that her brother Ah-ten had always worn. His pants were fitted and topped off with tall black boots. Seeing him dressed in such a way tugged at her heart, almost making her long for home.

“You are beautiful,” he said as he pushed her mask to the top of her head.

“Thank you.”

“I don’t deserve the thanks. The gods themselves deserve it. You make me forget myself.” He cupped her chin in his hand.

“Well, you must not. We have a job to do, remember?”

“Yes, I remember. I can’t help but wonder a few things about you, though.”

“Such as?”

“Such as what kind of magic you are working on me.” He brought his face close to hers. He was going to kiss her. She braced herself.

Hyla had been kissed so many times that it was almost as natural to her as breathing. It was a prelude to a job well done. But this was different. Cael leaned into her and gently let their lips touch. He was not aggressive or needy. He just let their lips graze each other. He breathed into her mouth when they touched. In almost the same gentle manner that the kiss began, it ended.

“Cael ...”

“Don’t speak. You will ruin the moment. A kiss for luck,” he said.

“Luck,” she repeated. It had not felt like a kiss for luck.

“We should go inside now.” He moved his mask down over his eyes. Then he helped her with hers. “Shall we?” He offered her his arm. She took it and let him lead her into the palace again.

Cael tried not to monopolize her time, but was finding it difficult to allow her to dance with anyone else. She was exquisite and completely bewitching. He knew that she had to have put a spell on him. He felt a twinge of guilt as he spun Hyla around the room for the fifth time tonight. He would have to announce her soon, and then he would lose her attention.

Hyla was already the talk of the evening. He was aware that everyone was whispering about the unknown woman who danced with the prince. That they knew his marriage arrangement had been broken and they could not help but wonder what this woman had to do with it. That they had never seen anyone with hair this color, or anyone so small as she who held herself so well. That they wondered what she would look like when the mask was removed. Oh, yes, he was very much aware that the men wanted to dance with her and the women both admired and loathed her.

Finally, it was time for his announcement.

“As you all know,” he began, “my marriage to the noblewoman Ah-lia has been canceled. I am no longer under obligation to unite with her. This is in thanks to a young woman from Desert Moon. She has helped me form an alliance with the Djinn there.” The people cheered. Cael waved his hand to silence them, then held it out to Hyla. She stepped up onto the platform to stand next to him. “I present to you the Lady Hyla of Tu’at!” He removed her mask. Gasps came from the crowd, followed by applause. Cael smiled down at her and took her arm in his, then led her to the dance floor.

“Tu’at?” she asked.

“Would you rather I tell them who you really are?”

“No.”

“Then you are from the underworld, my dear.”

“Is your cousin here tonight?”

“With her husband. And here he comes,” Cael whispered into her ear.

“I’m ready,” she whispered back.

“Excuse me,” Lionel said. “May I?”

Cael smiled. “Of course. Lady Hyla, this is Lionel, a duke here in our fair land.”

“Lady Hyla,” Lionel said, stressing *lady*. He held out his arms to her, and she smilingly went into them.

Cael stepped aside and watched them dance. Lionel would be putty in her hands, he just knew it.

“It is a pleasure to meet you.” Hyla smiled up at him. Lionel’s face was still covered with his mask, though most of the guests had removed theirs after the announcement was made.

“I assure you, my dear, the pleasure is all mine.” He held her too closely.

“Have you lived in the capital your whole life?” she asked, going through the usual meaningless chatter with him.

“No, I have not. I am a wanderer. Like yourself.” He smiled, though his smile sent a shiver of foreboding down her back. There was something about him she couldn’t place, something that made her wish she hadn’t agreed to dance with him.

“How would you know anything about me?”

“Wouldn’t you love to know?” he said slyly. “Meet me in the garden and I shall reveal everything,” he whispered into her ear as he pushed the mask off his face. Again, a sense of familiarity swept through her. When her father had ruled, he had kept a close check on all

Djinn of any importance. Since Lionel was one of the Djinn, she was certain he had been on Desert Moon at some time, and yet she still couldn't place him.

"I don't think that would be appropriate, do you?" Though she asked it teasingly, there was something about his tone that made her wonder who he really was and what he wanted. And, if true, how did he know who she was? Her gut instinct was to tell Cael how her stomach turned whenever she looked into Lionel's eyes. There was so much more going on behind their lazy expression than Lionel would have her know.

"Perhaps another day. I see your prince coming." He nodded toward Cael as the other man approached.

"My turn." Cael took Hyla's arm and gently pulled her from Lionel's embrace. Thank the gods. Her head spun from both the alcohol and the frenzy of the evening, as well as from trying to place the man whom she had been brought here to dupe.

Hyla fell against Cael, her head comfortable resting against his rock-hard chest. For the hundredth time tonight, she found herself thinking how at ease she was with him. She never should have left Eden Four.

The night was ending and the party was breaking up. People began to retire to their beds and their homes. Cael and Hyla ventured out into the garden. She was completely drunk now and even had to lean on him to hold herself up. They were quite a spectacle, he was sure. He did not care, though, for he'd had a bit much to drink also and was reveling in her attention. It was a fine thing to have a beautiful woman hang on one's every word as she was doing with him. It had been too long since he'd had such lovely attention. After Hyla's disappearance, he had been too busy with state affairs. On Desert Moon, the High Council -- and attempts to make peace with its members -- had taken its toll on everyone in positions of power.

Cael and Hyla walked to the bench that sat in the middle of the garden. She was still leaning on him. "The party was lovely," she said.

"Yes, it was," he agreed. "And you were the most beautiful woman there." He kissed the top of her head.

"Cael, what are we doing?" She sat up and looked into his eyes.

"Whatever do you mean?" he teased.

"You know very well what I mean. What are we doing? Here? In the garden?"

"We are enjoying one another's company, my dear."

"I am not enjoying it," she said, the wine obviously making her fuzzy and bold.

"And why is that?" he whispered. He put his hand under her chin. He held her there so that their eyes were locked. "Would you enjoy it more if I ..." He leaned close to her. "... if I were to ..." He moved even closer. Their lips were but a whisper apart. "... kiss you," he whispered.

His words brushed against her lips before his mouth fell on hers. To his relief, she clung to him and allowed the kiss. She breathed into him and he into her. Then, she twined her fingers in his hair. In all of his years of kissing, he had never touched lips as soft as these. Or as captivating. Or as spellbinding. She was making him lose his senses.

Cael drew her closer to him, into his arms. All he could see, taste, and feel was this exotic redhead who was clinging to him and begging for mercy. His head was filled with wine. And with thoughts of her. He had a mind to carry her to his room right now. He resisted, though. He decided to sit here in the garden and kiss her until he grew weak from it or sated himself with her lips.

"We cannot do this," she breathed against him.

"What, my lady? Kiss? Is there a law against kissing?"

"No. But kisses such as these should be forbidden. They are wicked and make me forget myself."



Cael brushed the hair away from her face and looked into her eyes. “What shall we do, then?”

“I shall leave. In the morning. I fear that I can’t finish the job you brought me here to do. My mind is clouded.” She stood then, swaying a bit in front of the bench as she rose.

With her illuminated in the moonlight as she was, Cael was losing his senses with her standing there like this. He had never felt a longing like this; he wanted her completely. He was sure to be damned for it, too. Yes, she must leave. He would send her away in the morning. It was for the best.

“You should go,” he agreed. He did not look into her eyes as he said this, but turned away from her. As she ran into the house, however, he might have seen a glimpse of tears in her eyes.

## Chapter Ten

Hyla could not recover from the kiss. Her lips still burned from the impression of his upon hers. She would leave him. She must leave him. If she stayed here, she would ruin everything because she would not be able to keep her distance from him. Not now. Not after he had awakened her and she knew how a kiss was supposed to feel.

She closed the door and began taking off her dress. Tears fell freely now. She was so confused. She did not want to leave this place. She had only just arrived and had not even had time to explore the land. And her destiny was here; she just knew it. She had felt it when she was looking out across the river. She could not leave, much as she wanted to, but she could not stay either.

She was lying across her bed, sobbing, when she heard the door to her room open. Her heart leapt into her chest. It was Cael; it had to be. She sat up and tried to wipe away her tears. She waited for him to enter the bedroom.

Instead, it was Lionel who came in. "Well, well, what have we here? Tears? How unlike you." He smiled when he saw her.

"Get out!"

“Or what? You’ll scream? I doubt it. Your prince would not take too kindly to you having me in your room.” He crossed the short distance between the two of them and sat next to her on her bed. “How interesting it would be to explain.” He reached out to touch her hair. She slapped his hand away.

“Don’t touch me,” she said. “I *will* scream for help.”

“No, you will not. Tell me, Hyla, are you still drunk? You made quite a spectacle of yourself out there tonight. Fawning all over the prince. Your brother Creed would not approve.”

She straightened at the mention of her brother. “What do you want? Have you come to taunt me, or do you have another purpose?”

“I always have a purpose. I have a proposition for you.” He reached for her again. She stood up to avoid his touch.

“I’m not interested.”

“Oh, but you will not be able to refuse.” He smirked and lay on his side, propping himself up on his arm and gazing at her.

“Don’t bet on it,” she said.

“I am sure of it. You see, your prince leads a dangerous life. Accidents can happen. Especially if one is as resourceful as myself. I can kill him at any time and make it appear that you have done it. How would that suit you? To die for your lover’s death.”

“He is not my lover,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Not yet. But I fear that a few more cups of wine and he will be reciting poetry.” She would not let him see that he was getting to her. “Now, my proposition. I want you to use your charms to help secure my place in this family, in this land.”

“I will not help you! I don’t even know you.”

“Yes, you will and you do.”

“Who are you?”

"I am a Djinn, just as you are. I know all about your potions, and I know a few other things about you, too. You seem surprised. I can see much of your thoughts through my own medallion. What you hide, you hide well. I know that you can convince anyone of anything ... except for me. What you do not cover so well is there for any with the gift to see. And I know your brothers Creed and Ah-ten -- they control too much on Desert Moon."

"And how is it you know all these things you claim to know?"

"I have a long history with the Djinn. I know your brothers quite well. You could say we're practically family, even. You and I ..." He reached out to touch her hair, and she again slapped his hand away.

"Leave now." She moved toward the door. He sprang to his feet and stopped her.

"No, Hyla." He took her wrists and pulled her to him roughly. "You will do this, or your prince will die. And he will know that it was you who betrayed him."

She could feel the tears returning. She would have to leave. It was the only way.

"My dear, if you leave this place, Cael dies and you will be held responsible. You will be hunted in every corner of the world. This is a powerful land. You do not want to fuck with them," he whispered.

Whoever Lionel was, she hated him. The hatred was real and seethed beneath the surface. She must know him from somewhere. Why else would she feel so strongly about him so suddenly? He must be all of the evil beings she had heard of as a child rolled into one.

She cleared her mind to think. There had to be a way to defeat this man. If there were, she was bound to find it. She knew that he had won for now; she would be forced to stay.

"I will stay, then," she said. "But I will not help you."

"Then I will tell Cael all that I know about you."

"What do you know about me?"

"Everything," he said, a wicked grin covering his lips. "Including the fact that you have lost something of grave importance."

Her hand flew to her neck as he pulled her medallion from his pocket. She hadn't worn it since she had come here, for fear that everyone would figure out who and what she was. Now, someone who appeared to be Cael's enemy held her fate in his hands.

*Think. Who is he? A lover? No, that is not possible.* But if he knew ... maybe he could help her unlock the past. She jerked away from him finally and turned her back to him. "What is it that you would have me do?"

"You shall discover exactly how I wish for you to proceed within the week. I have plans, and you will assist me in making them a reality."

"What plans do you have?"

"Plans to unseat your brother, so to speak. You see, I want what Creed has. But first, there's someone who is dying to meet you in Ben-gal. You and I will be taking a trip together very soon."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Then your prince will die. So you should say your farewells as soon as you can. Otherwise, you won't get a chance to say goodbye." He stood and strolled to the door. "Think about it."

"Never."

"Suit yourself."

He left the room as she stared after him, trying once again to figure out who he was and where he came from. He was sired by serpents, she was sure of it. How else could he be so vile and evil? And how could he know so much about her?

Cael saw Lionel coming out of Hyla's bedroom. He had stayed in the garden, thinking. He did not want her to leave and had decided to apologize to her. He had not expected to see Lionel. Cael hid in the shadows and watched him leave, strongly suppressing the urge to punch him. Hyla had moved awfully quickly. She had clung to him all night; then she had

practically thrown herself at him in the garden. And now, Lionel had been in her room. With her.

He fought back his anger. She had probably had this planned since the dance with Lionel earlier in the evening. She knew she would be meeting him when she was in the garden with Cael. The thought sickened him. He resisted the urge to hit something. He also tried to resist the urge to go in there and tell Hyla exactly what he thought about her actions. It did not work. He was going to put her in her place. He went to her door. Locked. He realized that she had probably done it to keep him out.

He stormed off to his room. He was not sure why he was so mad. After all, she was doing exactly what he had asked her to do. She was going to seduce Lionel and convince him to sign the treaty. She was obviously well ahead of him on this one. He knew that he should not feel such rage, but she had done something to him tonight in the garden. She had enchanted him and ... and cast a spell of some sort on him.

Now that he was away from her, he knew that this was what she must have done. She had woven a magical spell around him and caused him to forget himself. She had admitted she used potions and charms to get her way with men. And now she was doing it to him. He grew even angrier. He could not believe that he was falling victim to the very spell she was supposed to weave around Lionel!

Sleep would not come to him this night. He realized that it had come less often and more restlessly since she had entered his realm than it ever had before. The dreams that had haunted him had only intensified now that the woman was near. She had only been here two days and had already caused his sanity to unravel. He would not allow this to happen. He would not fall victim to an enchantress.

## Chapter Eleven

Hyla's head ached when the light woke her the next morning. She had just had the most restless night imaginable, dreaming awful dreams about Cael and her under the moonlight. She rolled over and groaned. She would clear her head of these thoughts and prepare to seek out Lionel. She knew he had been in her room last night.

She drew herself a warm bath. Her entire body ached as if she had danced or fought all night long. She let her body slide into the water and closed her eyes, and that was when she started to remember. As if it were all a wild dream, it came back to her. She had kissed Cael, a warm, delicious kiss. She could almost feel his lips still bruising her own. Then she remembered Lionel. He knew her, and though she could not place him, somehow she knew him, too. He was dangerous: he could tell everyone who she was. If word got out, it was certain that her brothers would come searching for her, or they would insist Cael return her to Desert Moon.

She knew that her fate had indeed been sealed. Hyla had no choice but to help Lionel in his plan. He would surely kill Cael and let her take the fall for it. She was new here, after all. Fate was a wicked woman in the employ of Lionel, no doubt. Why else would she be so cruel as to introduce her to a new level of feeling at the same moment she ripped it from her?

Hyla pulled herself out of the bath and looked at herself in the mirror. She really looked the worse for wear from last night. If she planned to get any work done, she would have to avoid Cael's bubbly wine. It went straight to her head and was no good for her.

She dressed in one of the new dresses that Cael had chosen for her on their first day in the market. She dried her hair the best she could, but it was still damp when she pulled it away from her face and put it into a long braid. Today, she would convince Cael to leave this place and go back to Desert Moon.

"The deed is done," Hyla announced as she walked into Cael's room. He was sitting in a large, overstuffed chair, looking through some papers. He appeared to have had as bad a night as she had. His hair was ruffled, and he looked as if he had just gotten out of bed.

"So I saw," he replied.

"What do you mean, saw?" She came fully into the room and sat down on the divan near him.

"Last night. I saw Lionel leaving your room."

"Oh." He looked angry for some reason. "Does this displease you?"

"It is exactly what I wanted," he said flatly.

"Then why do you not seem happy?" She rested her chin on the arm of the divan.

"I am ecstatic," he insisted. He shot her a quick, fake smile, then returned to his papers.

"I suppose you will be sending me back to Eden Four now."

"I suppose." He did not look up. "Tell me, is one night with you so wonderful that it makes a man change his mind? And where is the negotiation? Has he signed the contract?"

"He will. I can guarantee it. And one night with me, as you put it, is worth its weight in gold. Tell me, what has changed between us? I've forced his hand, uncovered some of his secrets and such. I thought you would be thrilled." She searched his face for a sign, but he gave none.



“Yes, you would think so.” He stood and presented his back to her, looking out the window. “Did you sleep with him?” he finally asked.

“What does that matter? I did what you sent me here to do.”

“So he hasn’t signed the treaty?”

She bit her bottom lip. “I’ve already said he will sign.”

He remained silent.

“Cael, you need to go back to Desert Moon. I’m sure you’re needed there.”

“What secrets does our Lionel possess?”

“Cael, please just trust me. I have him over a barrel. You should go now. He’ll sign.”

“Hyla, leave me, please. I have much work to do.”

“What is your problem, Cael? I thought this was what I was here for. I thought I was here to help you convince Lionel to sign this treaty.”

“I do not have a problem,” he said, turning to her.

“Yes, you do. You are acting as if I have done something wrong when all I did was what I was paid to do.”

“I did not pay you to sleep with him!” Cael shouted.

“What do you want from me?” she finally asked. “Last night you said I should go, so I decided I would finish the job before I left. And now, now you act so ... ungrateful! What is it that you would like for me to do? Read your mind?!” She was shouting back at him now.

“What do I want?” He turned his back again. Then he faced her and closed the distance between them before he could stop himself.

Before she could fight him off, he had his hands on her again. He claimed her mouth for his own as she sank into him. He twined his fingers in her braid and used it to pull her even closer to him as he kissed her.

Cael drank her in. He was getting his fill of her, even though he knew that she was not his. She belonged to no one. No one but herself and whoever was keeping her warm. It angered him to no end. He wanted to hurt her, to teach her not to play with his emotions. He wanted to bruise her skin beneath his hands. He wanted to show her that she should be his and belong to no other man. These thoughts scared him in a way that he was not accustomed to feeling. They made him want to melt into her and never let her go.

But he did. He released her when he realized that he would never gain ground with her. She might be the most desirable woman in the world, but she was not the kind of woman he could tangle with. He reached for her again and held her out at arm's length, looking deeply into her eyes. They seemed clouded over. His grip on her shoulders was tight. He was sure his fingers were cutting into her skin, but he could not seem to loosen his hold on her.

"Leave me, Hyla. Leave me before you regret it." He let go of her with a gentle push.

"I'll not go until you tell me what is wrong with you."

"Do you want to know?!"

"Yes!"

"I am in love with you!" He shouted it before he could stop himself.

He had always known that taking Hyla would be a rough adventure. As he dragged her against him, hearing the tiny moan escape her throat only excited him more. He was beyond control, just as he had known he would be. He was lost in her deep-blue eyes as she lifted her chin, giving him silent permission to claim her lips.

When he shoved his tongue into her mouth, he meant for the movement to be rough. But he turned to jelly when she molded herself against him, accepting his assault as if she were the softest thing in the universe. He clung to her as he drank in her delicious nectar.

His cock raged beneath his linen pants. He knew this was going to be painful for them both, but there was no way to stop as her hands sought out his hair and her legs wrapped

around his, almost knocking him off balance. Her hot breath made its way into his body, sinking down into his soul, filling him with a desire he could not even begin to describe.

Before he could stop himself, he pushed her against the divan and began tearing at her dress. The fabric gave way to the softest ivory skin he had ever beheld. She was a mixture of hard temptress and soft innocence, and he couldn't decide which he preferred as her naked body glistened in the light.

"How do you want me?" Her eyes glazed over with desire as she spoke.

"Hard. Rough. How do you want me?"

"I want you to take me. Take all of me."

Her words sounded so innocent even as she spread her legs wide for him. Cael lowered himself onto her and delighted in the feel of her beneath him. Why had he denied himself this feeling for so long? Why had he hidden from it and lied to himself? She seemed so sweet and pure. He did not care how many men she had bedded before him. He knew only that he would be the last.

She felt like silk as he ran his fingers along her collarbone. He was sure it had been carved from fine ivory and that her hair was taken from the fires of the sun. He wove it around one hand as he let the other explore her arms and neck. She gasped when he closed his hand gently around her neck so he could feel her heart beat as it quickened under his touch.

He couldn't wait as her wet pussy pressed against his cock. In one motion, he thrust into her body, claiming her with the same kind of intensity he had dreamed about for so long. He pressed his cock deep into her body, stopping only when he filled her completely. Then he pushed harder against her pelvic bone, determined to make her his forever. His cock throbbed from within her soft, wet pussy. Gods, she was so tight! So incredibly tight. He couldn't think as her nails raked across his back before digging into his ass, urging him to move, to take her, to finish what he had started.

He pulled back, sliding his cock out of her until just the tip remained inside her body. She stared up at him, her eyes large and heavy with lust as he slowly moved, sliding back into her, filling her completely. She rose to meet his movement, arching her back, raising her hips. Her teeth bit into his shoulder while her pussy squeezed his cock as if it would never release him.

Before he knew what was happening, the change was on him. He hadn't warned her what happened when Mer men mated. Oh, Gods! His scales moved. He could feel them as they shifted, turning the way they were wont to do. Then the tiny suckers worked their way to the end of his cock, binding him to her completely as it sank into her precious skin.

"Oh, gods," she cried out as she dug her nails into his back, drawing blood this time. He felt it as it slid down his back.

"I'm so sorry," he managed.

"Fuck me, Cael," was her response.

She drove him to the edge with those three little words. They were exactly what he needed as he began his thrusts anew. Her pussy opened for him, welcoming him, meeting his every thrust as her gaze remained locked with his.

This was no dream. He was taking her as he had always wanted, making her his. And he hated himself for it. He hated that he was such a fool as to fall victim to her charms. He hated that he loved her and couldn't live without her.

A scream erupted from his throat, only to be joined by hers. They clung to each other as the orgasms ripped through their bodies, rocking them to pleasure, taking them over the edge. His come shot against her cervix as the suckers finally receded back into his cock. It was done. He had shown her his worst.

He collapsed on top of her, unable to steady his breathing, unwilling to look her in the eyes.

"Cael," she whispered, running her hands along his back.

“What?”

“I love you, too.”

“What?” He looked up at her.

“I said, I love you, too.”

“I shouldn’t have done that.” He pulled away from her. When he moved, he saw the blood. Oh, gods, he had hurt her!

“Yes, you should have. I’ve waited so long for you, for this night. For this.”

“I hurt you.”

She smiled. “A little. But it’s supposed to hurt your first time.”

“Your ...”

“First time.”

“Why did you not tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“That you had never been with a man,” he whispered.

“Would you have believed me?” she asked. “Are you disappointed to learn that your temptress was a virgin?”

“But what about Lionel?”

Her face instantly changed upon the mention of his name.

“Hyla?”

“I have to tell you something.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“Worse. He has my medallion. And he wants me to kill you, I think. I can’t do anything if he decides to place it around his neck. Cael, he will control me. I am a Djinn. It is part of our curse.”

“What does he want with your medallion? Doesn’t he have his own?”

“I don’t know what he wants. Even if he has his own, he can still use mine against me. Against my family.”

Shit. He sat on the edge of the divan and looked back at the woman he loved. He loved her, damn it. Love. And that didn’t come around too often. And she said she loved him back in spite of what he had just done to her.

“I’ll kill him,” he managed beneath his building rage.

“No. You would be arrested. I have to do it. I’ll kill him; then I have to leave.”

“I don’t understand this.”

“He’s a Djinn, Cael. He’s a step ahead. He probably knows you and I are together now. What I don’t know is who he is. I mean, who he really is. There is something familiar about him, and he swears he knows me.” She sat next to him and put her arm around his shoulder, pulling him against her. He liked the way she felt, but he hated that he had placed her in this situation.

“You’re in danger.”

“No. You are.”

“We can’t stay here.” He stood and picked up his pants. Trying to think of a way out of this, he thrust his legs into the pants and slid them back on. “Get dressed. I am so sorry to do this to you, but you have to leave.”

“No. I’m not going anywhere without you.” She stood and raised her ever-defiant chin.

“Hyla, please. I love you. I don’t want you in the middle of this.”

“I already am. Please, let’s find a way out of this together.”

“I know a way out.”

“What?”

“Your brother ...”

“No.”

He pulled her to him, the smell of their sex rising to remind him how he must protect her. “Yes. Creed is now the brahman. He has the power to protect you.”

“Not if Lionel has my medallion.”

“Yes. Even then. The brahman is the most powerful Djinn. You know this.”

“I can’t go back there.”

“You must. We’ll go together. You’ll see that you were wrong about him. About them both. They do love you.” He gave her ass a squeeze. “Now, get dressed. I have to get you out of here.”

“What about your plan to overthrow Lionel?”

“I will need Creed’s help now that Lionel has you in his pocket, as it were.”

Tears glistened in her eyes. “I am so sorry.”

He pulled her to him and wove his fingers into her hair. “You’re not half as sorry as I am. This was all a mistake. I should have never brought you here.”

“What about us? Are we a mistake, too?” She pulled away from him, the tears starting to flow.

“No. I should have taken you home right away instead of bringing you here to try to seduce you.”

“I have never been afraid before. No matter what. But I’m afraid now.”

“And you have a right to be. He does hold your medallion. But we’ll get you out of here before he can use it.”

“Can’t he use it to pull me back?”

“I don’t know. I’m not up to date on my Djinn folklore.” He smiled. “Your brother will help us.”

## Chapter Twelve

The ship must have stopped because when Hyla woke, she no longer felt as if she were being rocked from side to side. She rolled over and found herself against the wall. She was alone. She sat up and looked around the room. Cael was nowhere to be found. She wondered for a moment if last night had been a dream, but when she moved, her aching body told her that it had in fact been reality. Her clothes were within arm's reach. She took them and dressed. Cael was probably above deck.

She made her way up the steps. It had been dark below deck, and her eyes had grown accustomed to it. She shielded her eyes from the sun and stepped fully onto the deck. She scanned it for a sign of Cael, but did not see him. She turned to go back below deck and found herself frozen when she heard a voice.

"My dear, how nice of you to join us." It was Lionel. He was here, on the ship.

"Where is Cael?"

"He is on the next ship back to the capital." He smiled.

"No." Her words were little more than a whisper. "He cannot possibly be,"

"Left at first light."



Hyla noticed the blade in his hand. He was running it over the ends of his fingers. She wondered if he would kill her now. She also wondered about Cael. Where was he? He would not have left her after last night. He had declared his love for her and she for him. He would not have gone back to the capital without her. She knew this deep within herself.

“You lie,” she said.

“No, I do not. It appears that he was playing a little game himself. You were here to pass the time.”

She reached out to slap him and he caught her hand. He held the blade to her throat. “You are a beast!”

“Perhaps, but I am your master.” He dangled her medallion in front of her face. “When I place this around my neck, you will do my bidding. Brutus,” Lionel called, “tie her up.” He threw Hyla toward a big, burly man with dirty hair and grimy hands.

“You will not get away with this, Lionel!” she yelled. “You will not!”

After Hyla was bound, she was placed back in the tiny room that she had shared the night before with Cael. His scent was everywhere. How could he have tricked her so? She was confused. She did not know whether to believe Lionel or not. Last night had been the most wonderful, magical night of her life. He had confessed his love for her. Wouldn't he have avoided that if he did not really love her? He could have had her without saying those words. Surely he knew that. No, she would not believe that he had played a game with her.

But, where was he? Had Lionel made good on his threat and killed Cael? The thought made her ill. She would not believe that he was dead. She closed her eyes. She had a gift that did not come with the medallion. Most of the Djinn relied upon their medallions to read minds, to see into the future, but Hyla was able to use her mind separate from the medallion, though her powers were not at full strength. She would use them to figure out where Cael

was and if he were alive. She concentrated on his face. All she saw was blackness. Her heart sank. She would not believe it! No one could make her believe it.

She lay on the cot where she and Cael had loved one another for the second time, burying her head in the sheet and crying until her body could produce no more tears. Then she fell into a restless sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You will not harm her," Cael said. He had been holed up in the belly of the ship all night after Lionel had knocked him out when he had gone above deck to check on the status of the trip. He had no idea how Lionel had found him, but he had. Cael fumbled now with the ropes tied around his hands. There was no way he could escape. Lionel had made sure of that.

"I will not lay a finger on her." Lionel smiled.

"I will kill you!"

"You are in no shape to do anything right now."

"You cannot keep me here forever. You will be forced to release me."

"I will release you, but not until you have served your purpose. If you want to save her --" Lionel continued to smile down at him. "-- then you will do exactly as I tell you."

"What do you want from me?" Cael demanded.

"I want the same thing you want: Hyla. That is all."

"What do you want with a woman such as she?"

Lionel threw his head back as he laughed. "That will become clear to you when we reach Ben-gal."

"Ben-gal? What is in Ben-gal?"

"Answers, my prince. Answers."

Cael watched as Lionel left. He would find Hyla. He swore he would. He closed his eyes and remembered her face last night when she had loved him. She had been innocent. He had had no idea. He smiled in spite of himself. She had given herself to him completely. Though she had known hundreds of men, she had saved herself for him. His heart ached at this thought. She'd saved herself for him, and then, completely and trustingly, she'd given herself to him. He let a few tears slide down his cheeks. He hoped she was safe and out of harm's way. He hoped she would remain strong. He would save her. He vowed it. On his love for her, he would save her.

"Sit up." Lionel burst through the door, flinging his demands at her.

"Leave me alone." She wiped the tears from her eyes, unwilling to let him see her cry.

"No. We must talk."

"I have nothing to say to you," she sneered.

"I have plenty to say to you, my dear."

"Then speak." She continued to lie there.

"You will not want to miss this, I assure you."

"Then tell me what is so important that I would want to hear."

"We sail to Ben-gal," he began. "We go there to fulfill your destiny. Well, yours and mine. This is a long story," he warned. "Do you think you can stay awake for it?"

"Why Ben-gal? Who are you?"

"You have asked me on several occasions who I am. I will tell you now what you need to know. We are family, you and I. And I am in desperate need of something from your brother."

"We are not family. I don't know you."

"No, but I know you. And I know your brother Creed. I know he has been searching for you for years."

The thought of Creed searching for her no longer seemed an impossibility. Cael had said she was wrong about her brother, both her brothers, and now, this stranger seemed to confirm his words. "Tell me how you know me."

"I know you because my father and your brother share a very common interest. An Earth girl whose past is wrapped up in theirs. My father has studied your family for years, seeking ways to destroy it, to pay Creed back for all the damage done in the past."

"So what do you want from me?"

"You are nothing more than a pawn, a means to weaken Creed and help my father successfully end your brother's control over Carly. Yes, Carly. Your eyes widen when I say her name. Did you know that your brother has used his powers to send visions to her for years? He has broken the rules of his promise to the council never to contact her, and my father will punish him."

"What promise?"

"It was agreed that her soul would be allowed to live and reincarnate according to Djinn laws if Creed never contacted her."

"Oh. And what do you get?"

"I want the power of the brahman without the complications of the title."

"You can't have one without the other."

"Oh, yes, I can. I have the most powerful tool in the galaxy. You. And you are at my bidding."

"I am not so powerful; besides, I'll never do what you want me to do."

"You have no choice, in case you have forgotten. I have your medallion. I own you. And you are the brahman's sister. He will turn away his title to save you."

*No.* She shook her head wildly. There had to be a way out of here.

“Deny it all you want. You are here to serve many purposes. For now, you will ready yourself to meet my father.”

“I will never go along with this.”

“And I told you, you have no choice.”

“What does your father want from me?”

“You shall find out when we reach Ben-gal,” he said, waving off her comments and her anger. He stood to leave.

“Lionel, wait.” He turned back to look at her. “You cannot leave like this. You must tell me more,” she begged. “What does your father want? I can’t exactly do what you want if I don’t know what that is.”

“My father settled for seconds when he married my mother. He wanted your mother. You will do as a replacement. And while he is occupied with you, I will force Creed’s hand. He will exchange his medallion for your freedom.”

“And you will double-cross your own father?”

He shrugged. “It is not as if he hasn’t double-crossed me.”

“I have powerful friends in this system. They will search for me.”

“Do you mean Rundar? Isn’t he the one who sold you out to Cael?”

Her eyes widened. He knew far more about her than she realized. “How do you ...”

“I have your medallion. I know everything about you. All I have to do is close my eyes and I can see into your soul. And right now, I see a woman who will do anything to save the man she loves, the man whom she believes loves her in return. Stop fighting me. Your resistance only makes me more determined to get what I want.”

With that, he left the room.

She worried for hours, attempting to think of a way out of her predicament. The bottom line was that she needed Creed’s help. If Lionel were correct and Creed came for her,

then she needed to be ready to face the past she thought she had left behind. And she needed to find a way to keep Creed from handing over his medallion.

Djinn medallions held so much power in themselves. They took on the inherent powers of their owners as well as the powers associated with religious titles, such as the brahman title her brother now held. A medallion such as his could conquer worlds without the victims even knowing what was taking place. It could give Lionel enough power to control an entire system, if he wished.

There was no way Hyla could allow that to happen.

Cael had felt it when the men flung him over the side of the boat. He had counted on his Mer instincts to kick in, the legendary gills to open up, allowing him to survive in the ocean. As soon as his body had hit the water, he'd felt renewed with life. Unfortunately, this renewal did not last long enough as he struggled to free his hands. He'd ended up sinking to the bottom of one of the artificial landings off the coast of a tiny island in the sea.

When the Mer had ruled, these landings to enter the kingdom were often used as jump-off points, meant to mimic those of Atlantis, the great Earth kingdom which had met its death some twelve thousand years ago. Now, the landings were used by those who dared to defy attempts at modernization and therefore lived beneath the water. He knew there were thousands who lived by the old ways, and in many situations, they seemed to be the more civilized in comparison with those who had accepted the modern ways; they did not concern themselves with talk of war and destruction.

As soon as his hands were free, he shot back to the surface of the water. It was then that the clouds began swirling around him, wrapping him up in a water storm, as was common in Mer waters. The waters did what they could to protect their inhabitants from invasion, even if the invasion was unintentional. His head bobbed just above the surface before he was swept under. Finally, his body went limp as he was carried to the shores.

Thoughts of Hyla surrounded him as he fought for consciousness. He would not let her down. Somehow, he would find a way to save her from the evils he had placed her in. Somehow, he would find a way to prove to her how wrong he was and how much he loved her.

Cael drifted in and out of consciousness on the shore until he felt a pair of hands turn him over, moving his face from its sandy pillow.

He squinted up at the large man. "Creed?"

"Yes. I knew the moment you found her, and I sensed it when her medallion was taken. As the new brahman, I have certain ... advantages."

"Then why didn't you save her?" He rubbed his wrists, which stung from the tight ropes. His entire body felt like one bruise. He hadn't been able to move since landing here, his muscles aching from exhaustion.

"We will save her. But first, we have to form a plan. The forces at work are much stronger and more politically complex than I would like. You have been away from Kalsaeia for a long time. Political interests are different here than they are on Desert Moon," Creed warned.

"So I see. We have to go to her."

"No. We have to wait. I promise you, I will not allow her to be harmed now that I have found her again."

"So what is it they want? Why did they take her?"

"Because she is our weakness, yours and mine. They took her to use her as a bargaining chip. The reason Lionel never signed your treaty is because he knew that eventually someone would try to force his hand. He planned to retaliate, using whatever means necessary, hoping it would spur a war between us. His plan, from the start, was to get me here."

"So he wants to kill you?"

“No. He wants my power.”

“Impossible. There are rules ...”

“Lionel cares not about rules. He plans to take. He wants my medallion.”

Creed dropped down next to him on the shore, and Cael finally sat up, feeling a sharp pain run down his back as he did.

“And what does he plan to accomplish with that?”

“Control without responsibility. The combination will be a danger to us all. Because he is wed into your family and born into mine, he will pose a danger to us. Lionel and I are both Djinn, part of the same line of ancestors. All of us are one, and all of us have the ability to control the others if we know how to use it.” Creed stood and reached out to help Cael. “Tell me, can you stand?”

“I think so.” Cael took his hand and stood on unsteady feet. “This is all my fault,” he confessed, feeling his heart sink with the realization. “I brought her here under false pretenses. I wanted to bring her back home, to Desert Moon, but she refused. So I concocted a plan. I never realized how dangerous it would be.”

“What kind of plan?”

“I had hoped she would convince Lionel to sign the treaty between the Djinn and the Mer. I was wrong in bringing her here, delving into political arenas where I had no say and little power.”

“Your father is a powerful man. He will aid us.”

“I don’t want anyone else involved in this. I couldn’t stand to lose another person I love.”

“Yes, I understand. But we still have to speak to your father about this matter. He must help us. He is our way into Ben-gal.”

Cael nodded his head, knowing Creed was right. “And what will we find in Ben-gal?”

“An old enemy, and a war that should have long since ended.”



There was something foreboding about Creed's tone. Cael took in a deep breath as he followed Creed to a small boat off the coast. He would find Hyla and bring her home if it was the last thing he did, he swore to himself. Just thinking of how he had placed her in danger was enough to make him sick. He never should have concocted the plan to fool her. Instead, he should have seduced her, romanced her, made her love him. His fears had stopped him from being honest, something he swore would not happen again.

## Chapter Thirteen

Hyla had been warned not to fight the trip to Ben-gal and not to cause trouble with the sultan. Her Djinn instincts were on alert. Even without her medallion, she sensed a veil of protection around her. Someone had come to her aid. She smiled at the thought. Somehow, she would find a way to regain her medallion, which she knew Lionel kept in his pocket. Only when he wore it could he read her thoughts. As long as it did not rest against his chest, she was safe from his prying psychic abilities.

When they arrived in Ben-gal, she was taken off the ship and driven by carriage to the palace. Once there, she had been immediately taken to this room and had not left it in the three days since. The room was a large suite, fit for a princess, containing everything she could possibly want, except a window and an unlocked door. She kept records of the housemaids' comings and goings and had managed to figure out that only two guards stood at her door. It should be easy enough to overpower them, even if she didn't have the power of the medallion to aid her. She still knew a bit about mixing her potions, something Lionel could not take away. Over the past twenty-four hours, she had been gathering materials to use.

"You will go along with my plans," Lionel warned, shaking Hyla back from her own schemes.

"And what plans are those? As of yet, all I have seen from you is theft and kidnapping." She smiled as sweetly as she could manage.

"There is so much more going on here than you realize. Besides, I have the upper hand, in case you've forgotten. I have the power to make you do whatever I want." He removed her medallion from his pocket. "Now, are you going to go along with those plans willingly, or not?"

"You leave me little choice." It was best to make him think he was in charge.

"That is exactly as I wished. My father wants you as a bride. Something to do with knocking your brother off his throne. I have no interest in thrones. They come with complications. I want power. I want Creed's medallion. It is far more powerful than yours. And I plan to use you as a bargaining chip with them both."

"Fine. Bargain away. But while you're planning my future, do you think you could arrange for some flowers to brighten this dull room? Those white tropical flowers I saw when we arrived. What are they called?"

"Trimunta. They grow all over your planet."

"You forget, I have not been on Desert Moon in so long, I forget what grows there, if anything." She feigned ignorance, knowing full well it had not been so long since she had been home and that she still recalled the landscape.

"A land of deserts. Still, there is an oasis."

"Enough talk of home. The flowers. Can you get them for me?"

He laughed. "I am talking of using you as a tool, and you want flowers?"

"I have given in to your plans. I just want the room to smell good now."

"Women," he muttered under his breath. "Anything else?"

"Some honey would be nice. Fresh honey. Unstrained."

“For?”

“A beauty mask. I do want to look my best when I meet your father.”

Within the hour, all the ingredients had arrived. She mixed the honey and flowers with the other herbs she had managed to gather. No one was aware of her plans. She had also innocently convinced one of the maids to bring in real glasses with her wine last evening. She smiled as she began placing her mixture into one of the glasses.

“This has to work,” she whispered to herself, thinking of Cael as she used the handle of her hairbrush to carefully mash the materials into a thick poultice.

She sucked in her breath and broke the remaining glass on the edge of the table. Taking one of the large shards, she cut into her thumb, allowing the drops of blood to seep into her potion. When the mixture was complete, she took a scrap of fabric and wrapped the poultice in it. Then, she took the shard once more and cut her palm open before letting out the most bloodcurdling scream she could muster.

“Help me!” she shouted, moving near the door, the poultice in one hand while the other bled.

“What’s going on in there?” one of the guards asked.

“I’ve cut myself. I’m really bleeding a lot. I think I might pass out.”

“Stand away from the door.”

She moved back and then positioned herself on the floor to look as if she had fainted.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” One guard stood over her.

“She don’t look too good,” the other said.

“Help me,” her voice was a faint whisper.

Both men knelt before her, one touching her neck while the other examined her hand. With the poultice in her good hand, she reached up and touched the back of the first guard’s neck. All it took was a little Djinn magic, something she had learned from her grandmother, who had been a bit of a rebel in her day. Luckily for her, the main blood vessels in the back

of the neck were those most responsive to her mixtures. All it took was contact with the back of the neck and the victim would be rendered helpless for several hours. Thankfully, she was immune to its influence.

The poultice worked fast, infused with the kind of magic only someone born of the line could control. Like a spell, it struck its intended victim quickly. Within seconds, he had fallen over backward.

“What the hell? What’s wrong?” The second guard moved to check on the first. Hyla took the opportunity to slide the fabric against his neck. Within seconds, he had collapsed also.

“Are you both all right?” she asked, sitting up, tucking the poultice away in a makeshift bag before binding her hand with scraps of material.

“Yes,” they said, though neither opened his eyes or sat up.

“Good. I wouldn’t want to hurt you. I need to know something. Where are the keys?”

“In my pocket,” the first said.

“Get them for me, please.” She watched as he dipped his hand into his pocket and retrieved the keys. “Now, where does Sir Lionel sleep?”

“In the next wing. Third door on the right.”

“Are there guards between here and there?”

“No,” they said in unison.

“And do you know what time he retires?”

“Before midnight.”

“And which key will allow me into his chamber?”

“Black key. Fits most doors,” one of them managed.

“Thank you, gentlemen. Now, I will give you something in return.” It only took a few seconds to place a sexual scenario into their heads. She patted them both on the cheek before

slipping from the room. She locked the door behind her and made her way down the hall, her heart lifting with each step. She would attempt to hide until Lionel retired. She was going to get herself out of this mess; then she was going home.

Slipping into Lionel's room undetected had been easy enough. She slid the key back into her pocket and searched the room carefully. Of course, he wouldn't have left the medallion behind, but there was always a chance. Rifling through his dressers, she found nothing but clothing and other men's items. Her medallion was not there.

She took in a deep breath before making her way to the bed. It was high enough that she could crawl under it and await his return without chance of discovery. Deciding this was the best thing to do, she slid beneath the bed and waited, but not before she coated his pillow with the herbs from her poultice.

It took hours for him to return. When he did, his unsteady footsteps proved what she'd thought might happen. He had been drinking, no doubt to celebrate what he thought would be his impending victory. He had obviously not checked her room to see if she was there. His heavy boots hit the floor with two resounding thuds. Then his pants were kicked aside. The medallion, the key to her freedom, fell from his pocket and rolled beneath the bed.

She couldn't believe her luck as her freedom rolled toward her. Her fingers closed around it as she clutched it to her breast. Finally! Whatever chaos was about to ensue here could do so without her interference. She had other matters to tend to -- mostly finding her way back to the man she loved.

Slipping the medallion over her head, she closed her eyes in an attempt to see Cael. Where was he? Was he safe? She saw him lying in bed, tossing with restless sleep. A slight smile came to her lips as she knew her first order of business. Using the ancient words of the Djinn, she disappeared. Her love for Cael would guide her to him. From there, they would find their way back home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Creed was uneasy even now, despite knowing that Hyla had recovered her medallion. She would be free from the evils Ash and Lionel had planned, but he had to stay and face them. It was the only way he could truly be free to reclaim Carly, his love. Ridding Desert Moon of the High Council was only one step toward that freedom. Now he must also secure his holdings in Ben-gal. To do so, he would be forced to face his past. All of it. Even the parts he knew had the power to destroy him.

He must deal with Ash, who had never been one to sit back and await his revenge. Now that Creed had taken the title of brahman, there would be no stopping Ash, even if this outpost was thousands of miles from the Djinn realm on Desert Moon. Ash had wanted Creed to pay for the rise of the High Council. He felt that he should have been named leader in Creed's stead, even though he had never set foot on Desert Moon. Instead, he was a distant cousin, one who kept his bloodline secret.

## Epilogue

Hyla looked down at Cael's sleeping frame. The ship they were on was bound for Bengal; she'd have to warn him and his father both, but for now, she just wanted to drink in the sight of him. Her Djinn powers allowed her to see everything that had taken place since they were separated. Her heart swelled with love for him. He was willing to risk everything to save her. She smiled. He didn't know it, but the woman he loved was more than capable of saving herself. Sometimes, it just took a little longer than she would like.

She reached out to touch his golden curls in the darkness. He moaned, and his hand reached out to close over her wrist. She sucked in her breath. Ordinarily, she would pull away or fight against an act such as this. She had sworn never to give up control to a man. But Cael was different. He was no ordinary man, but part Mer, as the turquoise scales on his sides proved. And he was a born leader, a man who knew how to control those around him while still allowing their freedom.

"Cael," she whispered his name in the darkness as he sat up, his hand still closed around her wrist.

"Hyla? How did you ... What did you ... Oh, gods, I am so happy to see you." He pulled her to him, his hand releasing her wrist while his arms circled her waist.



“I managed to mix up a trick or two and get back what is rightfully mine. But there is still trouble brewing. You can’t go to Ben-gal. Kiss me, Cael. I was so worried about you.”

His eyes sparkled as the moonlight streamed in through the tiny window. “I have missed you.” His hand made its way into her hair, twisting itself in the curly mass. Then his lips came down onto hers, hard.

Her heart lodged in her throat as his tongue parted her lips and delved into her mouth. Oh, how she had missed this! She had missed him. Winding her arms around him, she pulled him even closer, drinking in the feel of him against her. He smelled like the sea and like every fantasy she’d ever had.

“Cael, I love you. And I know I have made a mess of things.”

“No. I have. When I saw you, I couldn’t bear to leave you on Eden Four. I had to find a way to make you mine. This is all my fault. Lionel and Ash, it’s all my doing. The treaty would have never been signed one way or the other. Lionel is an enemy to the Mer. He is also a power-seeker. I asked you to come with me to my father’s house so I could seduce you. But I failed in that, as well.”

“So you lied to me?”

“I tricked you. Just a little Mer magic. But it exploded before my eyes.”

“So I see.”

“Do you still want to be here with me?” His eyes softened as he asked the question.

“Yes, Cael. I do. But more than that, I want to go home with you. I would like for you to take me back to Desert Moon. I want to see my brothers.”

“So you believe me now about them?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Creed is not on Desert Moon. He is here. In Ben-gal. He was going to save you.”

“How did he know I was there?”

“He’s the brahman. He has ways of knowing things.”

“You’re right.” She ran her hand through his hair again, pulling his face so close to hers she could feel his breath on her lips. “He will need our help.”

“No. His mission was to save you and then to face down Ash. He will want you to be safe.”

“And I am safe. With you.” She ran her finger along his bottom lip.

“Perhaps we should turn the ship around, then.”

“You know, I am wearing my medallion, which means I have the power to make your wishes come true.”

“Are you trying to seduce me while I’m trying to be practical?”

“Yes. I am at your mercy.”

“But then you would be my servant.” A slight smile tugged at his lips.

“Yes, I would. And you know what? I’m ready to do that. I’m ready to be yours, to give myself over to you. I’m ready to give you control.”

“I was hoping you would say that. But first, let me get us headed in the right direction.”

“Then you’ll come back and ...”

“Yes, I’ll come back.”

It only took a few seconds to give the command to turn the ship around.

“You know I am expecting forever from you,” Hyla whispered upon his return.

“Hyla, there are things you don’t know about me.”

“Things like the fact that your penis does something weird when we have sex? Things like that look of lust you get when your hand closes around my wrist and you pull me to you? I know what you want, Cael. I know what you need.” She shifted on the bed, listening to the springs creak beneath her movements. “I know you need to control me.”

“Hyla ...” He ran his finger across her cheek. “You have no idea.”

“Yes, I do. Now. I can see into your head. I know those naughty things you want to do to me. I know what you thought about on your way to Eden Four. Even now, your body sends signals to me. I know that you need to dominate me, to have me bend to your will.”

“My own personal genie.” He laughed.

“No. Your own personal wish-granter. I can make your wildest fantasies come true.”

“You already have.”

“No, I haven’t.” She lay back and threw her hands over her head in submission. “I know about your ship fantasy.”

“What ship fantasy?” He moved next to her, his hard, shirtless chest pressing against her side.

“The one you had on the way to Eden Four.”

“You would allow me to tie you up? To have my way with you?”

“Yes, I would. But first, you have to make love to me the old-fashioned way.”

“And how’s that?” His hand skimmed up her side, causing her nipples to harden in response.

“Like a man who loves a woman.”

“And how is that?”

“Do I have to show you?”

She took his hand and moved it lower to her belly. Then she arched against him. His hand slid lower with the movement.

“What would you like to do now?”

“You’re the one who is supposed to be in charge.”

“But you wanted me to love you the traditional way.”

“Who says this isn’t traditional?”

His hand fisted around the hem of her dress before raising it up her thighs. Her skin prickled with goose bumps as his hand skimmed along her inner thighs. Parting her legs for him, she closed her eyes, giving in to the sensation of his hands on her skin. He pulled her skirt all the way up to her waist, then tugged at her underwear, sliding it down her to her knees before pulling it all the way off and tossing it aside.

“I want you to undress for me,” he whispered as his hand slid between her thighs and ran along her labia.

She sat up slowly and raised her dress over her head. Her breasts sprang free, her nipples hardening in the cool air, her medallion resting between them. Tossing the dress aside, it landed in a heap with her underwear. “Now what do you want?”

“I want you to touch yourself for me.” He sat up and leaned against the headboard. The moonlight streaming in provided enough light that she could see his cock, large and ready for her, awaiting what would come next.

She sat in front of him and spread her legs, watching his eyes glaze over with lust as he watched her. Her hand went down to cover her pussy, rubbing lightly over her labia and clit.

“Spread your lips open for me,” he urged.

With one hand, she spread her lips open, then used the other hand to rub her clit. She began with small figure-eight motions, avoiding her tender bud as she moved. It hardened in response while her pussy began to cream. Having Cael watch her touch herself was both liberating and indescribably kinky. As she continued to rub her clit, his hand went to his cock and he began to stroke it slowly. She licked her lips, wanting to take him into her mouth, but she was unwilling to stop her current activity.

Slowly, she slid one finger into her open, waiting cunt. Her inner walls spasmed at the invasion. She threw her head back, knowing this was turning him on as much as it was her. Releasing her pussy lips, she reached up to touch her nipples, first gently, then giving each a rough tug. She hadn’t realized until now how much she loved to be touched roughly,

frantically. It made her feel as if desperation drove the action, and right now, she was desperate for Cael.

“I want to touch you,” she said.

“Not yet. I want to watch you first. Keep touching your sweet pussy for me. Show me you can make yourself come.”

Her finger began to thrust in and out of her pussy, coating itself with her juices each time it entered her body. Her breasts bounced lightly as she began bucking against her finger. Finally, she lay all the way back on the bed, closing her eyes tightly, as one hand continued to fuck her cunt while the other rubbed her clit with renewed intensity.

She was going to come. Her orgasm was right there, on the edge, when his hand closed over hers, stopping her movements.

“Roll over,” he growled.

She obeyed, rolling onto her knees, raising her ass in the air, exposing her pussy for him to see.

“Place your hands under your head.” His words were a soft command.

Again, she obeyed, her pussy clenching and awaiting his cock.

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want it hard?”

“Yes.”

“You know what happens when I fuck you hard. You know I will bind myself to you, that you will not be able to move away from me until I’ve had my fill of you. Still, you want me?”

“Yes. Please, Cael.”

His hand closed over her pussy, pressing inward and upward, placing pressure on her clit. He began squeezing her labia and clit, lightly at first, then with more strength, holding the pressure much longer. "I'm going to milk the come from your body."

She convulsed at his words, her juices spilling out into his hand. Her heart thumped heavily in her chest while she ached to move, to back up toward him and sit on his hard cock. He continued to squeeze her tight box while she remained as still as she possibly could.

"Oh, yes. You are so wet. So wet, my love. You do know that I love you, don't you?"

She nodded her head wildly, her hair falling into her face.

"And you know that I control you."

"Yes. Please, Cael. Please fuck me."

"Fuck you?" he teased. "I'll fuck you soon enough. Right now, I'm enjoying making you squirm."

"I can't take any more."

"For me, Hyla. Please."

She raised her hips, unable to remain still. His hand made light contact with her backside. The feel of skin on skin, his hand commanding her not to move, was enough to send her over the edge again. She came loudly as a scream erupted from her throat. Her muscles refused to move as she remained ass in air, sobbing, her pussy weeping its juices down her legs.

Before she knew what had happened, Cael had moved so that he now lay on his back. In one motion, he shifted her and impaled her on his cock, her back to him.

"I want to watch you fuck my cock."

The thought was delicious, and the words were enough to make her want to please him. She rose and fell on his cock, grinding her pussy on it, spilling her juices down to his balls.

"I can see your sweet cunt take all of me, Hyla. I can see your pussy. It is so hungry for me. You know what I want to do? I want to love you like this forever."

"Mmmm," was her only response as her hand moved down to rub her clit. She leaned forward, allowing him to watch her as she continued to move on his cock.

Within seconds, his cock shot the suckers onto her vaginal walls, holding him against her while he came inside her. This time, one of the suckers attached to a special spot inside her, massaging it with light suction. She let out another scream, coupled with her orgasm.

When the suckers released her, she slid from on top of him and moved to lie next to him.

"Forever, you say?"

"Did I say that?" he teased.

"Yes, you did."

"Forever sounds good to me. Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"You're going make me say the words, aren't you?"

"Yes, Cael. I am."

"Hyla, my love, will you marry me?"

"Yes, I will."

"And will you grant my wishes for eternity?"

"Yes."

He ran a hand along her cheek. "I couldn't have stood it if I lost you. I would have killed them with my bare hands if they had harmed you."

"I know. But now Creed is in danger."

“He’s the brahman, Hyla. He can manage on his own. Besides, he claims he is the reason for all of this. Let him fight his demons. There’s a woman on Earth. She’s waiting for him.”

“Sounds like you know a lot about my brother.”

“I know a lot about my future brother-in-law. He and I are friends. And I am ready to take you home now.”

“Your father must come, too. It will be too dangerous for him here.”

“I agree. We will convince him. Then, if you don’t mind, we shall travel by spaceship. I have a trick or two I would like to try out.”

The wicked gleam in his eyes told her the visions she’d had earlier were indeed his fantasies. And she planned to make every one of them come true.

\* \* \* \* \*

Creed approached Ben-gal with one thought on his mind: Carly. He and Ashmendi, the trickster Djinn, had battled for her affections for years, finally causing his father to force him to choose between his title and the woman he loved. When he chose Carly, the High Council was deemed ruler in his father’s stead, but they chose to further punish him, sending Carly’s soul to Earth when she died, thus keeping her cut off from the Djinn world and from Creed.

Ash had begged them to allow her to stay, to be with him, but they’d refused. In the end, neither man won the object of his affection. However, now the council was no more. Creed was the brahman, and even though he knew the Djinn rules of Earth and Desert Moon both decreed that he allow Carly her freedom and forbade him from contacting her, he could not stay away from her.

He knew Lionel had his own dreams of being brahman, and he knew that Ash had promised certain gifts to his son for delivering Creed upon these shores. Neither man would see him coming, a ghost in the night, rising with the dawn’s fog. If he killed them, he could



lose his title. However, there were no rules against capturing them, enslaving them in bottles the way the Mer once did to the Djinn before Earth had fallen so many thousands of years ago.

When Atlantis was the center of Earthly knowledge, the Mer had counted on the Djinn to aid them in their conquests. A Djinn who captured another Djinn was the worst kind of traitor to the ancestral family, but Ash and Lionel had pushed him too far. Just as his brother Ari had pushed their brother Ah-ten, he was now left with a decision to make.

He could hear Carly's voice on the wind, singing a haunting song out in the desert, dreaming of an Africa she had never seen. Her soul longed for that desert, and there was a reason for that longing. The desert was in her blood, but it wasn't the desert of Earth -- it was Desert Moon. Even now she worked her meaningless jobs, searching for a place in a world that didn't make sense, a place where once more, she was a nameless child, abandoned at birth with no knowledge of who she was.

Only one thing bound her to him: the medallion that traveled with her through time. It was his oath to her, a way to remind her -- no matter that she couldn't remember. He sent it to her every time she reincarnated. One day, she would look into his eyes and know he had been protecting her. Until then, all she could do was dream, and all he could do was keep her safe from those who wanted to steal her innocence.

She had no place in the war between Ash and Creed. She was the Helen of ancient Troy who had become the figurehead of a war. In reality, she was a woman who only wanted love, and Creed was the man who desperately needed to give it to her. But his Carly was changed. He was changed. The man she once loved was dead, having given so much of himself in the name of keeping peace in his land.

As he approached the palace, traveling on the air, he wondered if she would still love him. He knew there was a possibility she would not even know him, but he hoped the magic he had sent with her would be enough to resurrect their love. Either way, he would know

soon. The two bottles in his hands were intended for his enemies. Once they were captured, he would be free. And he would go to Earth and seek out the only woman he had ever loved.

 THE END 

## Alicia Sparks

A Gemini through and through, Alicia likes to leave everyone around her breathless from her numerous projects. Not only does she make you quiver with her words, she is also a Ph.D. candidate who is studying Folklore. In her spare time, she is a university professor who teaches freshman composition and American Literature. An avid lover of music, most of her inspiration comes from the gorgeous musicians she listens to. The rest is imagination with a little reality thrown in for good measure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

*Take on Me*

by Lacey Savage

Available Now from Loose Id

## Take on Me

Silwen didn't stop to look behind her as she fled into the kitchen. She wanted to put as much distance between herself and the rogue captain as possible, and if she never laid eyes on him again, that would be just fine with her.

She swiped at a loose tendril that had escaped her carefully bound tresses and picked up a large carving knife. A half-plucked chicken lay on the wooden counter and she headed for it, intent on doing as much damage as she could to something that wouldn't fight back.

"Do you remember the first time we were together?" His voice was smooth and deep, like rich Karavian wine. It traveled down her spine and left a soft warmth in its wake.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to face him. "No."

"You're lying."

"As far as I'm concerned, we were never together. If we had been, you wouldn't have left --"

She bit her lip, her teeth digging into the tender skin. Why couldn't she ever keep her mouth shut?

"I can see you're still upset about that. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"If?" She stared at him incredulously, knife pointed toward his chest even though he was still halfway across the room.

"I left because I had too. My father..." Drax's voice faltered, his long lashes shielding his eyes as his gaze fell to the floor. Silwen fought the urge to run into his arms, to comfort the obvious tension that had settled upon his strong, broad shoulders.

When it was clear to Silwen he wasn't going to continue, she risked a question of her own. "How is your father?"

He looked up at her, his eyes unreadable. "I don't know. Dead, I guess."

"I'd hoped..." She struggled to find the right words. "I didn't know your father was on the *Bravehearted*." She gestured toward the journal pages. "And when I read that, I'd hoped I misunderstood."

Drax scrubbed his hand over his face. "The morning we were last together, I learned that the *Bravehearted* never made it to the port in Cauldernon. I jumped on the first vessel leaving the docks in search of them, but the trip amounted to nothing. We never even came close to finding the ship, Captain Barbarosa, or my father."

"I'm so sorry." Her heart constricted with the knowledge that Terrem Attir was dead.

Silwen placed the knife down on the table. Giving in to her initial urge, she crossed the distance between them quickly and wrapped her arms low around his waist, pressing her cheek against his chest. The smell of the ocean mingled with the slight scent of sweat, bringing back a deluge of memories. Memories of sounds and images treaded vividly across her mind.

The close proximity of his body was driving her to distraction, so Silwen closed her eyes and tried to focus on something else.

Drax's father -- dead. Unbelievable! Terrem Attir had never been the type of man to succumb to anything, and she'd always thought he'd stare death right in the face and tell it to come back later. But if even he couldn't stand up to the forces of nature, what chance did any of them have?

"Want to take another stab at that question?" Drax asked, his husky voice shattering her thoughts.

"What question?"

He placed a soft kiss on her temple, sending a wave of desire rushing through her body. "You know what question."

"Ah." She cleared her throat. "That one."

“And don't say no again. I won't believe you.” He placed his hands on her hips and held her tightly to him, his fingers swirling in slow, sensual circles. The sensation penetrated right through her clothes and made her shudder in anticipation.

“Why did you really come here?” she asked, avoiding his question.

“I need a navigator. That's the truth.” He placed a finger under her chin and exerted pressure until she looked up and stared into his eyes. She wanted to turn away, knowing that if she studied his handsome face much longer, she'd lose whatever common sense she had left.

“I'm not a navigator anymore --”

The rest of her words were lost inside his mouth. Gently, he parted her lips with his tongue, the silky soft texture, the taste of him invading her senses. She couldn't fight her body's reaction to him. His kiss felt too good, and it had been too long since she'd been in his arms. She opened to him, an unexpected groan escaping her throat as their tongues met, teased, explored.

The force of his kisses drove her back, but Drax moved with her, licking and sucking at her lips like a parched man at an oasis. The firm edge of a table stopped her retreat and she pressed herself closer to his chest, losing herself in the embrace.

He hadn't changed at all. Not a bit in six years. She ran her hand over the firm muscles of his arms as his kisses moved lower, down her neck, stopping just above her breasts.

Drax swept her off her feet before she even thought of protesting, setting her down on the table. The wood creaked and her knees spread almost of their own volition, a wave of pleasure rushing to her pussy. He stepped between her open thighs, his mouth clamped hard around a nipple.

Ecstasy flowed through her, wetting her thighs with cream even as she pushed her cunt closer to him, needing more, yearning to know if he'd feel as good now as he did back then, if he could still fuck her with that same ravenous intensity.

“May I see them?”

It took Silwen a moment to gather her thoughts enough to figure out what he meant. His gaze was fixed on her hard nipples, one soaked with a wet circle, straining through her cotton tunic.

“You've seen them before,” she murmured, undoing the laces of her tunic. As the only serving maid at this hour, Silwen knew no one was likely to come into the kitchen. She wiggled her wings and held them close together, pulled them through the small slits in the restraining garment and tugged the tunic over her head.

His eyes widened, and she gasped with pleasure as his large, weather-worn hands cupped the full weight of her breasts, squeezing gently.

“You're magnificent,” he whispered.

She groped for composure. Her entire body hummed with a sensual buzz, instinctive and intense.

*Damn him for making this so easy.*

“All right,” she said. “You have a navigator.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*What people are saying about*

## **Take on Me**

First, if you plan on reading this story, be sure you have a cold shower ready. Or better yet, send your lover to bed early and tell them to wait up for you. They won't be disappointed.

-- Kathy, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

This diverse world of pirate like-treasure hunters is an exhilarating and fantastic read. There are many races depicted within this novel, not to mention the different cultures. With tons of action, this story rolls along so quickly that I didn't have time to get bored.

-- Francesca, *Enchanted in Romance*

The story is exciting and the sex is very hot and intense. The characters are vividly drawn. Lacey Savage spins a story filled with humor and interesting plot twists.

-- Candy, *Coffee Time Romance*

Ms Savage creates wonderfully rich, detailed worlds, full of history, myth and fantastic races...[A]n absorbing, sexy tale of swashbuckling pirates and mythical beings, all bound together with a gossamer thread of magic.

-- Michelle Naumann, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*