

eBooks are *not* transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.



Samhain Publishing, Ltd. 2932 Ross Clark Circle, #384 Dothan, AL 36301

Beginnings: A Touch of Magic Copyright © 2006 by Cassandra Kane

Cover by Anne Cain ISBN: 1-59998-232-3 www.samhainpublishing.com

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: October 2006

Beginnings: A Touch of Magic

Cassandra Kane

Universal Alliance Settlement Exploration Unit: Report 17836ZE-C

Target:

"Samhain" Type M planet on outer edge of Ekabadian System. Nine year cycle.

Atmosphere: Habitable. Terraforming unnecessary. Possible instability due to proximity of Ekabadian Black Hole.

History:

Year 2395. Illegal colonization by New Wiccan cult, *Lalith's People* (Cross Reference), in privately chartered starship *Goliath*. Contact with Universal Alliance severed immediately. *Goliath* reported missing. Assumed crashed on Samhain, no survivors. No resources to verify. Status: Code F (Extreme Low Priority).

Year 2552.9 Status Change: Code C (Medium Priority). Black hole proximity considered stable. Universal Alliance green light colonization into Ekabadian System.

Year 2553.2 Settlement Scouting Unit SU-SEU5821 dispatched. Preliminary report on Samhain: Highly ionized atmosphere. Frequent electrical storms causing equipment malfunction. Small colony of *Goliath* survivors detected. Scouting Unit classified "Missing" following preliminary report. 13 days in field.

Year 2559.4 Settlement Scouting Unit SU-SEU6073 dispatched. Confirms preliminary by first scouting unit. Civilization: Primitive, barbaric. Observation of restrictive New Wiccan rituals amongst *Goliath* settlers. Scouting Unit classified "Missing" following secondary report. 19 days in field.

Current Status:

Year 2561.7

Final reconnaissance mission. Type: Scouting / Military
Primary directive: Ascertain whereabouts of missing scouting units
Secondary directive: Ascertain Samhain readiness for colonization
In case of mission failure, SEU to hand over Samhain exploration to
UA Special Forces for full military intervention.

Chapter One

"So that's Samhain," Colonel Stodd Orson sneered, staring at the small green planet on the ship's viewscreen.

Scout Leader Captain Tirana Albaster nodded. She despised the man but it was best if she treated him with civility. These Universal Alliance Special Forces military types were known for their short fuses—and their trigger-happy fingers.

"There's something in Sector 12A," the ship's science officer reported, reading the data from his console.

"Signs of life, Lieutenant?" Tirana asked.

"Affirmative. Looks like a small settlement."

"Send the location co-ordinates to Shuttle 4. I'm going down."

"We're going down," Colonel Orson corrected as he followed her from the navigation pit.

"That goes without saying, Colonel." Tirana's voice was polite even as she lengthened her stride to shake him off. "I'm fully aware that you were assigned as protection on this mission."

Colonel Orson stopped her with a thick hand on her shoulder and gave it a deliberate squeeze.

Tirana spun around, shrugging out of his hold. "I'd appreciate it if you stopped pawing at me, Colonel."

The colonel grinned, showing crooked teeth beneath thin, stretched lips. She tried not to look at the scarred eye-socket, wondering again why

the man refused to wear an eye-patch. She suspected he liked the fear—if not downright horror—it inspired.

"I've already apologized for my...accidental...visit to your quarters last night, Captain," he said, not looking sorry at all. "But an attractive woman like you must surely be used to such...accidents?"

Tirana stared at him with unflinching distaste. "I don't care for what you're implying, Colonel. But let me tell you this—if there is another incidence of inappropriate behavior, I will be forced to report it to your commander. I'm sure Special Forces wouldn't want another scandal on their hands after the Dilorac incident."

Orson's good eye narrowed. "Are you threatening me, Captain?"

"Take it as you will," she said coolly. "And please remind your men that this is a peaceful recon mission. I don't want their excessive use of *chi'kle* to jeopardize it by putting any of my team in danger. Native life forms are to be treated with respect, Colonel. We'll meet in Shuttle 4 at oh eight hundred."

She turned on her heel and strode down the corridor to assemble her scouting team.

Behind her, Orson spat out the *chi'kle* he'd been chewing. The masticated gob stuck to the corridor wall.

"Uptight bitch," he snarled.

After the Dilorac debacle, where a Special Forces unit had wiped out an entire native settlement following a bar brawl, the performance-enhancement drug had been made illegal. Fifty thousand addicted Special Forces men were forced to quit or take the drug in secret. Colonel Orson didn't believe in hiding because of someone else's stupid mistake. No one had dared pull him up on it until now.

He fingered his gun and thought about the places in Tirana Albaster's curvaceous body he'd like to shove it. And the part of his anatomy he'd definitely be shoving there eventually, whether she liked it or not.

がならればないない

Electrical storms raged overhead as Tirana and her three-man scouting team cut their way through the thick forest undergrowth with machetes. Following on their heels, weapons cocked, came the ten-man Special Forces unit headed by Colonel Orson.

Orson had been professionally distant since the encounter in the ship's corridor. She hoped she'd made her point but somehow she doubted it. She was aware of his gaze lingering on her backside in the tight rubberized comms suit.

Tirana swallowed the urge to turn around and claw out his remaining eye. Then took a steadying breath and shook her dark hair to remove all thought of Orson. *Keep your mind on the job*.

Successful completion of this mission would fast track her career in the Settlement Exploration Unit. That's why she'd volunteered for it. As far as she was concerned, failure was not an option.

She looked down at her locator link. The tiny screen showed they were close to the original coordinates for the settlement. Trees crowded close around them, thick-branched and tinged with purple, towering into the angry sky. She couldn't see more than a couple of yards in front, but the locator indicated a rapid rise in the ground ahead. A hill. Any settlement would more than likely be situated at the summit where it would be easier to see and protect itself from possible attack.

"What the fuck...!"

Tirana heard the soldier's shout and whirled as he pumped a volley of laser fire into the undergrowth. The bushes at the foot of a large tree fizzled and burned, leaving a charred mass.

"Stop it!" She ran at him, aiming a kick at his hand. The impact catapulted the rifle into the air and the soldier jerked back his hand with a yowl of pain.

Outraged, he turned and raised his fist at her in fury.

"Stand down, soldier!" Orson barked.

As the soldier lowered his fist, Tirana noticed Orson and his soldiers had their rifles aimed squarely at her chest.

She froze.

Orson took out a square of *chi'kle* from his pocket and popped it in his mouth. Chewing, he gave his sneering grin and lowered his rifle. "You attack my men one more time and I can't guarantee I'll be able to hold them back."

"Should I remind you *again* that native life forms are to be respected?" Tirana almost spat at him. "We know nothing about Samhain. We don't know what type of native life forms we're dealing with, and we have sketchy data on the culture that has developed from the descendants of the Goliath. This mission is still under the jurisdiction of the SEU, Colonel, and we'll play by *my* rules."

Orson's eye glinted. He turned to the offending soldier. "Son, what did you see out there?"

"An animal." The soldier glared at Tirana. "Looked like some sort of—some sort of gargoyle. Ugly as sin. Sir, it was *grinning* at me."

"I don't care if it was mooning you, from now on keep your finger off the trigger." Orson turned to his men. "That goes for all of you. No firing unless by my express orders." He raised an eyebrow at Tirana, his lip curled in contempt. "Happy?" Tirana gave a curt nod before picking up the locator link she'd dropped when she'd kicked out at the soldier. Her scouting team observed her and Thurley, her second-in-command, curled his right finger to his chest, signaling for instructions.

Continue, she signaled with a raised thumb. Then shot out her little finger. But be on your guard.

It was bad enough being on a planet that had already swallowed a starship and two previous scouting units, she thought in suppressed fury as she wiped the mud off her locator link. Now they had to watch their backs for the men who were supposed to be protecting them.

A roll of thunder growled overhead. A sudden flash of lightning sizzled from the empty sky and struck the treetops. A branch broke off high above them and came crashing through the thick foliage to land with a heavy thud at her feet. Tirana's heart pounded as she realized it had only narrowly missed her head.

In her hand, the locator link beeped once and then died.



The stink of burning reached them first.

They'd been climbing uphill for the past hour, crunching over a thick mulch of dead leaves, their thigh muscles straining against the deepening gradient of the slope. Cutting through a final tangle of undergrowth, they emerged from the crowding trees. Orson gave a series of hand signals and everyone spread out along the edge of the forest, hiding behind tree trunks and in the scant undergrowth.

Crouching behind a dense bush sparkling with purple berries, Tirana peeked out to survey the landscape.

The top of the hill rose like the bald pate of an old man, rounded and smooth amongst the lushness of the crowding forest. Not more than two meters before them, a two-foot high stone wall swept to either side, rounding the curve of the hill. She surmised it was more a boundary marker than an attempt to keep anyone out.

The hill rose in a steep incline from the boundary wall to a ring of tall standing stones circling the summit. Inside the stone circle an enormous bonfire of dried faggots blazed, shooting sparks and billowing acrid smoke into the purple twilight. A whorling mass of clouds churned in the sky, criss-crossed with flickers of lightning.

Beneath this disturbing backdrop, a group of people in long robes gathered around the bonfire, chanting. She figured them to be at least a dozen, though it was too dark and they were too far away for her to make out how many.

Tirana looked across at Orson, who knelt on one knee behind a neighboring bush with the butt of his weapon resting on his thick thigh. She signaled that she and Thurley were to go closer while everyone else remained behind. Orson frowned, looked as if he would argue. Instead, with an abrupt movement, he signaled agreement.

Tirana nodded at Thurley. They picked their way over the rough stone wall and crept up the side of the hill. Nearing the top, they slipped behind neighboring standing stones, or menhirs, and hid in the black shadows. Tirana crouched down and peeked around.

The chanting had grown more intense as they neared, and now the robed men raised their hands to the sky in gestures of supplication. But they weren't alone. Beyond the bonfire on the downslope of the hill, a crowd had gathered. Their stark, white faces watched the chanting group with a mixture of worship and fascinated horror.

The chanting stopped. A black-robed figure detached itself from the group around the bonfire and approached the crowd.

"Bring forward the son of Amun and his familiar." His voice boomed in the sudden quiet.

A man and what looked like a dwarf, both with hands tied behind their backs, were shoved out from the front of the crowd.

Tirana snuck across to another menhir where the view was unhindered by the bonfire. As she peeked again, a blaze of lightning slashed across the sky, illuminating the scene before her.

For that flashing instant, she saw the man in clear relief. He was tall, slim-hipped and wide across the shoulder. A coarse tunic opened at his broad chest, revealing a long necklace of blue gems hanging around his neck. Dark thick hair hung to his shoulders, framing a strong, square-jawed face. Tirana was struck by his male beauty, but what captured her attention were his brilliant eyes as he stared at the robed figure in blazing fury.

By his side, hopping from foot to foot as he gibbered, was what looked like a tiny gargoyle.

"Silence your familiar!"

The gargoyle stopped gibbering, his bulging eyes glaring at the priest.

The glacial voice boomed out again. "What is your plea to the charges?"

Tirana leaned forward, angling to get a closer look at the man with the necklace. The gargoyle screeched and stared straight at Tirana. The man's head snapped around. His blazing eyes met hers. She was held, transfixed and breathless, as their gaze locked for what seemed an eternity.

Then a volley of laser fire shot across the top of the crowd, scorching the sky with red.

Colonel Orson and his Special Forces team stormed the stone circle.

Chapter Two

Orson's soldiers thundered past, manic grins fixed to their faces as they fired indiscriminately at the crowd. Tirana felt someone's hand on her neck, shoving her to the ground, a body throwing itself over hers. She nose-dived, felt the scrape of grass against her cheek, the smell of damp soil pressed against her nostrils. Screaming and shouts reverberated around her, punctuated by sharp volleys of gunfire.

"Get off me!" She fought against the dead weight forcing her down, managed to jab her elbow into his ribs. The body slid off her. She pushed herself away, struggled to her knees and pulled the stunner from her holster, turning to protect herself.

Thurley lay sprawled facedown on the ground beside her. Laser fire had blasted a gaping hole in his back, his flesh blackened beneath the edges of his singed jacket. He was dead, taking the shot obviously meant for her.

The hot sting of fury wiped out the shock of horror. She rose and pushed through the frightened crowd running to escape the battle being fought on the far side of the hill. The bonfire had toppled beneath the weight of two robed men lying across its scattered centre. Loose embers fluttered into the sky from the trail of fire spreading over the hill.

"Orson!" Tirana strode towards the knot of soldiers herding the crowd. It was difficult to see more than the circling shadows of their uniforms, the points of their rifles. A scatter of bodies littered the area.

Someone slammed into her, screamed. Tirana stumbled, gripped her stunner firmly. She heard the sobbing of women, the cry of children. *Children!*

Damn Special Forces. Damn Orson. She would make him pay for this outrage.

Orson was standing on the exact same spot where only minutes before the man in the necklace had stood. In the flash of lightning, she saw a smug smile settle over his countenance as he watched his soldiers rounding up the crowd. Half a dozen of the robed men knelt before him, the soldiers' weapons digging into their backs. Their hoods had been yanked back to reveal spider-like tattoos engraved on their bald heads.

"Orson!" Tirana raised her stunner.

Orson turned and saw her. A nasty smirk spread over his face.

A blazing heap of embers obscured her view, making a sure shot difficult. She stepped closer and flicked her stunner to its highest setting.

"I wouldn't try that," Orson called, raising his voice to be heard over the space separating them and the sobs from the crowd. "You're outnumbered, Captain. I suggest you stand down."

"You'll be court-martialed for this." Tirana aimed at him through the shimmer of heat. "I'll make sure of it."

Orson laughed in derision. "Who do you think authorized this?"

No. Oh, no. She stared at him in horror.

"You think they'd give something like this to you without a reason?" His voice rose in scorn. "You were in way over your pretty head from the start, Tirana."

Her shoulders jerked when he said her name. There was menace and rage in his voice, a desire to hurt. And in his eyes the lust to control, to make her submit, to destroy her.

"Come here, bitch." Orson's mouth thinned into a vicious twist. He lifted his laser rifle, aimed it, and took a step towards her.

Standing in the open was suicide, her stunner no match for a rifle. She wheeled and ran, stumbling over the bodies strewn in her path as Orson shouted her name. Laser fire sizzled past her ear. Up ahead, she saw Thurley's body beside the menhir. Beyond the standing stone lay the bare hill, where Orson would get a clear shot if she ran. She'd have to make her stand there.

She ran to it and jumped over Thurley's body. Someone caught her arm as she landed and dragged her behind the menhir. She smacked up against the solid chest of the man standing there. He gripped the top of her arms and held her still against his hard body.

Tirana gazed up into blazing green eyes. A shock of recognition shivered through her body. The man with the necklace stared at her, his beautiful face austere in the shadows of the tall stone, his mouth set in grim determination.

"Come with me."

She heard the low authoritative growl of his voice and shook her head, twisted out of his grip. Something screeched. The gargoyle jumped from foot to foot at her feet, his tiny, leathery hands pulling at the edge of her trousers.

Shock had her stepping back involuntarily, out into the line of fire. Something sizzled, slapped into her arm. There was a moment of excruciating pain before everything went black.

Loren caught her unconscious form as it fell, dragged her to safety behind the menhir. He sat the woman's body up against the stone. A jagged wound had torn open the skin at the top of her arm, pouring blood over his hands. The wound was not fatal, but the shock had knocked her cold. He ran his hands over the severe clothing that cupped every curve of her lush body, searching for other wounds, trying to ignore the surge of blood to his groin. Even unconscious she stirred his blood.

The devil is upon us! deLoren's voice screeched in his head, demanding his attention.

Loren turned and held his hand down for his familiar, waited as the tiny *hekarten* scampered up his arm to his shoulder. He winced as deLoren gripped a fistful of his hair and held on tight.

"Calm yourself," Loren murmured. "I know how to deal with him."

Loren stood and summoned his power. He felt deLoren whisper on the outskirts of his mind, felt a great push, and deLoren's energy joined his, pumping through Loren's body until it surged to his fingertips.

The one-eyed devil soldier ran around the menhir, his face contorted in triumph. He would have expected to see the woman unconscious on the ground and stopped short, startled, as he faced Loren instead.

His reflexes were good, Loren admitted, as the soldier raised his rifle with barely a pause and squeezed the trigger. But Loren's were better. Loren snapped up his hand and evoked a force field that shielded them from the burst of laser fire and sent the shots skidding to one side in a trail of blue sparks.

The soldier's mouth gaped open, then fury washed over him at having been thwarted. Instead of shooting again, he was smart enough to pull out a club clipped to his belt and came at Loren shouting, the club swinging over his head.

A moment later, his thickset body shot back in the air, propelled by the force of the *powrbal* Loren threw at him. The ball of blue energy smashed the soldier hard to the ground, crackling over his body in a thin sheet before it dissipated. The devil soldier groaned, attempted to move and fell back. Loren wasted no time. He crouched over the woman's body, lifting her limp form over his free shoulder while deLoren balanced on the other. With both burdens weighing him down, he ran down the hill and slipped into the forest.

GOCENTACION DE LA CONTRACTION DEL CONTRACTION DE LA CONTRACTION DE

Tirana came around with a start, crying out at the pain shooting along her left arm. Her hand flew to touch her shoulder and instead touched the warm skin of the hand resting there. Snatching her hand away at the unexpected contact, she opened her eyes and met a brilliant green gaze.

"Have no fear." His voice soothed her. "You are safe."

She was lying against a tree trunk in a small clearing in the forest. The gorgeous man knelt beside her, studying her in a way that made her breath catch in her throat. He was even more beautiful up close, with fine, molded lips and a straight patrician nose that drew her admiration, though that almost feminine perfection was tempered by the sprinkle of dark stubble over his jaw and the thick brows drawn close over startling emerald eyes. But it was the pressure of his hand over the wound that sent shivers along her body from the heat radiating at his palm.

"You were wounded, I am stopping the flow of blood," he said before she could formulate the question.

The arm of her uniform and her left side were covered in slick blood, as was the man's tunic over his right shoulder. Her stomach lurched, sickened by the sight of blood spattering their clothes. She realized she would be dead now if this man hadn't taken her away from the fighting at the stone circle. She would have confronted Orson, but with his

superior strength and Special Forces training he would destroy her in one-to-one combat.

Something chattered across the clearing. She swung her head around, saw the little gargoyle sitting on a fallen tree trunk pulling the skin off the soft fruit held between his small hands, the same fruit which hung ripe and purple from a nearby bush. He revealed a flash of tiny sharp teeth before he bit into the fruit and sucked at the juicy insides.

"deLoren says we should leave." The man's breath caressed her ear.

"You understand him?" Tirana turned her gaze back to him in surprise.

"deLoren and I mindspeak." He watched her reaction to this news.

Telepathic communication. She absorbed the fact with some excitement. There were telepaths on other worlds but interspecies telepathy was almost unheard of. She turned back to study the little creature in fascinated curiosity as it pulled out the seeds from the center of the oval-shaped fruit and threw them over his shoulder. The leathery texture of his dappled brown skin set deep wrinkles at the joints of spindle-thin arms and legs, and his chunky body boasted tiny brown nipples and no genitalia that she could see. A large head balanced on a stick-like neck, distinguished by pointed ears, a wide mouth, bulging eyes and two round holes above his mouth serving as nostrils.

"deloren. Is that his name?"

"deLoren, *hekarten* to Loren." The man's tone flowed with the smoothness of formality.

"Loren?"

"I am Loren."

She swiveled her head back to look at him. This close to her, his lips were only inches away. He'd been observing her while she watched deLoren, studying her with the same intensity. She gazed at his generous

mouth and wondered what it would feel like to be kissed by him. Loren's lips twitched into a smile, and a slow blush crept over her cheeks as she realized he knew exactly what she'd been thinking.

"Your name?"

"W-what?" She wondered why this man's—Loren's—proximity set her nerves to jangling. A prickly heat spread over her body, and her nostrils flared at the scent of his earthy masculinity that had her nipples tightening. "Tirana."

"Tirana." Her name rolled around his mouth as though savoring a rare delicacy. "I am pleased to meet you, Tirana." His lips lowered and brushed hers.

Tirana's eyes widened in shock. She'd read about this custom in ancient societies on Terra, where people greeted each other with a kiss—a custom she'd always found disturbing in its over-familiarity. But her shock sprang more from the sudden electricity that sizzled between them. The touch of his lips branded her with their soft touch.

She stared at him as he pulled back from the kiss. Loren's hand cupped her face, his gaze traveling over her features as though imprinting it to memory. Her stomach lurched with the sudden urge to feel his mouth on hers, and she licked her dry lips, her heart battering against her ribs.

The color of his eyes darkened with unabashed lust as he watched the flick of her tongue. Then he lowered his mouth to hers in a passionfilled assault that had nothing to do with the first gentle greeting.

Sparks of pure desire shot over her body as his tongue parted her lips to explore the warm cavity. Swept up in the sensation of his mouth plundering hers, she met his assault fiercely. She arched against him when the hand at her face lowered to curve around her breast, his thumb flicking at the taut nipple straining at the comms suit.

A fear-filled screech from deLoren had Loren breaking away, wincing.

"What's wrong?" Her bruised lips ached for Loren to continue his devastating exploration.

"The devil soldier is near." Eyes glazed with unabated lust, his gaze swept over her. "We must go."

She felt a surge of disappointment. As if on cue, they heard a thrashing in the undergrowth somewhere behind them. deLoren screeched and scrambled off the tree trunk. Bouncing across the clearing, the small creature launched himself from the ground to Loren's shoulder. deLoren jerked in desperation at Loren's long hair.

Loren pulled Tirana up with him as he rose to his feet. She winced, expecting to experience pain at her arm. Instead, there was only a vague discomfort. She eased her arm up and around and shot Loren a look of surprise.

But Loren had turned away and watched the surrounding undergrowth with a frown. Suddenly the fruit-laden bush deLoren had been eating from burst into flame. deLoren screamed and clasped his thin arms in panic about Loren's head.

Loren pried deLoren off and tucked him under his arm. Grabbing Tirana's hand, he turned and ran.

Tirana steeled herself for a long sprint through the forest, yet they had barely crossed the clearing when Loren skirted an outcrop of rocks behind the line of trees. She stumbled as the thick mulch of the forest gave way to pebbled dirt. Loren pulled her around a boulder leaning like a sentinel guarding the rocky mound.

Loren bent to squeeze in the narrow space between the rocks leading to a dark hole gaping beyond.

Tirana stopped. "Where are you going?"

"This passage leads to Laliata." Loren tugged at her hand.

"No." She didn't know what that meant, but there were other priorities. As much as she longed to follow him, craved the taste of his mouth, she'd come here on a mission and needed to fulfill it. "I have to get back to my shuttle so I can radio for help—"

"Tirana!" Orson's rage-filled voice shattered the quiet of the forest.

Tirana froze.

"I know you can hear me, you and that fucking alien freak."

Tirana stared at Loren. His face had hardened into an austere mask. He set deLoren on the ground and the *hekarten* scrambled between his legs and disappeared into the dark void between the rocks.

"Come out, you bitch." The sound of snapping branches nearby indicated he was close. "Or I'll fry you both."

Loren's gaze raked over her with hot possession before his expression transformed into one of cold determination. He pushed Tirana behind him, shielding her, then picked up a couple of large round pebbles at his feet and weighed them in his hands.

He meant to protect her, Tirana thought in wonder. He barely knew her and he was going to pit himself against Orson's laser fire with a couple of stones. He would put his life on the line for her—while safety lay only a few feet away down the hole deLoren had disappeared into. It was madness.

She pulled at his arm. "Let's go."

Loren frowned. "Hide behind me. I will get him as he—"

"No." She drew him around, tugged urgently at his arm. "Take me to La-latita?"

"Laliata." His mouth quirked at her mispronunciation.

A volley of laser fire scorched the edge of the boulder, sending a shower of crumbling rock over them. Loren moved to cover her, his arms wrapping around her. Pressed against his chest, she breathed in the heady scent of his maleness. Their eyes met and his filled with a hungry possessiveness that had a blast of heat pooling between her legs.

Fragments of rock rained on them from the top of the boulder. Orson was getting closer.

With a last hungry look, Loren caught her hand and dragged her after him through the dark hole between the rocks.

Chapter Three

Loren found it hard to run with his stiff member rising hard between his legs. He wanted nothing more than to throw Tirana down and ravish her. That and beat the devil soldier to a pulp for his threats. He'd been too lenient with him back at the Sacred Circle and he would not make that mistake again. If not for his own sake, then for Tirana's. He knew the soldier wanted her, but the thought of that monster's hands on her lush body sent a cold fury sweeping over him.

Tirana was his.

He'd known that the moment his lips had met hers. A fire had coursed through his veins then, a deep need that had stiffened his staff with urgent force. He knew she would be his mate. Had known, if the truth was told, when deLoren had pointed her out at the Circle, watching them like a beautiful, otherworldly apparition.

He'd given quick praise to Lalith that the soldiers had saved him from the judgment of the Priests—a judgment that would have had him sacrificed in the pyre together with deLoren. It had given him a chance to work himself free of the rope binding his wrists and make his escape with the surging crowd.

His first thought had been to find her. deLoren had shouted in his ear, frantic to get away, but Loren had gone to look behind the Sacred Stones, cursing when he realized she'd disappeared. Then she'd found him. A sure sign she was meant to be his.

His hand tightened over hers.

The entrance to the underground passage had been left far behind before he slowed. They were deep in the bowels of Samhain, winding their way along slick, slime-covered walls wet with the rain filtering through the earth and rocks above. He was sure the devil soldier would never venture this far after them. If he tried, he would be driven out by the *ba-hekarten*. It had happened to more than one of the Priests and their followers when, in the frenzy of their hatred, they had organized hunting parties to root them out.

For this was the domain of the True People.

"What's that noise?" Loren heard the fear in Tirana's voice.

This deep down, the passages were lit by the cold glow of the phosphorescent lichen clinging to the walls. Apart from the steady drip-drip-drip of filtering water, he could hear the faint shuffles of the *bahekarten* behind them. They could sense Tirana and were drawn by the ripeness of her life-force.

"The ba-hekarten live here. Don't be afraid. They won't harm you."

"Ba-hekarten?" She grasped his hand tightly, her voice sounding nervous. "Isn't that what deLoren is?"

"deLoren is hekarten."

"I don't understand."

He remembered she was an offworlder, that what seemed natural and familiar to him was strange and alien to her. "Hekarten have chosen from the True People. Ba-hekarten are still searching."

"What are they searching for?"

"Their host."

She does not understand. deLoren's impatient voice came into his mind. Loren could sense him in the passage somewhere ahead, surefooted in his home ground. The forest scared him, and he would throw

up a stink whenever Loren went overground. His fear had proved justified when they had been captured by the Priests.

Why don't you show her the hekarten-jal? That might make her understand. deLoren's tone was openly sly.

There's no need for us to follow that route to Laliata. Loren frowned.

You need to mate, and so do I. Our time is due. Loren could almost feel the hekarten's hunger, mirroring his own.

No, I won't force it on her. But his tumescent cock had stiffened involuntarily at the thought.

So let her decide. And deLoren capered off into the darkness.

GOCENO SONO

Tirana was afraid of the dark. It was a weakness she was loathe to admit, even to herself. When the rocky passageway had begun to lighten, she'd breathed a sigh of relief. But the fear had returned when she realized they were being followed. Not by Orson, whom she hoped they'd left behind in the forest, but by the shuffle of tiny feet.

Hekarten and ba-hekarten. Loren's explanation had only left her more confused. She had too many questions that needed answering, all of them jumbled about in her head. One of them lay uppermost.

Why had Orson called him an alien freak?

Loren was human, a descendent of Lalith's People, of that she was sure. Yet deLoren was undoubtedly a creature native to Samhain. His fierce attachment to Loren seemed unnatural. The robed men at the stone circle had called deLoren his "familiar". In Terran mythology, only black witches had familiars.

Adherents to the New Wiccan religion were sprinkled in small pockets in planets all over the galaxy, but Lalith's People had been a breakaway cult, more rigid in their religious beliefs, holding the mystical Lalith as True Goddess over the numerous deities of other wiccans. A small colony on an alien planet separated from the rest of the UA for over a hundred and fifty years was bound to develop in unique ways. Already she could see two strata—the robed priests with the frightened crowd of followers, and the True People with the *hekarten*. All of this she could extrapolate from what she had witnessed, using logic to slot the pieces together.

It was Loren who remained the greatest mystery. She trusted him, trusted that the *ba-hekarten* meant no harm although she sensed them everywhere, scurrying on the edges of her vision like frightened rats. It was getting to know more about Loren—*everything* about Loren—that made her swallow her fear and keep to his side.

Her hand was still clasped in his although she had to walk behind him in the narrow passageway that glittered from the lichen clinging to the glistening rock. His dark head almost brushed the ceiling, his broad shoulders the edges of the wall. She sensed a deep power in him, a power that called to her wildly, heated her whenever she met those amazing emerald eyes.

Her gaze lingered over his tight butt, wondering how it would feel cupped in her hands. At the forest clearing she'd felt the hard length of his member against her body through the material of his trousers, had shivered with desire at the thought of easing it free and holding it warm in her palm. Feelings she had rarely, if ever, experienced on first meeting a man. She just wasn't built that way.

Or maybe she was, and it needed the right man to unleash it.

Loren stopped and she bumped against him, caught in her erotic musings. The passageway had opened wider and they were at a junction that split into separate tunnels. deLoren crouched by the rock wall separating the entrance to the tunnels, staring intently at Loren.

"I would like to show you something." The strange, flat tone of Loren's voice instantly aroused her curiosity. "If we go this way—" he pointed to a passage to their right "—we go straight to Laliata."

At his pause, she glanced at the dark opening of the passage to their left. "And that way?"

"To the hekarten-jal."

The very blandness of his voice indicated this was where he wanted her to go. "What is it?"

"A place sacred to the True People."

Their gazes locked. He wanted her. And she wanted him.

"Are you sure you want to show me this sacred place?" She needed to know if she could trust him.

"If you choose to, yes."

Tirana had the giddy feeling she was on the brink of a life-changing decision. A decision Loren was leaving entirely in her hands.

She took a deep breath and followed her instincts. "Then yes."

deLoren broke the silence with a gleeful chattering and shot off into the tunnel to the left.

Loren smiled, tightened his hold on her hand, and followed him.

They walked for what seemed an hour before the passageway began to widen. The lichen covering the walls took on a warmer, pinkish glow, heating the air until the sweat began to trickle down Tirana's neck and into the back of her comms suit.

Finally, a blast of warm air hit her in the face, damp and earthy. The passage opened into a huge cavern, with the floor lost in the darkness far beneath. Stalactites aimed down like pointed spears from the ceiling, stalagmites rose like twisted columns to greet them, both covered in glittering pink lichen. She gazed in awe at the shapes of strange forms

twisted in fanciful displays. From somewhere up ahead came the steady drip-drip of water.

They picked their way along a narrow rocky path sweeping along the side of the cavern, leading down towards the bottom of the cave. Tirana heard the scrabble of feet and once or twice caught tiny blinking eyes watching them from behind twisted rock formations before the creatures disappeared with a flourish of warm air.

The atmosphere became warmer and more humid as they went deeper into the cave. The comms suit became sticky with her sweat-slickened skin. Finally, the rock beneath her feet turned to sand and leveled out. A splashing rumble of water came from up ahead, swathed in darkness. She looked up, saw stalactites twisting around the sides of the cave, curving like the giant flutes of a cathedral organ.

Loren took her along a well-worn path to the center of the cavern. A tall waterfall fell from an aperture halfway up the wall of the cave. The gushing water poured onto a ledge and bounced off the edge in a stream that danced and played over rocks in bright sparks before plunging into a small rock pool below.

Tirana marveled at the beauty of the sparkling curtain of water and the clear pool at her feet. "Where does all the water go?"

"There is an underground stream that becomes a river near Laliata."

"What is this place? It's so beautiful. All of it." She swept her hands about the cave.

"A place of meditation and ablution for the True People." He gazed at her with a fixed intensity. "When we are of age, we use this place for our prayers, and the pool for purification before entering the *hekarten-jal*."

A feeling of unease gnawed at her gut. "If this is your sacred place, perhaps I shouldn't be here. Loren, I'm an offworlder. I don't have a religion, I don't believe in a god or a goddess. You believe in something that I can never believe in. You should know that."

Loren nodded, his gaze never leaving her own. His eyes glowed here, Tirana thought in alarm, with a phosphorescent brilliance not quite human.

"I expect nothing from you." A strong emotion crossed over his features, and he qualified it by saying, "Nothing you would not choose freely."

Drawn into the brilliance of his gaze, Tirana felt her body heat at the meaning behind his words. He wanted her, but it would be her choice.

She pulled down the zipper at the neck of the comms suit to ease the warmth flushing her face. Loren's burning gaze followed the slide of the zipper before he lowered his hands over hers and teased her fingers free of the tag. She held her breath as he eased down the zipper, exposing the rounded swell between her generous breasts.

"You are very hot." His fingers traced over the damp skin at the curving top of her breasts, watching her mouth. "And we are both very dirty after the ordeal at the Sacred Circle."

Shivering at his touch, Tirana glanced with longing at the waterfall and the pool at their feet. She slanted her head and smiled up at him. "Are you trying to seduce me with a swim?"

His eyes laughed down at her. "Perhaps."

She stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest. "You first."

Loren raised an eyebrow at her challenging stance and grinned. He drew the necklace of blue stones over his head and dropped it on the sand between them, quickly followed by his tunic. Tirana caught her breath at the play of muscles over his shoulders and arms. His solid chest was covered by fine dark hair arrowing over well-defined abdominal muscles to the edge of trousers. Kicking off his soft boots, Loren planted

well-formed feet in the sand as he untied the leather belt knotted at his waist. He watched her reaction as he slowly removed the belt and let the trousers slide over his hips and pool at his feet.

For a beat she stared into his eyes, noted the playful challenge in them, before she made herself look at him. His legs were long and lean, rising to muscular thighs. Between them, from the flare of dark hair at his groin, his staff rose hard and long, tipped with a large, smooth head.

A magnificent specimen, Tirana thought as her breath caught. And totally human.

A small smile teased the corners of his lips. She realized she was staring a little too hard. Not that he seemed to mind as he was evidently proud of his physique—with good cause.

"And you?"

When she had issued the challenge, she hadn't thought ahead to the fact that it would be her turn to undress before him. A flush of embarrassment crept over her cheeks. Tirana reminded herself brusquely that she had nothing to be ashamed of, that she could be just as proud of her body as Loren was of his.

Smiling at him coolly, she lowered the zipper of her comms suit to her midriff, shrugged off the shoulders and wiggled the tight rubber over her hips. Her naked breasts swung as she bent to remove her boots—which she should definitely have taken off first—before peeling off each leg. Her face was red as she straightened, wearing just a tiny pair of panties snug against her hips.

Loren's expression heated as his gaze ran over her breasts, yet he still waited expectantly. Sighing inwardly, she slipped off the panties, threw them over the pile of clothes and faced him. He considered the trim thatch of hair between her thighs before his gaze moved back to her breasts in a way that had her nipples hardening. A long leisurely look that took its cue from her own careful study of his assets.

Smiling, Loren stepped forward and took her hand. She trembled at the warmth of his palm sliding over hers, yet he only pulled her after him, skirted the edge of the pool and went to the waterfall. A mound of rocks rose to the ledge where the stream poured before bouncing off into the pool below. A narrow set of stairs had been cut into the rocks. Tirana followed Loren as he climbed them—trying hard not to gaze at the tight muscles of his butt at face level, but nevertheless taking time to admire them—before they came out onto the ledge.

Tirana saw deLoren sitting on a boulder beyond the curtain of water. Beside him sat a tiny furry creature with large, soulful eyes and pointed ears. It looked like a cross between a small monkey and a rabbit. Was this one of the *ba-hekarten*? Not as fear-some as she had imagined, even though both creatures observed her with an unnerving intensity.

Loren pulled her under the waterfall. Tirana gasped as the blast of freezing water poured over her head and shoulders. Raising her face to the pounding water, she sighed as the grit and sweat washed away.

Loren touched her arm and she opened her eyes. He rubbed the dried blood off her arm, and she noticed with shock that the wound from Orson's laser fire had disappeared. As she turned to ask how he had healed the wound, Loren caught her face in his hands and crushed his mouth to hers.

She moaned beneath the onslaught of his tongue as it pried into her mouth and explored the moist interior. Her legs weakened and she clung to his broad shoulders, caressing the firm muscles, reveling in the slick feel of his skin. Loren lowered his hands over her breasts, cupping them, before sweeping to the small of her back. He pressed her to him, hip to

hip. Caught between them, the head of his cock nestled comfortably at her belly button, hot and hard with need.

Desperate to feel his butt in her hands, she wriggled her arms between his until her hands closed over the firm rise of muscle. His mouth left hers to trail over her jaw and down to nibble at the tender spot where neck met shoulder, until he lowered his hot mouth over one taut nipple.

Tirana arched back at the explosion of need that gushed between her legs, sending a wanton heat shooting over her body. She pressed her groin to Loren's as he tongued her nipple while a thumb circled the other. As his teeth pulled at the tight nub in his mouth, his finger rubbed the other nipple between his fingers until her legs weakened with the restless heat of desire that threatened to engulf her.

Loren groaned in frustration as she extricated herself from his embrace and stepped back. His eyes glowed through his wet hair, his chest rising rapidly with his excited breath. The waterfall pounded over his lean body. He was beautiful, raw and untamed.

The intensity of her feelings for him frightened her. The hunger coursing through her veins pulled at her as much as the fear deep in her gut. Fear of the urge burning inside her to join with him forever.

"Tirana." He reached for her.

She turned to face the pool and dove head-first off the platform into the depths below.

Chapter Four

Tirana was dragged down into a vortex of cold water, spun and twisted, dragged downwards to the bottom of the pool. Her chest burned as she expelled her last breath and a freezing cold wrapped itself around her. She flailed her arms, mouth open in a silent scream, trying to hold on to anything that would keep her from the relentless pull of the current.

Something hard gripped her wrist, hauled her up through the water. She broke the surface with a desperate gasp, drawing the air deep into her burning lungs. An arm caught her around the chest as she gulped in air, drew her to the edge of the pool, pulled her out. On all fours, she vomited a lungful of water into the sand as Loren smoothed back her hair.

She spluttered, wiping water from her face, looked up at him. "Thank you."

"If I had known you found me so distasteful you would rather risk death than my arms, we could have bathed safely in the pool."

Tirana flinched at the coldness of his tone, the edge of anger on every careful word. She had meant to get away from the intensity of her own feelings, had almost killed herself by that childish and foolish reflex. And she had hurt him, when he had done nothing. Nothing but desire her.

"I'm sorry." She touched his arm. He drew away, the look in his eyes distant and dismissing, and rose to his feet.

"We'll go to Laliata now." He reached for her comms suit from the pile of clothing, threw it so it landed beside her in the sand.

"No." Panic made her voice harsh as she stumbled to her feet and faced him. He ignored her, crouching as he gathered up his boots and sifted through the pile for his trousers. "You haven't shown me the hekarten-jal yet."

"There will be no *hekarten-jal*." Loren lifted his trousers and shook off the sand.

A piercing scream filled the cave. She saw deLoren hopping from foot to foot in a dance of anger on the rocks above the waterfall. Loren winced. Then his face set hard as he flicked a hand at deLoren. The creature toppled backwards onto the rock.

"Loren!" Tirana stared at him in shock. Somehow Loren had made deLoren fall, she was sure of it. A lash of anger that should have been directed at her.

In a temper, she tore the trousers from his grasp. "I said I'm sorry. What more do you want?"

"My clothes." His face was impassive, eyes hooded.

Furious, she cupped the back of his neck and dragged his head down to her. Her lips burrowed into his cold mouth, prodded at an unresponsive tongue. She growled in frustration, catching his fleshy lower lip in her teeth, pulling and nipping. She glared at him, saw the flash of anger in his eyes, lowered both hands and gripped his cock. It jumped to stiff attention in her grasp.

Loren shoved her back. Then his hand clamped over her wrist. He turned on his heel, storming off into the darkness at the far side of the pool.

"Loren!" Her feet skidded in the sand as she tried to tug her arm free from his iron grip. Darkness enveloped them, and a moment later they were in another warm passage. Here the rock glowed red around them. There was a low round entrance at the end, so small Loren had to bend his head to enter. She barely had time to duck under the rock as he dragged her after him

"Here!" Loren pushed her into the cave before him.

She stumbled and fell. Her hands landed on a soft, cushiony substance the texture of cotton candy. A soft cloud of fibers stretched over the floor of a small cave, warm and snug like a cocoon. Or the pulsing red insides of a womb, for the walls were covered in glittering red lichen.

Loren fell to his knees behind her, hooked her legs apart, and slipped his stiff member between her thighs, resting the hard shaft on the slit of her sex. He hauled her up and slid his hands around to cup her breasts, squeezing them. She gasped at the pleasure/pain as Loren lowered his mouth to her ear.

"This is the *hekarten-jal*," he growled, his hot breath fanning her face.
"The mating place."

Heat spurted at her core as he said the words. *Mating*. This was what he'd wanted all along. What *she'd* wanted since she'd set eyes on him back at the stone circle but had been too cowardly to even admit to herself. Until now.

One of his hands swept over her midriff, burrowed between her thighs, found the hot, pulsing nub. She arched back against him at the first flick of his finger, and he caught her head and dragged it around so he could crush her mouth beneath his. His tongue devastated her, plundered and ravished, even as his fingers rubbed over the slick flesh of her throbbing clit. His cock jerked between her thighs as the blood pumped to his extremities, and he moved his hips to slide it back and forth between the moist folds of her sex.

His mouth left hers, his breathing harsh, and he bent her forward and worked his hand between them to position his cock at the entrance to her vagina. She vibrated with the need to have him fill her, held her breath in excited anticipation as she felt the nudge of his thick head pushing at her tight entrance.

Loren suddenly stilled and pulled away. Her juices slid out, dripped over the inside of her thighs. She felt the desolate thud of abandonment clenching at her stomach as his warm body left hers. Slowly, she turned to face him, saw him crouching back on his heels.

A war of emotions—regret, desire—swept over his features. "I'm sorry." He covered his eyes. "I cannot take you this way."

"Why can't you?" She was no longer afraid to reveal the raw need in her voice. She dragged his hands away from his face so he could see the truth in her eyes. "I want you, Loren. What I did back there—when I jumped—that was fear. Not fear of you, but fear for what I felt for you."

His eyes blazed with fierce hope before the fire in them banked. He shook his head. "Tirana, I have not been honest with you."

"About the *hekarten-jal*?" She smiled. "Because you brought me here to mate?"

"It will not be a simple mating." His beautiful eyes were full of guilt. "You said you didn't believe in gods or goddesses. That you believed in nothing. But if we mate here, you will become *si-heketarten*."

She shrugged helplessly. "I don't understand that word."

"Touched by magic." He paused for a beat. "As are all the True People."

"Magic?"

He nodded, held out his hand. She saw a blue flame lick over the palm, gather itself into a ball of light, pulsing and spinning. When it had grown to the size of a small orange, Loren threw it in the air. It shattered against the low ceiling and spilled over them in a shower of rainbow sparks. Tirana felt the prickles where sparks touched her wet skin.

Magic. He could communicate telepathically with deLoren, he could perform magic—or manipulate energy so that it seemed like magic. And it seemed that mating with him would allow her to do the same. There were mysteries here that would take a long time to unravel. For starters, she doubted that magic could be sexually transmitted.

"Tell me about what was happening in the stone circle when I first saw you," she asked softly, looking at his empty palm. His fingers clenched in a fist.

"The Priests captured deLoren and I. The True People are heretics to them, to be sacrificed to their cruel goddess, the one they call Lalith and is not Lalith."

"What were you doing there, risking capture?"

"The *ba-hekarten* told us you had come. I was searching for you, to bring you back to join the others in Laliata."

"Others?"

"Those who came from the skies before."

He could only mean the previous SEU scouting missions. Tirana experienced the heady sense accomplishment as the mystery unraveled. "They're in Laliata? They're all alive?"

"Only those who chose to be si-heketarten."

Joy gripped her. "I'll take them back with me on the shuttle. The SEU needs to know they're alive."

Loren frowned. "They cannot leave."

"Of course they can. We'll find a way to get past Orson and his men—

"They are True People now." His tone was patient.

"If they've converted, which isn't surprising after all this time, they can safely practice their religion anywhere in the galaxy."

"You don't understand. The True People can never leave Samhain. Your friends can never go back. They chose to be touched by magic, to be one of the True People. They said others would come and that we must find you before the Priests did. This is true, Tirana."

"Yes but—"

The impatient flash of anger in his eyes stopped her further arguments. "Look where you are, Tirana."

She stared at him without comprehending. "I'm in a cave."

"No. You're in the hekarten-jal."

She gazed around her. The walls weren't rock, she realized, but something soft and living, pulsating with heat. And the fibers beneath her, they were part of it, the soft hair of a living creature.

"What is this place?" she whispered.

"The soul of Samhain. Lalith's womb."

Tirana felt the *hekarten-jal* enveloping her in its pulsing warmth, infusing her with a sense of safety and acceptance. Her heart beat fast, her breath felt shallow and labored.

"The hekarten-jal wants you, Tirana. As I want you."

Her body quivered at the heat in his voice. "I don't—"

"You can go back to the Priests, or you can join the True People. There is no other choice."

She shook her head. "You asked me to choose at the junction, to go to Laliata or come here. I could have chosen Laliata."

Loren nodded. "And there you would be asked to make the choice again. The Priests or the True People." His voice deepened as his eyes grew in brilliance. "I brought you here for mating but have no doubt that, with me or alone, here you would eventually come."

Tirana's thoughts twisted and spun, verged on the edge of control, tumbled over. And yet...and yet a slow excitement was building within her, insinuating itself in her mind, pressing against her body. She knew she was on the brink, on the precipice of something that would change her life in unimaginable ways. Loren was telling her she had no choice, yet he was asking her to make that choice, now, with him.

The key to it was Loren, whom her body ached for, whose eyes blazed for her, whose mouth she would never forget. Would never want to forget.

He sat quietly, observing her. And held out his hand, silently asking her to take it. To take him.

She made her choice—and slipped her hand into his, palm against palm.

Loren closed his fingers over her hand and came to kneel before her on the soft fibrous mattress of the *hekarten-jal*. His hands cupped her face, lifted it, and he rested his lips on hers. The kiss was sweet and gentle, a soft exploration, a token of love. It sent a shiver through her, and she trembled with the force of it. She loved him.

He murmured against her lips, lifted his mouth to kiss her nose, her eyelids, her forehead, before swooping down on her mouth again. She felt his passion, his demanding need for possession, like a bolt through her center that had her clutching at his shoulders.

He lowered her back, pressing himself along the length of her body until she was cushioned deep into the soft, thick fibers. Loren's hands swept over her tender breasts, and his mouth followed, teeth nibbling at the taut nipples that still ached from his earlier assault. Tirana felt the hardness of his staff lying hard against her sex, rubbing across the slickness of her exposed clit. Loren eased his fingers between them, circled fingertips over the engorged nub, dipped into the wetness between

her legs, and circled some more until her legs fell open in the ache to accept him.

He shifted, his lips lifting from her breast, his gaze meeting hers. She drowned in the brilliant green of his eyes as his cock nudged at her entrance again. This time, he shafted her strong and sudden, burying himself inside her. She cried out at the burst of pain and pleasure, heard him murmuring endearments as his lips slid over the moistness of hers. When she settled, he began to move with a slow rhythm, pulling back and then penetrating her again and again, until she was meeting him thrust for thrust, arching her hips to meet the pistoning of his. Tirana could feel the unfurling at her core, the rise of her orgasm. Loren's eyes were blazing into hers, his buttocks clenched beneath her squeezing hands as she locked her legs around his waist.

He stopped, his breathing ragged, and lifted her as he sat back on his heels, drawing her with him, her legs clenched around his waist. He was buried deep inside her, her breasts pressed against his chest. She grabbed a handful of his hair and kissed him. He moaned beneath her devouring mouth, and she rode him hard and fast, driving him deeper and deeper, until he stiffened. She felt the spasm of his hard shaft throbbing inside her, and her own orgasm tore through her body. She cried out, arched back, as the waves of pleasure shot over her.

Something soft dropped to her neck, clung, and stung her hard between the shoulder blades. She screamed, twisted to take it off—and a sensation of pure ecstasy shot through her. Colors burst beneath her eyelids, shattered like crystals, sent her flying and floating until she was caught up on a breeze of color. A warm gust pushed into her mind, trickled through her consciousness, sent a pulse of energy to every extremity until every cell of her body vibrated. It seemed to go on forever, ebbing and flowing, until it subsided like the pulling back of the tide.

Tirana opened her eyes and found herself clinging to Loren, her arms wrapped around his neck. She felt something slide over her back and drop into the fibers behind her. Loren's gaze met hers, and he swept a wet strand of hair from her sweat-slicked face and kissed her.

She eased herself off him and, heart beating fast, turned to look behind her.

The small, soft creature that had been with deLoren at the pool lay huddled on the fibers, curled into a ball. Tirana recognized it. Knew it. No, *her*. It was the sighing breeze in her mind.

Her voice soft, she called to it. "deTirana."

Her *hekarten* unfurled itself and blinked at her, eyes groggy, tiny ears twitching.

Hello. The voice swept weak and gentle over her mind.

"Hello." Tirana smiled.

Chapter Five

Tirana didn't know how long they spent in the *hekarten-jal*, but it felt like days. Her tentative attempt to communicate with her *hekarten*, deTirana, was abandoned as the creature drifted off to sleep. Soon she and Loren followed, wrapped in each other's arms, and when they woke Tirana found only a soft pelt beside them. deTirana's fur.

"She is becoming *hekarten*." Loren soothed her fears. "She will become like deLoren. Don't worry, deLoren is with her. They will return."

They made love again, taking each other with a fierce desire, a heat that smoldered at her molten core. She couldn't get enough of him, of his touch worshipping her body, of glorying in the splendor of his. She came time and time again, crying out his name, as he drove himself into her. When they were both sated, embraced by the *hekarten-jal*, they slept again.



Wake.

Tirana opened her eyes at the soft sigh in her mind. deTirana's presence was close, timid and afraid. Loren curled in sleep at her side, his warm hand clasping her breast.

She stretched, feeling extraordinarily relaxed and fulfilled. There was a warmth at her center that had never been there before, not just contentment but...power. As though a restless ball of energy had wound itself around the base of her spine, spinning, ready to be released.

Sliding from under Loren's grasp, Tirana padded out of the *hekarten-jal* into the great cavern.

Here. She looked about the cavern for deTirana and saw her sitting on the steps leading to the waterfall.

The small creature had transformed into the spitting image of deLoren, who sat at her side, grinning. His eyes twinkled in glee as he bit into the round object in his hands, one from the pile of fruit at their feet. Tirana felt her stomach rumble with hunger.

She took one of the oblong pieces of dark fruit and bit into the pulp. It was sweet and delicious. deTirana observed her with sombre curiosity and Tirana studied her in turn. The *hekarten* was smaller than deLoren, with tufts of hair on the tips of her tiny ears, softer eyes and a smaller mouth. A feminine version of Loren's *hekarten*.

Sitting beside them, she ate her fill of fruit. At her last mouthful, deLoren and deTirana scampered away into the darkness. Her stomach full, juice covering her chin and chest, Tirana climbed the steps to the ledge and stepped into the pounding curtain of water.

She could never go back, she knew that. In the *hekarten-jal*, she and deTirana had become one. Leaving Samhain would mean the death of the *hekarten*, and her own death. She belonged here now, on this strange world. Belonged to Loren—as he belonged to her.

She closed her eyes, moved out of the waterfall, brushing back her wet hair as she remembered Loren's hard body taking hers. She'd wake him, let him know how much she wanted him, and—

"Very nice."

Tirana's eyes snapped open in shock. Orson leered at her, his yellow teeth exposed in a snarling grin. Dried blood had pooled in his scarred eye socket from the scrapes across his face—or what she could see of them under the smears of dirt. A large backpack was slung over his shoulders. He must have gone back for that before he'd come looking for her. Had taken the time to prepare. And she understood that his obsession with having her, destroying her, knew no end.

He jabbed the muzzle of his weapon between her breasts, let it trail down over her midriff to her belly. Lowered. She jerked away. He snatched her arm and yanked her, dragged her down the stairs after him. She slipped, cried out in pain as her ankle scraped against stone. He threw her like a rag-doll on the sand.

She turned to crawl but he was on her in a second, his knee planted between her thighs, forcing them apart. He struck her across the face with the back of his hand, a blow that sent her eyes rolling back into her head in agony.

"Thought you'd get away, did you? Bitch." She heard him as she struggled up from the blackness, opened her bruised eyes to see him throw the rifle and the backpack to one side. He wrapped a hand around her neck, pressing down hard till she gasped for breath.

"I'm going to enjoy tearing you apart." His rank breath rolled over her face. She felt him fumbling at his trousers, jerked against him in panic, choked as he pushed his thumb into her windpipe.

His cock pressed against her thigh and he groped between her legs. Her eyes widened in horror as he pushed himself at the entrance to her vagina, ramming against the tight constriction of her muscles denying him passage.

"Lemme in you fucking wh—"

Suddenly he was off her. Gasping, she gulped in a lungful of air. She heard blows, the sick thud of flesh against flesh, a moan of pain. Turning in the sand, she saw Loren leaning over Orson's prone body, the lapel of

his army jacket twisted in one fist. Loren's expression was contorted with fury as he pounded and pounded at Orson's face.

Tirana struggled to her feet, hobbled over to Loren, dragged at his shoulder. "Stop it! You'll kill him."

Smashing his fist into Orson's face one last time, Loren threw the soldier to the ground in disgust. The soldier's face was a sickening, bleeding pulp of raw flesh. But he breathed, moaned softly with pain.

"Loren," she whispered.

Loren turned and caught her as she fell. She savored the strength of his arms, the sanctuary of them. There was a stricken look in his eyes, the glitter of tears, as he touched her face.

She tried to assure him. "He didn't—he didn't—"

"Sshhh. It doesn't matter. You're still here. Still here." He clasped her close to his chest, lowered his head to brush his lips gently against hers.

They heard Orson moan and twist on the sand. Tirana pulled away as she glimpsed Orson reaching for the rifle. She aimed a kick that sent it skittering over the edge of the pool to fall into the water with a plop. Loren turned to crouch, ready to spring at him.

Orson crawled back over the sand, his one eye a slit between slices of raw flesh. "Get away from me!" he screamed at Loren. "Don't touch me."

He caught the strap of the backpack and dragged it with him, scrabbling at the fastening until its contents spilled on the sand. Clothing, food and a square black box with cables attached. A long-range transmitter.

Tirana burned with sudden hope as she saw the transmitter. Orson threw the delicate instrument carelessly to one side, and she felt a hot wave of anger sweep over her. A ball of energy formed at her core, rose through chest and shoulders, shot over arms and out through her hands—which she had pointed at Orson. It hit him square in the chest, sent him flying back into the sand. Away from the transmitter.

She slumped back into Loren's arms, drained by the outpouring of energy.

A piercing cry filled the air, reverberated around the walls of the cave. It was followed by the chattering of a thousand angry creatures who scraped and scrabbled over sand and rocks through the darkness in a frothing sea of fur. Orson screamed as the *ba-hekarten* surrounded him, over him, under him, until they lifted him beneath the carpet of furry bodies, thousands of tiny feet running towards the blackness at the far end of the cave, carrying him away into its depths. He screamed once. And then a deafening silence.

Shaking, Tirana turned to Loren. He stared at deLoren and deTirana sitting on the rocks beside the waterfall, grinning. Loren grinned back.

He caught her bewildered expression and said, "The *ba-hekarten* don't like the devil soldier. They'll throw him out of the caves, just like they do the Priests."

She sighed in relief. She didn't want Orson's death on her conscience, as tempting as that was.

She saw the transmitter half-buried in the sand and crawled to it. Loren followed, watched curiously as she lifted it onto her lap.

"There'll be more like him," Tirana told him quietly, wiping the sand from the metal box. "Special Forces will take Samhain. They'll destroy everything." She stared at him. "Everyone."

Loren took her hand, squeezing gently. "What will be will be. There is nothing we can do but prepare."

"I have another idea."

She packed the transmitter into the backpack, snapped on the seals, went to put on her comms suit.

"Where are you going?" Loren sounded alarmed.

"Topside. I need to send my final report."

Loren was at her side, dragging her into his arms. "No. More of your soldiers may be sitting in wait. And if not them, then the Priests. I cannot lose you."

He held her close, whispered, "Tirana, if I lost you I would lose everything."

She wrapped her arms around his waist, saw the despair blazing in his eyes and felt love for him bubble through her.

"You'll never lose me, Loren. That I can promise you."

His mouth covered hers hungrily and she arched up to meet his passion and her destiny.

Epilogue

Universal Alliance Settlement Exploration Unit: Report 17836ZE-C

Update:

Year 2561.7

Settlement Scouting Unit SU-SEU9107 first transmission: Reported plague on Samhain's surface. Origin suspected parasitic, estimated 99.9% fatal. Suggest immediate quarantine of onworld Special Forces and SEU teams. Transmission incomplete. Scouting Unit declared "Missing". 4 days in field.

Recommendation:

Immediate withdrawal of UA Special Forces' troop carriers enroute to Samhain. Special Forces' mandate over Samhain returned to the SEU for further investigation. Exploration of Samhain coded black for extreme low priority.

About the Author

Cassandra Kane grew up in Australia and now resides in the UK. A graduate of the University of Sydney, Cassandra divides her time between the day job and her writing. She enjoys good food, interesting conversation and exotic travel, not necessarily in that order.

To learn about Cassandra, please visit more Send email Cassandra www.cassandrakane.com. an to at cassandra@cassandrakane.com or join her Yahoo! Newsletter group at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cassandrakane-news to find out about the latest news and releases.

Look for these titles

Now Available:

If Wishes Came True by Cassandra Kane

Beginnings: A Samhain Anthology Read the entire Beginnings collection now available in print!

Beginnings: A Touch of Magic

© 2006 Cassandra Kane

A race against time to save a planet—will the price be too heavy to pay?

Captain Tirana Albasta leads the last scouting mission to mystery planet Samhain, which has already swallowed two previous missions and a starship full of New Wiccan colonists, Lalith's People.

Determined to keep the planet from UA Special Forces' harsh military control, Tirana finds much more than she expected. For the descendants of Lalith's People have split into two separate societies—the anti-magic Priests and the magical True People—and she has just been caught in the crossfire.

Complicating matters is her attraction to Loren, the broodingly handsome True People witch who ignites passions she has never before experienced, and who just might make leaving Samhain impossible in more ways than one...

Beginnings: A Warrior's Witch

© 2006 Mackenzie McKade

Legacy bonds them—betrayal will test them—but, love and a little bit of magic will keep them together.

Gifted with both Berserka and Wicce heritage, Sabine wonders which legacy will determine her fate. A path of freedom and independence? Or will the Berserka curse tie her to one man, not of her choosing?

After his father's death, Conall returns to Scotland to take his rightful place as chieftain. Fate steps in and unleashes his hot-blooded lust on one obstinate woman resolved on defying destiny.

A forced marriage binds them. Desire and their animalistic nature draw them together. But someone is threatening to destroy the fiery love growing between them. Salt in the water, poison in the wine has everyone looking askew at Sabine, including her husband.

When the clan demands Sabine's death, Conall must choose between family and the woman he loves.

Beginnings: Babe in Woods

© 2006 Lorelei James

Animal attraction takes on a whole new meaning...

Manhattanite Lacy Buchanan is out to prove she's a tough cookie by signing up for a survivalist hiking trip in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The last thing she expected was to get lost, forcing her to spend the rest of the hike alone with surly, too-sexy mountain man, Becker, who blames her entirely for their predicament. After Becker saves her from a rattlesnake, and gently calms her fears, Lacy feels lucky to be in his experienced hands.

But Sam Becker isn't really a hiking expert. He's strictly the moneyman in Back To Nature Guided Hiking Tours and a last minute, temporary fill-in guide. He can't believe his bad luck when his reluctant charge—a mouthy, but hot, blonde bombshell—pulverizes their only compass, destroying their chances of following the coordinates to base camp. Yet something about Lacy's trusting nature makes him want fulfill her idea he's her rugged hero.

As Sam and Lacy attempt to find a way out of the treacherous mountain passes, their natural instincts take them...farther away from civilized behavior and straight into the mating calls of the wild.

Beginnings: Night Music

© 2006 Charlene Teglia

When death marked her, he offered her rebirth...

Meghan Davies has been living a dream as the bass player for the allfemale hit rock band, The Sirens. But the dream becomes a nightmare with the discovery that cancer, undetected and now too far gone, heralds the end of everything.

Romney Kearns has been watching the sharp-tongued, flame haired woman from afar, wanting, but never approaching because he can offer her nothing but death.

When he discovers that death already has her marked, he sets out on All Hallow's Eve to seduce her, claim her, and make her willing to accept his dark offer. An alternative. Not life as she's known it, but a kind of rebirth. Eternity with him and immortality for her to make night music.

Beginnings: Ritual Love

© 2006 Kate Davies

A lost woman. A hunted man. On a night of forbidden rituals, the veil between past and present lifts—and their worlds will never be the same.

Scientist Moira Sinclair doesn't believe in magic. Or at least she hasn't since childhood. She's only come to Iona in remembrance of her long-deceased grandmother, the last person who encouraged her fanciful side. But now she's stumbled onto a secret druid ritual—and into another time.

Aedan Ap Crannog is furious to discover an outsider spying on their sacred, banned Samhain rites. With her strange garb and stranger mannerisms, Moira is unlike any woman he's ever known. But she could cause trouble for him and the people who follow him in the ancient ways. To prevent her from sounding the alarm, he takes her captive, hiding her in the labyrinth of caves along the far shore.

Despite their differences, sparks burn between them as brightly as the Samhain bonfire. Now captive and captor must find a way to bridge the centuries before the magic disappears with the dawn...

Beginnings: The Last Prophecy © 2006 Jennie Andrus

Hours before being murdered Maddy gives her last prophecy—her sister's death and salvation.

The MacElwain sisters had always been different. In search of a "normal" life, Lottie did her best to ignore her crazy sister, until Maddy predicts Lottie's death. Suddenly Maddy is dead and Lottie has a very short shelf life and, according to Maddy, she's going to need to find a moose if she wants to survive. Unfortunately, moose aren't too plentiful in downtown Toronto.

Not willing to trust her life to an animal, Lottie runs to the shores of Newfoundland, where danger, love and acceptance wait for her to fulfill the last prophecy of Mad Maddy MacElwain

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure
Fantasy
Historical
Horror
Mainstream
Mystery/Suspense
Non-Fiction
Paranormal
Red Hots!
Romance
Science Fiction
Western
Young Adult

http://www.samhainpublishing.com