

**House of Moons 2: The Shadow Master**  
**Kara Fey**

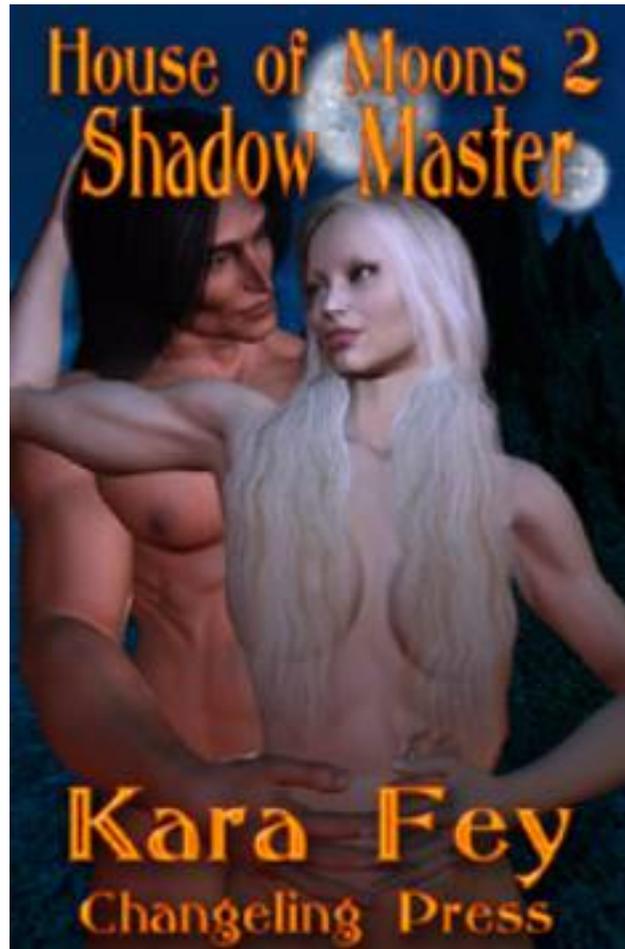
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## Chapter One

Despite the biofilters, perfume and sex clung to the inside of Kamara's nostrils. Stale air and the narrow hallways on the slaver station closed in on her. War raged between her mind and her senses, but logic forced her to stay, to allow the acrid smells to invade her lungs. Five senses screamed that she inhaled the decayed air from inside an ejection coffin. Her sixth sense confirmed the truth was worse.

Space Station Tantra 9 reeked of magic, drenched her psyche with writhing slaves and lust, and inflamed her body as if she'd been dosed with the powerful Ozera drug. The floor shifted beneath her feet and nausea threatened to choke her. Throwing one hand out to steady herself against the wall, she quickly slid onto the cold white marble of her throne as the door swung open and her servant, a trader named the Lizard for his green tinged skin, escorted her next *client* through the door.

Lizard stepped forward, silver eyes flashing with annoyance, and bowed. "Empress, this one has requested to meet you."

"My thanks, Geck. Leave us."

He scrambled from the room and Kamara smiled. The memory she'd implanted to control him had worked extremely well. Almost too well. She'd been the bait in this hell hole for almost three moons now. Her reputation as the Slave Empress, the best to be bought, had traveled to the far worlds, and still there was no sign of her quarry. But this... this visitor was *very* interesting indeed.

A tall man dressed in black bowed his head to her and stepped forward to speak. Kamara raised her hand to silence the fool before the lies could even begin. Hidden beneath the technology of a 5-S holographic mask stood a woman from Kamara's own homeworld, and a Daughter of the House of Moons. Tall, strong, and beautiful, this daughter of Anthea caressed the moon dagger strapped to her leg like a man would stroke his lover's lips. Her touch was soft. Comforting.

Deadly.

"Why did you come here, Moon Warrior?"

Distress radiated from the woman hiding behind the mask. The holographic face before her frowned, but Kamara saw the real frown beneath it as if a shadow of the warrior's form looked at her from beneath the surface of a deep lake. The woman's face shimmered for a moment before she turned the mask off to reveal striking blue eyes and long golden hair. Aye, she was golden and beautiful, like her Sisters, but stern, and far too serious for her age. The skin on Kamara's neck tingled in warning. She knew this woman. Had seen pictures...

"I came for you." With these words, the warrior pushed at her mind. A kaleidoscope of suffering and chaos flowed freely from the warrior. Kamara knew then that an empath, perhaps even a Shadow Master stood before her, but one newly awakened to her gifts and struggling for control. That she was a Moon Warrior, heir to the throne of Anthea, and forbidden to use her talent, her magic, intrigued Kamara all the more.

Taking pity on the woman, the first decent soul she'd come into contact with in too long, Kamara ramped up her own energy barriers and moved closer to the woman to afford her some relief. After the psychic roar of the station, of hundreds of slaves writhing with Ozera-induced lust, the quiet peace she rarely allowed herself was deafening to both of them.

All business, and seemingly undisturbed to have her true identity known, the warrior spoke. "I am Charla, a servant of Esmee, my queen. I have come to take you out of here."

Kamara laughed. Charla's blue eyes narrowed, studied her, attempted a probe. And that's when the other's presence became known. Gritting her teeth, Kamara yanked her white gown up from where it trailed on the floor and moved even closer to whisper an accusation. "Perhaps that was your intent, but my brother followed you." Charla attempted to read her thoughts again, and Kamara felt her meddling brother's power augmenting the

attack. Padraic, most feared of the Shadow Masters, psychic parasites who could watch events through another's eyes, surged to the forefront of Charla's consciousness, fighting to take control of her. Enraged, Charla fought back, but Kamara knew her brother was too powerful for the untrained warrior to resist. Sighing, Kamara reached out to touch Charla, and melded their strength together to force the intruder completely from her mind. Eyes wide, seemingly shell-shocked and struggling to maintain control, Charla stood before her and wrestled for the breath to speak. "Why are you here, Princess?"

*Princess?* So, the little Moon Warrior knew who she was. Charla's sudden curiosity was proof that the poor woman realized she was in over her head. "Setting a trap."

"For whom?"

"It matters not, but I won't leave until he's dead. Tell my brother to stop interfering before he gets us both killed."

"I didn't know a bastard Shadow Master hitched a ride. I assume he's one of your brothers. They captured my Sister, Hana. I want to know where he took her." Charla glared at her, towering over her by at least a hand in height. Rage poured from her energy field, hot and intimidating, to envelop Kamara like a flood of lava.

Nevertheless, Kamara feared no one, and respect hung in the air between them.

Charla had a delicate angel's face, but her eyes conveyed both intelligence and deadly menace. The bitch was no angel. She was a warrior, a hunter who scented prey. She'd be back, with her powers under control. Nothing in this lifetime would stop her. That determination was something Kamara could both understand and admire. She just couldn't cooperate. Hana and Kiel were extremely happy, and Hana was pregnant with her nephew. No. Charla could not be allowed to interfere.

"So you can rescue her?" Kamara kept her voice neutral.

"Yes."

"You believe she wishes to return with you?"

"No."

Truth. What a novel concept. Kamara smiled and lifted her other hand from the many folds of her clinging white gown. Before Charla could pull away, Kamara's fingers sought and found the edge of her glove and encircled the bare skin on the inside of her wrist. A jolt of raw power blossomed like a solar missile in Kamara's chest. As though a bomb had exploded, the power roared through their fragile connection in one massive surge. Charla's knees buckled and she swayed, then sank to her knees.

Looking down at the woman she held in thrall, Kamara wrapped her in a soft cocoon with her tone. "I'm sorry, Moon Warrior. This is the only way."

Soft, melodious, and impossible to resist, the voice of magic worked its spell on Charla. Kamara wasn't about to allow this overzealous woman to ruin Kiel and Hana's happiness or destroy three moons of hard work and planning. Her prey was getting closer. She could literally *feel* him closing in on her. Padraic had meddled in her life once too often. Padraic and Charla. The two of them could ruin everything... so she'd just have to keep them occupied with each other.

Oh, this was going to be fun!

With a smile in her voice, Kamara started planting memories...

## Chapter Two

### *Two Spins Later...*

Charla's nostrils flared. Never would she understand Esmee's order to bring a male before her -- for questioning! As a Seeder, yes. But why waste time talking? If the queen had a problem with him, why not just order his execution? Shaking her head, Charla watched from where she leaned against an arching metal girder and the wall. Half hidden in shadow, 5-S mask firmly in place, she kept her eyes on the Cross-Worlder, her target, as he approached the lizard man. For some reason, she couldn't remember the details of her assignment. Only two certainties remained. One, she must capture him and make the three-week journey back to Anthea. And two, she must, at all costs, ensure he came to no serious harm along the way.

But the man was an imbecile. Tracking him down had been as easy as laying out breadcrumbs for a falkyn. Now, ten thousand in coin shined before him on the table, and the Lizard still refused to present him to the Empress. Any wicked eyes the sparkling fortune didn't attract, Padraic's raised voice would!

"Pick up your coin, and move on." Charla spoke quietly to herself, ignoring the low growl of her synthesized voice. She watched, *willed* Padraic to walk away. Big, brutal male guards wearing nothing but beast skin and nano-infected knives were closing in on the table. One move, one word from Lizard, and he'd be in trouble up to his well-sculpted ass. She didn't want to have to kill half the men on the station just to keep him alive. No male was worth that much trouble.

Charla felt the violent darkness of impending bloodshed scream into her empathic awareness, spread through the collective consciousness. Cutthroats and thieves, dealers and smugglers, all shifted their evil focus onto the man and his money. Lizard's men were all that held them back. What was on the table would feed most of the bastards for several cycles. Like carrion, they circled the room, watching... waiting...

"Hellsfire!" Nothing would save his coin now. Should he pocket it and walk away, the bastard thieves would follow and slit his throat before he made it to the docking station. Charla allowed herself one last, leisurely perusal of his body. Tall, his bulging thighs were shown to perfection beneath tight brown pants, massive shoulders beneath a lighter brown shirt, and his wavy black hair begged to be touched. He was even more desirable than the man she'd ridden at the Seeding, and at the time, she'd thought him nearly perfect. Hot liquid drenched her core at the memory. But this male *was* perfect. Something about him called to her in an elemental way... except for that temper. It was about to get him killed.

Reluctantly, a small modicum of respect for the male crept from the deep recesses of her soul. Bad humor she understood all too well. She suffered from the same malady. Violence swirled in him. He welcomed it, welcomed the battle as an outlet for his rage. As did she. Anger had become a difficult habit to break.

Perhaps he could handle himself in battle, but taking the chance would mean disobeying her orders. She was to deliver him safely to her queen.

Sighing, she pulled her 5-S mask from her neck and put it in her pocket. Time to take him down. At the thought, her nipples rose to attention beneath the silken glide of her shirt. After she fought off this need to kill something, got away from this place, and forced the last of its negative energy out of her system, she could have a little fun. Padraic was just the thing she'd been craving since the Seeding Ritual. Her orders left plenty of room for interpretation. No one said she couldn't play with this male a little on the long ride home.

Smiling at the thought, Charla loosened her golden hair, raised her chin in challenge as it tumbled down her back, and strode through the chaos of the market square. Deep in her pocket, she wrapped her left hand around a small nano-injector. The drug would dampen his magic for a few hours, but do no lasting damage. Unlike the bots riding the moon dagger she held in her right hand, the drugs weren't made to kill.

*Stop walking like a warrior, before you reveal yourself!* Sharp and insistent, the command stung. But she allowed her chin to fall a fraction, her shoulders to depress, and her pace to slow. Her fists tightened around her weapons.

*Better.*

*Who are you?* she shot back.

*If you don't know, why are you hunting me?*

*Padraic?*

Taunting laughter flowed through her, caressed her body, wreaked havoc with her control. He was taunting her! The man knew he was hunted, and he'd set a trap to draw her out into the open. Well, he had a thing or two to learn about battle if he thought it this easily won. The male would be trussed up and stowed away on her Rider for her pleasure...

*I assume you have a plan? Other than ravishing me?*

Goddess, he was irritating. A plan? Not really. Just an idea...

*No? I do.*

Charla could feel his smug smile and it annoyed her.

*Just play along before you get us both killed.*

Then Padraic turned, and the brilliant blue of his eyes stole her breath. "Ah, here she is now."

The Lizard, his guards, and every vicious thug in the market turned their complete attention to her. Struggling to keep from slapping the satisfied smile from his face, Charla closed the distance.

An angel of death approached him with fury simmering in her eyes. Padraic knew he'd played her. But he'd had no choice. This Moon Warrior was the one his sister had chosen to speak to. She was the one who'd been inside, seen Kamara, talked to her, touched her! He couldn't take the chance of losing her. And even though he knew her thoughts, he couldn't physically track her down with that damn mask she had. He'd suspected that his baby sister would place an order for protection on him, and he'd been right.

A bodyguard had never, ever looked so good. Golden hair flowed in waves to her waist. High firm breasts teased him from beneath the flowing cape she wore. Long legs begged to be spread wide and then wrapped around him. She was tall, strong, a graceful predator with striking features and ocean blue eyes. Without a doubt, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Even better, he caught glimpses of her thoughts. Thoughts of riding his cock! The body part in question rose to attention instantly.

"Come, dearest, and choose your gifts." Padraic held out a hand to her, confident that his sister had planted a strong enough compulsion to ensure the warrior's cooperation. She would do anything, *anything*, to keep him from getting killed.

He was right. Smiling in return, she placed her right hand in his. Fire leapt from her touch to his skin and spread until his body ached. She stepped up to the table and nodded in the direction of the coins still sitting there, the devil's temptation. "What have you done this time, lover?" Her voice was warm honey, sent heat pulsing through his veins. God, how powerful a weapon she would wield if ever she used the voice in earnest.

"I bought you a gift."

She whirled to face him, her fiery blue eyes narrowed to slits. "What?"

Lizard spoke from behind her. "Take your pick. He paid for two."

Alarmed, his warrior turned her full awareness back to him. "You bought slaves?"

"Yes." Padraic couldn't resist. He pulled her tall, hard body forward, crushing her breasts to his chest. "Aren't you going to thank me?"

The moment she opened her mouth to protest, he claimed it with his own.

\* \* \*

Lifting his leg, he forced her knees apart and rubbed her core. Padraic held her there, flexed his muscles, released, and stroked a rhythm of need to her mons with his thigh. The fire that invaded his system at her touch exploded through his bloodstream, relentless and hot. Concealed beneath her long cape, he kneaded her ass with

his hands and wished they were somewhere he could rip off her pants and ram home. God, he was in pain, so rock hard he wanted to throw her on the ground and pump into her, despite the audience. Just looking at her was almost enough to make him lose control.

“You take two or not?” Lizard’s chuckle broke the spell at the exact moment the cold metal of her dagger pressed menacingly into his abdomen, reminding him of the danger they were both in. But his warrior didn’t respond to the slaver’s question. Every muscle in her body tensed, aching to start a brawl, to slice him open. Hovering in her mind, he knew she was a hairsbreadth away from giving in to the urge...

*Choose two. We walk out of here alive, and we save them.*

*Agreed.* Lightly, her hand roamed up the planes of his chest and wrapped around his neck. He felt a small prick in his skin, then swayed on his feet as a momentary jolt of pain rocketed through his brain and stole his balance. The bitch had injected him with something. Probably bots.

*Witch.*

*Yes, I am.* No longer was her smile forced, and she was magnificent. He wanted to slap her and devour her at the same time. Neither was an option at the moment. They needed to get the hell out of here before whatever she’d given him took him down.

*You’ve got about twenty minutes.* Satisfaction purred behind the thought.

*And then?*

Her fingernail scraped over his nipple through his shirt and his chest muscles jerked in response. *It’s nighty night time.*

He wasn’t sure the antidote his brother’s mate Hana had given him would work. The thought of falling prey to anyone on the station left him cold. With none of the usual Shadow stealth, he flung his consciousness toward her so he could see what she saw, hear what she heard, and know each thought the same moment she did.

She turned to the slaver’s stage, scanning the poor lost souls on display. Decisive, she weeded out the humans who were beyond saving, settling on a young pair who still resisted Ozero’s blinding call to mate. Brother and sister. Young. Stolen from a refugee camp after their parents died. Neither had seen much more than fifteen cycles. He wasn’t sure how she knew the things she did, but he didn’t doubt she was correct.

“Those two.”

Lizard nodded and motioned for the guards to remove the two naked slaves from the line. “Done.”

Padraic’s cock shifted uncomfortably when she slid off his thigh. The cushiony invitation between her legs drew his attention through every agonizing moment of her descent. Finally, she swung her foot around his knee and freed herself. He felt like he’d grown to three times his normal size. Try as he might, he couldn’t stop the room from spinning, or his magic from flaring, threatening to burst out of his control.

Reaching up, she tucked her face into the side of his neck and wrapped her arm around his waist. Dagger poking him in the ribs, lips caressing his skin, she whispered, “You’ve had your fun. Let’s go.”

## Chapter Three

Every pair of eyes in the market followed them as Charla held Padraic, arm wrapped tightly around his waist, and stepped off Lizard's platform. The children they bought fell into step behind them like obedient pets. But she sensed the stirrings of hope, of freedom, in their young minds. They communicated with one another on a private telepathic channel she couldn't break into, despite her recent flare of magical ability, but she refused to take chances with their safety. Already her party was hunted.

Hellfire. Was this some kind of trap? Did he have one of the missing master keys to the Riders? It was possible. More than possible. "You want my ship."

"Why would I need your Rider, when I've got Hana's?" At his taunting laughter her hand clenched, and her dagger nearly drew blood from between his ribs as she battled for self-control. The missing Rider was one more item she would have.

Charla whirled from Padraic's *embrace* to enfold the two slaves in her arms and herd them on ahead, away from the battle she knew was coming. She sent the directions and the security code directly into the girl's mind. Her Rider would take them to safety. "Now go." The two children ran as though a Rhion beast was nearly upon them. He had Hana's ship. The woman she hunted. The girl she once called friend. "Where is she?"

"Exactly where she wants to be. With her bonded mate."

"I don't believe you." And she didn't. Couldn't. The thought was too painful. That would mean everything Hana had told her in the message she'd sent was true. Charla refused to believe her entire life was a lie when another explanation was more logical. "You males brainwashed her, or are holding her captive somewhere."

"We shall see." One of her special gifts was recognizing truth from lies. His answer sent a shiver of dread coursing down her spine. But she didn't have the time or inclination to argue with him now.

Four men, weapons drawn, followed, closing in on them from behind. Charla reeled from the psychic currents in the air and shoved Padraic around a corner into another metallic tunnel. Three of the men were high on stims. The fourth was the danger... he was completely sane, totally in control, and utterly evil.

"You fool," she hissed at Padraic as they hurried down the exit corridor toward the shuttles in the docking bays. Every space on the walls was covered with moving, three-dimensional advertisements for hot, steamy sex. All types. All species. It was disgusting, frightening... a shiver raced over her skin straight to the muscles in her core, making them clench around emptiness. *Intriguing*. "Don't you realize how many murderers and thieves are in the market? Why did you draw so much attention to yourself?"

"I had to make sure I got *your* attention."

Why, oh why, did he have to rub his scalding hot hand over her ass? Sensitive and hard, her nipples peaked to attention. "Get your hand off my ass before I cut it off. We're being followed."

"I know." The smile in his voice was beyond irritating.

"Then what in hellfire are you doing?"

"Making them believe we're unaware of their presence." Padraic rhythmically massaged her buttock, gliding his hand from the small of her back to her thigh and back. Everywhere he touched, she burned.

Padraic stopped mid-stride and pushed her back to the wall. Hot and strong, his hands snaked around her waist and pinned her in place. Behind her on the moving screen, a couple writhed in the heat of mating. Their cries filled her ears, seduced her senses, and made her want to mimic their lust. Padraic rested his body against hers, ran his hand up her thigh, higher, to caress her breast. Fire streaked through her body from his palm, darted to her core and forced a gasp from her throat. Never had anyone touched her this way, made her want...

"I can be very convincing." The threat whispered over her skin, heated her flesh and made her imagine his hot breath caressing every inch of her... without clothing.

“What?” Goddess, it was hard to think with Padraic’s hard thighs holding her pinned to the wall, his even harder cock rubbing, scorching her through her pants...

Trailing a path of silken fire across her collarbone with his lips, then up her neck, Padraic reverted to telepathy as their mutual enemies, still half a kim away, grew bolder, jostling each other and smiling in anticipation. *You have a Stinger?*

*Yes.* Her firearm was locked safely at her side. Thankful, she flexed her fingers around the weapon. Were it not for that task, she feared she wouldn’t be able to resist burying her hand in his thick hair, pulling his mouth to hers for another taste.

*When I give the command, use it.*

The memory of her first kiss at the slave table haunted her, compelled her to experience the wet temptation of his mouth again. Her tongue darted out to lick the remnants of his essence from her lips. Goddess, he tasted good.

“I don’t follow orders.” Charla spoke at the precise moment she arched her body into his. Aggressive and hungry, she rubbed her mons the length of his cock and took his mouth with a savage need to taste the forbidden.

The very air hummed with magic and awareness. Charla took it all in, absorbed every nuance of her body’s reaction, Padraic’s smell, the erotic thrill of sliding her tongue against his while the slavers closed in on them. She’d never felt more alive. This male challenged her as an equal. The thought was frightening, and there was nothing more exhilarating than fear.

Beneath her cape, Padraic’s hands left her body in search of his own weapons. A dark cloud of anticipation flowed toward them from around the corner. A thought flared to life, but died before fully formed.

Breaking the kiss, she hissed into his ear, “Moon Warriors don’t run.” Charla spun, pulled her Stinger from its holster, and shot out the vid camera watching them. “If we did, they’d just hunt us down like dogs.”

“True.” Padraic whispered the single word near the sensitive skin of her earlobe, leaving her flesh energized and begging for more, then moved out from behind her.

The psychic energy preceding them was so ramped up, she expected their stalkers to be foaming at the mouth, was somewhat surprised by the normal grime on their cheeks and half dead look in their eyes when they rounded the corner. Three men in gray mercenary uniforms fanned out as best they could in the narrow corridor and closed in. When they were within three long strides, Charla shoved Padraic away from her and fired. One man took a hit in the shoulder, but didn’t go down. Beside her, Padraic was still, unmovable as an ancient oak. She didn’t have time to figure out what the idiot was doing.

Stepping in front of him to block any possible shots, Charla fired again. The shot bounced off of her prey and took out another vid screen. “Why aren’t they firing?”

*They want you alive. And they have enhanced armor.* Infuriatingly calm and curious, Padraic’s voice shot into her consciousness.

“Enhanced with what?” Another shot bounced off the third man to destroy the image of two lovers in a swimming pool. Sparks flew, and then the screen went black.

*Magic.*

Magic! As much as she hated the thought, her own newly awakened senses confirmed his statement. Even now she could feel Padraic moving in their minds, gathering information. No wonder her ancestors had killed off their men and run away. Here she was, about to get run down by slave traders with magical body armor and all because Padraic had pissed off her queen.

“Hellsfire, you males are a pain in the ass.” Charla put her Stinger away and pulled her blades free. She figured she had about ten more minutes before the bots took Padraic down. Four to one were odds she’d prefer to avoid. Unforgiving and painful, Padraic’s hands slammed down onto her shoulders and stopped her from charging the enemy warily circling in front of them. He yanked her several steps back, away from their opponents. The mercenaries paced them like reflections in a mirror. *They seek to capture you. You’ve already been sold at auction.*

“How much?”

*Fifteen thousand Galactic.*

“Impressive.” Charla’s blades rang with sound each time they met in a death dance in front of her. The familiar singsong quality filled her with calm and she shrugged out of his grasp. “Should’ve been fifty.”

Padraic laughed. “That’s their price for capturing you.”

She took a step forward, fearlessly raising her blades in challenge.

The woman was as insane as he. Reluctant admiration flared within him. *I hope you have armor on.*

She didn’t take her eyes off her prey. *Of course I do.* Anger coursed through her, spiked her energy, and made her aura flame brilliant orange around every perfect curve. Pity that no one else could see it. He wanted to pin her to the ground, unzip those battle pants, and ram his cock to the hilt in her hot cunt. She was magnificent. And deadly. Mustn’t forget deadly. The thought made him harder.

*You take care of these three. I’m going hunting.*

Still a presence in her mind, he read her intentions clearly. The leader of these animals hung back and sent his men in to be slaughtered. Charla’s determination was absolute, so he shrugged. Now that he’d touched her, he’d be able to track her at will. “Go ahead. I can handle them.”

Surprise flicked across her features at his acceptance. His confidence. The poor girl had no idea what she was dealing with in him. None. But she was about to learn.

Calling forth his complete will, he focused on the men fanned out in the corridor, blocking her path to their leader. Intense pain always accompanied the gift, but he ignored it and cast his Shadow ahead of him. Weak from months on stims, their minds were easy to invade, even easier to control. All three men walked to within arm’s reach of Charla and froze, unable to control their own bodies.

“Padraic, you’re ruining my fun.” With a snort of disgust, Charla pulled out her Stinger and shot each man in the heart. Simmering beneath her calm exterior was rage at being bought and sold. Retribution. The three dead men were galactic justice at its best. Padraic knew that moments after they walked away, the robots would come out and cart off the bodies. There was only *one* law on Tantra 9, survival of the fittest.

Farther away, waiting around the corner, the evil energy of the leader retreated. Charla started after him, but Padraic wrapped his fingers around her wrist. He’d just controlled three men with his will alone, and she’d hardly batted an eyelash. Never had anyone shown less of a reaction. Either she completely trusted him, or her self-confidence left no room for fear. Both possibilities made him rock hard. “Let him go. We don’t have time.”

“He doesn’t deserve to live.” She kicked the scum at her feet in frustration. Battle lust boiled beneath her calm exterior. She was not happy with the news that she’d been bought and sold. Not happy at all. Deep and fierce, fury erupted within her. Too much and too fierce to be solely attributed to this incident. It festered and writhed like a demon, just waiting to break free.

“You can’t kill every slaver on this station.”

“One dead’s better than none.” Clearly irritated with him, she twisted her wrist in his grasp, trying to break free.

“Aye. But I prefer to leave this station as quietly as possible. That will be an easier task if we don’t start a war.”

Their eyes clashed. A shockwave of energy leapt from her eyes to his and Padraic’s every nerve ending froze in shock. All around them their energy fields were fusing, pulsing as one. He knew she felt it too, but wisely ignored the calling of blood. As would he. Bonding to a Moon Warrior was not in his plans. Padraic shook his head to clear the fog rising in his mind. “Besides, that one will come to you. Fifty thousand galactic guarantees it.”

“Perhaps, but the rest of these slaving bastards will serve as a warning.” Jerking her hand out of his grasp, she squatted down and carved a half-moon into each man’s left cheek. The symbol of the House of Moons, the mark was both feared and hated. Satisfaction nearly purred from her throat with each artistic slice of her blade. She was more than willing to perpetuate the ferocious reputation of her Sisters.

A mere hint of blood formed, then ran down their filthy faces. Without a suggestion of mercy, Charla watched it slither down their necks, drip into their ears and filthy hair.

“Enough.” Padraic pulled her to her feet from behind, enjoyed the soft give of her ass beneath his cock, and buried his nose in her mass of golden hair. “Breathe. They’re dead. It’s time to go.”

Completely alone in the corridor, the immediate threat gone, confusion rose, swirled in a vortex of unanswered questions and unrecognized desires. Padraic hid his smile in her hair. Uncertainty worked in his favor, especially since she was too distracted to realize he fed her lust with his own, controlled her body like a master musician playing his favorite instrument. Slowly, as if not to frighten a skittish wild beast, he slid his arms around her until she was completely enclosed in his embrace. She didn’t turn him away.

No, her body *craved* him.

Encouraged, he risked losing a hand by cupping her left breast through her thin uniform, rolled her nipple with his fingers. The soft weight of her flesh called to him like no other. The nipple puckered instantly, and she moaned, rocking her ass back against him. Stirred by her response, he caressed every bit of flesh he could reach with his other hand, slid his hand under the waist of her pants and stroked the soft skin of her abdomen. He dared to go lower, but stopped when she stiffened in alarm.

The foolish woman still hadn’t realized the bots weren’t affecting him. She was unable to resist her own body and his subtle mental nudges. Padraic took his sweet time arousing her, rubbing her stomach, diving lower, then retreating. Again. This time his fingertip grazed her clit and her hips jerked in response. He wondered how long it would take her to get suspicious. Could he have her legs spread by the time she realized her mistake? Perhaps he’d play along and see where he ended up. She had information he needed, and a body he wanted to tame. He’d never been tempted to use his talents to seduce a woman, but to ride this one he was willing to burn in purgatory.

Charla turned in his arms and the devil’s hands immediately returned to knead her ass, driving her temperature up about a thousand degrees. Goddess forgive her, she wanted more, and she only had a few minutes left to indulge herself. Soft, sinful, and too great of a temptation to resist, his lips locked to hers, and his tongue darted in to tease and taste. Unrepentant, her body molded itself to his, eager to explore the sensations she knew she would forbid herself later. Not just later... forever.

The bots gave her the excuse she needed to surrender for the moment. Too eagerly, she lifted her arms, slipped her hands around his back. Body heat pulsed from his flesh to hers, from his lips to hers. Not only her body, but her life, as well, was going up in flames. Only her third kiss, and the thought of never experiencing the crazed rush of desire again made her want to scream.

She was a warrior. Soon she would be queen. That meant she could take what she wanted and damn the poor soul who stood in her way. And right now, what she wanted was to ride Padraic. Slide down his hard cock until she was so full she’d tip her head back and roar her satisfaction to the goddess herself.

But she didn’t want him chained. No, blasphemous as it was, she wanted his hot hands on her breasts, his tongue in her mouth. How she could know his touch would bring bliss, could want something she’d never experienced, she wasn’t certain. But she didn’t care. Aye, she wanted it all. She had both the time and privacy on her ship to take him. And no one would ever need to know.

“You want to fuck me, turn me over to your precious queen, and then walk away?”

“Yes.” That’s *exactly* what she wanted. Although, he was too magnificent to rot in Esmee’s dungeon. Perhaps she’d ask for permission to keep him as her own personal toy.

Solid as a rock, his cock burned her abdomen, demanded she recognize the threat even before he voiced the thought. *No, my dear. I will fuck you. And before I’m through, you’ll beg me to take you.*

Charla was delirious with need, her mind locked to his, her tongue lost in his mouth, her breasts molded to the hard planes of his chest. Weak and trembling, the darkest shadows in her heart flared to light at his words... and secretly hoped he wasn’t boasting.

Without warning, their psychic connection began to fade. Suddenly, he leaned against her slightly smaller frame for support. The microinjection in his neck, the unexpected fight, and the energy he’d used to control their attackers must have depleted his defenses. His twenty minutes were up a little early.

“The bots?” Padraic whispered the question and his hot breath fanned over her nipple. He immediately sucked it into his mouth. Tonguing the hard peak through her shirt, his wet suckling forced a moan from her throat. Her cunt clenched in need.

“Aye.” Sighing with regret, Charla ignored the throbbing in her core and caught him as he fell. “Play time’s over, loverboy.”

## Chapter Four

Padraic struggled not to reveal himself as Charla carted him through the station with a motorized gurney and took him to a private room. There, she stripped his shirt from his chest, rubbed her small hands across his skin until he thought he'd go mad. But lust rose in her thoughts. She wanted to straddle his cock and ride him like... *Kiel!*

Damn her! Fuck. Damn. She was the one who'd raped his brother. And now she was comparing them.

Remembering the feel of Kiel's cock stretching her, of straddling Kiel's hips like he was a prize stallion bucking beneath her. Her memories and emotions pounded through his skull. Lust. Worry. Anger. Frustration. They all buzzed around in his mind, pulsed through his body, sped up his heartbeat -- to match hers.

Hell. He'd been around women his whole life. Hundreds of women. Thousands of women. None had affected him this way. Not one. Their energies had merged, fused into one in that corridor. Only one explanation made sense, and it didn't thrill him. This beautiful, vengeful, arrogant, future queen of the House of Moons was the chosen one. His bond-mate. And all she could think about was fucking his brother. That knowledge alone fueled his ire and sealed her fate. When he was through with her, Kiel would be nothing but a distant and weak memory. Tired of pretending, Padraic opened his eyes. Unfortunately, the antidote he'd taken wasn't perfect. Like a shard of glass, a sliver of light passed through his eyes, sliced into his mind. But he could see her. She'd stripped down to tight black pants that showed her ass to perfection and a sleeveless white silk undershirt that clung to her breasts and outlined her peaked nipples. Charla, First Daughter of the House of Lore, Princess of Anthea, his *mate*. A mate who, at the moment, was pacing the floor next to him like a caged Rhion beast who scented fresh meat.

Or a lover in heat.

The pain in his head receded. A quick glance around the room confirmed his suspicions. Extravagance dwelt here. Plush green silkwoven rugs muffled her footsteps. Soft glowing lights tracked grooves of copper color in the arched ceiling. The room's only furnishings were a blood red, feather stuffed lounge chair big enough for two, two chairs at a small table, and the bed, which he currently occupied.

Small. Efficient. Cheap. And one of thousands, all exactly alike. His princess wasn't stupid. And she still didn't know he was awake. Time to get some information.

Still somewhat disoriented, Padraic waited for his will to gather, to form the cohesive whole he needed to shadow her thoughts. He was patient, focused, willed his magic to cooperate...

Nothing happened. Somehow, while he'd been pretending to black out, she'd shielded her mind. He'd have to push, hard, to get through the new barriers. Or distract her.

A moan of frustration escaped him and Charla was immediately at his side. "Are you all right?"

"No." Hell no. Soft as a feather's touch, her hand rested on his chest, burned his flesh, and sent his body into instant overheat. He *hurt*. Clenching his teeth, he resisted the urge to throw her down on the ground and rut, and opted for sitting up instead. Charla shoved him back down, her nipples hovering within reach of his mouth. Lifting his neck, he strained to taste one, but she moved.

"Don't move. The bots will make you dizzy for a few more minutes. I'm sorry." He must have pissed off multiple gods because when she sat up her hands moved to his abdomen. The muscles there clenched in sweet agony. He remembered her hands on his body, removing his clothes. How he wanted those hands stroking his cock...

"It's not the bots." Daring to meet his gaze, she gasped at the desire he knew she saw there. Although his body was on fire, his magic was surprisingly quiet, watching and waiting for a chink in her mental armor. "How long will my magic be gone?"

"I'm not sure. A spin. Perhaps two."

*Two spins to play with her before she realized the truth.* Blue as the ocean, her eyes stared down at him, asking questions he wouldn't answer. Soft and wet, her tongue darted out to lick her lips in an invitation he couldn't resist, didn't want to resist, for at least one spin. Hopefully two.

For two spins he could satisfy his craving for her, as long as he resisted the danger of a full bonding. Two spins of total carnal bliss. If he could convince her to stay here, to let him suckle her breasts, bury his cock in her body, and stroke her until she screamed. For two spins he was going to break every rule his society laid down for a Shadow Master.

Aye, it was time to seduce her, to take what he wanted and bury Kiel's memory forever. When he was through, he'd take his insolent baby sister, Kamara, and get the hell off this God-forsaken station.

\* \* \*

In an instant, the atmosphere changed from curious to carnal. His thoughts were too chaotic for her to read, or guess at, but his desire pounded through her skull like a storm pounded the surf. She had no idea what he thought or believed. All she knew was that he was lying in bed naked, cock hard as a rock beneath a soft silk sheet, watching, waiting for her to reveal her plans. Her intentions. Her desires.

Planning required thought. And lust so completely ruled her body that she had very little energy left for that particular mental activity. Charla couldn't move, was fascinated by the play of his muscles beneath her palm where it rested on his stomach less than a handspan away from his thinly veiled shaft. She shouldn't touch him at all, shouldn't want to rip the sheet from his body and hold him in the palm of her hand, taste him. Her body shouldn't remember what it felt like to allow a man's touch while she rode him, yet somehow, it did.

Of its own accord, her hand moved toward his chest, feasted on the texture of his skin, the warmth of his flesh. More than she needed her heart to beat, she needed to taste him. Haunting and seductive, the thought whispered to her... *Just one taste.*

Charla shook her head. And then what? She'd be no closer to tracking down the bastard slaver who thought he owned her. She'd still have no way to get off this ship to rendezvous with her own. And this male, this perfect male, would still be forbidden. Looking at him sent a sharp stab of desire through her so she closed her eyes.

"Padraic?"

"Yes."

"Where's your Rider?"

"I'll tell you, for a price." Hands fisted in her hair, he pulled her mouth to his. She could breathe again. Her fourth kiss.

Ecstasy beckoned with the thrust of his tongue into her mouth, and with the palm of her left hand resting lightly on the moon dagger strapped to her thigh, she allowed his embrace. Charla held nothing back. The taste and texture of his tongue intrigued her. Wanting more, she closed her mouth around it, sucked rhythmically to match the tempo of his fingers that now plucked and played her nipples through her thin shirt. Goddess, he was good at making her writhe with need. How many other women had felt his expert touch?

Charla released his tongue and pulled away. Other women. The stark reminder couldn't have come at a better time. They came from different worlds. As much as she wanted him, there was too much at stake to waste time here. *Duty before self.* That was a mantra the elders had pounded into her head every day of her life.

Even though she ached and her core dripped with invitation, Charla tensed her muscles to stand. Hard as iron, his hand clamped down on her thigh, refused to let her leave his side without a struggle. "I'll tell you anything you want to know, for a price."

Temptation... and Charla was dismayed to discover how weak she truly was. "What do you want?"

"Two spins."

"What?" The man made no sense, but still, her legs refused to move, refused to carry her away from the greatest threat to her soul that she'd ever faced.

"For two spins, I want you to forget you're the future queen. I'll demand your total surrender to my touch. I'll stretch you with my cock and make you scream with pleasure. And when the two spins are over, I'll take you to

your ship. You'll tell me about my sister and then you can return to Anthea and I'll go my own way." The entire time he spoke, his hand stroked her thigh, incapacitating her ability to think.

"I can't do that."

Padraic's smile sent a rush of adrenaline through her system, made her pulse race. "Yes, you will."

Goddess, how could she resist that offer, that body, that cock? No one would ever know. "No." She had a duty to her queen. She'd taken his clothes so it would be harder for him to run, not to ride him.

Padraic's hand wandered from her thigh to her waist, then higher to squeeze her breast. He pinched and pulled her nipple, sending a fresh wave of heat to the place between her legs. Sitting up in the bed, he crowded her with his body heat, his scent. Smooth and magnificent, his chest was a hand span from her famished lips. "Come on, Charla. You know you want to spread your knees wide, slide your cunt down my cock, feel me buck inside you. Let me taste you, suck your clit." With every description, vivid images of the acts appeared in her mind, like a movie she couldn't turn off. "I can make you scream."

She should be reaching for the dagger strapped to her thigh, but for some reason she was frozen in time, unable to do more than imagine... and feel. It took every effort just to remember to breathe, to fight the urge to shove him down on the bed and ride him until she passed out. Her cunt was so engorged it was almost painful. And still she couldn't move, couldn't stop imagining the way his tongue would feel inside of her.

Padraic ripped her shirt open, then threw it across the room. Torture would have been more merciful than his hot mouth just hovering over her naked flesh. His next words seared her as his hot breath wafted over the crest.

"Don't fight it. For two spins, you're mine."

Like a starving beast, his mouth clamped down on her nipple and suckled until she moaned. Before she could recover the will to protest, he unzipped her pants and splayed his hand over her abdomen. Diving fast, he flicked her clit with his middle finger over and over, matching the rhythm of his tongue on her nipple.

Hot and fierce, her body's demands rose to a fever pitch. The memory of the Seeding Ritual rose to overwhelm her senses. She remembered riding the Seeder's cock, stroking her own clit, head thrown back as she approached release. But suddenly the image in her mind changed, and it was Padraic she rode. Except he wasn't chained like her Seeder had been. He was bucking beneath her, rising up to pull her breast into his mouth as she took him. His hands were kneading her ass, pulling her buttocks apart, stretching her cunt even wider over his massive cock. Charla shook her head in an effort to clear it and looked down at the man seducing her senses. The sight of Padraic's dark head feasting, his mouth on her breast, of his hand stroking her clit thrilled her, made her want more. Goddess help her, if he didn't fuck her soon she was going to explode.

Aye, she knew what she wanted. And it was radical, blasphemous, treason. Skin on skin, naked writhing bodies. That's all she could think of. Coherent thought seemed to have gone up in smoke when he set her body on fire. Nothing mattered but filling the painful emptiness between her legs.

Tired of waiting, of allowing him to control her, she shoved his shoulders backward and followed him down on the bed. With shaking fingers she stripped, straddling his hips. She couldn't stand to see the knowing grin on his face, so she closed her eyes as she positioned herself over his erection. Tormenting herself, she sank down over the head of his cock, just the tip, no more, then stopped and opened her eyes.

"Is this an invitation?" Padraic's hands glided over her thighs, her hips, and rested in the curve of her waist, burned into her flesh with the same intensity his gaze burned into hers. Blue locked on blue, both hungry and desperate.

"No." Her chest was tight.

He lifted his hips, stretched her a little more. "I won't stop." *Ever.*

*Ever.* Magic pulsed behind the word, squeezed her heart and clenched her deepest core as she slammed her hips down to take all of him. She didn't want to stop. But despite their personal desires, she had her orders, her duty, and he had his. For two sweet spins they would both pretend otherwise.

Aye, she'd burn in hellfire for this.

But she wanted him willing.

*Willing!* Goddess help her, yes. Free to touch, to stroke, to caress her flesh with those strong hands. The thought of a man's weight on her body was exhilarating. For so long she'd been in control. For years she'd been bowed to, revered, and feared. Now, one man's touch, his kiss, had warped her purpose, clouded her judgment, and stolen all good sense. Aye, she'd enjoyed it completely. And she didn't care. "Kiss me again."

## Chapter Five

Padraic didn't need a second invitation. Tongue thrusting deep, he pulled her down hard, so her mons rubbed the hard muscles of his abdomen. The soft skin of her ass was a temptation too perfect to resist. She tasted like honey, and wildflowers, and something else, elusive and perfect, he couldn't define.

Gently at first, he pulled her legs wider, lifted his hips up from the bed, and drove his cock against her womb. Her pleasure filled his mind, every secret desire laid bare before the power of his magic. Uppermost in her thoughts was the need to be dominated, ridden, thrown down and pumped into with reckless abandon. The visions in her mind pushed him over the edge. He rolled her onto her back and rammed home in one powerful lunge. Free now to roam and explore, he tore his mouth from hers and nibbled a path of soft bites to her left breast. Charla dug her fingers into his hair, pulling him to her, and arched the hard peak beneath his lips, silently pleading with him to feast there. He teased her, flicked and swirled his tongue on the mound until she whimpered beneath him, until the delicate hands buried in his hair turned frantic.

He sucked her nipple into his mouth, deep and strong. Instinctively, her hips rose, pulling him deeper. Padraic's cock bucked in demand to move where he lay, buried to the balls. Charla stopped breathing for a moment, then moaned when he placed a hand on each knee and spread her legs so wide they nearly touched the bed on either side of her. Drowning in her scent, in her taste, he released her nipple, then pulled it back into his mouth. Rhythmic and demanding, his tongue and his cock stroked a matching beat on her body. He wanted to play, to taste, to learn every secret curve. He wanted her begging for release, screaming as he took her.

He wanted everything...

Once again claiming her mouth with his own, he slid one hand beneath her ass to lift her, grinding his hips in a slow thrust that made her crazy. A sudden burst of power hummed into the air, invaded his body with a thousand tickling fingertips of magic. With every shift of her hips, every soft whisper of her hair on the sheets, her soul called to his, a siren luring her mate. Charla's magic roared to life and demanded an answer from his own in an elemental urge to become whole.

Padraic refused to answer *that* call. Her *body* called, and his answered. His *soul* was another matter entirely. Blood rushed to his cock with every thrust of his fingers, pulsing in time to her cries, her heartbeat, her magic. "Padraic! Please!" Charla's head thrashed from side to side.

She needed more, and so did he. Still deep inside, he stroked, sliding in and out, over and over, coating her folds with wet heat. His right hand flicked and rolled her nipple. She shivered as he blew a hot kiss over her, wandered a path of bliss along the side of her neck with his tongue.

In and out. He plucked her perfect nipple. Pulled it up until magic and lust flew straight from her nipple to her cunt. Charla arched her back, locked her legs behind his thighs and surged up to meet him, pulled him deeper. Relentless, Padraic blew into her ear. He shoved one hand between their joined bodies, flicking her clit once, just once, with his finger. She shivered. Again. And again.

She tasted like fire, passion, and power. Addicting and sweet. Like magic.

Unable to stop, he pumped into her tight wet cunt until she screamed and her inner muscles went into spasms around his cock.

Impatient to lose himself in her, he slid his hands beneath her and lifted her hips off the bed and pulled her toward him as she lay sprawled before him like a sacrificial offering to the gods.

Logic was overruled by his body as he claimed her, ruthlessly determined that she would never forget *his* taste, *his* cock stretching her, *his* need. He wanted to fuck her forever. Pound into her hot cunt over and over until she begged him for release. She was so hot, so tight. He watched her breasts bounce as he rammed into her. Then her hands were there, replacing his, pulling, stretching, fondling her own nipples.

The sight nearly drove him over the edge.

Spreading her legs wider, he dove deep and stayed. Small circular movements were all he allowed. He pulled on her ass just enough to open her even more, slide in a little deeper, tease her other opening with the whisper of cold air and exposure.

Charla whimpered. Her cunt clamped down on his cock and wouldn't let go. He pulled out a fraction, pushed again. Harder. He watched, fascinated as her hand left her breast, slid over the smooth stomach to her mons. She rubbed her clitoris, flicked over it, pulled. With every stroke of her fingers, her core rippled around him, her magic flared, and his answered, driving him closer to release.

Without moving her body, Charla set the pace with her hand. Padraic surrendered to his own lust watching her play. Unable to stop himself, he withdrew, and pounded into her. Harder and faster until her cunt milked him dry, stealing every ounce of his seed, and his soul, as he followed her over the edge.

He collapsed onto her and rested his forehead in the hollow of her neck. Fool that he was, Padraic already knew when these two spins were over he wanted to keep her.

\* \* \*

Magic woke her, little electric shocks that jumped between her naked body and Padraic's. Like a fierce wind rattling a rusty door, sneaking in around the edges, Padraic's power surged and receded within him. She knew his magic was combating the bots still circulating in his blood. She ignored them. Just as she ignored the words that shimmered in her mind when Padraic touched her. *Mind to mind, heart to heart, blood to blood.* She didn't know what they meant, but she instinctively knew what they would do. Steal her freedom... bind them together so tightly she'd lose her very soul.

"You're awake." Padraic's deep voice rumbled through his chest and into her ear.

Lifting her check to look up at him, Charla smiled. "I'm exhausted." *And sore. And deliciously happy.* The thoughts escaped before she could censor them, and she was grateful that his empathic abilities were hampered. As difficult as it would be for her to carry out her orders, she would. There was no alternative.

Almost absently, Padraic's hand glided over the flesh of her arm, caressing. Arousing. She wanted him again. And this time, she wanted to be on top. Rising up to straddle his hips, she let her hands relearn the planes of his chest. Instantly, his cock rose in greeting, more than ready to invade her. Just the thought of sliding onto him sent a torrent of wetness to coat his tip. Charla threw her head back, arched her spine to rub her clit along his length, spreading her juices over him.

Padraic moaned beneath her, but his fingers dug into her hips and held her still. His magic might be hampered, but hers was not. She read his intentions clearly, his need to negotiate, to plan, to ask her questions she wouldn't answer. "Charla, we have to talk."

"No. We don't." Talking, thinking, planning... all were things she didn't want to do at the moment. All she wanted was to take him, ride him, clench him with the muscles in her cunt until he bucked beneath her and begged for mercy, for more. Devious, and without mercy, she shifted until his cock hovered at her entrance and his head slipped a fraction of the way inside of her.

"We need to talk now." The strength in his hands, which held her still, suddenly shifted to pull her down, impaling her with his thickness.

"Later." Pent up breath escaped her in a rush, and she rose, then slammed down again. Goddess, he felt good! His hands rubbed circles on her ass, then slid up to fondle her breasts, play a delicious rhythm on her hard nipples. Every touch sent a shock of power to her cunt, a zap of magic pulsing in the air and in her blood, relentlessly driving her on.

Padraic sat up, and her mons bumped the solid ridges of his lower abdomen. Sliding her hands onto his shoulders for leverage, Charla rode him, letting the tension build. His hot mouth suckling her breast, sending her hurtling over the edge, and he followed, his cock bucking and writhing inside her as he gave up his seed.

Still struggling for air, Charla rested her forehead on his shoulder and absorbed the moment. Full. Sated. And caressed by Padraic's hands that slid up and down her back.

His deep laughter called to the playful side of her nature, and she hid her smile at his words. “Now are you satisfied?”

“Yes.” Charla lifted her head and kissed him with every pent up emotion she could never admit to, could never surrender to the keeping of any male. When she pulled her lips from his, he was hardening again within her.

“Aye, a man could get used to waking up this way.”

The joy within her faded. “Aye.” Charla crawled from his lap, unable to meet his gaze. She had one more spin to live for herself. Then her ship would be waiting and she would belong to her Sisters once again. She headed for the small door in the corner of the room. As much as she needed a shower, she needed escape from his probing eyes even more. Males weren’t supposed to be like him. And she knew him well, had glimpsed his soul with her magic. Strong. Intelligent. Honorable.

“Charla.”

*Ruthless.*

Silent as a ghost, he rose from the bed behind her and closed the distance. The heat from his body swamped her. If she leaned back, she’d meet hot, hard male flesh. Hand resting on the door scanner, she couldn’t move.

Frustration pounded through her in waves, and his arms encircled her waist from behind. Soft as a whisper of wings, his lips hovered over her ear. “Your mission in regards to me, whatever you believe it to be, is false. It’s nothing more than a memory implant.”

More than his voice convinced her that he told the truth. Closed doors rattled, memories screamed behind them, demanding to be revealed. Relenting, she leaned into him with a sigh. “If that’s true, what, exactly, do you expect me to do about it?”

“I can help you remember, if you’ll let me. I need you to remember what my sister told you.”

Hellsfire. Why was she suddenly certain she didn’t want to? “Why? What about your sister is so important?”

His anger burned through her, set her blood on fire and kindled a need for revenge so fierce it took her a moment to realize it wasn’t her own.

“Kamara was kidnapped three moons ago by slavers. My brother Kiel and I have been tracking her since then. That’s how Kiel ended up in Anthea, and it’s why I’m here. I can’t leave this station without her. I need you to remember what she said to you.”

Kamara. The name flitted through her consciousness and an image of dark eyes and long black hair flashed in her mind, memory burst free. “The Slave Empress.”

“Yes.”

Charla turned to face him, to make sure he heard and understood what she would say. “She wasn’t kidnapped. She’s there by her own choosing.” She wasn’t sure how she knew this, but she was certain it was fact. Kamara was fresh in her memory, intense and determined, a fellow warrior. “She won’t go with you. You’ll just get her killed if you try to interfere.”

Padraic’s hands wrapped around her shoulders convulsively. “I need to know. Let me help you remember.”

Despite the bots, his magic flared between them, burned through her consciousness for a moment, just long enough to sear three months of his agony, his worry and helpless grief into her.

Unable to resist the urge to comfort him, she raised a hand to his cheek. “All right.” And perhaps, if he spoke the truth, she could let him go free without betraying her queen. “What do you want me to do?”

## Chapter Six

“Relax. Clear your mind of distractions. Don’t fight me.”

Padraic’s fingers massaged her scalp until the roots of her hair tingled. Steaming hot water lapped at her breasts when she shifted her weight in the large tub and let her head fall backward into the hollow of his chest where he sat behind her.

“Easy for you to say. I’m not invading *your* memories.” Invading her thoughts, her soul. That’s what he was doing. And her heart. “Just get it over with before I change my mind. You Shadow Masters aren’t exactly the most popular people on Anthea, you know.”

“I’ve been feared and hated since I was five years old. You’re not telling me anything I don’t know.” His voice held no apologies for what he was, and no regret.

Charla was supposed to assume the throne in a few moons. She’d done her homework on her enemies. “Age five, the time of testing.”

“Yes.”

The age at which he’d been told what his future held. What must it have been like to be hated and feared as a young child? No wonder he’d walked away from his world. But still, what about his duty to his people? Shadow Masters were the law, the judges whom none could ever lie to because they moved into your mind, felt your feelings, remembered your crimes, and could control your body. They *lived* the crimes. Never before had she considered the cost to those judges forced to relive the crimes in spirit. What a nightmare. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t feel sorry for me. I’m more powerful than any I know, save my sister. No one dares to hunt me, and that’s just the way I like it.”

Charla snorted. “I dared.”

Padraic’s voice wrapped his smile around her. “Aye. But then, you’re a Shadow Master as well.”

Water spilled over the edges of the tub when she jerked to sit up, and was immediately absorbed by the reclaiming units in the floor. Sucked into oblivion by a force she could neither see nor comprehend. Just like the forces at work in her life now, tearing her apart and rearranging the pieces of her soul into a patchwork of temptation and confusion. First she lost her childhood friend and her honor, and now this. “No.”

Slow and steady, he pulled her back until her head settled in the curve of his shoulder. The heat of his naked flesh contrasted sharply with the sudden chill in her heart. “You heard me.”

“You’re mistaken.” Her hands trembled, so she hid them beneath the water and closed her eyes.

“Am I? Do you never know what someone is thinking, feeling? Have you not always been able to read people, their desires and their lies?”

“Yes, but I’m just an empath.”

“No, Charla, you’re a Shadow Master. Your gift has been suppressed by your elders and their drugs.”

Her heart skipped a beat, then resumed. Had her Sister Hana not told her the same thing? In her message she’d accused the elders of that and more. Charla hadn’t eaten or drunk anything from her home stores since leaving Anthea. And every day she felt the effects more, as something wild and untamed sparked to life inside her.

Soft as sin, Padraic’s lips nuzzled her neck. “Charla, don’t go back.”

“I have to.” She was the next queen. For a thousand years, the line of succession had never been broken. Her Sisters needed her vision, her leadership, and her strength. She wouldn’t turn her back on them just because she took a few rides on a nice cock.

“Why? So you can trap more young warriors with lies? Steal their magic? Their gifts? Their sons?”

The questions reverberated through her skull, stirring up feelings and memories long forgotten. An ache sprang to life deep in her chest, and her heart actually hurt. Fierce and unexpected, pain stabbed behind her eyes and

another memory broke down the door in her mind. A son... *they'd taken her sons*. Smiling babies with blue eyes and dimples. Ripped from her arms as she screamed over the dead body of her eighteen-year-old lover. Images crashed in. Relentless and elemental as a tidal wave, they broke through barriers and flooded her with knowledge. Pain. Regret.

Charla sank beneath the water and opened herself to the flood. Clear and true, she saw herself as a sixteen-year-old living on the Outskirts with her mother, learning the secrets of growing Ozera flower. A young man from a nearby village caught her eye, and she'd eagerly given herself up to the raging lust of youth and curiosity. Her mother returned to the city, but allowed her to remain for two seasons. But when she'd returned to find Charla with twins nearly two years old, the elder had ripped the children from her arms and ordered her lover's execution.

Tears escaped into the sea of bath water surrounding her face. Her lungs burned for air, but it was nothing compared to the pain of betrayal she held in her heart. Her twins would be nearly eight years old now. Where were they? Alive? Dead?

Unable to hold her breath another moment, Charla burst from the water and screamed like a wounded animal. Her own people had deceived her and used magic to tamper with her memories. And why? Because she'd lain with a male in an attempt to thwart their plans for her. She'd become a mother. Had dared to want a life other than sitting on the throne.

And the bitch who had walked toward her in flowing silver robes as she lay in a crumpled heap in the dirt, the elder who had locked the memories in her mind... where was she? Hawklike nose, round eyes in a deep-set face, a face that screamed of unrestrained magical power. The woman's mouth curled at the edges, held a ruthless sneer on her lips. She was one of the oldest, the most revered of all their elders. Charla had called her *Mother*. She would die.

Swift and silent, Charla was out of the tub and fully dressed in hunter's black by the time Padraic caught up to her. Her silver moon daggers slid home in her thigh holsters, whispering promises of death.

"Where are you going?" He reached for her arm, but she pulled out of his grasp.

"I'm sorry, Padraic. I never should've endangered you, or held you captive. You're free to go."

Air was forced out of his lungs in a silent rush. He'd never truly been her prisoner, and they both knew it. Magic erupted in his chest in response to the adrenaline flooding his system. It refused to let her leave, was shrieking with rage that its mate would dare walk away. "Where are you going?"

"To get some answers."

Arms crossed, he watched her eyes glaze over with desire as they followed the path of water sliding over his chest to disappear into the damp drying cloth he'd wrapped around his waist. His cock, still hard and hurting from their bath, held her attention. "You're going hunting."

She didn't deny it. And after seeing the memories that had flooded her, he couldn't blame her. He could, in fact, still hear the terror-filled cries of her boys being pulled from her arms. The elders of her culture enslaved her and her Sisters as surely as her ancestors had been held by his. Suddenly he wished the bots truly had stolen his magic. Her pain hurt him much more than his own ever could.

"I'm sorry, Charla." Torn and tortured inside, she looked away from him. A single tear slid down her cheek and burned his heart like acid. He shouldn't care. She was a ruthless bitch. She'd raped his brother and hunted his sister. Yet she acted all along with a sense of duty and honor. There were no excuses between them. He'd been in her mind, knew her almost as well as he knew himself. Despite her past, he couldn't let her go.

"Hana tried to tell me. She sent me a message." With a forceful thrust, she slammed her Stinger into its holster in the small of her back. "I wouldn't believe my whole life was a lie..."

As if the single tear were an abomination, Charla wiped it from her face and pulled on her thigh-length coat. He was sure more weapons were hidden among its dark folds.

"Where is Hana's Rider docked? I'll meet you there at nightfall. Once we rendezvous with my ship, I'll leave you in peace."

“It’s my Rider.” Taking a deep breath in through his nose, Padraic didn’t dare move. Fierce and adamant, the magic in his soul burst forth, claimed her as his own, weakening his will until he gave in to the urge and slid his hand beneath her hair to massage the tightness from her neck. He could not hold her prisoner, but he wasn’t about to allow her to leave. Not in this state. And not to face an enemy well trained in magic. “Hana gave it to me. And you haven’t told me about Kamara yet.”

For a moment she just stared at him, thinking. A whisper light touch moved through him, leaving a path of sensual heat in its wake. She would sense that he spoke the truth. Trembling, she closed the distance between them and brushed her lips to his forehead in a silent farewell.

“Tell Hana to be happy.”

The unexpected request froze him. “I thought you didn’t believe...”

She shook her head, effectively cutting off his answer. “I don’t know what to believe anymore.” Charla rubbed both temples with still shaking hands. Her magic was new to her. Untamed. Powerful. If she were truly his mate, she must be a Shadow Master as well. Linked as they were, he knew emotions and thoughts were crowding her mind. Memories. And *truth*.

With startling clarity, Padraic realized why the elders of her culture forbade the younger to use magic. The old women did, in fact, taint their food and drink with a drug that held their powers dormant. His brother Kiel and his mate Hana had discovered that truth the hard way.

If Charla wanted an honest answer, there was only one way to show her. “If you want to know the truth of your world, use your gifts. Look into my memories. See what Hana told me.”

A troubled shadow flitted through her eyes, then disappeared beneath steely determination. Softly as first, then with a bolder touch, he felt her spiritual presence. Her energy, her soul merged with his and absorbed his knowledge like a dry sponge first exposed to water. His own magic rose up in greeting, enveloped her in warmth, and held back nothing. There could be no secrets among his kind. It was the main reason everyone feared them.

He was the most powerful being she’d ever encountered. He defied her, argued with her, teased her. Not since she was a child, since before the ritual of womanhood, had anyone *dared* to tease her. With an almost desperate longing, her body cried out to join with his, to stretch herself wide on his cock and lose herself in the heat of his hands on her breasts, his mouth...

Forbidden fruit had never looked any sweeter than Padraic did at that moment. She’d known him one day, and he was the only truth she’d had in her entire life. Unable to resist one last touch, she ran her hands over his massive chest, thick shoulders, and bulging muscles. The scent of his flesh called to her, begging to be tasted. Charla forced herself to bite her tongue, preventing its need to escape and taste him. She let her senses go for one moment, a stolen fraction of time to feel his magic pulsing through her blood, their hearts beating in rhythm, and to hear the siren song of his soul crying out to hers.

Eager to truly know him, to delve deeply into his memories, Charla didn’t resist the odd wrenching sensation as part of her left her own body behind and entered his. A lifetime flashed before her eyes, flooded her with his every moment of triumph, and pain. He was an honorable man, someone she could live with, if the situation had been different.

Worry for both her and his sister, Kamara, was utmost in his mind. Confident that he could take care of himself, he had less faith in the women’s abilities. That made Charla smile as she withdrew. All the skills he employed to use his magic were now hers. He didn’t belong in the war she wanted to start. She couldn’t bear the weight of his death on her conscience. Her young lover, though not a true love match, had been funny and full of life. He hadn’t deserved the tortured death dealt him. Padraic would not suffer a similar fate.

Softly, Charla brushed her lips against his, savored the strength of his touch, and worked up the will she needed to leave him forever. “Kamara is tracking a killer. She pulled his identity from Zira’s mind before she lost consciousness.” Padraic’s muscles clenched beneath her hands. She knew from his memories that Zira was his cousin, young, innocent, and beautiful -- until she’d been brutally attacked. “Your sister can *feel* the killer’s

presence, and he's getting close, watching her. If you interfere, you'll reveal her true identity and he'll kill her." "Damnation. You women are going to be the death of me."

"You have to leave her alone."

"Hellsfire." Frustration and fear for his sister rose to choke him, choke her. "Who is he?"

"The killer? She wouldn't say, but I'm sure she knows his name. She said he's a Sentinel."

Padraic framed her face in his hands and glared down at her. "Perfect. You're hunting a Luci, and she's hunting a royal spy."

"A Luci?"

"Aye. Like Kamara. Someone who implants memories or hallucinations with a touch."

Charla had to admit the odds were not stacked in their favor. But life was never easy. Wasting energy bemoaning the fact was not her style. She shrugged and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling his lips down to hers, and kissed him.

He opened his mouth, thrusting his tongue to duel with hers in a battle of wills that left them both breathless and hungry for more. Padraic wrenched open the zipseam of her uniform and exposed her mons. Never in her life had she wanted anything more than to wrap her legs around his waist and slide down over his cock. Her pussy throbbed. Her outer lips ached with the pain of being overly engorged and desperate.

Magic rose, vibrated in the air, and heightened her awareness of him. Every breath he took burned in her lungs. Every beat of his heart pounded through her chest. And his desire roared through her to explode in her cunt.

"Padraic..." Charla's fingertips jumped, zapped by small sparks of magical energy where they moved to his waist. She couldn't wait another moment without spontaneously combusting. Yanking the wrap from his hips, Charla jumped up, locked her legs behind his back, and then lowered herself onto his thick shaft.

Teeth clenched, Padraic then slid his hands around to hold her buttocks. She realized he must be careful to avoid the moon daggers strapped to either thigh. He carried her forward until her back met the soft padding on the wall, pinning her there, impaled on his cock. She actually feared the heat of her skin would burn through her uniform.

"You're not going anywhere alone." Padraic pounded into her flesh to accentuate every word. "That old bitch will destroy you." *And you're mine.*

The last thought hung in the air between them. A part of her wanted to deny his claim, but the rest of her, the part stretched over his cock, the hands buried in his hair, the traitorous voice in her heart that begged to keep him, thrilled at the idea. "What would you do with me, Padraic? I'm a Moon Warrior, not a pet to be kept on a leash." Rock hard and merciless, he shoved her legs open wider, plunged deeper. She gasped and buried her face in his neck to keep from screaming with need. "Shadow Masters are too powerful to keep, Charla. You have to choose." Never had she felt anything this erotic. Every ounce of her body vibrated with awareness and magic. The head of his shaft bumped her womb, sent a shockwave of energy through her entire body, and branded eternal knowledge of him into her on a cellular level.

This much pleasure would surely kill her. Now was not the time to talk, or decide her future. Right now all she wanted was to slide up and down on his thickness, spread her legs wider, and take more of him. Deeper. Harder. Faster.

Squeezing her inner muscles, Charla caressed his length with the moist heat of her core and forced him to stop talking. With a smile, she nibbled the skin of his neck, ran her tongue along his collarbone, and rode him like a wild beast in heat until they both lost control.

## Chapter Seven

“Where is she? Are you sure she’s here?” Charla watched the market carefully. Once again hidden behind the holographic image of an ugly male, Charla walked with Padraic through the crush of unsavory slavers toward the area he’d indicated to her on the station map.

“Yes. I saw the woman in your vision on this station right before you spoke to Kamara. She is well known, and feared. It is rumored that she controls everything that happens here. They call her the Ghost. Everyone knows she exists, but few can remember her face.”

“Anthea doesn’t control this station. That’s impossible.” Even as she said the words she caressed the daggers hidden beneath her cape. That was the old, naïve girl talking, the one who’d never been a mother, who’d never been betrayed. Never hated. It would be so easy for a memory planter to remain unseen, to direct others, to annihilate people’s lives. “I hope you’re wrong.”

“I’m not.”

Before Charla could summon a response, she saw her. The sight of her mother’s well-loved face was like a blowtorch firing into her stomach. “Goddess.”

“Are you all right?” Padraic’s hand wrapped around her arm when she stumbled.

“There she is.” She thought she was prepared to see her mother, confront her, and coldly walk away. As much as she hated her past, the last eight years of love and guidance wouldn’t allow thoughts of murder. Truth was an axe that had cut her in half, and now she fought with every breath to hold the pieces of her soul together.

Familiar and soothing, Padraic’s consciousness merged with hers, honed in on her visions of the woman Charla both loved and hated. Conflicting memories fought a war within her. She’d known two mothers, the one who’d destroyed her young life and the kind mentor who’d stood by her side these long years. There was no reconciling them.

“Be careful.” Padraic pulled his hand from her arm. “I’m right behind you. Whatever you do, don’t let her touch you.”

Padraic’s presence reassured her as nothing else could. He was the one person she knew wouldn’t lie to her. Ever. She knew him intimately. Walking beside her, resplendent in black and sexy as hell, he was a dream come to life. A dream she’d never even known she had.

Her plan was dangerous, but simple. With her newly mastered talents, she planned to enter her mother’s mind and discover the truth about her sons. About everything.

The woman she hunted stood behind a table wearing long red robes. Braided blond hair, streaked with gray, hung halfway down her back. Although the woman looked thin and fragile, Charla wasn’t fooled. Her mother was both agile and quick. And, if she were like Kamara, she’d see right through the mask.

With her mother’s attention drawn to what another elder said to her, Charla walked to within two steps and stopped. Hands rock steady, Charla reached up to her neck and deactivated her mask. “Hello, Mother.”

The woman turned her head atop a long elegant neck. Shock registered in her eyes for a brief moment, then receded. There was no warm welcome, no hint of love in her mother’s cold and calculating eyes. Charla couldn’t shake the feeling, no matter how ridiculous, that her mother’s body had been possessed. This woman’s eyes promised death. Something was not right.

“Charla. I was told you’d left the station.”

“Not until you tell me what you did with my sons.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Anger flared in a halo of red energy around her mother’s form, then receded into a tightly controlled pattern. The lie falling from her lips set off every internal alarm Charla had. Chest tight, hands balled into fists, Charla fought the urge to punch her.

“I remember everything, Mother. How you murdered Hanrey, tore my sons from my arms...” Rising with her anger was a heady surge of magic. It pooled in her blood and stalked a target like a Rhion beast waiting to strike. The fire of it made her eyes burn. Her mother’s gaze widen in shocked response. “I remember the touch that stole my memories.”

“I see.” The answer held no denial, no games, and no regret. The last nearly tore Charla’s heart from her chest. She fought back the swell of tears she’d held in tight control until now. Her own mother...

“No, Charla, I am not your mother.” The woman turned to the table beside her and pressed a small red button on a summoning device. “My sister always had a soft spot for you. But I have the gift of sight. I knew you would betray us the first time I held you in my arms, when you were still bloody and fighting for your initial breath.” Undisguised hatred poured from her gaze. Charla stepped back in shock. Her aunt stepped forward, forcing her to retreat yet again as another new memory surfaced. Her mother and identical twin sister arguing over Charla on her fifth birthday. Aunt Graza had wanted her killed after her testing. Said she was too dangerous. Said she would destroy them all...

“Yes. I see you remember now. I tried to convince my sister to kill you, but she was always weak in that regard. Even when you betrayed us with that farmer’s son, she refused to allow me to punish you. Instead, she stayed home and coddled you while I was banished, sent to oversee our operations here in this hellhole crawling with the dregs of humanity.” Graza took another step forward and raised her hand. The supernatural energy surrounding her flared to brilliant white, nearly blinding Charla’s newly awakened senses.

Padraic’s voice was a cool balm. *You are the stronger now. Take the information you need.* Strength flowed into her. Her aunt didn’t stand a chance of resisting two Shadow Masters.

Her aunt dove at her, determined to initiate physical contact so she could control Charla’s mind once again, but Charla was faster. Brutally and without forgiveness, Charla poured her consciousness into her aunt’s body, invaded her soul like the black shadow of death.

Merciless.

Though she was strong-willed and determined to resist, Graza’s mind lay open before Charla like a well-read map. Charla commanded her body to remain still, then dove deep, unlocked doors and Garza’s hidden memories. Shaken by the hatred and resentment her aunt felt harbored, Charla nearly lost her connection when she discovered her sons had been sold for fifty thousand Galactic two days after being taken from her. Her aunt had sold her sons. And her niece.

“You bitch.” Staggering from the revelation and betrayal, Charla lost control of the link and popped back into her own body. “The slavers in the tunnel were yours.”

Now on her knees, her aunt slowly rose to her feet and swayed before her. “You brought this on yourself when you betrayed us. You disgrace your Sisters, your family, our House. You are too impure to rule the House of Lore, to be queen.” Raising her right hand she signaled to someone behind Charla. A heartbeat later Charla felt the sting of bots racing into her bloodstream from a quill sticking out of her neck. “You’re a long way from home, Charla. Even your mother won’t be able to save you this time.”

“Perhaps.” In moments she would lose consciousness. She felt the slaver closing in on her, eager to pound his body into hers, to beat her, to break her. Padraic’s presence was shimmering on the edge of her awareness, like a ghost. Like a shadow. She couldn’t allow her aunt to win, no matter the cost. Let the slaver come. *I’m sorry, Padraic.*

Her aunt was escaping, walking away like a queen. Focusing the last of her will and drawing on the knowledge gained from Padraic’s memories, Charla again invaded her aunt’s mind and stopped her retreat. The strain of maintaining her presence in two bodies at once was like a thousand needles puncturing her brain, but she ignored the pain. She only needed a few seconds. With speed born of years of practice, Charla hurled her dagger through the air and imbedded the silver half-moon in Garza’s heart.

An agony of fire ripped through Garza’s chest and her own. Charla’s heart stuttered, and her knees buckled. Her scream of pain echoed Garza’s.

Everything went black.

## Chapter Eight

Padraic forced his heart to beat, to squeeze the blood from its chambers, from hers. Too infuriated and worried to bother with stealth, he pulled the Stinger from its holster and shot the slaver kneeling over her between the eyes. Lying on the floor, pale as death, Charla lived because he forced her to live, still a shadow in her mind. His heart beat for hers. His lungs filled with air and hers followed. His essence actually ached and he realized their Binding had already begun. If he lost her now the black void in his soul would never be whole again. If he survived at all. God help him. He'd been a rebel and a loner for years. And now, if he couldn't save her, life held no more appeal than death.

Padraic knelt and lifted her into his arms, buried his face in her hair. "Damn you, woman. Five minutes in my mind and you think you've mastered your gifts?"

He felt the others approaching then. Women. Antheans. Hot, elemental rage boiled to the surface. He would kill anyone who tried to touch her or stop him from taking her.

"Please, Cross-Worlder, I can help."

Padraic looked up to see a woman in silver robes approaching. Older than Charla, compassion shone in her eyes, and the healing gifts shone in brilliant golds and greens in her aura. Padraic knew better than to trust blindly, but with his soul locked in the struggle for life within Charla's body, he couldn't scan her as he normally would.

She took another step and black hair streaked with gray cascaded around her shoulders. "Please. We are not all like Garza. We've been waiting here, growing and learning to harness our magic." In a flash of silver she knelt on the floor across from him, Charla's unconscious form between them. Padraic stared into her deep blue eyes and saw excitement. "We've waited impatiently for her to come."

"What?" He raised his Stinger, resting its tip in the middle of her forehead. The elder didn't give off the psychic stench of insanity, but what she said made no sense.

"Since the prophecy at her birth, we have waited. She will launch the revolution."

"What revolution?" Several more women approached in different colored robes and Padraic realized they were all communicating telepathically. None seemed hostile, but he pulled Charla closer to his chest and focused his energies in case he needed to attack. Her warmth seeped into his body and her scent teased him with memories of hot steamy sex and paradise. He didn't want her in battle, he wanted her safe in his bed. "What are you talking about? She left Anthea to find Hana, not to start a war."

"Let me heal her. She will know what to do."

He didn't have much choice. Already his body tired of holding her in this world. His lungs burned and his heart ached, labored for every beat. "She's linked to her aunt. I'm not sure you can help her."

"Aye. I can heal the damage to her body." The elder placed her hands on Charla's chest and closed her eyes with a knowing smile. "Your Binding will take care of the rest."

\* \* \*

God, she was beautiful. Perfect. *His*. Physically healed, she lay comatose in his bed, her golden hair spread beneath her like a halo on the silver bedding, her face vibrant and her body calling to his.

Alive.

Yet not.

Padraic drained the last of his ale and checked his ship's navigational controls once again. Everything was operating as it should. They'd safely left Tantra 9's docks this morning. The ship could run itself until they arrived home or he turned it off, which left him free to pace and choke on helplessness every time he looked at her unconscious body.

The healer had indeed repaired the damage to Charla's internal organs. Her touch brought instant relief to both of

them. Padraic's heart beat on its own, his lungs didn't have to fight for air, but his soul was still torn in two. How could he bind them together if Charla never woke up?

He'd asked the healer and her answer hadn't pleased him. She said he'd have to pursue her in the Shadow Realm, the place Death called home, where dreams were born. It was a place even he was not eager to visit. Were he not a Shadow Master, the attempt would kill him. Even with his gifts, he wasn't sure he'd make it back.

But Charla waited.

"Hellsfire!" Charla's favorite curse flew easily from his lips. He spoke to her, despite the fact her soul was far beyond the reach of his words. "And you said males were a pain in the ass."

Padraic stripped, lay down beside her in bed, and pulled her into his arms. Should neither of them return, he wanted his last memories to be of her scent, her warmth, and her soft body cradled next to his. Her hair tickled his lips as he spoke to her. "Listen to me, Charla, I'm coming for you. Do you hear me? I'm coming."

With one last deep breath, Padraic pulled her essence into his lungs and let go. Immediately his spirit hovered above the bed and he saw the body heat of the couple lying there, inanimate empty shells waiting for their souls to return. A silvery cord still connected him to his body, and with brutal determination he severed it, cast his soul into the riptide of the Shadow Realm.

Immediately, darkness enveloped him, tossed him like a leaf in a flood through the realm beyond normal time and space. Then the motion stopped, and he hovered. Nowhere. Everywhere. There was nothing but silence so deep a heartbeat would have sounded like a cannon's boom.

*Focus!* He had to find Charla. To find her, he had to open his eyes.

Since he had no physical form here, the desire to see was all that was required. Awareness returned, but this reality was different. Energy flowed and pooled around him, at times swirling, at others stopping for a moment to assume the outline of a form before disappearing again in the ocean of existence flowing around him. Pure energy. Nothing more. How would he ever find her in time? *Charla?* The name reverberated through the mass around him and was swallowed by it.

Then he heard her laugh. Dizzying and electric, reality shifted around him until she stood before him, laughing and waving good-bye to someone he couldn't see.

"Charla?"

Covered by a red robe that swirled around her ankles in the cosmic winds, she turned to him and smiled.

"Padraic. It's about time."

Padraic held out a hand to her, half afraid she would disappear in the swirl around them, but she surrendered her smaller hand to his keeping. In the real world she was beautiful. Here, she was ethereal and the love shining from her eyes nearly blinded him. "Are you all right?"

"Aye." She held out her other hand to him. "I thought I would die, but you're holding me to the other world, aren't you?"

"I couldn't let you go, Charla. I love you."

Her smile widened. "I know. I can see it as plainly as you see my love for you. There are no secrets here."

"The Shadow Realm, the place of Death and nightmares."

"And dreams." Charla floated into his embrace and wrapped her arms around him. "Take me home, Padraic. I'm ready. And I have a lot to tell you."

"I have to bind your soul to take you back."

"Is that a proposal?" With a whisper of her intent floating around them, he found himself suddenly naked, her equally bare flesh rubbing everywhere they touched. Magic arced through space between them, sealing them together with every microscopic strike.

Laughter bubbled up from the depths of his soul and exploded into the energy around them in ripples of gold.

"Aye. I want to keep you forever."

"Then make my body burn for you so it will call us back." Charla pressed her lips to his again, forced his mouth open with her tongue, and moved so her hard nipples passed over his, calling them to rise in answer.

All around them, the energy field vibrated with their urgency and their love, reflected their desire, magnified it until Padraic feared his soul was going to explode with the heat. Pure instinct led him to speak. "Mind to mind." "Mind to mind." Fusion happened instantly and Padraic reeled from the shock of sharing her awareness. Charla slid down his chest and sucked his nipple into her mouth. He tasted himself in her mouth, felt her cunt throb and ache to be filled.

"Heart to heart." Soft beneath his hands, her breasts filled his hands. He flicked her nipples with his thumbs and she moaned. His cock bucked at the sound, demanded to claim its mate.

"Heart to heart." Her soft voice was followed by thunder roaring in his ears. Their hearts beat as one, pulsed through them both with magic and fire. He pulled her mouth up to his and invaded, demanded submission with his tongue. Her whimper of surrender drove him mad with lust. Still aware of her core, empty and desperate for his touch, he slid his hand over the soft planes of her stomach, lower, to dive between the soft folds.

Charla screamed and arched into his hand as a shockwave of his magic invaded her cunt through his hand. He shoved two fingers into her wet heat and arched her backward over his other arm to suck her hard pink nipple into his mouth.

"Blood to blood, Padraic. Say it!"

"Not until I'm buried to the hilt." Their link allowed him to feel both the wet heat coating his fingers and the sweet pain his invasion caused, the agony of her emptiness. Inserting a third finger, he spread them wider inside her, stroked the sides of her pussy until she sobbed with need and wrapped her hand around his cock where it stroked the soft skin of her abdomen.

Painful and insistent, her hands pulled his head from her breast and tried to force his mouth up to hers. But this was the Shadow Realm, and intention was everything. With a thought he changed their positions in space. Her body hung suspended in the air before him, legs spread wide, cunt open and begging to be tasted.

Like a hungry beast that scented prey, he sealed his lips over her clit and sucked the sensitive nub into his mouth. Suck and pull, flick the hard little mound with his tongue. Unable to resist the tempting mound of her breast, Padraic's right hand cupped the soft peak, squeezed, and flicked the nipple in time to the sucking and nibbling of his tongue on her clit.

In his mind, she begged for release, begged for him to fill her. But he wasn't ready to end his fun.

On the next strong pull of his tongue she arched her hips up and slammed his waiting fingers deep once again.

"Goddess, Padraic! Please!"

Unable to resist another moment, Padraic grabbed her waist and pulled her down until the tip of his cock hovered at her entrance. "I told you you'd beg."

"Padraic!"

With a shout of triumph, he shoved her down and impaled her on his cock.

Like an explosion rocketing through his body, her release hit them both hard and fast. Her cunt milked him, pulsed around his shaft like muscles made of pure flame.

Her cunt was still convulsing from the aftershocks when Charla raised her head to look him in the eye. "Blood to blood. Say it."

Padraic twitched his hips to show her who was in charge and was gratified when she threw her head back and whimpered. Apparently unable to control herself, she ground her mons against his abdomen and shuddered again.

"Blood to blood." He lifted her, then slammed her down again. "I bind you to me."

"I bind you to me." The universe shifted around them. Molecules of energy split and recombined until one couldn't be distinguished from the other. The roar in the air was drowned out by sensation as she arched her back, shoved her perfect breast toward his eager mouth, and slipped a hand beneath her bottom to cup his sac. One touch made him lose all control. Savage and desperate, he thrust into her, harder and faster. Hollow and empty, he filled his mouth with her breast and pounded his hips to hers until they both exploded.

Cosmic winds whirled around them, hurtled them through space, and flung them back into their bodies. The physical world exploded into his senses like a supernova. Charla's hair brushed his cheek, her naked flesh

pressed the length of his body, and her presence filled him with peace.

A moment later she rolled to face him, blue eyes filled with happiness and mischief. “Padraic, I need you to teach me how to be a pirate.”

Laughter bubbled from his chest. “I’m retired.”

“Not anymore.”

Unable to resist the temptation, he fastened his lips to hers for a kiss that left them both breathless. His cock, which he wasn’t sure had survived the last explosion, rose to attention between his legs, more than eager for another go.

With a knowing smile, Charla rolled him onto his back and straddled his hips. Her core throbbed around the head of his shaft, hot and inviting. “Are you going to help me or not?”

“What do you need to blow up?” He knew he couldn’t resist her, and he wanted her hot cunt riding him far more than he dreaded her answer.

Charla let her head drop onto her shoulders and opened for him, took him so deep he wasn’t sure where he left off and she began. “Three factories on Anthea where they make and distribute the suppressant. Only three elders are trusted with the locations of all three. My aunt was one of them.”

He lifted his hips to tease her and was rewarded by her inner muscles clamping around his cock. Struggling for breath, he surged beneath her. “The... chemical... that... suppresses... your... magic?”

“Aye.”

Padraic froze as understanding dawned. “If you destroy the factories, the natural abilities of every Moon Warrior on Anthea will awaken.”

“Exactly.” Charla rose above him until his cock was nearly free, then slowly slid down his length again. “It’ll be absolute chaos in a matter of weeks.”

“Aye. A revolution.”

Charla smiled down at him. “I like the sound of that. Then I can begin the search for my sons.” Leaning over to kiss him, she stopped just as their lips touched. “And Padraic?”

“What?”

“I’m going to keep you.”

Padraic rolled Charla onto her back and held her hands captive over her head. Grinding his hips against hers, he smiled. They were bound by blood and magic. Nothing, not even death, could take her from him now.

**The End**  
*For now.*

### **House of Moons 3: The Slave**

Wild, unpredictable Princess Kamara Lonriev has allowed everyone to believe she's been captured by intergalactic slavers when in fact she is setting a trap. She'll do anything to make sure she gets her man, including using her magic to manipulate the memories of those she meets. Tracking a Sentinel, a royal spy, wanted for murder is risky -- especially when she discovers this man is immune to her magic. She's going to need every trick in the trade to bring him to justice.

Tobiath is determined to expose and punish the traitor who framed him. Kamara seems to be the perfect bait to draw the real murderer out of hiding. But neither Tobiath nor his "bait" counts on the explosive chemistry between them, the call of magic and blood. They're both going to learn the hard way that love and duty don't always mix.

## **Kara Fey**

Kara started writing at the tender age of eleven, and was never smart enough to stop. Now she battles the craft of writing like it's an addiction, an obsession, or a psychiatric/chemical imbalance. (It's probably all three.) She especially believes this when all her characters are running around in her head demanding their stories be told. There's probably a medical term for that...

Kara can't stand wimpy heroes and heroines, so her characters are strong willed, intelligent people who aren't afraid to take chances. We all need a little taste of that kind of courage and fantasy in life. Her one wish is that readers will enjoy her stories!

For more about Kara's world, please visit her website at [www.KaraFey.com](http://www.KaraFey.com)